



Evidence Based Practice in School Libraries

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Table of Contents

Preface	1
List of Journal Editors	3
Weaving Evidence, Reflection, and Action into the Fabric of School Librarianship	
Carol A. Gordon and Ross J. Todd	4
Creation of a Research Community in a K-12 School System Using Action Research and Evidence Based Practice	
Susan D. Ballard, Gail March, and Jean K. Sand	8
School Library Media Specialist Collaboration with Special Education Personnel in Support of Student Learning	
Lesley S.J. Farmer	37
An Emerging Theory for Evidence Based Information Literacy Instruction in School Libraries, Part 1: Building a Foundation	
Carol A. Gordon	56
School Librarianship and Evidence Based Practice: Progress, Perspectives, and Challenges	
Ross J. Todd	78
Librarian-Teacher Partnerships for Inquiry Learning: Measures of Effectiveness for a Practice-Based Model of Professional Development	
Joyce Yukawa and Violet H. Harada	97
An Emerging Theory for Evidence Based Information Literacy Instruction in School Libraries, Part 2: Building a Culture of Enquiry	
Carol A. Gordon	120
Evidence-Based Practice: Evolution or Revolution?	
A Commentary by David V. Loertscher	147



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Commentary

Evidence-Based Practice: Evolution or Revolution?

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For some years, school library media specialists, like other educators, have been urged to raise their sights from the work-a-day world to the think-a-day world of reflective practice. The concepts of evidence-based practice and action research along with the general educational ideas of data mining, data-based decision making, diagnostic assessment, and a host of other terms encourage everyone to concentrate on results or the impact of actions and programs on teaching and learning.

Indeed, the American Association of School Librarians' *Standards for the 21st Century*, and its companion document, *Empowering Learners*, challenge teacher librarians to educate learners in dispositions, responsibilities, and self-evaluation, not just the steps of inquiry. One assumes that building reflective students means that the adults are reflective as well.

A teacher librarian may feel that the typical day is so overcrowded with organizational tasks, classes streaming in and out of the library, teaching lessons about research, disciplining,

and trying to personalize the reference process that, by the end of the day, a sense of overwhelming fatigue makes any reflection about impact the remotest concern. Simple survival might loom larger.

However, the push for accountability all across education requires everyone involved with learners to come to terms with success, failure, and put in place a system of sustainable school improvement. The higher the pressure to prepare learners to compete globally, along with the alarming statistics on drop out rates and low math and reading scores compared with the rest of the world, only increases the pressure for introspection.

At first, teacher librarians may feel that the pressure for accountability rests solely on the shoulders of the classroom teacher, since testing data is taken and reported teacher by teacher. The supporting specialists, such as teacher librarians, reading coaches, instructional specialists, councilors, and even music, art, or Physical Education teachers may feel as though

they are merely bystanders and observers in the accountability game. However, in times of financial exigency, questions about direct impact on learning causes administrators to cut any programs not seemingly pulling their weight. Do specialists of any kind really make any difference? Any measurable difference? Any significant difference?

With such pressure to raise scores during the No Child Left Behind years in the United States, many have thought that with a new administration, the testing whip would become less severe. However, it does not appear that the emphasis on accountability is going away any time soon. It is here to stay, and it is being required of all who participate in education, not just the classroom teacher. Teacher librarians fighting to retain their jobs are being asked, "What direct impact do you have on teaching and learning?" Thus it seems that the need for teacher librarians to embrace the ideas of evidence-based practice (EBP) and self-reflection are no longer optional. That said, however, self-reflection as a part of evolutionary practice may not be the best thing to implement.

Evolutionary Practice vs. Revolutionary Practice

We think of using EBP as a method of continual improvement of systems and the routines we do each day. This approach to data collection and analysis is designed to help us as professionals work smarter, not harder. This idea pervades all organizations and businesses: doing more with less; concentrating on efficiency; eliminating waste and time-consuming/unnecessary practices—all come under scrutiny to make constant and wiser decisions on a daily basis. Such introspection is a sound approach as long as the antecedents or foundational inputs remain essentially the same. In other words, as long as the learner characteristics, the abilities of the teachers, and the goals of the organization remain fairly constant, emphasis on evolutionary school improvement works. We all

keep refining and adjusting what we do and hopefully get better and better over time.

However, thinkers in many fields have recently challenged such a stance. There is no longer time to evolve at a slow and measured pace. Sudden and drastic change in many sectors of environment, business, government, and world finance requires quite a different mentality. General Motors cannot continue to refine the gas-guzzling SUV and expect to sell the millions of vehicles year after year as they once did. At some point, the constant rise in housing and oil prices affect business, no matter what tinkering takes place. Allowing the status quo to continue with slow evolutionary progress is a recipe for disaster. It does not matter how adept we are in continual improvement through evidence-based practice, we could be without a role and a job.

As much as we all might prefer evolutionary change since it is comfortable and predictable, this stance seems less and less an option in our society—our global society. Think of the Google generation/digital natives that surround us. Think of the rise in charter schools that don't have libraries. Think of homeschool and online distance education programs that have no access to a teacher librarian or school library and often brag that a library is no longer needed. How does EBP fit into a revolutionary rather than evolutionary pattern of change?

In the medical field, out of the box research often disrupts current practice. For example, the Australian study that identified a bacteria that caused stomach ulcers was dismissed at first partly because it not only was counter to a previous train of research but also, because if true, it would be very unpopular with drug companies who were making a great deal of money treating stomach acidity. As evidence-based practice continued to mount, the disruptive change was inevitable. One could forecast similar innovative change to traditional treatments if a cure to Alzheimer's, cancer, or heart disease was developed. The point is that such major change has already

appeared in the information culture, but few have stepped up to the plate to reinvent or do the 180-degree thinking to latch on to innovation.

Perhaps a school library example might clarify this point. All school libraries once used pockets and cards to circulate materials. This system was replaced by automated circulation systems. These systems keep making improvements and now are part of a larger OPAC system. If the teacher librarian understands the system, there are many reports that can be printed out to analyze the collection, circulation, acquisitions, etc. This is an example of an evolutionary system and much can be done to improve not only the distribution of materials but also to analyze collections and patterns of use. However, should a device like the Kindle2 appear where every user has not only access to textbooks, the Internet, the digital library collection, but also has a library credit card to build a private collection, the tables turn. Disruption of the function of the library collection and the erasure of the need to warehouse and circulate, track, and harasses naughty patrons, changes everything. EBP strategies change overnight for some practices but not necessarily for the central mission of the library to assist every patron with information access and the building of basic literacies and lifetime reading habits. Like the drug companies in our previous example, would librarians be actively rejecting user controlled digital devices because of a fear that a machine would not be snuggable in bed or the aphrodisiac smell of ink on paper is missing?

Could EBP practices actually impede innovation? And, when innovation does occur, how can EBP either confirm the new ideas or discard them? Consider the following radical ideas and what kind of EBP would be necessary:

- The OPAC and library website are turned into a giant conversation rather than a one-way stream of information. If “they” helped build it, would they use it

rather than bypassing it as they do currently?

- Children and teens construct and build their own information spaces, learn to manage those spaces, and learn to manage themselves in those spaces. As it is now, filters theoretically “protect” access to dangerous sites and information. Certainly, if they were given freedom to explore, a generation of youth would be corrupted. What experiments and EBP studies would bring some sense to this controversial arena?
- Suppose the library were turned into a learning commons with a physical and virtual space that were the centers of all professional development and school improvement initiatives. Would this marriage propel the old school library directly into the center of teaching and learning? What EBP would be needed to test this impact on administrators, teachers, and teacher librarians?
- Suppose the digital generation took the leadership initiative to use their social networking skills over into their academic skills. Would they take such a leadership role? What EBP would be needed to document any changes in information behaviors?¹

Perhaps we should think and rethink the central tenets of the role and function of a library/information service that is required to elevate each learner. What does a holistic learner look like? Are there one or many types of learners? When information and technology systems are designed and under the control of learners, what are the implications not just for the organizational structure required to provide such an information system but the human

¹ These proposals are just a few made in: Loertscher, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan. *The New School Learning Commons Where Learners Win!*. Salt Lake City, UT: Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 2008.

intervention, personal trainer, integrated information diagnostic system do individuals require in order to excel in whatever world they are required to compete in?

It is certain that evolutionary or revolutionary change never happens without reflective practice. In her article, published in this issue of *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, Carol Gordon proposes that change will not occur unless building level professionals have mentors to partner with and those mentors ask tough questions. In this context, EBP happens. The question of "What difference has it made?" is asked over and over and over. The question for teacher librarians and many other specialists in education is whether many existing programs will be improved in time or face disintegration only to be reborn as the phoenix in new relevant clothing.

Perhaps we are really suggesting that the true EBP strategies must operate simultaneously in both an evolutionary manner and a revolutionary manner simultaneously. Is that possible? Is that the secret to a think-a-day professional vs. just a work-a-day professional? What do you think?

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