Hearing the Voices of those We Help: Finding the Natural, Multidimensional Perspectives on the Value of School Libraries

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The Editor of School Library Media Research (Daniel Callison) asked Ross Todd to comment on his recent research projects and his perspectives on the research agenda for future work by others at various universities. Todd's efforts to reveal the value of school libraries on various levels of learning are well documented in studies in Ohio, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. Access to his work in collaboration with Carol Kuhlthau and the Ohio Educational Library Media Association can be located at www.oelma.org/studentlearning

Triple Research Foci

At a broad level, my research primarily focuses on the engagement of people and their information worlds, and how this interaction can be understood to facilitate professional action and change and make a difference to individuals, organizations, societies, and nations. Drawing on an intellectually diverse and rich multidisciplinary base, it focuses on understanding the interconnectedness of people, information, and knowledge, and the development of creative and responsive information and knowledge infrastructures that can make a difference to individuals, social groups, institutions, and organizations, and facilitate professional action and change. Against this broad backdrop, my research specifically focuses on the transformative role of school libraries in twenty-first-century schools, their integral role in the learning fabric of schools, and their role in ongoing school improvement and reform. At the center of this is children—understanding how they connect with, interact with, and use the information world to learn and how they build knowledge of the world around them and of themselves. So my research starts with children, and takes on three foci.

Understanding How Children Learn

Understanding how children learn and build new knowledge from information is, to me, at the

Information Utilization for Learning

learning in an effort to gain a more holistic picture of the contribution of school libraries to student learning. Certainly, I believe that it is critical importance to demonstrate the relationship of school libraries to student achievement as measured by standardized test scores; however, the value-added contribution of school libraries beyond test scores on any large scale is little understood, so we wanted to reach beyond the substantive accumulation of data on test scores, and try to capture a wider, multidimensional perspective of the impact of school libraries on students and their learning.

Kuhlthau's Research

Of course, shaping this work has been the significant work of Carol Kuhlthau, who has been an enormous source of inspiration and guidance for me, and the greatest privilege I have had in my academic career was to work with her at Rutgers University. Her research provides an understanding of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of students' encounters with information and their information-to-knowledge experience, and how they might be supported in this endeavor to build personal knowledge and understanding. This work is particularly significant in the context of help, as it emphasizes how people may be enabled and supported in their quest to seek meaning and develop understanding, but it also articulates mediation and intervention as key help mechanisms, with school librarians becoming involved in the constructive process of another person. While I think that most instructional interventions of school librarians tend to focus on access to resources—that is, finding stuff—we also wanted to give some attention to understanding more fully help in the context of the students engaging with information to meet curriculum content objectives, both in terms of source and access helps, as well as in terms of using information to build new knowledge of curriculum topics, and to explore some of the cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of engaging in the information search process.

What Was Found in Ohio and Delaware

In our Ohio and Delaware studies, then, "help" was conceptually defined as institutional involvement through advice and assistance in the information seeking and use experiences of people (helps as inputs), and the effect of the institution's activities and services on the people it serves (helps as outcomes/impacts). We made a decision to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, driven by a belief that a combination of numerical data supported by the voice of the students in the form of stories would hopefully provide some compelling data on school libraries' impact on students' lives. Given our focus on students, we did not want the students to be lost in myriad statistics, to be reduced to sets of numerical data where their humanity is lost.

Given the evidence-based practice focus of this study, and our goal to enable schools to use this study—both methodology and findings—to improve practice at the local school level, we also wanted to create a relatively simple data collection instrument that individual school libraries

Methods for Data Collection

We collected the data in two ways. First, we operationalized "help" in terms of set of statements

few of the students took us to task in their comments, saying that it was not the school library per se, but the work of their school librarian.

SLMR: A problem with not clearly showing that the professional school media specialist was the key or important helper, rather than the "generic" school library is that many can derive for this study that trained, experienced and efficient library assistants can deliver much of what is described as "help" in place of the professional. While library assistants are important in the operation of the school library, the certified, professional librarian is not readily identified in the survey. Therefore, it is problematic to assume the students recognized the difference between the certified professional and the library assistant, and one might conclude that a school library can provide such help services, staffed with professionals or not.

Hearing Stories of Success

As a researcher, I really am interested in listening to the responses, stepping into the minds of people to try to see what is going on there, and hearing it from their perspective. In our data driven world, it bothers me that the human spirit, the human voice, is lost, and we wanted to bring together both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions. To gather qualitative data in both the Ohio and Delaware studies, we provided an open-ended, critical incident question (based on Flanagan 1954) to enable students to articulate specific instances of feset, tm <</MCI-2(c)4(i)-i8u9(c) 73 d,

The school libraries involved were not chosen from a random sample of schools, and therefore no claim to representativeness can be made. Rather, the studies were grounded in best practice. We wanted to construct a picture of what goes on in quality school libraries, and to learn from that to set in motion a cycle of continuous improvement, particularly at the local school level. Thirty-nine schools across Ohio and the thirteen schools in Delaware were carefully selected to participate in these studies on the basis of providing an "effective school library program." The criteria for selection, derived from existing research, such as Lance's work, were based on building-level presence of credentialed staff; curriculum-centeredness; adequate, appropriate, and diverse resources; information technology infrastructure for accessing and using information in various media and formats; information literacy instruction; and reading enrichment programs.

We did not set out to study school libraries that did not meet these criteria. People often have asked us why we didn't study "bad" school libraries? Good question. It has a complex answer. What does a bad school library look like? What criteria determine a bad school library? Who would volunteer a bad school library for study, and what would it achieve? Given that the Ohio and Delaware studies were undertaken on behalf of school library associations and task forces who funded these studies, would they commission a study of bad school libraries? Would I even want to do a study of bad school libraries?

We went into these studies knowing that we were charting a somewhat different direction for state-based studies, and continue to learn from them. It is gratifying to see others building on these studies and taking them in thoughtful directions, and reaching beyond the limitations we had on these studies.

The Study in New Jersey

I want to comment somewhat on the New Jersey study we undertook through an IMLS grant in 2003–2005. This study was quite small, and I do not consider it a state study by any means. It involved ten schools, ten school librarians, seventeen classroom teachers, and almost six hundred students. Although it took a completely different approach to those undertaken in Ohio and Delaware, some things were common. It, too, focused on documenting the experiences and perspectives of students and was situated within a broader goal of developing an evidence-based practice focus. It also sought to provide both research-based data, as well as a set of tools that could be implemented at the local school level to chart and measure learning outcomes through the school library.

Rather than focusing on multiple dimensions of help, this study focused on charting the changes in students' knowledge of a curriculum topic in a collaborative instructional unit involving school librarians and classroom teachers, and where instructional interventions focused on guiding students through their inquiry. Why did we go down this track? Through our previous work, and, of course, through the work of Keith Curry Lance, we get a sense that school libraries do help students in a multitude of ways. We know that they contribute to student achievement, as measured by standardized test scores. But at the grassroots level, what exactly do they learn? Do they learn anything though undertaking the numerous research assignments and tasks they are asked to do utilizing the school library? And if they do learn something, as we hope they do, what does this learning actually look like? Did their knowledge and understanding of their topics change because of all the work they did in the school library, and because of the instructional interventions to support them?

To me these are much more intriguing questions, and really get to the heart of what I am interested in researching. This is much more microscopic research, and I really believe that we have to get down to this level, starting small, trying to look at and measure what is going on at the grassroots level in the classroom and the library. It means getting into the action in the classroom and the small library. This is important for two reasons. First, if we ever are going to make a contribution to the "gold standard" based on randomized blind trials, testing the efficacy of a range of instructional interventions, then we have to come into this with some deeper understanding of what is going on at the grassroots level, and build the larger research accordingly. Second, we also have to empower professional practice at the school level, not just providing insights into what goes on and how this can contribute to a cycle of continuous improvement, but developing some mechanisms for measuring the change in learning at the local school level.

So our study in New Jersey tried to accomplish several broad goals. First, to establish what changes, if any, are evident in students' knowledge of a curriculum-related topic as they proceed through the stages of a collaborative inquiry project. In essence, we were curious to see how students build on existing knowledge and transform found information into personal knowledge, and how their knowledge of a topic changes. Second, to identify what changes, if any, are shown in the students' feelings as they proceed through the stages of a collaborative inquiry project. Third, to see if and how the students' study approach influences knowledge const-2(nf)3(lr)3(oj)-2(e) o cu(ud)-1 stea6(ol)-2(l)-

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3. How did the teacher help you?

Following the New Jersey research and the feedback from the participating teams, we refined these instruments. These instruments have been further tested by fifteen teams of school librarians and classroom teachers across the United States, and we are currently analyzing a great deal of data that will help us further refine and package the instruments. We see this as part of the evidence004 Tcl frbi -1(n(f)3(th)-6(ls)-1p1.15 T(br)-(pa)4(ve)ud(ha)4(ve)4(be)2(r)3(m t)-2y)30.
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Third, on the basis of what the data tell me, how can I continuously improve my practice to ensure that I provide the best opportunities for students to learn and to succeed—to be, to do, and to become? For example, in the Ohio and Delaware studies, their perceptions of how school libraries supports them on their wider reading interests and the development of their identities were lower than other dimensions in the studies. This is not saying that the school library did not help them with their reading aspects, it was that they perceived other dimensions of the school library to be more helpful. Yet I would wager that most school library policies and mission statements has some rhetoric about school libraries and students and reading. So the challenge is to reflect on what is happening in the local school library, and to be honest about current practices, and to rethink and reshape practices that will realize the rhetoric.

I suspect that most reading enrichment initiatives center on book talks, literature displays, book promotions, and the like, all which seem to be fairly passive activities. In the light of the findings, how can we rethink and reshape the initiatives and interventions we have traditionally used to build and sustain an active reading culture? When we analyzed what works in Ohio and Delaware in terms of engaging students in reading for pleasure, we found, from the perspective of the students, that they valued such things as availability of latest releases; personalized, targeted, proactive service; identifying interests; developing self-esteem; using curriculum as link to reading enjoyment and enrichment, and being shown that academic success can be achieved through improving reading.

The Ohio and Delaware studies also showed just how much the students valued the provision of information technology, not just as a tool for finding information, but as a tool for helping them create presentations that represent their knowledge of their topics. The findings enable as to ask, for instance, how do we use the available information technology in the library to build a more active and motivated reading culture? I see multiple opportunities to foster active student engagement, discussion and creative outputs through Web blogs; book raps; interactive book reviews; online literature circles and reading pals; student-created e-books; student-run school reading Web pages; and student-generated summer reading programs.

I think that the general questions that these studies raise ask us to look at the role of school libraries in relation to reading initiatives much more carefully. Across the country, there is increasing attention being given to students engaging with informational texts for learning, and school libraries must address this more carefully in the context of not just promoting, but playing a central role in, the development of literacy. Improving children's literacy require careful consideration of instructional strategies that are sustained over long periods of time. This means that school librarians must be much more astute in assessing the needs of students in research and reading environments, and being much more actively engaged in the literacy and reading policies and frameworks in the school.

Future Research Agenda

SLMR: What is your likely research agenda for the next two years as a result of what you have learned from these recent studies?

I really want to continue to develop the evidence-based practice frontier, and empower and enable school librarians to do this at their local level. In many respects, the findings of all of the statewide studies are lost if school librarians expect or wait for someone else (such as politicians,

school superintendents) to take action. Far too often I get the wailing question, "What are you doing with this research?" The expectation is that I am the one out there bringing it to the attention of the decision-making authorities. I want our school librarians to realize that all the state studies undertaken are "their" research, not "my" research, and that they are clarion calls for them to take action. Taking action means that they are living the solution. Not taking action means that they will be living someone else's dreams and someone else's solutions, and someone else's solutions may not be in the best interest of student learning outcomes through the school library, or their own future.

That said, the work we did in New Jersey tracking changes in knowledge has left a very strong impression on me. I want to focus my research energies on understanding the dynamics of students learning through the school library. This means taking a really microscopic look at students' information-to-knowledge experiences and processes across multiple disciplines, grade levels, and learning needs; looking at the learning that is going on; and developing ways to measure this learning and to accumulate the diverse evidence across multiple contexts.

This suggests a variety of approaches: comparative case studies, experimental and quasi experimental designs, even some ethnographic and longitudinal work to understand what is going on and what learning outcomes result. What I would like to come out of this is not just a richer understanding of the information-to-knowledge process, and of course, a richer pool of data, but also an understanding of how student inquiry through the school library can be more effectively enabled and guided by school librarians; that is, how instructional interventions and mediations might be more effectively designed to bring about the highest and richest quality of learning outcomes through the school library.

To put it simply, if that is even possible, I want to focus on the utilization of information for learning, to understand that dynamic, particularly building on the research on the Information Search Process that Carol Kuhlthau has given us. What are the most effective instructional interventions that can guide students as they progress though each stage of their search process? This is really why we have established the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries at Rutgers University.

Instructional Interventions

What this raises further to me is the nature of the instructional interventions that school librarians need to undertake in order to enable students to develop knowledge in rich and complex ways. As I mentioned earlier, my thinking has somewhat been shaped by what Gore, Griffiths, and Ladwig (2004) call productive pedagogy, which focuses on the development of higher order thinking, depth of knowledge, depth of understanding, ability to engage in substantive conversation, ability to recognize knowledge as problematic, and reading grounded in language, grammar, and technical vocabulary.

We have to ask, "What constitutes productive pedagogy in the school library?" My suspicion is that much of the instructional intervention that goes on in school libraries (if it even goes on) focuses on students accessing, finding, and evaluating information, with considerably much less attention given to instructional interventions that focus on doing something with this found information in deep ways. In other words, instructional intervention focus on information as input, rather than on knowledge and understanding as outcome. This raises another fundamental

In this respect, the proposed AASL learning standards represents a fundamental set of claims about the school library's role in learning. Each of these claims should be clearly underpinned by research that gives authority to the claims, and clearly demonstrates to all educational stakeholders that the school library profession's basis for operation is a strong research foundation. Each of these claims provide opportunities for further research, so that the research platform for practice continues to build in a focused and powerful way. By addressing these claims, we establish a coherent research program that continues to build the research and cumulate the findings in a strong way. This also will enable us to focus on the complex learning dimensions and to understand the information-knowledge experience of students in much more detail, and what might be the range of appropriate instructional interventions. I really do think that we have to focus on elucidating and testing instructional interventions so that we work to continuously improve the instructional interventions of school librarians.

Applying What Is Learned from the State Studies

SLMR: How should we use the information and methods from the "state studies" to improve school library media specialist performance, rather than to simply "protect" current school librarian jobs?

I think we need to give much more attention to improving the performance of professional practice. What comes across very clearly in all of the state studies is the centrality of the instructional role of the school librarian, and intervening through instruction in the library and