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Learning to take the lead with evidence-based practice: A study of school librarians

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Abstract:

Evidence-based practice (EBP) is a cyclical, iterative, and reflective means of using myriad forms of evidence to guide everyday decision-making and to continuously improve the school library program. Multiple professional library organisations and school librarianship leaders have espoused the necessity of school librarians adopting EBP as a regular part of their practice. Research has consistently shown engaging in EBP benefits the library program, the librarian, and stakeholders, but school librarians' experiences with it and comfort level vary considerably. This paper (1) shares the results of a multi-state study situated in the United States which explored school librarians' formal education and professional development within the realm of EBP and (2) discusses the implications for school librarian educators' practice.

Keywords: evidence-based practice; school libraries; school librarianship education.

Introduction & Literature Review

Evidence-based practice (EBP) is an “approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian observed, and research derived evidence...applied to improve the quality of professional judgments” (Booth 2002, 53). Todd explains evidence-based practice (EBP) in school libraries as a process that involves a) drawing upon existing evidence (foundational), b) calling upon professional knowledge as evidence (process), and c) collecting data as a means to measure evidence (outcomes) (Todd, 2001; 2015).

The *IFLA School Library Guidelines* (Schultz-Jones & Oberg 2015) recommend that EBP “...guide the services and programs of a school library and provide the data needed for improvement of professional practice and for ensuring that the services and programs of a school library make a positive contribution to teaching and learning in the school” (p. 11). Additionally, the American Association of School Librarians’ (AASL) *National School Library Standards* (2018) guide librarians to engage in EBP as a means of formatively assessing and improving their work. Recently, AASL affirmed the necessity of EBP in its strategic plan, positioning it as one of three overarching goals for the organisation. If the profession is to “facilitate evidence-informed school librarian practices” (AASL, 2019), it must first understand the existing knowledge and practices of school librarians.

School librarian preparation programs should prepare candidates to “collect, assess, and apply data and information as a means to transform practice and policy in school libraries to positively impact the diverse cultural terrain of groups and individuals in their learning communities” (AASL, 2019), and librarians who engage in such practices develop a “chain of evidence [that] is logical, accessible, and asserted to be impactful” (Schultz-Jones et al. 2018, p. 18).

Yet, prior studies of evidence-based librarianship suggest that the practice is nuanced (Gillespie et al., 2017) and particularly difficult for school librarians (Boulden, Pellegrino, & Gerakios, 2019; Richey & Cahill, 2014). School librarians’ facility with evidence-based practice (EBP) varies tremendously: some report reliance on the practice (Tam, Rebrovic-Habek, & Dukic, 2019) and others report unfamiliarity with it (Dowell, 2019; Subramaniam, 2015).

This paper shares the results of a multi-state study, situated in the United States, that explored school librarians’ formal education and professional development within the realm of EBP, addressing the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ 1: To what extent did formal library education help school librarians develop the necessary knowledge and skills to apply EBP?
- RQ 2: Outside of formal library education, which resources, tools, and/or opportunities are most valuable in supporting school librarians’ applications of evidence-based practice?

Methodology

School librarians working in the states of Kentucky, Texas, and Virginia in the United States of America were invited via email to complete an anonymous survey about data collection, data sharing, and learning about data and evidence. Survey content included 36 multiple choice, multiple answer, and open-ended questions. To determine frequency and percentages, descriptive statistical analysis was utilised. To analyse relationships, an independent t-test was used to perform the analysis on the total number of items, and the results were confirmed using nonparametric analyses.

Of the estimated 8,677 potential participants invited to complete the survey, 196 people attempted the survey, and 163 responses met all criteria for inclusion. Participants worked in public (92.6%, n=149) and private 7.4% (n=12) schools, and served a variety of age levels (Table 1).

Table 1
Levels of Students Participants Serve

Level	% (n)
Preschool (ages 3-5 years)	20.9% (34)
Elementary school (ages 5-11 years)	54.0% (88)
Middle school (ages 11-14 years)	32.5% (53)
High school (ages 14-18 years)	26.4% (43)
Other	3.7% (6)

Findings

Study findings reveal that most school librarians receive at least some instruction on data collection and analysis in their preparation coursework; yet, additional professional development may be necessary, as one participant noted “I wish I'd had more instruction in this area. A few assignments weren't enough.” When presented with a list of possible EBP-related courses and/or activities participants may have completed during their librarian certification programs, approximately half of participants indicated receiving some form of instruction on data collection and evidence and/or a required course on research methods (Table 2).

Table 2
EBP-related Library Education Course and/or Activity

Library Education Course/Activity	% (n)
Instruction on data collection and evidence interwoven throughout program coursework	52.2% (84)
Required course on research methods	51.6% (83)
Assignments on data collection	41.0% (66)
My library education did not prepare me to collect and analyse data	13.7% (22)
Other	9.3% (15)
Elective course on research methods	7.5% (12)

Interestingly, participants who reported learning about data collection and analysis through a required course on research methods during their library education were not statistically different in the number of ways they collect data than those who did not indicate taking a required course on research methods.

Conversely, Participants who reported learning about data collection and analysis through instruction on data collection and evidence during their library education used more ways to collect data about

- learner outcomes in the school library,
- collaborations with teachers,
- stakeholder perceptions and feedback, and
- professional practice

than those who did not indicate receiving instruction on data collection and evidence.

Participants who reported learning about data collection and analysis through assignments on data collection during their library education used more ways to collect data on

- the collection and use of materials,
- collaborations with teachers,
- stakeholder perceptions and feedback, and
- professional practice

than those who did not learn through assignments on data collection.

Not surprisingly, participants who reported that their librarian education did not prepare them to collect and analyse data used fewer ways to collect data on

- library usage,
- learner outcomes in the school library,
- stakeholder perceptions and feedback, and
- professional practice

than those who did not select that their librarian education did not prepare them to collect and analyse data.

In addition to their formal coursework, participants pointed to other resources, tools and opportunities that they use to learn about data collection, data analysis, and EBP. Prime among those informal learning experiences are regional and state school librarian meetings and conferences (81.4%, n=131), professional school library journals (79.5%, n=128), and district level workshops/trainings designed for school librarians (56.5%, n=91) as their primary means for learning about data collection, data analysis, or EBP. Participants also identified regional and state school librarian meetings and conferences (68.9%, n=111), professional school library journals (42.2%, n=68), and district level workshops/trainings designed for school librarians (37.2%, n=60) as being the most valuable resources to their work.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest, as school librarian educators, we should be providing instruction on EBP to both pre-service and in-service school librarians. School librarianship curriculum should include meaningful and practical instruction and assignments whereby students develop skills necessary to integrate EBP into practice as librarians. There is, of course, value in required research methods courses; however, assignments should be tailored to school library practice. To facilitate in-service school librarians' skill development or refinement, school librarian educators should reach practitioners through the avenues they

perceive to be most valuable: regional and state school librarian meetings and conferences and professional school library journals.

Conclusion

EBP is a valuable means of assessing and improving the school library program. With the combined approach of integrating meaningful and purposeful assignments into school librarianship coursework and delivering instruction at conferences and in professional journals, school librarians have the potential to develop skills necessary to routinely engage in EBP in their library programs, thus demonstrating their value to the school community.

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