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Filling a gap: would evidence-based school librarianship work in the UK?

Cristina Sacco Ritchie

Abstract

School librarians in the UK have a lower status than librarians in other sectors, and research on school librarianship in the UK is sparse. Annual self-evaluation is one way the profession has tried to make itself more visible. Evidence-based school librarianship (EBSL) could assist school librarians in the UK to improve their services, boost their profile, and build their portfolios as part of existing self-evaluation programmes. EBSL is an off-shoot of evidence-based librarianship, which aims to bridge the gap between research and practice, and encourages practitioners to conduct research in the workplace. Most of the current EBSL work is being done in the US, where school librarians are also typically trained teachers, however, EBSL is suitable for adaptation and use in the UK. Appropriate research methods must be chosen in order to make EBSL work in the UK, action research being one such method.

1 Introduction

Constant pressure to cut budgets and make the most of existing resources threatens any sector which cannot prove itself to be valuable. School librarians are feeling increasing pressure to prove their worth and ensure the safety of future resources, particularly as new schools in the UK have recently opened without school libraries, posts have been downgraded, and many librarians have lost both status and salary in the Single Status agreement, some as much as £2,000 a year (see Owen, 2009; *Schools dumping libraries*, 2008). Continual improvement through regular evaluation is one way schools, professional organizations, and advocates have attempted to bring the value of school libraries to the attention of stake- and budget-holders. Regular evaluation allows managers to determine what is and is not working, to identify areas of improvement, and to make judgments about the overall quality of a programme. In order to do this more effectively, current methods of evaluation have shifted focus away from traditional methods

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Author

Cristina Sacco Ritchie is a PhD Researcher at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow.

Email: cristina.ritchie@cis.strath.ac.uk

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such as taking quantitative measures such as stock and issue figures, and moving towards measuring learning outcomes and impacts made by the school library. Some current methods of school library evaluation encourage building a portfolio, documenting actions and achievements of the school library throughout the course of the year.

This paper will look at a potentially valuable tool in the arsenal of school library evaluation, evidence-based school librarianship (EBSL), which facilitates the process of asking what needs improvement, and the process of finding the best way to make those improvements. EBSL also provides a way to build a portfolio of evidence demonstrating professionalism and reflective practice. In the UK, where school librarians have a diminished position compared to librarians in other sectors, EBSL is a potential lifeline, a means to align the school library to the goals of the school, and to show that school libraries and school librarians contribute positively to academic life.

2 School Librarians in the UK

School librarians in the UK are typically solo-workers (Tilke 2002, 32) with no vertical mobility and extremely limited potential for career advancement. Historically, school librarianship has been perceived as a job for new graduates (see, amongst others, School Library Association, 1980, 21; Stimpson, 1976, 26), and this perception persists today. As solo workers, school librarians must carry out a wide range of tasks, including budget management, training, cataloguing, computer help, maintaining a website, marketing, and most importantly, he or she must build and maintain good relationships with patrons of all ages. Despite this wide range of responsibilities, school librarians are not compensated accordingly. Research conducted in 2008 suggests that school librarians in much of Scotland have lower pay ceilings than public librarians, in some cases, even lower than the pay grade specifically for children's librarians (Ritchie, 2009). Fewer prospects for career advancement, and a terminally low salary, however, do not appear to undermine the job satisfaction of school librarians. Recent research in the US found that school librarians are more likely than other types of librarians, such as cataloguers and reference librarians, to exhibit optimism, teamwork, emotional resilience, and a visionary work style (Williamson, Pemberton and Lounsbury, 2008). School librarians in particular enjoy high levels of job satisfaction: Berry writes that 85.6 percent of over 3000 library workers surveyed said that if they were to start over, they would choose a career in librarianship again, and among school librarians the figure is higher at 94 percent (Berry, 2007). There are no published figures for the UK with which to compare, however, as part of a survey undertaken as part of the author's Master's research, 84% of 225 responding school librarians across the UK reported being either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their job overall, however, 56% were either "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with their pay (Ritchie, 2008).

Across the UK, school library staffing is inconsistent, however, recent research indicates that in Scotland, 29 of 31 responding councils (out of a total of 32 councils) make a practice of hiring professional school librarians, and not library assistants (Ritchie, 2009). It is statutory in Scotland for schools to have school libraries, unlike in the rest of the UK. There are historical reasons for this; the

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Stimpson Report, published in 1976 for the Scottish Department of Education, is widely cited as one of the most influential works in the history of school libraries in Scotland (among others, see Valentine and Nelson, 1988, 4; Carroll, 1981, 193). The Stimpson Report recommended that each secondary school with more than 600 pupils have a centralised resource centre staffed by a professional librarian, or a qualified library assistant in schools with fewer than 600 pupils (Stimpson, 1976, 24). The number of qualified librarians in Scottish schools rose from 70 before the Stimpson Report (Stimpson, 1976, 27) to over 300 by 2002 (Knowles, 2002, 174). Scottish school librarians typically have a bachelor's degree in a subject area and a post-graduate qualification (diploma or Master's) in Library and Information Science, Library Management, or an equivalent (Herring, 1998). The Stimpson Report did not gain much traction outside of Scotland. In England, many fewer schools employ professional librarians, instead assigning a teacher to run the library (referred to in the literature as "teacher librarians"). According to a UK-wide survey on secondary school library staffing in 2000, 36.6% respondents were full or part-time chartered librarians, 17.6% were full or part-time teachers, and 3.6 were teacher-librarians. Nearly half of those surveyed, 46.8%, fell into the category of "other", i.e. they were neither fully qualified as teachers nor librarians (Tilke, 2002, 22). Comparing this data with the figures from Scotland, it is reasonable to assume that most of those working in school libraries without qualifications are in England.

The status of the librarian within the school is highly variable. Studies have suggested that the support of a head teacher is critical to the development of a school library, particularly in terms of vision, planning, resources, and monitoring problems (Oberg, 2006, 13). Ofsted found that in their survey, "overwhelmingly, the most significant element in bringing about improvements was the commitment and support of effective head teachers," (Ofsted, 2006, 1). Turner, *et al*. (2007), comment that senior management is a major factor affecting the running of school libraries, but found that 27.2% of respondents disagreed (slightly or strongly) that senior management understand the way the library is run. Oberg also notes that research has shown that teacher-librarians have low expectations of the support of head teachers, although they believe that support of the head teacher is critical to the success of the school library (Oberg, 2006, 13). Recent research indicates school librarians who feel that their supervisor is not supportive of the library were: most likely to feel they have the same status within the school as clerical staff, most likely to be planning on leaving their jobs within two years, and are also far less likely to feel respected by teaching staff (Ritchie, 2008). Tilke poses a potential reason why head teachers may have little understanding of the role of school librarians: because many may never have ever hired one. As Tilke points out, if a school librarian has worked at a school for ten years, and the head teacher has worked there for nine, then that head teacher will have never hired a school librarian in that school. The same could be said for the business manager, or any other member of the senior management team in a school (Tilke, 2002, 32). In order to improve the long-term position of school librarians, it is important to influence the thinking of head teachers.

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3 School Library Research in the UK

Current school library research in the UK is sparse. There is currently no national picture of provision for Scotland (Knowles, 2002), and the collection of annual library statistics published by LISU at Loughborough University has been discontinued. School library research is unique in that in order to study school libraries fully, one must touch on at least one other discipline, education, within the scope of study. This means that school library research often straddles a line between library research and education research, and "research aimed at evaluating the role of library and information services in support of other disciplines lacks a conceptual framework and an accepted body of methodologies," (Johnson *et al*., 2004). McLelland comments that the problem with contemporary school library literature in the UK is that little library literature is research-based, and research in librarianship tends to be carried out by individuals rather than properly-funded teams (McLelland, 2005, 9). McLelland attributes this imbalance in the literature to the preference on the part of practicing librarians for information about practical problems, also arguing that librarianship journals are more likely to publish a study if it is dramatic or favorable rather than critical (Eldredge, 2004, cited by McLelland, 2005 9). Johnson, *et al*., attempt to sound the alarm by warning that, given "the present weak state of evidence linking the activities of libraries and information services with organisations' performance," it will be difficult to make the case for more resources for school libraries "without more and better research," (Johnson *et al*., 2004). In the US, a large body of research spanning over ten years and 14 states has indicated with remarkable consistency that American school libraries positively impact student achievement, particularly those with longer opening hours, more teaching hours spent on information skills, high-quality collections, and more professional staff (amongst others, see Lance, Rodney, and Hamilton-Penell, 2000; Lance, Rodney, and Russell, 2007).

4 Evidence-Based Librarianship

The tension between research and practice is a well-worn conflict in librarianship. Evidence-based practice (EBP) attempts to bridge this gap. EBP originated in the healthcare sector in the UK in the 1990s, and since then, evidence-based librarianship (EBL) and evidence-based practice in teaching have both gained traction as well (Todd, 2008; Eldredge, 2004). EBL "seeks to combine the use of the best available research evidence with a pragmatic perspective developed from working experiences in librarianship," (Eldredge, 2006). At the core of EBP, EBL, and its younger descendant, evidence-based school librarianship (EBSL), is the idea that users are best served when the bridge between research and practice, or theory and expertise, is strong. Eldredge summarizes this relationship as meaning that practitioners use research results to inform their daily decision-making, and in turn, practicing librarians also become "applied researchers, who strive to 'produce' the research evidence intended for use by practitioners," (Eldredge, 2006).

The most prolific writer on EBSL, Ross Todd of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, takes the duality of the relationship between theory and practice, and expands it. Ross Todd promotes a threefold relationship between evidence and

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practice: there is evidence for practice, which is to use the best research available in order to inform daily problem-solving; there is evidence in practice, which is the application of research to practice; and there is evidence from practice, wherein practitioners pose answerable research questions and conduct research within their own school libraries, ideally to be disseminated for the benefit of other practitioners (Todd, 2008; Todd, 2009). Unlike in the medical profession, small-scale school library research undertaken in professional practice "is considered to be of value alongside evidence from published research studies," (Todd 2003, cited by Clyde, 2005) which means that all three legs of Todd's model have value in the wider world of school librarianship.

5 Suitability of EBSL in the UK

EBP and EBL originated in the UK, and as such, the foundations exist for its spread into British school librarianship. In addition, as Booth points out, the relatively small size of the UK provides an advantage in terms of potential uptake and coordination:

[T]he UK scene is more compact than that in the USA and yet more intensive than that in Canada. If one is to attempt to promote the uptake of a paradigm, it should be more achievable in a national setting where there are less than a dozen regional constituencies, a similar number of academic departments and no more than a handful of professional group.

(Booth, 2002, 118)

An aspect of EBSL, however, as promoted by Gordon (2005) and Gordon and Todd (2009), is the idea that EBSL is particularly well-suited to the teaching aspect of school librarianship. Of course, school librarians in the US and in Australia are typically trained as teachers as well as librarians, an idea that gained some traction in the UK, but eventually died out in the 1980s. School librarians in Australia must hold dual-qualifications to work in state schools (Tilke, 1998, 11) and in the US, most states require a Master's degree and a classroom teaching certificate (Thomas and Perritt, 2003) though the exact requirements vary from state to state. This means that school librarians in these countries, where the bulk of EBSL research comes from, are trained in pedagogy. They are also charged with teaching information skills as part of their remit. These differences inevitably impact their ability to carry out research on learning interventions. This does not, however, limit the potential applicability of EBSL in the UK, it simply means that appropriate research methodologies must be highlighted. Crumley and Koufogiannakis' model for a "core-centered approach" to research in evidence-based librarianship arranges research methodologies by who is more likely to use them, academics, or practitioners (Crumley and Koufogiannakis, 2001, cited by Todd, 2006). At the centre of the core are methodologies likely to be used by librarians in pursuit of answers to practical problems, such as case-studies, interviews, and observational study. At the periphery are methodologies that academics would likely use as part of formal research, such as meta-analysis, cross-sectional study, and randomized, controlled trials. A methodology missing from this model is action research, promoted by Carol Gordon (2007) as particularly useful to evidence-based librarianship. Action research is a suitable

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method allowing school librarians in the UK to undertake what is essentially educational research, because it is intended to be collaborative.

Although there is a lack of consensus about its methodology, action research has been described by various authors as "a tool of evidence-based practice," "problem-focused," and as "insider research done by practitioners using their own site as the focus of their study," (Ballard, March and Sand, 2009). Action research is a collaborative process, and can be an effective way to build partnerships between teachers and school librarians. In addition, the results of action research, when disseminated, have the potential to reach teachers is a way that other research would not: "results of action research can provide the vicarious experiences provided by narrative accounts from schools and classrooms which educators find more helpful than formal educational research," (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994, cited by Gordon, 2005, 38). Ballard, March and Sand (2009), document two action research studies carried out in their school district in Londonderry, New Hampshire. A problem identified in Londonderry was that, even though the school district performed very well, it was felt that "students continued to struggle with the research process and the resulting projects appeared more 'repackaged' than 'reflective' of understanding the topic." With the help of Carol Gordon, the authors surveyed teachers and students asking questions in order to identify whether or not students understood the ethical use of information. They found that students needed better understanding of ethical use of information in two regards: creating an accurate bibliography and the level of collaboration appropriate to schoolwork. Because of the results of these studies, the school developed a statement declaring the school's position on the ethical use of information and included it in the student handbook. Although the team at Londonderry did consult with an outside academic researcher, any solo worker comfortable designing and administering questionnaires or using other research methods is equally capable of running an action research study by him or herself (see Gorman and Clayton, 2005, for information on conducting qualitative research in libraries).

6 Challenges

One of the challenges facing EBSL is the dissemination of research. In order for research to be read by practitioners, it needs to be accessible in publications available to practitioners. Such publications include journals included in membership to professional organizations, such as the School Libraries Worldwide, the official journal of the International Association of School Librarians, as well as publicly-available serials such as the Times Education Supplement. In addition, few practitioners write published articles about research. Clyde and Oberg carried out a study on articles published in School Libraries Worldwide (SLW) from 1995-2003, in order to find out how well SLW supported evidence-based school librarianship. They calculated the percentage of research articles published, and the occupation of the people who wrote them. They found that over 80% of research articles were written by university faculty or PhD students. 7.5% of articles were written by a mixed group, such as a collaboration between an academic and a school librarian, and various practitioners, such as

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school librarians, employees of university libraries, and officers of library authorities contributed just over 2% of the articles each (Clyde and Oberg, 2004).

7 Conclusions

School librarianship in the UK suffers from a chronically low profile and a current lack of robust research. Evidence-based school librarianship can boost the profile of school librarianship whilst working within the current framework of regular evaluation extant in the UK. Despite the fact that school librarians in the UK are not trained as teachers, research methodology is currently a required component of library education programmes in the UK, and therefore, the foundations exist for professional librarians to conduct research in the workplace. On the whole, practitioners are committed to developing their services and "seem more likely to be interested in research that offers them the opportunity to do so," (McNichol and Nankiwell, 2003, cited by Johnson *et al*., 2004). The next step, therefore, for school librarianship, must lie in the gathering of evidence at the local level, and in increased large-scale research. It is promising that University College London has drawn up a proposal for a large-scale impact study using methodologies similar to the large-scale impact studies performed in the US (Owen, 2009, 1). In doing so, the profession must redouble its efforts to effect change in policy. Johnson *et al*. (2004) claim that there is "little merit in increasing research into the impact of libraries and information services if the results are not transferred into the policy-making process," (Johnson *et al*., 2004). This is imperative to strengthen the profession, even if a thorough examination reveals system-wide failures. The burden of responsibility to initiate improvement rests most heavily on the LIS research community and the professional organisations. Without large-scale work, local efforts will not be disseminated and the profession as a whole will not benefit. Conversely, enthusiastic work at the national level without buy-in and commitment on the part of the school librarian means that national campaigns will be an empty, pointless exercise. As demonstrated by a large and growing body of international evidence, school libraries are too important to let go to waste.

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