Relentlessly Focused on Learning: The Role of Evaluation

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Evaluation of practice is an essential aspect of implementing the new Standards of Practice for Effective School Library Learning Commons in Canada*. School libraries and school librarians are rarely evaluated in a consistent and systematic way, but evaluation helps to ensure that the library's programs and services are "relentlessly focused on learning." Evaluation can indicate the extent to which students and teachers perceive that they benefit from those programs and services, and it can also help to shape those programs and services and enhance the understanding of and commitment to those programs and services for both library staff and library users. Evaluation can enhance both accountability and transformation, addressing decision-making or problem solving concerns (accountability) and also influencing people's thinking about and developing support for the school library (transformation). Possible approaches to school-based school library evaluation include: program quality; stakeholder perceptions; program content; and program impact. Implications for teacher-librarians' education and for their evaluation practices are presented, based on current research.*

Raising Standards, Improving Lives

The title of this paper was inspired by the words of an Ofsted (UK) inspector, written about the work of a secondary school library: "the focus is relentlessly on learning" (Ofsted, 2006, p. 14). Ofsted (www.ofsted.gov.uk) is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills in the United Kingdom. It is an independent agency that reports directly to Parliament; it inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people and those that provide education and skills for learners of all ages. Its mission is captured by its logo which is "Ofsted: raising standards, improving lives."

The *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for Effective School Library Learning Commons in Canada* document (2014) is about raising the standards for all those involved in implementing school library programs, but especially for teacher-librarians and for principals. Each of the Standards of Practice addresses an aspect of a teacher-librarian's professional practice:

- Facilitating Collaborative Engagement to Cultivate and Empower a Community of Learners
- Advancing the Learning Community to Achieve School Goals
- Cultivating Effective Instructional Design to Co-plan, Teach and Assess Learning
- Fostering Literacies to Empower Life-Long Learners

● Designing Learning Environments to Support Participatory Learning

Evaluation provides the data needed to ensure that the school library program and, in particular, the teacher-librarian are indeed relentlessly focused on learning.

Evaluation Purposes

School library evaluation practices are varied, but school libraries and school librarians are rarely evaluated in a consistent and systematic way. For example, the Ofsted study (2006) of 32 UK "good school libraries" (i.e., libraries rated highly in a previous inspection or recommended by a local educational authority or School Library Service agency) showed that one-third of the libraries needed to develop their monitoring and evaluation systems.

When school libraries and school librarians are evaluated, the results can be very powerful. An important insight from my doctoral research (Oberg, 1992) was that program evaluation can serve more than accountability purposes: it can help stakeholders to understand the program more deeply, to become more committed to the program, and to enable transformation of the program. I spent almost two years in one school district, working to understand how a school district had gone about changing its school libraries. During that time, there was a major shift in the way that people in the district thought about three aspects of the school library: from a collection in a facility, isolated from the curriculum, and directed by support staff, to an instructional program, integral to the curriculum, and directed by teaching staff. This transformation, which occurred during the evaluation of the district's libraries, taught me an important concept: evaluation can address more than decision-making or problem solving concerns (accountability); evaluation can influence people's thinking about a program and develop support for the program (transformation). In short, evaluation can enhance both accountability and transformation.

Types of Evaluation

Types of evaluation can be differentiated by their broad purposes and by the type of evaluators involved. A school library evaluation focused on the overall quality of the program is generally wide in scope, conducted by evaluators who are external experts, and results in a quality rating (e.g., Ofsted school inspections). Often this kind of school library program evaluation utilizes national or local standards, such as *Achieving information literacy: Standards for school library programs in Canada*, in order to examine and rate the many facets of a school library (e.g., staffing, facilities, technology, and collections as well as instructional programs). The new *Standards of Practice* document suggests these terms be used to "indicate the transitional growth of a Library Learning Commons": Exploring; Emerging; Evolving; Established; and Leading into the Future (2014, p. 8).

Often, school library program evaluations are shaped by a positivist perspective, with an orientation toward measurement and judgment. In the past two decades, however, there has been a shift in thinking about evaluation, a shift to a constructivist perspective, with an orientation towards negotiation, that is, evaluation that makes space for stakeholders (the people who will be affected by the evaluation) to place their concerns and issues on the table. In this kind of evaluation, sometimes called responsive or fourth generation evaluation, the evaluator acts as a facilitator of the evaluation process. The goals and processes of a responsive evaluation are negotiated with the stakeholders, and the outcomes and recommendations of the evaluation are reviewed and confirmed by the stakeholders.

Evidence-based practice provides another approach to school library evaluation. This approach focuses on data collection and analysis for the purpose of improvements in practice. Evaluations conducted as part of evidence-based practice are generally narrow in scope, conducted by school-level evaluators, and resulting in recommendations for practice. The data collected and analyzed for purposes related to evidence-based practice can come from a variety of sources, depending on the aspect of practice being queried, such as: the online circulation and cataloging system (OPAC) records; student learning products; instructional patterns (by class, grade or subject); or surveys of students, teachers, and/or parents.

Since the work of the teacher-librarian is a key factor in achieving the learning goals of the school and school library, evaluation of the work of the teacher-librarian and the impact of that work should have a high priority. Most often evaluation of the school library and the school librarian has been conducted by the school principal, through informal visits to the school library and an observation of the school librarian in his or her teaching role. Everhart (2006) in a US study of principals' practices for evaluating school librarians found that principals relied more heavily on their own data-gathering approaches than on library-generated reports. The practices most frequently used by these principals were: informal visits to the library; student interviews; and teacher interviews. Some principals also reported that they examined student work.

The principals in Everhart's study were as concerned about library climate as they were about overall school climate. In addition, the principals were concerned about the librarian's constructive interactions with students and teachers. Because of the powerful impact that principals' views have on school library programs, teacher-librarians need to be aware of and share with their principals the research on the impact of library climate on the positive self-concepts of elementary and secondary school students (see, for example, Fodale & Bates, 2011; McAfee, 1981). There is not a large body of research specifically on school library climate and the impact of the school library on students' attitudes toward themselves as learners, but the evidence is building for the school library as a

place that enhances social and emotional growth, that helps young people develop self-confidence, perseverance, respect for others' perspectives, and teamwork skills. These are learning outcomes that are important to parents as well as to educators.

School-based Library Evaluation Approaches: Samples

School-based library evaluations are time-consuming, both in implementation and in follow-up, but they are very valuable. Evaluation can indicate the extent to which students and teachers perceive that they benefit from those programs and services, and it can also help to shape those programs and services and enhance the understanding of and commitment to those programs and services for both library staff and library users. Most importantly, school-based library evaluations help to ensure that the library's programs and services are "relentlessly focused on learning."

Possible approaches to school-based school library evaluation include: program quality; stakeholder perceptions; program content; and program impact. For the sample approaches to school-based library evaluations presented below, I draw on ideas and suggestions previously developed and disseminated (see, for example, Oberg, 2009).

Program Quality
A school library evaluation focusing on overall program quality normally is a long-term project, often completed over several years and involving a variety of activities. Evaluations of program quality normally begin with a framework to guide those activities such as a school accreditation process or a provincial or national standards document. A comprehensive program evaluation should be undertaken only with strong administrative support and with access to outside expertise such as a district consultant. However, value can be derived from undertaking a partial program evaluation, carefully planned to limit the resources needed. For example, a self-study might address the scope of library-based instructional activities over a single term or over one academic year in order to assess what percentage of students and teachers have been involved in these activities. A comparison to standards might be limited to one aspect of the library program or services, such as facilities or collection, or to one of the Standards of Practice. For example, a survey of graduates might be designed to address only the impact of the library's instructional activities on the graduates' current work or study activities (Fostering literacy to empower life-long learners).

Stakeholder Perceptions
An inspiring and comprehensive example of the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions is the Student Learning through Ohio School Libraries (The Ohio Study) where students and teachers in 39 Ohio schools were asked, through an online survey of 48 items, "How does the school library help?" (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a, 2005b). While a major study of this sort is beyond the resources of most

schools or school districts, there are simple but effective alternatives. Two examples are: district satisfaction surveys and school-based surveys or feedback groups.

Most school districts have some version of an annual "satisfaction survey" which is completed by students, teachers, and parents. If your district does use this evaluation strategy, it is very worthwhile to try to get a question or two added to the survey related to library programs and services. Even if you are unsuccessful at first, the lobbying for such a question can be an important way to develop a better understanding of library programs and services within the district administrative group.

Another example of gathering stakeholder perceptions (in this case, students) comes from principal of a rural school of about 300 K-12 students (K. L. Riise, personal communication, January 15, 2009). In preparation for developing the school's three-year plan, he and his vice-principal surveyed each class in the school, beginning with grade one, asking the students questions such as "What makes our school good?" and "What should we do more of to make it better?" The data from the surveys were analyzed and shared with teachers and support staff and with the parent council. The same school organized meetings of student representatives, two from each class, grades 7-12, to give feedback on the school's course offerings and "Expect Respect" program, asking students to identify over the course of several feedback sessions what they would like more or less of in their courses and program and what other issues needed to be addressed to make their school a better place for them as learners. Both of these approaches to program evaluation could be easily adapted to evaluating all or part of the library's suite of programs and services

Program Content
A program evaluation focusing on program content could be broad or narrow in scope and could be one-time or ongoing. A self-study might be designed to analyze the learning outcomes addressed through library-based instruction activities over a term or over several years (Advancing the learning community to achieve school goals).

The learning outcomes addressed through library-based instruction activities might be compared to the learning outcomes in one or more curricula: in Alberta, the *Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Program of Studies* (Alberta Learning, 2000-2003) provides an excellent starting point for determining the extent to which the library's instructional activities are meeting general curriculum objectives. Another approach might be the use of focus groups of classroom teachers and/or department heads which might consider what learning outcomes should be addressed through library–based instructional activities. For best results (rich discussions and frank observations), focus groups are best organized and facilitated, not by the teacher-librarian but by a third party, that is,

an outside evaluator such a teacher-librarian colleague from another school or a district learning consultant.

Program Impact
Impact evaluation for the school library focuses on the concept of 'value-added' and can be designed to identify the contribution of school library inquiry activities to student learning. Here is where it is important to find out from the students what they have learned. For example, inquiry projects should result in students developing a deep understanding of a topic, knowing how the process of inquiry works, and appreciating the importance of their learning. To discover to what extent inquiry projects had had an impact on these three aspects of student learning, elementary students from Grades 1-6 in the Library Power project (Oberg, 1999) were asked at the end of their projects:

- Could you tell me about your project, about how you used the books and computers? What worked well, what caused problems?
- How did you get started? What did you do in the middle? How did you finish? How did you feel at each of these points?
- What did you learn, what stands out in your memory? Did you share your project outside of school? How is your project like things people do outside of school?

A similar approach to be used with secondary students is the School Library Impact Measure, also called the Student Learning Impact Measure or SLIM (Todd, Kuhlthau & Heinstrom, 2005). At three points in the inquiry process, students are asked to complete Reflection Sheets with these questions:

- Take some time to think about your topic. Now write down what you know about it.
- How interested are you in this topic?
- How much do you know about this topic?
- Thinking back on your research project, what did you find easiest to do?
- Thinking back on your research project, what did you find most difficult to do?
- What did you learn in doing this research project? (This question is only asked at the end for the project.)

Analysis of student responses to interview questions or reflection sheets will be a demanding and time-consuming exercise for the teacher-librarian and teachers involved but they will be able to see how students have developed their knowledge and understanding of curriculum content as well as information handling and process skills that are important for school, work, and beyond.

Implications for Evaluating Implementation of Standards of Practice

Ongoing school library research suggests implications for evaluating the implementation of the *Standards of Practice for School Library Learning*

Commons in Canada. These insights should be considered during the planning of school library evaluations.

Major findings from the last ten years of school library impact studies (see Kachel, 2013) continue to confirm that the strongest impact on student achievement comes from school library programs with fulltime certified/qualified teacher-librarians. These findings on the positive impact of the school library on student learning include helping to close the achievement gaps commonly seen for students who are poor, minority, and/or have disabilities. In addition to having fulltime certified/qualified teacher-librarians, other school library factors that are correlated with improved student achievement include: collaboration; instruction; scheduling; access; technology; collections; budget; and professional development.

The following insights are offered in the spirit of possibilities, of potentials, for enhancing and enriching the use of the Growth Indicator Charts provided in *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for Effective School Library Learning Commons in Canada* (2014).

Facilitating collaborative engagement to cultivate/empower a community of learners

Principals and teachers often expect teacher-librarians to be the driving force behind collaboration. However, collaboration cannot be school wide without the involvement and direction of the principal or the school management team. "Where matters were left to the librarian alone, interested departments tended to develop good units of work but others remained uninvolved" (Ofsted, 2006, p. 20). The role of the principal in 'facilitating collaborative engagement' is crucial. "Across the grade levels, better-performing schools also tended to be those whose principals valued collaboration between librarians and classroom teachers in the design and delivery of instruction" (Kachel, 2013, p. 12).

Advancing the learning community to achieve school goals

The alignment of the goals, mission and policies of the school and the school's library learning commons with district and provincial/territorial education policies and plans should be clearly evident. Strong school libraries "contribute to student learning through an instructional program that includes the mastery of content and curriculum standards" (Kachel, 2013, p. 12). Teacher-librarians also help students to see cross-curricular connections, to develop information and technology skills, to acquire unique skills not taught in classrooms, and to become more discriminating readers.

Cultivating effective instructional design to co-plan, teach and assess learning

Students performed better in reading, writing and mathematics in schools where the teacher-librarian spent more time on instructionally related activities with students and teachers. "The strength of the relationship between library services and test scores increased with grade level" (Kachel, 2013, p. 11).

Fostering literacies to empower life-long learners
The relationship between reading enjoyment and reading achievement and the work of teacher-librarians has been known for decades. New studies conducted in Pennsylvania and Illinois show writing achievement is affected even more strongly than is reading achievement by the work of the fulltime certified/qualified teacher-librarian (Kachel, 2013).

Designing learning environments to support participatory learning
The learning environment, including the school's culture of learning, goes beyond the library learning commons facility. Opportunities for learners to be creators, producers and participants need to be available throughout the school. Here is where the work of teacher-librarians as "resident" providers of in-service professional development for classroom teachers has a strong impact (Kachel, 2013).

Implications for Life-long Learning for Teacher-Librarians

Developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes essential to conducting evaluation work as part of professional practice is something that requires long term commitment and study, usually through two phases in one's professional education: graduate level school library education, and continuing professional education

Three kinds of school library education continue to be offered in Canada: diploma programs, i.e., specialist courses offered at the undergraduate level; Additional Qualifications (AQ) programs; and master's programs (MEd or MLIS). Graduate level study in librarianship generally provides the most extensive preparation for evaluation work, through a required research methods course and/or through courses on evidence-based practice. Continuing professional education in evaluation work can be accessed through professional reading, conferences, professional development workshops, and personal learning networks (PLNs).

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