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School libraries and continuous improvement: a case study



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There are four critical challenges that I see as central to capacity building and continuous improvement of school libraries, and to re-imagining school libraries as purposeful and powerful in the school. We all need to engage in vigorous and frank discussions around these challenges:

1. Re-imagining the school library.

2. Building teams and partnerships.
3. Engaging Web 2.0 tools to develop deep inquiry.
4. Evidence based practice.

1. Re-imagining the school library as an inquiry centre, where enabling the information-to-knowledge journey of students, central to school education, is also central to the professional role of the school librarian.

Recent research points to some confronting findings: students are using libraries less since they first began using internet research tools. They typically begin their information search with a search engine, not a library catalogue, database or librarian. They appear to spend very little time on e-book and e-journal sites, and databases in school libraries, and, when they engage with information seeking, it is like a sport, bouncing in and out, skimming large amounts of information, and stockpiling large amounts of downloaded

information which contribute to superficial knowledge development.

I am pleased to see the recent *Statement on guided inquiry and the curriculum* by the Australian School Library Association and Australian Library and Information Association (2009). This reflects a critical priority. In an internet driven information environment, without inquiry there is no reason for school libraries. An instructional agenda targeted towards deep inquiry and knowledge development has to be the centrepiece of a transformed school library and the central dimension of the work of a teacher librarian. This agenda, along with the NSW *Quality Teaching* model (2003), goes beyond the development of a discreet set of information skills, to competencies, attitudes and values that focus on knowledge development, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and innovation. Information is the foundation. This goes beyond simply teaching students to find information, to creating deep understand-

Without vision, you walk in darkness.

ing and knowledge from the found information. This calls for a considerable rethinking of what is the centre-piece of the instructional framework of school libraries and the work of teacher librarians, and to discuss the learning practices, human support and the physical environment that will foster the development of these knowledge-centred outcomes. This implies a vision for learners actively engaging with school libraries to construct their knowledge, their world, and their future. Without vision, you walk in darkness.

2. Building teams and partnerships

While the school library literature has highlighted the importance of collaboration, particularly instructional collaborations, we have to ask whether collaborative initiatives are a defining characteristic of the professional work of teacher librarians. Research highlights instructional partnerships as a characteristic of those school libraries which correlate to high levels of student achievement. The levels of collaborations reported in the research are low. Instructional teams, engaging multiple expertises by team participants, must be a defining characteristic of the transformed school library. Without teams, there is limited capacity for change. Teams provide instruction necessary to foster deep learning in the complex information environment of 21st century learning. They also provide the evidence of learning outcomes which identify the school library as a vital knowledge centre in the school. Building strategic alliances, inside and outside the school, and instructional teams enable teacher librarians to take advantage of the varied experiences and expertises that exist in a school community, and build sustained support for the school library. Teacher librarians can capitalise on instructional expertise, subject

knowledge, technical knowhow, reading and literacy expertise, student expertise, and community knowledge. This will ensure the awareness of the teacher librarian's expertise.

3. Engaging Web 2.0 tools to develop deep inquiry

Without Web 2.0, school libraries miss considerable opportunities for situating learning in the real world of young people, and for developing deep inquiry. This rapidly developing platform of web tools provides an architecture of participation, and unprecedented opportunities to build community, foster collaboration, and creativity – which are core values of school libraries. We have to ensure that the focus is on the substance, the knowledge creation and sharing, rather than simply on mastery of a range of dynamic technical tools with superficial intellectual content.

...at the heart of a transformed school library is evidence.

4. Evidence based practice

In an era of strong educational accountability, at the heart of a transformed school library is evidence. Without evidence, it is just another person's opinion. Our school libraries

have to develop a much stronger focus on evidence, and explicit systematic evidence must underpin all decisions of professional work. I see this happening in three integrated ways.

- *Evidence FOR Practice*: focuses on using research to inform our day-to-day practice, particularly the inquiry-based instructional framework of the school library, reading and literacy development, and the development of critical thinking, knowledge, creativity and innovation.
- *Evidence IN Practice*: focuses on gathering of data from our practice, and using this data, meshed with research-based findings, and our professional wisdom and judgment to make informed decisions within our schools.
- *Evidence OF Practice*: impacts of our libraries on student achievement; gathering local evidence as well as country evidence that shows the vitality and sustained contribution to the learning agenda of the school.

The future of school libraries is a question of evidence. This requires sustained discussion and action at a school, state and national level, to continuously develop and support the evidence infrastructure.

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NSW SCIS Agency < judy.engall@det.nsw.edu.au > Phone 02 9886 7587	Cataloguing issues; making the most of SCIS; resources needing a SCIS record. Contact Judy Engall if you have resources not on SCIS.

This evidence is essential if sustained improvement is to be made. Evidence is the foundation of continuous improvement.

Delaware case study

An illustrative example is the cycle of continuous improvement for school libraries in the state of Delaware, based on substantive evidence collected through systematic research. 'Building capacity and continuous improvement of school libraries: the Delaware experience' (Todd, 2008) is the report of this program. In the initial round of data collection in 2004–2005, and subsequent data collection in 2005–2006, comprehensive data were collected from 154 public school libraries (91 elementary, 31 middle and 30 high schools, and 2 composite schools).

The study constructs a comprehensive picture of the status of school libraries in the state – their personnel, resource and technology infrastructure, instructional interventions in relation to information literacy, and reading and literacy development initiatives. The findings then provided an essential foundation for establishing the direction and nature of school library improvement, and implementing a range of initiatives and processes to foster this improvement. Some key findings included:

- 71% of school library employees are state certified school librarians. The largest group of non-certified school librarians are in the elementary schools.
- 60% of school libraries have paraeducators employed. 54% of elementary school libraries have no paraeducator support. Only 22% of school libraries have full time support staff.
- Cooperations (defined as informal communications between teachers and library media specialists), rather than coordinations and instructional collaborations, are the predominant mode of school librarians' interactions with classroom teachers. These take

place in English Language Arts, Social Studies and Science.

- School libraries where very low levels of cooperations, coordinations and collaborations take place are typically elementary schools without a school librarian full time in the building.
- Compared to the number of cooperations and coordinations, the number of collaborations (where the teacher and school librarians jointly set goals, design learning experiences and teach and evaluate units of study) is low. A small group of school librarians engage in a high number of collaborations. Given that both Delaware's statement of standards and national standards speak to the professional role of school librarians providing collaborative and integrated instruction in relation to information literacy and information technology development, this professional role is not taking place in a widespread and sustained way.
- The highest number of instructional collaborations take place where there is a full time, certified school librarian who operates a library program based on flexible scheduling.
- 48% of the school librarians are involved in the provision of professional development on information literacy in their school communities.
- While the school librarians engage in a range of information literacy instruction initiatives, these typically centre on knowing about the school library, different sources and formats and the different strategies in doing effective research, learning how to use resources, and evaluating information. Given the low levels of coordinations and collaborations, these would appear to primarily take place in isolation in the school library, and not optimally as part of instructional partnerships with classroom teachers.
- The school librarians engage in a range of instructional activities to help students use information technology in efficient and productive ways. Most typically this includes searching strategies for the WorldWideWeb, using electronic databases, evaluating web sites, and teaching about the ethical use of the internet. This takes place more widely in middle and high schools. Given the low levels of coordinations and collaborations, these would appear to primarily take place in isolation in the school library, and not as part of instructional partnerships with classroom teachers.
- The school librarians engage in a range of activities to promote reading across the school. These are typically literature displays and book talks, and promoting information resources, reading incentive programs, and to a lesser extent storytelling, book clubs and author visits. These are more pervasive in the elementary school, and decline in frequency through middle school and high school. However, reading activities that are most typically undertaken are primarily passive activities, and reading activities that foster active student engagement, discussion and creative outputs by students have much lower rates of library media specialist involvement.
- School librarians in the state are able to identify a range of learning outcomes enabled by the school library. There is some evidence to show that school libraries in Delaware play a role in helping students learn in their curriculum areas in a number of ways. 39.6% of school librarians indicated that their school library helps students become effective researchers, and develop in them a range of skills in locating and selecting sources, organising and evaluating information, and compiling information. 37.7% of school librarians indicated that their school library

helps improve reading skills and helps students develop greater interest in and motivation for reading. 22.1% of school librarians indicated that their school library helps students develop a range of technology skills related to using the internet effectively, and searching online databases and catalogues. 15.6% of school librarian specialists indicated that their school library helps students develop positive attitudes to libraries. Very few school librarians (4.5%) were able to articulate learning outcomes linked to curriculum standards and goals.

- There are approximately 1.6 million materials housed in Delaware's school libraries, with an average of 11,500 per school. (10,400 for elementary schools, 12,500 for middle schools and 13,500 for high schools). The average number of materials per student is 15.36.
- There are approximately 1.37 million books in Delaware's school

libraries. This is 87.5% of the total materials. The average number of books per student is 12.65. While a number of schools have above this average, this figure is well below the minimum resource recommendation for the state of 15 currently useful volumes per student. 37% of Delaware's school libraries do not meet this minimum resource recommendation. Only 38% of Delaware's school libraries have good or exemplary resource levels (that is, above 20 currently useful volumes per student [good], and 25 useful volumes per students [exemplary]).

- 40% of school library catalogues are searchable via the internet, providing opportunities for students in some schools to access the school library independently after school time.
- The average number of computers in the school libraries available for internet access is 15 (10 in elementary schools, 20 in middle schools, and 29 in high schools).

- Participation in interlibrary lending is low.
- 40% of school libraries operate on flexible scheduling of classes.
- Over half of Delaware's school libraries have annual budget allocations below \$6,000, and 30% of school libraries experienced budget decreases from the 2002–2003 school year.

The provision of these findings clearly poses substantive challenges. The findings indicate that those school libraries that are strongly integrated into the learning fabric of the school and which contribute to student learning outcomes have a common set of characteristics including:

- a state certified, full time school librarian in the building
- the availability of support staff who free the school librarian to undertake instructional initiatives and reading literacy initiatives
- flexible scheduling so that school librarians and classroom teachers can engage in collaborative



Friday, 5th June 2009 New England Girls School Armidale

Presentations will be made from leaders in the fields of Connected Learning, Reading & Literature and Collaborative Leadership.

Dr Len Unsworth

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Dr Carol Gordon

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Presented by ASLA (NSW) Inc. in partnership with the School Libraries and Information Literacy Unit (NSW Department of Education and Training).

www.aslansw.org.au/learning/conference.htm



planning and delivery of information literacy instruction

- an active instructional program of information literacy targeted towards learning curriculum content and skills
- a school library that meets resource recommendations of 15–20 books per child
- the provision of professional development on information literacy and technology literacies to the teaching faculty
- a budget allocation of \$12–\$15 per student per year to ensure currency and vitality of the information base
- a strong networked information technology infrastructure that facilitates access to and use of information resources in an out of the school.

The findings also show that Delaware's school libraries are making some (and variable) progress in reaching infrastructure standards and instructional goals. However, there are common shortcomings in the provision of infrastructure, such as resources and full time staffing, as well as collaborative instructional opportunities to work with classroom teachers targeted to meeting curriculum standards, and demonstrating learning outcomes that go beyond mastery of a basic set of information competencies.

Given the low level of articulating outcomes of the school library's program, the findings indicate that there are some significant communication issues, evidence based practice problems, and missed opportunities that school librarians and school leaders in the state need to reflect on and address. In addition, the findings also suggest opportunities to rethink reading and literacy initiatives, not just in terms of building motivation and engagement with reading, but also to link with state and national reading initiatives that focus on improving reading achievement, as well as reading for comprehension.

Evidence and continuous improvement

The above case illustrates the importance of evidence as a foundation for strategic planning, and negotiating a cycle of continuous improvement. In Delaware, the cycle of continuous improvement began with a frank, open and honest appraisal of the status of school libraries, and negotiating and implementing several key recommendations:

- developing a stronger evidenced based practice approach to school library programs targeted to measuring and demonstrating the school library's contribution to student learning programs
- developing stronger collaborative instructional programs targeted to meeting the knowledge and skills outcomes embedded in Delaware's curriculum standards rather than focusing on simplistic information competencies
- with particular emphasis on reading and literacy development, developing skills of engaging with school, district and state reading data in order to identify achievement gaps, learning needs, and to translate these needs into instructional and service programs through the school library and measure evidence of progress
- developing and negotiating school and district improvement plans that engage the school library in a direct and deliberate process of identifying school achievement gaps and developing evidence based programs to contribute to closing achievement gaps
- developing an integrated professional development program of school librarians, school communities and educational leaders to work together to ensure that high levels of student achievement take place.

Enabling continuous improvement

In moving from evidence to action, the program of continuous improve-

ment, at least at a state level, has centred on three sustained programs of professional action. Multiple experts at state and regional level worked together to provide an experience based and evidence based program of development and implementation. Each of these programs, described briefly below, is enabling school librarians in their local schools to take action, which is a clear expectation of the continuous improvement programs.

A key expectation of the program has been that school librarians will facilitate training in their school districts.

The programs have involved school librarians working in collaborative partnerships with classroom teachers, reading and literacy experts, and curriculum leaders in the key learning areas of the Department of Education. A key expectation of the program has been that school librarians will facilitate training in their school districts.

Mini-Course 1: School librarians and school improvement

This course seeks to provide school librarians with

- an understanding of the processes involved in evidence based practice, knowledge of the range of achievement and general school data available in and beyond Delaware to underpin evidence practice
- skills and strategies on
 - how to interrogate and analyse this data to inform school improvement efforts in Delaware
 - how to use this data in making decisions for school improvement efforts, in developing library interventions and to measure the impacts

- how to engage with school based improvement planning processes.

The outcome for all participants was the development and implementation of a library improvement plan that could be incorporated into the school's improvement plan, with explicit attention to data-driven needs analysis, design of instructional and service interventions, and design of outcome measures to establish efficacy of improvement processes.

Mini-Course 2: Unpacking the standards in the library

This program involves Curriculum Associates of the Department of Education, district content specialists, and classroom teachers working in an evidence based, collaborative partnership. The collaborative teams have worked together to:

- build an understanding of current research in relation to constructivist learning, and student information seeking and learning in complex and diverse information environments
- develop an understanding of the principles of guided inquiry as a pedagogical framework for constructing meaningful learning through the school library based on the Guided Inquiry framework of Kuhlthau (2007) and CISSL
- engage in an in-depth analysis of the new Delaware Recommended Curriculum (DRC) in ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies to identify content standards and AASL learning standards (2007) that lend themselves to collaborative student centred inquiry through the school library
- work with Delaware curriculum experts to design integrated and collaborative guided inquiry units based on Delaware standards. These exemplars of collaborative curriculum inquiry units incorporate evidence based measures to chart learning outcomes and are in the process of being highlighted on the Department of Education's

website for all classroom teachers and school librarians.

Mini-Course 3: Literacy and school improvement

This course sought to engage school librarians with reading/literacy specialist partners, in the development of initiatives targeted to reducing state achievement gaps in relation to reading and literacy. Lead by the Delaware Department of Education's Curriculum Associate for English Language Arts (which encompasses reading and literacy), the school librarian-reading specialist teams have worked together to:

- examine scientifically based research and writing strategies presented in a diverse body of literature
- examine and interrogate reading achievement data of Delaware meshed with data from the Delaware school library studies to establish achievement gaps that have potential to be closed through a range of school library interventions
- focus on measurable evidence to develop a student centred survey to collect evidence on their knowledge and ability in articulating the standards and their motivation towards reading
- investigate student centred active interventions based on their survey's results and the findings and recommendations of the Delaware Library Study

- develop a collaborative library based improvement plans which targeted Delaware Grade Level Expectations in ELA and AASL Learning Standards (AASL 2007), including processes and strategies to systematically measure the impacts
- initiate a Community of Practice for continuous school improvement in reading and writing.

...improvement and capacity building is an essential agenda for the future...

School library improvement and capacity building is an essential agenda for the future if school libraries are to be valued as an integral part of the information-to-knowledge fabric of a school. Being a part of the information landscape is not enough. Critical to building capacity and enabling improvement is individual and collective action – action that is informed by systematic research, guided by experience and wisdom, engages strategically and carefully with evidence, and which creates evidence for continuous improvement and program development, and for building active support for the learning centred work of teacher librarians and school libraries. ■

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