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## **Bolts from the Blue: Surprise Findings in School Librarians' Evidence Gathering**

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### **Christie Kodama**

Independent School Library Consultant,  
[ckodama152@gmail.com](mailto:ckodama152@gmail.com)

### **Jennifer E. Moore**

College of Information and Communications,  
University of South Carolina  
[JM328@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:JM328@mailbox.sc.edu)

### **Maria Cahill**

College of Communication and Information,  
University of Kentucky  
[maria.cahill@uky.edu](mailto:maria.cahill@uky.edu)



### **Introduction and Literature Review**

Evidence-based practice (EBP) is an “approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation and integration of valid...user-reported, librarian observed, and research derived evidence...applied to improve the quality of professional judgments” (Booth, 2002, p. 53). EBP has been identified as a strategy librarians can use to reflect upon, measure, and share libraries' impacts on the communities they serve (American Library Association, 2021; Adams et al., 2016; Todd, 2015). Multiple variations of EBP exist, but at its core, EBP in the school library context involves the school librarian (SL):

- identifying a need in the school library or school community;
- reviewing foundational evidence (such as professional/scholarly literature, standards/guidelines) to develop a program, service, or other solution addressing the need



- implementing the solution, and throughout the process drawing upon professional knowledge and formative evidence to revise as necessary;
- collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data to determine the efficacy of the solution;
- sharing findings with a variety of stakeholders; and
- re-engaging in the EBP cycle, revising and refining practice and retesting solutions.

As Ross Todd (2003) wrote, “Evidence based practice revolves around the key question: What differences do [the] library and its learning initiatives make to student learning? That is, what are the differences, the tangible learning benefits, defined and expressed in ways that lead a school community to say: ‘we need more of this!’?” (p. 30).

School librarianship leaders have emphasized the need for SLs to collect, analyze, and share data for advocacy and library program improvement (Church, 2012; Todd, 2001). However, findings of a recent study indicate SLs struggle to collect and share meaningful evidence of their practice (Moore et al., 2023). As part of a larger Institute of Museum and Library Services funded project (RE-254834-OLS-23) aimed at developing an EBP curriculum for secondary SLs, our research team engaged in a series of focus group interviews with practicing secondary SLs. The purpose of the interviews was to pinpoint secondary SLs’ current engagement with and challenges experienced when implementing EBP.

## **Statement of the Research Problem**

Based on findings from previous studies (Moore et al., 2023; Loh, 2023; Richey & Cahill, 2014), we expected to hear SLs’ descriptions of evidence collection, analysis, and sharing primarily connected with the SL’s program administrator role (AASL, 2009). Indeed, many focus group participants discussed collecting and sharing circulation and collection statistics, as well as library usage and other data connected with day-to-day school library functions. To a lesser extent, focus group participants also identified evidence connected with the teacher, instructional partner, technology information specialist, and leader roles. It was for these conversations that we opted to conduct focus groups interviews. We recognized that these nuggets of information from secondary SLs across a wide array of school types and situations would inform the curriculum we seek to develop. However, analyses of these focus group interviews also generated a handful of unexpected themes we believe might be informative for



the field as a whole. The purpose of this presentation is to share those “bolts from the blue” emanating from our focus groups.

## **Methodology**

Data were collected from focus group interview discussions. Participants were solicited via national, state, and regional SL networks and associations. Of the 217 individuals who completed the interest form, 25 middle and high school librarians from 19 states participated in one-hour virtual focus group interviews using an online web conferencing software. Research team members individually open coded each transcription using spreadsheet software and compared, contrasted, and combined codes.

## **Preliminary Findings**

Preliminary analysis revealed some unexpected, yet important, insights into SLs’ thoughts on EBP.

### **Evidence as Qualitative or Quantitative**

Participants tended to focus on evidence as either qualitative *or* quantitative, but not holistically. Many mentioned collecting circulation statistics, library usage statistics, and numbers of teachers with whom they collaborate. Conversely, others focused on student stories, observations of student learning, and student comments.

### **Student Involvement in the EBP Process**

Another surprise finding was student involvement in parts of or the entire EBP process. One participant developed a community service project whereby students would “cold call every school” in the state to “keep track of how many certified librarians there are in every district.” He and his students used this data to monitor trends over time, advocate to the state legislature on behalf of SLs, and record their findings in a podcast. Another participant shared a similar project in which students collected data about inequities in tribal education funding and then presented those findings to the state legislature.



## **Evidence to Celebrate Successes**

Participants also shared that they use evidence to celebrate “wins” or successes in their libraries. This is particularly of value to SLs on difficult days or as encouragement of past goals that were met.

## **Participating to Learn**

A fourth unexpected finding was that many participants chose to participate in focus group interviews to learn from other SL participants, as they frequently expressed value in interactions with SL peers. Participants described their EBP behaviors, shared templates and examples, and expressed interest in engaging in further discussion with other participants after the conclusion of the focus groups.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Scientific processes leave room for unexpected findings. Although potentially disappointing for researchers in hard sciences, unexpected findings sometimes lead to important discoveries and breakthroughs (e.g. penicillin, Viagra, etc.). While this study’s unexpected findings may not be as impactful as the aforementioned examples, they could be useful for the school library field and inform both SL practice and research.

## **Conclusion**

These unexpected findings reveal SLs are finding unique and interesting ways to collect, use, and share evidence of practice with their stakeholders. Because SLs are pressed for time and money, encouraging SLs to participate in research, particularly focus group interviews or other research allowing SLs to gather and speak with each other, might be another avenue for SLs to learn and improve their practice. Researchers are able to gather the participation they desire in their studies, and SL participants have additional opportunities to learn from and share their practice with other SLs.



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*Kodama, Moore and Cahill*

## Biographies

**Dr. Christie Kodama** is an independent school library consultant and educator. Her research interests include school librarian professional learning and leadership.

**Dr. Jennifer E. Moore** is an Associate Professor in the College of Information and Communications at the University of South Carolina. Her research interests include data literacy leadership, evidence-based practice, and computational thinking.

**Dr. Maria Cahill** holds a joint appointment as a Professor in the College of Communication and Information and the College of Education at the University of Kentucky. Her research focuses on the value of libraries for children and families.