

Evidence of evidence: Insights into the EBP journey of school libraries

By Dr Lyn Hay and the late Dr Ross J Todd

Snapshot

In this column, Dr Lyn Hay acknowledges Dr Ross Todd's contribution in helping teacher librarians chart their journey as evidence-based practitioners and draws upon some work Lyn and Ross collaborated on in this area to reflect on Ross's impact and TL action. This is the first of a two part series examining EBP initiatives for school libraries.

Ross first introduced the concept of evidence-based practice (EBP) to a teacher librarian (TL) audience in 2001 at the International Association of School Librarianship Annual Conference held in Auckland, New Zealand (Todd, 2001a). In this address, Ross presented a strong argument for the TL profession to shift their focus from advocating for and about the profession, to building a strong body of evidence on how the work and actions of TLs contribute to student learning. This seminal address formed the basis of Ross's first published article on EBP for school libraries in the Australian Library and Information Association journal, *Orana* (2001b).

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Ross continued to explore the concept of EBP, and by the late 2000s an EBP movement had started to build momentum as Ross published numerous book chapters and articles and collaborated with other researchers and practitioners in charting a course of EBP action for the TL profession (Todd, 2001c, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2015, 2018; Loertscher, with Todd, 2003; Gordon & Todd, 2009; Hay & Todd, 2010a, 2010b). By 2009, Ross articulated a working conceptualisation of evidence-based practice in school librarianship, defining it as:

...professional practice being informed and guided by best available evidence of what works, coupled with a focus on evidence of outcomes and impacts of services in relation to the goals of the educational environment in which it is situated. Consistent with evidence-based education and evidence-based librarianship, it incorporates a decision-making framework based on the best available research evidence with professional knowing and experience to make professional decisions and take professional action, and to implement and continuously improve professional practice, as well as a framework for documenting evidence of outcomes. (p. 88)

The establishment of such a working conceptualisation along with examples from TL practitioners (including those published in issues of *Synergy*) were incredibly timely given the commencement of the national inquiry into the status of school libraries, undertaken by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment (HRSCEE), in 2011. The Committee's report,

School libraries and teacher librarians in 21st century Australia, identified the importance of evidence regarding the value and impact of school libraries and teacher librarians in schools; however, the HRSCEE noted a lack of local documented evidence:

The Committee has been struck by the breadth of anecdotal evidence that it received demonstrating the significant contribution to learning outcomes in primary and secondary schools that a fully resourced school library, when staffed by a fully qualified and active teacher librarian, can make. (p.118)

The Committee acknowledged Ross's work in their report, noting:

Dr Ross Todd of the Centre for International Scholarship in School Libraries described the importance of 'evidence-based practice (EBP)' in influencing the recognition of teacher librarians. Dr Todd explained that EBP is the process of teacher librarians documenting how they make a difference to learning at their school and bringing it to the attention of principals, teaching colleagues and parents. More than just proving the worth of teacher librarians, EBP is about 'demonstrating the vitality of our [teacher librarians'] contributions to learning.' (p. 42)

This also reflected a key finding of the 'School Library Futures Project' (2010b) that Ross and I conducted for the NSW Department of Education, where we identified the pressing need for TLs to develop capacity as evidence-based practitioners:

While there is a rich and complex body of literature that documents the strong contribution of quality school libraries to learning outcomes, we saw few examples of such evidence, and relatively weak arguments related to why school libraries are needed, and the evidence of their impact on student learning... [where] teacher librarians do not seem to have presented cogent, sustained, evidence-based arguments for the future of school libraries. (p. 39)

This resulted in the recommendation "that the profession as a whole needs to develop the capacity to articulate needs from research-based evidence and local evidence collected in the school", and we advised that guidelines and professional development in evidence-based practices could be provided by education systems with such a program being implemented for school-based

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principal and teacher librarian teams. Ross and I have both been strong believers in TLs reaching out strategically to their principal, arguing that conversations between a TL and school principal are essential. I recall at many a conference, Ross arguing that developing a leadership in learning partnership with the principal should be part of every teacher librarian's vision.

By 2015, Ross and I were interested in exploring the concept of 'embedded practice' by TLs as evidence-based practitioners. Increasingly, we were seeing examples of TLs establishing their own practice of evidence building, and we had numerous conversations about why some TLs were breaking ground as EB practitioners, while others were still struggling to initiate EBP as part of their professional practice. We decided to create a Facebook group called 'Evidence-Based Practice for School Libraries' to act as a platform for conversations with TLs about their

EBP efforts. This group quickly grew to just under 500 members. We saw this group providing an opportunity for TLs dabbling in EBP projects to seek support, share ideas, and celebrate wins and gains.

As a result of the interest in such a forum to share ideas and outcomes, Ross and I conducted a small pilot study to understand how teacher librarian members of this Facebook group had embedded evidence-based practices into their school library programs. We were particularly interested in:

- identifying dynamics of evidence-based programs;
- showcasing innovative strategies for collecting, disseminating, and utilising evidence to build school library programs;
- identifying a range of outcomes reported in these initiatives; and
- illustrating how evidence of educational outcomes tied to curriculum standards has informed collaborative instructional practices of teacher librarians and teachers.

While we presented results of this pilot at conferences, this work remains unpublished. So, I would like to share some of our findings in this column as a tribute to Ross's continued work on evidence-based practice.

The pilot involved an online survey which was completed by 53 TLs. The questionnaire consisted of a total of 30 questions, collecting quantitative responses regarding TL demographics and basic data about each respondent's school context. We employed Ross's EBP model (2007) as a framework – Evidence for practice, Evidence in practice, and Evidence of practice – for collecting qualitative data on evidence-based practice activities undertaken by TLs and/or a school library team. Key focus areas included factors in the school that support EBP activities, factors inhibiting EBP activities, sources of research evidence used by TLs to inform their evidence-based practices, and types of documents, tools and forums used to report on and disseminate findings of EBP initiatives.

Demographics and school context

Of the 53 respondents who completed the questionnaire, the majority of TLs worked in schools in Australia and the USA (Figure 1), with TLs also working in New Zealand, South Africa, the UK, China, Singapore, Egypt, Japan, and Portugal.

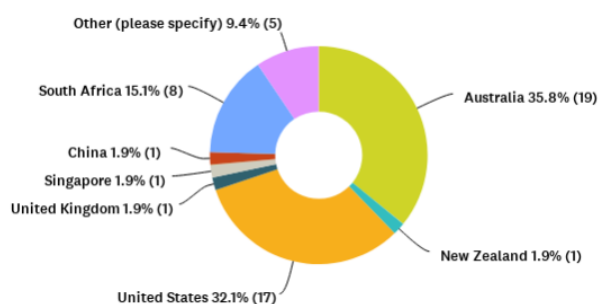


Figure 1: Country of employment as a TL

As presented in Figure 2, over half of respondents (52.8%) worked in public schools, with just under one-third (32.1%) working in independent schools, 13.2% working in Catholic schools and one respondent working in an Anglican school.

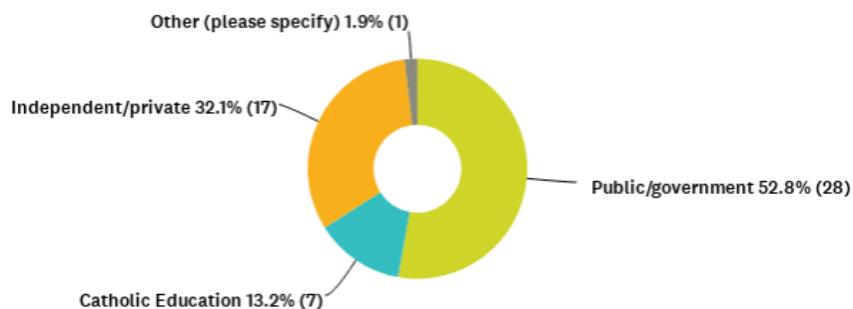


Figure 2: Type of school

Respondents were asked to identify how many years they had worked in a school library. Over half of the respondents had worked in a school library for 11 or more years, and just under one-quarter of respondents having worked in a school library setting for less than 5 years (Figure 3). Therefore, most respondents had worked in school libraries for a number of years, with 92% of TL respondents identifying as female and 8% male.

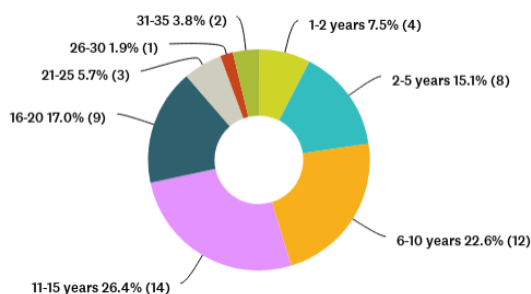


Figure 3: Number of years working in school libraries

Respondents were also asked what number of Full-time Equivalent (FTE) professionally qualified teacher librarians were working in their school library team (presented in Figure 4). Of the 53 respondents, over two-thirds of the TLs were working in a school library that employed the equivalent of one or more qualified TLs on the team, with two school library teams employing 3.1 or more FTE qualified TLs. This does suggest the chance of implementing EBP as part of a school library team is enhanced when a school library team consists of one or more qualified TLs.

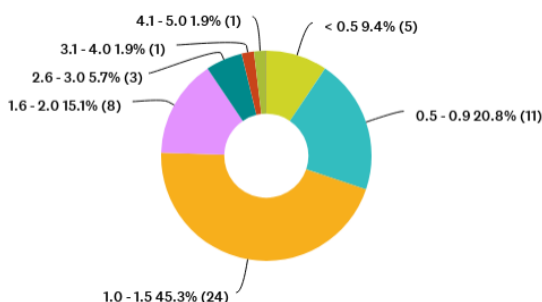


Figure 4: Number of FTE qualified TLs working in the school library

The type of school library scheduling for classes was also of interest by those undertaking EBP initiatives. Respondents were asked to select which of four types of scheduling best reflected their school library program, either a fixed schedule (classes at regularly scheduled times); a

modified fixed schedule (some open access in addition to scheduled access); a flexible schedule (open access throughout the school day), or open access including extended hours outside the school day.

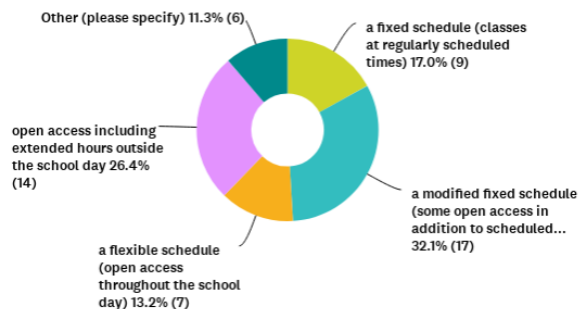


Figure 5: Type of school library schedule for classes

Figure 5 demonstrates a mix of library schedule types with the majority of those who answered 'Other' working in K-12 schools where approaches to scheduling were different between the primary and secondary school libraries. Examples from these respondents included:

There are two libraries. A fixed schedule in the primary library. The secondary library is available for individual booking by teachers.

Fixed for PreK-4, Flex for 5-8.

We have 3 libraries, one for each section, Early School, Middle School, High School. ES has fixed schedule, MS is flexible and HS is open access.

Also of note, those nine respondents working with a fixed schedule were all TMs working in a primary school setting only. Thus, the majority of respondents undertaking EBP were working with semi-flexible, flexible or open approaches to the scheduling of classes in their school library, thus allowing some level of "embeddedness" of EBP as part of their professional practice.

Respondents were asked to list the types of EBP training they had undertaken to help them gather, analyse and report local evidence. Over 60% of respondents stated they had not received any formal training in EBP, with the majority of TMs gaining exposure through conference presentations or seminar sessions, or by engaging in professional reading. More formal types of training undertaken by the remaining 40% included learning about EBP as part of a postgraduate course (Masters in teacher librarianship and learning analytics were mentioned); full day seminars (many mentioned these being presented by Ross); workshops provided by professional associations, education systems or regional TM network, or EBP training provided as a school-based initiative.

Respondents were asked to identify what factors had assisted them in embedding EBP activities in their school library program. The following five broad factors were identified in supporting embeddedness:

- **Support from school**, including the school community supporting inquiry learning through the school library; the TM being provided with access to students in regular

classes; the TL's involvement in whole school assessment practices; and action research and EBP training provided across school initiatives with a school-wide expectation for reflection and innovation by all teachers.

- **Peer support** from within the school and beyond the school through a TL's own professional network, including mentoring, peer evaluations and peer reviewing of one's EBP activities; school library visits and meetings with other TLs to gain knowledge of practices in other schools to identify the benefits of EBP in schools; and attending conference presentations, and monitoring listservs and social networks to draw upon exemplars from other TLs to inform suitable questions to explore as an EBP activities.
- **Internal motivation**, including the desire of a TL or school library team to show how their library supports student learning with 'hard evidence'; having the curiosity to better understand what and where impact occurs as a result of school library programs; and the desire to keep up to date with emerging and current practice.
- **Ready access to data collection tools and methods**, including school- or library-based subscriptions to tools such as Survey Monkey, Mentimeter and other polling platforms to survey students, staff and parents in an efficient and effective manner; use of mobile phones or iPads to capture videos of learning activities and record quick or short interviews with students and teachers; developing knowledge and skills in collating and analysing data and reporting on findings, including library management and learning management system data.
- **Professional certification processes** contribute to one learning how to 'embed' EBP into one's professional practice, including working towards National Certification and needing to gather relevant evidence against the professional standards for teachers, or gathering evidence to support job applications or applications for promotion.

School library practices examined

Respondents were asked to identify those areas of school library practice they have explored in the scholarly literature to inform their EBP journey. Key areas of practice included:

- Designing, implementing and evaluating Guided Inquiry units
- Students' reading engagement with graphic novels
- How mobile devices can be used to support student learning
- How to improve a school's reading culture
- The value and impact of TL-teacher collaboration on student learning
- The impact of digital reading interventions in reading engagement
- Developing students as life-long readers

- The effects of introducing a new information literacy model, e.g., information fluency, ANCIL
- The impact of genrefying the fiction collection to better support students' reading engagement
- Integrating the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities into inquiry units and assessment
- The impact of a BYOD on students' reading behaviour using digital versus print resources
- The use of teen magazines to improve literacy
- The impact and outcomes of our maker space facility and program
- The impact of redesigning school library spaces to support 21st century learning
- Student engagement with ebook collections
- Evaluating our Digital Citizenship program

Some respondents described the need to gather evidence to demonstrate the value of a specific program. For example:

I am currently busy looking at the Grade 8 Information Learning programme with my colleague. We are trying to make everything we do about the learning process and as activity based as we can. We are somewhat frustrated as we see the classes only x1 in a 10 day cycle for 40 mins. and everything is compartmentalised into subjects and very marks driven and marks orientated. The teachers see these as free lessons for themselves.

Students' use of the collection largely affects my book orders, so I use graphic novels and Dolly magazine [among others] as they improve literacy and have been very popular within my school according to loan stats.

To show how student levels in information literacy had improved and to increase staffing as Guided Inquiry teaching throughout subject areas has increased in our school.

Some TLs described how they were trying to design EBP initiatives that would be seen as strategic and connected to school or district priorities, as illustrated by these TLs:

I made an appointment with the principal to find out his goals for the school for next year so I can see how the library can support his goals.

Discussed with my principal as part of my key goals for this year in implementing into my library.

We applied by planning sessions with 2 or 3 teachers. Then, we applied short questionnaires, as well as the School Library Evaluation model in use in Portugal. We presented the results in the meeting of the Group of Schools Board.

Reporting on EBP initiatives

Respondents were also asked about the methods and processes they employed for reporting on the findings and outcomes of their EBP initiatives, including who their target audience was for a particular EBP project. The school principal, teachers and parents were often identified as a TL's target audience. School leadership was often the targeted audience in an attempt to maintain or increase funding for school library programs or staffing in the future. Parents were identified as an important audience for programs designed to support student engagement as readers, or users of digital information resources or digital devices, particularly if students needed access to technologies, the Internet, resources or reading or instructional support while at home.

Teachers were often the target audience where a TL or school library team were trying to expand a particular program, whether that involve reading, literacy, technology use, inquiry learning, especially where the TL was trying to be involved in the design of curriculum units. Here TLs were using local evidence to demonstrate the value of TL-teacher collaboration and greater integration of school library programs, resources and/or service in specific curriculum areas or year levels.

Print or digital charts and infographics were seen as the simplest way of disseminating key findings or recommendations of an EBP initiative, although the majority of respondents did state their preference for presenting findings and recommendations to targeted audiences. Many also reported beyond their school community via conference presentations, network meetings, writing articles for journals or newsletter, publishing outcomes of EBP efforts via the school library website and/or a personal blog.

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Conclusion

While Ross and I were interested in gaining a deeper understanding of how some TLs were successful in embedding EBP into their professional practice, overall, the feedback from survey respondents suggests that evidence-based practice is still seen as an 'add on' by many teacher librarians. This was in part as a result of the tension felt by TLs regarding the investment of time to undertake EBP versus time demands to address other priorities, and in part that a number of TLs lacked knowledge and skills in designing an EBP project and in data collection strategies. There is clearly a need for more training in EBP; however, this needs to go beyond basic EBP101-

...Evidence for practice, Evidence in practice, and Evidence of practice...

style training, in fact a project-based mentoring approach could be one solution. We also found some TLs struggling with differences within the three elements of Ross's EBP framework with Evidence for practice, Evidence in practice, and Evidence of practice, and how these can assist in shaping the design of an EBP project.

This, therefore, leads to my writing a follow-up article where I will present a four-step process for TLs to work towards building a local evidence base, and examine EBP projects demonstrating the impact of the teacher librarian and school library program on student learning through the lens of Ross's EBP framework.

While Ross is no longer here to continue supporting TLs' EBP journey, he has provided our profession with much to work with. So, let's continue to explore how embeddedness can be employed as the method for building the EBP capacity of the TL profession into the future.

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