I like to see the most productive of questions get born out of laughter, and the most frustrating of brick walls give way to learning what has been there all along.

—Eleanor Duckworth (1986)

Professional practice is never perfect, especially the instructional dimension of school librarianship, which is always a work in progress. We review, rehearse, reflect, and revise our instruction, trying to do it better each time. While a serendipitous, non-systematic approach may seem less stressful, it is no fun to meander from one mistake to another. Action without reflection often misses the mark. Informing our work with what works can guide us to productive questions and the discovery of reliable and creative teaching methods that will help us break through what may seem like brick walls. One of those discoveries is collaborative teaching. However, another exciting collaboration is the powerful synergy between school librarians and school library researchers.

The articles in this issue of Knowledge Quest explore the instructional dimension of school librarianship central to evidence-based practice. The subtext of these articles poses interesting questions such as: “What do school library researchers and school library practitioners have in common?” and “What can they learn and accomplish together?”

It may seem as though they live in different worlds, but researchers in our profession share important goals with school librarians: To demonstrate the impact of school libraries on student learning and to continuously improve instruction. Evidence-based practice emerged more than a decade ago when Ross Todd, a contributor to this issue, applied evidence-based practice to school librarianship. He describes a framework for action: evidence for practice (reading the research), evidence in practice (applying the librarian’s expertise), and evidence of practice (students’ learning outcomes). In his article Ross champions school librarians as transformational agents who collect local evidence from their everyday work that demonstrates the impact of school library programs on student learning.

Mega Subramaniam, a researcher, addresses a particular case related to Ross’s challenge: the lack of evidence for what school librarians contribute to student achievement in STEM content areas. This evidence gap weakens claims that school libraries make a difference in student achievement.

On the other hand, an abundance of evidence shows that school library instruction impacts student achievement in reading and writing. Caroline Gordon Messenger, a classroom teacher, demonstrates how evidence-based practice can link instruction in information literacy with improving comprehension through reading strategies. Caroline models how inquiry teaching in the classroom can deliver a hybrid instructional model using research-based Guided Inquiry.

Carole Stubeck, an elementary school librarian, also uses Guided Inquiry to structure her teaching. Carole documents an action research project that uses stages of
the Information Search Process and digital technology to overcome problems of fixed scheduling by extending instruction from school library spaces to classroom and virtual spaces.

Like Carole, Joyce Valenza, a researcher and educator of pre-service librarians, applies technology to improve instructional practice. Joyce presents a rationale for rethinking the tools school library leaders use in collecting evidence and describes new digital tools for examining, analyzing, and sharing student work.

Susan Ballard, a consultant and educator of librarians, tells her story of how action research, as a tool of evidence-based practice, changed the culture of her school district. Susan’s narrative relates how action research became a sustainable model as it spread across the district to involve teachers as well as school librarians in evidence-based practice.

Kevin McGrath, a school librarian, applies design thinking and digital technology to the redesign of his school library. Like action research, design thinking involves reflection, gathering evidence, and drawing conclusions in a team approach to problem solving. Kevin describes how evidence-based practice helped educators and students in his school create a new learning environment in the library that included a high-tech Innovation Lab.

Hannah Byrd Little, a school librarian and administrator, also takes a team approach to presenting her students with rigorous intellectual challenges. Hannah offers a whole-school approach to a senior Capstone project that requires students to read peer-reviewed research, formulate theories, and conduct primary research. She describes how a school librarian meets the same challenges as her students when she aims to generate local evidence and to deliver evidence-based advocacy.

Jennifer Richey and Maria Cahill are collaborating researchers who ask interesting questions about school library practice. Jennifer and Maria use Ross’s well-known approach to study school librarians’ use of the three dimensions of evidence-based practice. Their findings will surprise you.

Five themes emerge from these articles—themes that are common ground for researchers and school librarians to connect their work in the context of evidence-based practice:

1) The dimension of school librarianship central to evidence-based practice is instruction;

2) The common goals of evidence-based practice for the researcher and school librarian are to demonstrate the impact of school libraries on student learning and to continuously improve instruction;

3) Local evidence generated by the work of school librarians is a critical piece of evidence-based teaching and evidence-based advocacy;

4) Guided Inquiry, action research, design thinking, and other research-tested methods can improve instruction while providing evidence of its impact on learning; and

5) Digital technology can facilitate evidence-based practice and provide solutions to problems of practice.

There is strong consensus among these authors: Local evidence generated, documented, and shared by school librarians in their everyday practice is the most powerful effect of evidence-based practice that can ensure a future for school libraries. Enjoy the authors’ explorations, discoveries, and reflections!


Work Cited: