

The Canadian school libraries research toolkit: Supporting practitioner research for the school library learning commons

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

Snapshot

Anita Brooks Kirkland champions action research and evidence based practice within our profession and describes the Canadian school libraries research toolkit.

What does the research say? I'm positive that everyone reading this who has ever tried to implement a new strategy has been asked that question. And when administrators and decision-makers ask the question, it is best that we have the answer! Increasingly those answers are coming from action research, conducted by teacher-librarians and other school library professionals as they integrate research into their own practice. Action research helps us to understand our own practice more deeply by exploring the impact of specific instructional strategies. Shared with colleagues, the results of action research inspire innovation and move school libraries forward. This very specific research puts evidence-based practice into action. Yet many practitioners feel uncertainty when faced with the prospect of doing research, fearing that they lack the background or knowledge to be effective. Canadian School Libraries (CSL) has addressed this uncertainty with the creation of the [CSL Research Toolkit](#).

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The evolution of school library research

To understand the importance of practitioner research, we must put it into the larger context of trends in school library research overall. The past three decades have seen the emergence of more and more research into school library programs and student achievement. We have come to rely on this body of research, but frequently it does not provide the answers we need. School libraries are good for students, but there is similar research on practically every other aspect of education, particularly in program areas that find themselves under persistent threat. As an active musician and former music teacher, I can quote many large studies showing the positive impact of music education on students, but alas political support and funding for both school libraries and music programs remain similarly precarious.

Increasingly researchers are moving away from the 'school libraries are good for you' approach to being able to demonstrate precisely why that is the case. Understanding specific practices becomes exponentially more important when we make this shift.

Don't rely on the big research studies to make your case

While recent research looks increasingly at specific practices, it does not always provide the answers we need. Try as we might, finding research to answer decision-makers' questions about new strategies may prove difficult.

Here's the first problem. The majority of the big studies upon which we rely are American. The large-scale studies done by researchers like Keith Curry Lance dominate the literature. Their importance is irrefutable, but the context is not necessarily comparable to the situation in Australia where you live, and in Canada where I live.

Lack of Canadian research into the efficacy of school libraries and school library programs has been a persistent concern for decades. *The crisis in Canada's school libraries: The case for reform and re-investment* (2003) by Dr. Ken Haycock decried the paucity of Canadian research and cited it as a reason for the perceived decline in school library programs. In its expert panel report on the future of Canada's libraries (*The future now: Canada's libraries, archives, and public memory*, 2014) the Royal Society of Canada re-stated this concern, but also cited important Canadian studies that had emerged since the Haycock report.

A similar call for research specific to the country's context has been made in Australia. In her report to the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) in 2003, Michelle Lonsdale stated:

In terms of evaluating the impact of the school library on broader aspects of learning, it may be that a series of focused, small-scale, qualitative studies are a more useful option in an Australian context than the large-scale, quantitative models adopted by researchers in the United States. Such methodological approaches as action research, survey questionnaires, case studies and interviews would be ideally suited to studies seeking to measure the difference that school libraries and librarians can make in an Australian setting, particularly on more intangible outcomes such as autonomy, confidence and self-esteem, or on particular subgroups, such as non-English-speaking students, indigenous students, low-achieving students or those at risk. Longitudinal studies that track changes over time need not be large scale and could also prove a useful source of information.

The second problem we might have in relying on earlier large-scale studies is that while they demonstrate compelling correlations between school library programs and student success, they offer little insight into just exactly what we do to achieve those results. In their review of research into school library programs over the past decade, Johnston and Santos Green (2018) cite this as a particular problem. They suggest that interpretation of correlational studies is often subjective, and refer to school library researcher and scholar Ross Todd's call for greater precision in examining outcomes for students and the impact of school library initiatives on student learning.

Relying on the evidence

Mentioning evidence-based practice (EBP) means mentioning Dr. Ross Todd in the world of

school libraries, of course. I dare say that he is very well-known to *Synergy* readers. I must tell you of the impression he made on me and my colleagues, school library instructional leaders from across Ontario, when he introduced us to evidence-based practice in the early 2000s. With his legendary energy, he implored us to get off of our soap boxes and advocate with the evidence! Emerging from the era of correlational research, he caught us off-guard, inspiring us, yes, but making our hearts freeze in terror at the same time! How were we going to do that? What kind of evidence? How could we gather the evidence within our perceived constraints? Yet Dr. Todd's call resonated here in Canada, and indeed world-wide. In his famous and provocatively-titled article, *Evidence-based manifesto: If school librarians can't prove they make a difference, they may cease to exist* (2008) Todd implored us to focus on learning, measuring our impact by the outcomes for students.

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For school librarians, the big question regarding EBP is, 'Why do school libraries matter today, particularly in the context of an educational world that increasingly relies on diverse, complex and often conflicting sources of information?' The answer lies in student outcomes – specifically, what school librarians can do in their instructional practices to ensure those outcomes.

Evidence-based practice focuses on what works – what specific practices have an impact on student learning. Researchers seek out the best available evidence of effective practice that has an impact on student learning. From an evidence-based practice point of view, the importance of local action research by practitioners becomes increasingly important. The collaborative model of school library instruction provides a particularly powerful context for that research.

Create the Evidence

Empirical academic research, even if it is evidence-based, may however still have its limitations in terms of providing insight into specific practices. In education, teacher action research has become increasingly important for discovering what works and how, and this approach holds particular promise when applied to the collaborative learning environment of the school library. Indeed Lonsdale's report to the ASLA (2003) specifically identified action research, survey questionnaires, case studies and interviews as research approaches that may be more appropriate in the Australian context.

Action research refers to a range of research methods to address questions that educators might have about specific practices and help them to develop practical solutions and strategies. Action research is based in practice and not separate from it. Action research is undertaken by practitioners such as teachers or librarians rather than external experts. Practitioners facing a problem in practice or trying to improve practice by exploring a new technique employ an action research approach to integrate learning and continuous improvement into their practice. The

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action research process, unlike other processes, may involve changes in practice as part of the research, as opposed to assessing the program as is.

School library researcher and strategist Judith Sykes (2013) offers a useful explanation of the power of action research.

Action research is a process of defining a question related to one's practice, then designing, executing, reflecting upon, and changing that practice as a result. It combines studying and reviewing literature, collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, and structuring action plans to create continuous cycles of informed professional renewal. Individuals (educators or students), schools, school districts, and even states or provinces can adopt the methodology of action research. As such, it lends itself to mobilization – indeed, action and transformation – in enabling schools and school libraries to support and advance the learning of each student. Developing skills and strategies for formulating questions, amassing data, structuring events, and analyzing results can lead to profound professional renewal and more responsive service to the students and learning communities one serves.

There is a compelling need to turn our stories into real evidence, through research.

Many teacher-librarians are already engaged in action research. Nevertheless, when a new idea is implemented in the school library there is frequently no real plan to assess its success or share what was learned. We are great at collecting anecdotes and informal observations, but rarely take the next step of organizing the collection and systematic evaluation of this data. There is a compelling need to turn our stories into real evidence, through research.

In general, the literature confirms the need for local, evidence-based practice if the roles of the school library and teacher librarian in student learning are to be valued in the way that the research suggests they should be valued. Such research is an important strategic tool for raising the profile and prestige of library professionals and for reinforcing in the minds of policy-makers and school communities the crucial contribution that school libraries can make to student achievement. (Lonsdale 2003)

Practitioner research moves us forward, increasing understanding of and confidence in the role of the library in education. There is a compelling need to de-mystify the research process in order to empower teacher-librarians and other library professionals to engage. Canadian School Libraries (CSL) has responded to this need with the introduction of the **[CSL Research Toolkit](#)**.



The toolkit's sections provide a comprehensive and understandable overview of the research process and techniques:

- **Introduction:** Assessing outcomes and impacts.
- **Research Approaches:** Understanding different research approaches as they vary in terms of purpose, size and methodology, and where practitioner action research fits.
- **Research Stages:** The specific stages of valid research.
- **Research Methods:** Choosing the best method for your research purpose is the key to success.
- **Research Ethics:** Because research involves human interaction, it is very important to follow ethical guidelines.
- **Data Analysis:** Analyzing your research data must be done methodically and consistently in order to draw valid conclusions.
- **Sharing & Learning:** Action research informs your own future practice. Sharing what you have learned amplifies its impact.
- **Additional Resources:** Resources to inform your own research and deepen your knowledge of effective methodology.
- **Getting Started:** Ideas to inspire practitioner research and the integration of research into practice in the school library learning commons.

Larger academic studies relating to school library practice remain relatively rare in Canada and addressing the need for 'made in Canada' research is a critical part of CSL's mandate. Evidence-based research, particularly that which is conducted by school library practitioners, is extremely important for exploring contexts unique to Canada. In that respect we are so very similar to Australia, and we would do well to heed Lonsdale's advice to use such research as a strategic tool for raising the profile and prestige of library professionals.

We hope that the research toolkit will be a catalyst for inspiring Canadian research, and perhaps it might also inspire some "made in Australia" research too. When that school administrator or decision-maker asks that pesky question, "What does the research say?", a body of practitioner research might help with the answer. Better yet, the question might inspire you, the practitioner, to propose your own action research to find out how well the strategy that you are proposing might work for the learners at your school. Research integrated into practice is a powerful thing. Please have a look at the CSL Research Toolkit to explore the range of approaches and tools that might work for you.

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Anita Brooks Kirkland is a writer, presenter and consultant. Anita specializes in the areas of information and digital literacy and the role of the school library learning commons. She draws on her extensive experience as a teacher educator, both as an instructor in teacher-librarianship for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, and in her previous role as the Consultant for K-12 Libraries at the Waterloo Region District School Board. Anita was a contributing writer to **Together for Learning**, Ontario's guideline document for the school library learning commons. Anita is very active in professional organizations. She was the 2014 president of the Ontario Library Association, served as president of the **Ontario School Library Association** (2005) and co-chaired **The Association of Library Consultants and Coordinators of Ontario** (2011-13). She currently chairs the board of directors of **Canadian School Libraries**. Anita shares an extensive collection of program resources, articles, and presentations on her website and blog, **www.bythebrooks.ca**.