A professional focus on evidence-based librarianship (EBL) has emerged over the last decade. It has been taken up by many sectors in library and information work, and even a cursory search of subscription and open databases will show the scholarly interest in and effect of evidence-based practice in areas such as medical librarianship, law librarianship, public librarianship, and special librarianship. In more recent years, this focus has begun to be addressed by the school library community.

Although this emergence appears to be firmly grounded in the evidence-based movement of the health care profession that emerged in the early 1990s and that subsequently migrated to medical/health librarianship, its historical and philosophical roots in the library and information science arena extend back several decades. Bertram Brookes, in the post of Reader in Information Science, University College of London School of Librarianship and Archives from 1966 to 1977, claimed that nothing could be described as a science of information and that no common assumptions, implicit or explicit, could be regarded as its theoretical foundations and used for professional practice. In Brookes’ (1980a) search to “find the grounds of information science,” he concluded that information science was floating in “a philosophical limbo” and operated “busily on an ocean of commonsense practical applications... It has no theoretical foundations” (p. 125). Brookes (1980b) considered that although the practical pursuit of information science was the collection, organization, and provision of information resources—or “public knowledge systems,” as he called them—he believed that such professional practice should be founded on scientific investigation of the cognitive interactions between users and these public, documented artifacts of knowledge. He argued that there was an urgent need for the field to investigate “experimental or observational knowledge structures and information inputs” (Brookes, 1975, pp. 48-49), observing what happens, measuring the effects as well as possible, investigating simple cases to develop skills in techniques and confidence in theories, and then moving on to more complex cases. From this research base, he saw that the professional arena of librarianship and information work could have a solid foundation.
At the same time across the Atlantic, a similar call for a research foundation for the practice of librarianship was being articulated by Houser and Schrader (1978). This was based on their concerns about the status of research in library science and the nature of the knowledge communicated to students undertaking librarianship education. They believed that the essential characteristics of any profession committed to its progression, long-term viability, and survival must center around “a body of scientific knowledge, including theory-based research activity and a research methodology, as well as practical skills and applications which inculcate these” (p. 24). Their analysis concluded that library science “has no community consensus about any scientific theory” (p. 148) that might give it some claim as a social science and be the focus of practice. They proposed a scientist-professional model grounded in a set of philosophical assumptions, which included the study of unique problems of the field through empirical methodologies to establish findings that could be tested, retested, validated, refined, and extended and that formed the predictive knowledge base of professional education and professional practice.

In the last decade, considerable and vigorous discourse has taken place to establish more clearly the nature, boundaries, and dimensions of an evidence-based focus in librarianship and information science. Booth (2000) defines EBL as

an approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian-observed, and research-derived evidence. The best-available evidence moderated by user needs and preferences, is applied to improve the quality of professional judgements. (p. 1)

In his definition, Booth calls for a theoretically based librarianship, one that places considerable emphasis on scientifically derived evidence as the foundation of librarianship and one where the application of this evidence is moderated in the context of organizational and community factors. Eldredge (2000) argues that evidence-based librarianship “constitutes an applied rather than theoretical science. EBL merges scientific research with the pressing need to solve practical problems… EBL provides a framework for self correction as new information becomes available that suggests new directions or methods” (p. 290). Both Eldredge and Booth underscore the importance of a strong research foundation for professional practice, what might be called evidence for practice, and see it playing an important role in establishing and building the credibility of librarianship as a social science. They also present the notion that professional practice is neither a static nor mechanistic process; rather, it is continually transformed by the emergence of new research-based evidence.

Taking a slightly different position, Crumley and Koufogiannakis (2001) emphasize “evidence in practice,” as well as “evidence for practice.” They argue that evidence-based librarianship “is a means to improve the profession of librarianship by asking questions as well as finding, critically
appraising and incorporating research evidence from library science (and other disciplines) into daily practice” (p. 62). They first encourage librarians to ask themselves the “embarrassing” question: “When was the last time we consulted the literature to find evidence about a library or profession-based problem?” (p. 68). They further encourage librarians to practice their profession “in an evidence-based manner.” To enable this, they propose a core-centered approach to engaging with evidence derived from within their practice and evidence available though the research-based literature. This is shown in Figure 1.

In Crumley and Koufogiannakis’ (2001) model of the core-centered approach, the types of studies that librarians are more likely to carry out in their practice to answer the questions asked by practice and to inform the continual development of practice are placed near the center of the model. Methodologies less likely to be used to gather evidence are placed farther from the core. The outer methodologies are those that academic researchers rather than practitioners tend to use. Particularly useful about this model is that it illustrates the meshing of locally derived evidence with that derived through formal research in other situations and contexts in order to improve professional practice. In other words, the evidence base for librar-
ianship is not only the established research of the field; it is also generated by librarians being both work-place researchers and reflective practitioners.

In particular, Crumley and Koufogiannakis (2001) encourage librarians to conduct qualitative and quantitative work so that the array of substantive questions that emerge in practice can be answered. They identify six key domains of daily practice that can generate questions: "reference/inquiries, education, collections, management, information access and retrieval, and marketing/promotion" (p. 63) and where evidence-gathering strategies can be developed, particularly in areas where there is a lack of quality evidence available for making decisions and improving practice. Some examples of questions include: "In academic libraries, how do electronic subscriptions affect usage of the print monograph collection?" "In managing e-journal access and retrieval, is using an OPAC vs. a library website database for indexing those journals a more user friendly medium?" and "In reference transactions, do librarians, as compared to library technicians, provide a more complete answer?" (p. 66).

They clearly encourage librarians to engage in local, systematic evidence-gathering processes and to contribute this evidence cumulatively to build a dynamic foundation for practice. Evidence for practice and evidence of practice are emerging as two central dimensions of evidence-based practice.

School librarianship has also begun to incorporate evidence-based practice in its discourse, and there are some indications that this focus is a key priority for the field. At the recent school library summit in Chicago in November 2006 sponsored by School Library Journal, 200 participants were invited to engage with diverse ideas that centered on visioning school libraries of the future. Through a collaborative process of short presentations, intensive discussion and debate, analysis, and synthesis, the participants constructed a list of the top 10 priorities/opportunities seen to be at the center of developing school libraries of the future. The list, with highest priorities first, strongly affirmed the importance of evidence-based practice to the professional outlook.

1. Mesh the added value of libraries (presumably derived from evidence) into the educational-learning environment;
2. Demonstrate through the use of data and evidence to various stakeholders that school librarians and library programs pay learning dividends and improve student achievement;
3. Develop and embrace new models for interacting with learners using 21st-century technology;
4. Provide stakeholders with instructional materials, information, and model school libraries to demonstrate excellence;
5. Technology;
6. Taking a leadership role in educational applications for emerging technology;
7. Librarians engaged as partners in the ongoing assessment of student learning;
8. The inclusion of information literacy in teacher preparation curricula;
9. Target the have-nots—closing the information gaps;
10. Building trust and respect with library users; recruiting young school librarians.

The approach to evidence-based practice taken by scholarship in school librarianship has some similarities to the conceptions presented by Booth (2000), Eldredge (2001), and Crumley and Koufogiannakis (2001). It clearly focuses on grounding professional practice on a strong research foundation and the need for conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best research evidence in making decisions about daily practice. This is evidence for practice. Over the last five years, this evidence for practice has come into the limelight, particularly as a number of school libraries have encountered difficult circumstances in an intensely accountability-driven and fiscally tight educational environment. It has resulted in several significant compilations of research findings such as Haycock’s (2003) analysis of the need for reform in Canadian school libraries; Lonsdale’s (2003) review of research in the Australian context; and Scholastic Library Publishing’s (2004, 2006) School Libraries Work! and Compendium of Read 180 Research 1999-2004. As evidence for practice, such documents articulate the dimensions of school library infrastructures and instructional and service initiatives that contribute to student achievement. A key role of such research compilations appears to be an evidence-based advocacy agenda by the school library community to various stakeholders such as educational agencies to develop frameworks and plans to provide for the sustained employment of school librarians and for resource, technology, and management infrastructures.

Such compilations also represent evidence of practice when quality dimensions are in place, in that they specify an extensive range of outcomes, particularly related to student achievement as measured by performance on state standardized test scores, and other value-added outcomes such as students’ personal, social, and cultural competences. The latter dimension—evidence of practice—has become a focal point of the evidence-based practice framework for school libraries, extending the evidence concept developed by Booth, Eldredge, and Crumley and Koufogiannakis. This was first articulated by Todd (2002) who argued that evidence-based practice for school libraries should focus on two aspects.

Firstly, it is the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the performance of your role. It is about using research evidence, coupled with your own professional expertise and reasoning to implement learning interventions that are effective... Secondly, evidence-based practice is about ensuring that your daily efforts put some focus on effectiveness evaluation that gathers meaningful and systematic evidence on dimensions of teaching and learning that matter to the school and its support community. (para. 2)

The focus on evidence for practice and evidence of practice in school libraries had generated a major focus on evidence in practice, that is, understanding and using professional practice, local and immediate, as a
generator and source of evidence. This has currently taken a specific and explicit focus, that of understanding the effect of professional practice in relation to students' learning and achievement. In essence, this focuses on deliberately and systematically planning and implementing into daily work routines a range of initiatives, processes, and strategies that enable school librarians to gather evidence of effects and outcomes of the range of services and interventions undertaken in school libraries. It also focuses on being able to make a set of claims about how the school library has contributed to the development of students as intellectual, social, cultural, and personal agents. A framework for documenting evidence of student achievement is elaborated in Loertscher (2003). This might seem a narrow focus for evidence of practice compared with the questions asked by Crumley and Koufogiannakis (2001), but it is driven by the accountability and advocacy needs facing school libraries and their future survival. Evidence-based practice is about practice. The dimensions—evidence for practice, evidence of practice, and evidence in practice—collectively represent a holistic and integrated framework for professional practice that is robust, reflective, and regenerative.

The emphasis on evidence of practice does not presuppose that this is the only focus. Indeed, the two research articles presented in this section of School Libraries Worldwide show that an evidence-based approach can extend into many dimensions of practice. Nancy Everhart's study of the evidence used by principals to evaluate school librarians is a study of evidence in practice. It is clear that a variety of informal and formal evidence approaches are used. However, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that evidence of practice plays a key role here, particularly in terms of principals' examination of students' work to establish their engagement with the library, including use of sources, quality of writing, and their overall inquiry. Deborah K. Wilson-Matusky's study brings together the three dimensions of evidence outlined above. Her study elaborates a process of continual program improvement by first using survey questionnaires to gather evidence of the scope, quality, and effectiveness of school library services; then using evidence from established research to determine appropriate strategies for evaluating the local evidence; and finally, on the basis of the findings, generating professional directions as part of the cycle of continual improvement.

References


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