

# Actionable evidence and how you can contribute to building evidence-based school librarianship

By Dr Lyn Hay

## Snapshot

In this article, Lyn unpacks Dr Ross Todd's concept of actionable evidence as presented in Ross's EBP framework and introduces a set of guiding principles to assist TLs work towards building a local evidence base that is informed and actionable. The article concludes with two simple templates to help shape a plan of EBP action in your school.

In 2009, Dr Ross Todd presented a conceptualisation of actionable evidence in the article 'School Librarianship and Evidence Based Practice: Progress, Perspectives, and Challenges' (pp. 78-96). This is where Ross provided an overview of progress and developments surrounding evidence-based practice (EBP) in school librarianship as an emerging field of practice for teacher librarians. Based on his evaluation of the broader EBP in LIS context and then closer analysis of EBP in school librarianship, Ross proposed:

A working conceptualization of evidence based practice in school librarianship to date is that it is about 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... [and therefore] 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).

Ross concluded that 'current thinking on evidence-based school librarianship seeks to establish a holistic approach that welds three dimensions of actionable evidence: evidence for practice, evidence in practice, and evidence of practice' (p. 78). However, as per findings presented in our previous article (Hay & Todd, 2022), some teacher librarians have struggled with differences within the three elements of Ross's EBP framework (Evidence for practice, Evidence in practice, and Evidence of practice), and how these can assist in shaping the design of an EBP project.

According to Ross's (2008) model, *Evidence for* practice focuses on 'examining and using empirical research to form practices and inform actions, and to identify best practices'. It is the informational dimension of school library practice where evidence informs practice.

<b>Evidence FOR Practice</b>	<b>FOUNDATION</b> Informational Existing formal research provides the essential building blocks for professional practice.
<b>Evidence IN Practice</b> Applications/Actions	<b>PROCESS</b> Transformational Locally produced evidence—data generated by practice (librarian observed evidence)—is meshed with research-based evidence to provide a dynamic decision-making environment.
<b>Evidence OF Practice</b> Results - impacts and outcomes; evidence of closing of gap	<b>OUTCOMES</b> Formational User-reported evidence shows that the learner changes as a result of inputs, interventions, activities, and processes.

Figure 1: Todd's (2015) holistic model of evidence-based practice or teacher librarians

Whereas *Evidence in* practice focuses on ‘integrating the available research evidence with the deep knowledge and understanding derived from professional experience, as well as using local evidence to identify learning dilemmas and needs, and achievement gaps’. This is the transformational dimension of school library practice, where ‘this kind of reflective practice enables us to make informed decisions about how the school library can bring about optimal learning outcomes and actively contribute to fulfilling the school’s mission and goals’. While *Evidence of* practice is derived from ‘systematically measured, student-based data’ that demonstrates ‘the real results of what school librarians actually do’. This is the formational dimension which ‘focuses on measured outcomes and impacts, going beyond process and activities as outputs... [and] establishes what has changed for learners as a result of inputs, interventions, activities, and processes’. These dimensions all help a teacher librarian work towards the building of actionable evidence.

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## Focus on actionable evidence to drive your EBP initiatives

**Actionable evidence is outcomes-focused and action-oriented.**

Actionable evidence is outcomes-focused and action-oriented. It, therefore, makes sense for teacher librarians to use actionable evidence to drive EBP initiatives in their own school to demonstrate the work of the teacher librarian, the school library team, and collaborative teaming with teachers. Actionable evidence requires what Ross (Tood, 2008) described as the development ‘of local initiatives that document and demonstrate the individual school library’s impact on learning outcomes’.

Approaches to actionable evidence to improve student learning are also being implemented at the tertiary level. For example, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA, 2016) identifies the importance of assessment design approaches that ‘generate actionable evidence about student learning that key stakeholders can understand and use to improve student and institutional performance’ (p. 6). NILOA states that colleges and universities have more information about students and their learning than ever before, but few institutions use this information productively. NILOA argues this is because ‘the evidence available is not translated into actions to enhance student accomplishment’. I think this is also symptomatic at the compulsory schooling level. To effectively generate actionable evidence, one needs to ask questions about student behaviour and performance that teachers (and others, including students!) want answers to. NILOA advises that one needs to ‘build interest and momentum by creating occasions for people to work together to raise issues and questions they care and need to know more about in order to improve student engagement and learning’, followed by the second and most important part of this process of them bringing ‘these same people back together to make sense of the findings and tease out their implications for action’. Thus, actionable evidence is used to inform decision making about changes or revisions to existing programs, as well as identifying opportunities for new programs or initiatives.

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Interest in actionable evidence is growing, particularly in education. One recent initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has devised an actionable evidence framework to inform research-based initiatives in the education and social sectors (Hossain & Maynard, 2021), and I think the guidelines and processes from this framework could easily be adapted by teacher librarians to inform actionable evidence that continues to build strong evidence-based school librarianship. The Actionable Evidence Framework (AEF) outlines eight principles to guide evidence building, which I have adapted here to reflect EBP for teacher librarians and school library researchers (pp. 6-9). The AEF states that for evidence to be actionable, it should:

- **Prioritise teacher and TL learning and decision making** – answers questions that are highly relevant to policy and practice, and that help teachers and school library staff prioritise decisions in service of students and the local school community.
- **Centre on community needs and voices** – addresses the context, perspectives, priorities and assets of teachers and students in your school, along with the challenges they face.
- **Be responsive to the operational context of teachers and school library team** – reflects the context in which teachers and the school library team operate, including organisational settings, relationships and resources, and education sector and policy environment.
- **Attend to systemic and structural conditions** – considers systems, policies, practices, cultural norms, and community conditions that influence and/or affect the work of teachers and school library team.

- ***Be credible and transparent*** – uses high-quality data and analysis, aligning methods with teacher and school library team questions, timeline and context.
- ***Enable timely improvements*** – allows teachers and school library team to make evidence-informed decisions in a timely manner.
- ***Be accessible and user centred*** – clearly communicates research design, analysis, and findings to facilitate teacher and school library team understanding and use.
- ***Builds teacher and school library team capacity for research and EBP*** – provides teachers and school library team members with data, products, tools and training to own and advance their own evidence agenda.

**Ross advocated for teacher librarians to work both strategically and operationally with evidence within their local school communities...**

In 2011, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment's national inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians stated that most of the 'evidence' presented to the Committee by the teacher librarian profession consisted in the main of unsystematic and anecdotal accounts of the impacts and benefits of school libraries in Australia schools (HRSCEE, 2011). Over 12 years later, we still find TL practitioners struggling with actioning EBP in their own schools. Evidence-based practice is not just about focusing on documenting learning outcomes, which is an operational action. It is about documenting engagement with evidence at the strategic level to inform practice (Hay & Todd, 2010). Ross advocated for teacher librarians to work both strategically and operationally with evidence within their local school communities and strongly argued that actionable evidence is at the heart of effective TL practice.

Each of the above eight AEF principles can help teacher librarians work towards the development of relevant and systematic evidence-based processes and guide actionable evidence to inform continuous improvement in their local school community.

## Planning for action

In their final report, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment stated that,

'The Committee appreciates that evidence-based practice takes time on the part of teacher librarians but agrees that documenting and highlighting examples of teacher librarians' successes in improving educational and community outcomes is critical to illustrating the enormous potential of school libraries to help students achieve better results' (HRSCEE, 2011, p. 43).

If you haven't yet engaged with EBP, the time is now!

Over the years, Ross and I ran several workshops on how to plan for actionable evidence using the following two templates which were revised and tweaked to meet the needs of specific audiences. **Template 1: EBP Action Plan** helps you identify key stages of an EBP initiative and articulate a plan for action. The action plan presents a seven-stage plan of action, which includes a column for you to identify who is responsible for actions in each stage. This has been purposefully designed to encourage TLs to seek out collaborators as part of their EBP initiatives. Therefore, use a separate template for each EBP initiative and complete this template in collaboration with your school library team, teachers, support staff, or school principal, whoever is involved in planning for, implementing and /or reporting on the EBP initiative.

**Template 2: School Library EBP Program Plan Template** helps you develop a longer-term plan for building an EBP program where you identify one or more new targets per term. This template will help you see how each term’s EBP initiative(s) build on previous initiatives. I suggest you try to complete each section of Template 2 by the end of Term 2, 2023.

## Template 1: EBP action plan

Complete each of the following EBP stages:	Who is responsible	Resources required	Timeline
1. Aspect of school library program you wish to measure for impact:			
2. Research literature documenting evidence/impact of this aspect of school library program:			
3. Type(s) of evidence required to demonstrate impact of this aspect of school library program:  Student evidence:  Program evidence:			
4. Strategies & techniques to collect data:			
5. Strategies & techniques to analyse data:			

6. Reporting evidence to school community:  Audience:  Presentation methods:			
7. Reporting your evidence at local/state/national levels & beyond:			

## Template 2: School library EBP program plan template

Targets	Actions to make this happen
A. EBP target(s) to achieve in Term 3, 2023.	
B. EBP target(s) to achieve in Term 4, 2023.	
C. Ideas to consider for 2024 implementation.	

## References

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**Dr Lyn Hay** has worked in K-12 and tertiary education for over 35 years as a teacher, teacher librarian, university lecturer and researcher, and educational consultant. Lyn is also the founder and Director of the Leading Learning Institute which provides professional learning, consultancy and research services for the library and information services sector, as well as K-12 and tertiary education sectors. In more recent years, Lyn has also been mentoring teacher librarians to design local evidence-based and action research projects to demonstrate the impact of their school library programs on student learning.