

Pre-Service School Librarians' Perceptions of Research Pedagogy: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This article is an exploratory study of graduate-level instruction on research designs and methods for pre-service school librarians (PSSLs). Using a focus group of one cohort of PSSLs, we examine students' perceptions of understanding research methods, course content and delivery, and self-reported application of new knowledge from a sequence of two graduate research courses in a Master's degree program. Findings indicate increased appreciation and understanding of the research process among participants and the ability to integrate the research findings of others into their own practice, while also indicating little or no confidence

teachers, administrators, parents, and the broader school community, school librarians, like other educators in K12 schools, require the knowledge to incorporate into their work current research in the field (AASL 2010). Additionally, the incorporation of research as a part of best practice in

research in school libraries occurs despite an emphasis in graduate programs of competencies based on the assertion that conducting research is a vital task for all librarians.

Research Pedagogy in School Library Programs

The competencies for librarians as articulated by professional organizations include statements that point to pre-service librarians' need to be knowledgeable about understanding, conducting, and analyzing research. The American Library Association (ALA) competencies state that a librarian will know "the techniques used to analyze complex problems and create appropriate solutions," the "fundamentals of quantitative and qualitative research methods," and "the principles and methods used to assess the actual and potential value of new research" (ALA 2009)

Ross J. Todd's EBP framework includes three types of evidence:

- x Foundational evidence: "Existing formal research provides the essential building blocks for professional practice."
- x Process evidence: "Locally produced evidence—data generated by practice (librarian observed evidence)—is meshed with research-based evidence to provide a dynamic decisionmaking environment."
- x Outcomes evidence: "Use reported evidence shows that the learner changes as a result of inputs, interventions, activities, and processes." (2015, 9)

When action research is considered in the context of these three components of EBP, action research could be viewed as being in partial alignment with EBP. The data collected by school librarians as part of action research could be seen as the process evidence that Todd details. Additionally, the cyclical nature of action research matches with outcomes evidence in EBP because action researchers look at their own practices to make changes and adjustments to improve practice, and then go through the process again to measure for potential improvements. Both action research and EBP could be tools to improve instruction of PSSSLs on research completed by practitioners. Both provide some context for this research study.

Context: Our School Library Program

Most of the PSSSLs in our LIS graduate program are licensed teachers who want to add an endorsement as school librarians. Our program is entirely online, and we serve students across our state as well as out of state and outside the United States. As part of their required coursework for their Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree, PSSSLs take a two

the time and, therefore, were unable to examine daily school library practices. Instead, PSSLs frequently conducted surveys of practicing school librarians with participation elicited through a professional online discussion group. Finally, while PSSLs may have been presented with the suggestion of publication, students had no requirement or incentive to publish their papers.

Methods

Guiding this study was the exploratory question: How should a school library program prepare pre-service school librarians to integrate research into their future practice?

Participants

Participants for this study had recently completed their M.Ed. with a school library endorsement. In the year prior to data collection, these graduates had completed the research sequence in their graduate program: two research courses sequentially over two semesters. The participants for this study took these courses as a cohort group with the same instructor teaching both courses. Participants were part of a competitively selected small cohort of students funded by an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant and were all teachers

Student confidence during and after the course remained low. As one participant remarked: "I felt like a dope for two semesters, really. Like I should have known how to do it, but didn't."

Students stated that from the very beginning of their instruction, they lacked confidence about their understanding of research methods and about conducting research. A contributing factor to low confidence at the outset was the students' perception that they were not prepared for the research sequence by other courses earlier in the program. A participant said, "It was like jumping into a lake and not knowing how to swim." While the students were comfortable discussing other topics about school libraries by the end of the school librarian preparation program, the research sequence was so different from anything else [they] had done" in their coursework or practicum experiences, and they did not have any sense of mastery.

Students detailed some ways the program might have prepared them more for learning about research:

- x reading more academic articles in other courses similar to the ones presented in the sequence,
- x completing a mini-review of literature in another course,
- x incorporating elements on conducting action research throughout other courses, and
- x introducing the different parts of original research and scientific reporting earlier in the program.

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For the culminating assignment in the second course in the sequence, PSSLs produced a Master's thesis with original data collection and analysis, with final products totaling around seventy pages in length. Despite completing such a significant product, students lacked confidence in working towards publishing their findings to a broader audience after the research sequence was completed. Among their comments were:

“I thought about publishing, but have no idea on what to do with it!”

“I still feel as though I don't have a solid enough understanding to publish my

seeking information as provided by others). Even after completing the courses, this student talked about the Super3 and the Big6 (Berkowitz and Eisenberg 1990), which are taught to K learners as an inquiry process, as though learners were doing the same type of original research and data collection expected of these Master's degree candidates in the research class.

Students did identify the required review of the literature as a helpful course assignment. This review allowed them to enter the field of school librarianship possessing information based on empirical evidence. Students discussed the benefits of using research findings from the field to engage other educators in discussions from an informed, rather than anecdotal, stance. As one participant said, "All those articles and research I gathered have come in VERY handy during my discussions with the new principal and the teachers." Some students felt they learned far more from conducting background investigations on their topics than they did from attempting original data collection and analysis.

Students reported mixed perceptions on the feedback they received from the instructor. Some students stated the feedback from the instructor was essential to their success. Those students who reported positive discussions with the instructor felt reassured that they were "on the right track." Students talked about getting stuck determining their research methods and not knowing if their research ideas were too broad or narrow, and found the feedback in conversations with the instructor to be "invaluable." Other students reported the feedback they received as insufficient, and they did not feel encouraged in their understanding of the research process.

This group of students went through the program in a cohort, specifically taking all classes together and beginning and ending the program at the same time. Prior to the research sequence, they had completed numerous group projects together and interacted on a regular basis both formally and informally. With the research sequence at the end of the program, students in the cohort knew each other well, and some relied on one another for feedback and support. "I got more of my feedback from peers, because we talked frequently." One student stated the feedback received from peers was "amazingly encouraging!!!!!!" Another indicated that she was uncomfortable providing informal feedback to other students because she did not feel she understood the material well enough to help anyone. Not all students sought peer feedback, and one student indicated that she felt she was "floundering on my own" in a "very lonely" semester.

Application to Practice

Along with the themes of students' lack of confidence in understanding and applying research methods, and their issues with the course design, a third theme that emerged was the PSSSLs' confidence in applying research to practice. Participant

- x identified a reluctance to publish their work,
- x

Discussion

This exploratory case study examines one librarian preparation program's instructional approach

Agarwal, and Watkins 2014). In fact, many models of action research do not include a dissemination stage. The outcome of action research is assumed to be only further action. Many models depict action research as an iterative cycle through which data continuously informs practice, but these models do not articulate when or how it is appropriate to share methods or findings. Carol A. Gordon has suggested that “action research is distinguished from formal research in that its results are articulated through an action plan that addresses the problem identified in the action research” (2006, 8). In 2009 Todd emphasized dissemination as a component of EBP, but he did not specify the type of dissemination that might contribute to the broader practice of school librarianship through publication. When dissemination is discussed it is often localized with a focus on sharing at the building or community level, rather than by means of national publications (Ballard 2015).

Students in this exploratory study saw the value in being reflective of their practice. However, they did not always see these efforts as being a form of research, action or otherwise. Students specifically mentioned tasks such as using student feedback to improve library services.

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Appendix A: Definition of Terms

action research: “a systematic enquiry with the purpose of understanding and improving one’s own practice” (Hopkins 2014, 8). This includes research conducted by practitioners, primarily in K–12 education, but possibly in collaboration with others in higher education. The process of action research is cyclical, including an examination of one’s own practice to make improvements in future instruction.

classroom research: original research conducted by teachers in the classroom. See also practitioner research and action research.

course sequence: see research sequence

evidence, types of:

- x **foundational evidence:** “Existing formal research provides the essential building blocks for professional practice” (Todd 2015, 9).
- x **process evidence:** “Locally produced evidence—data generated by practice (librarian observed evidence)—is meshed with research-based evidence to provide a dynamic decisionmaking environment” (Todd 2015, 9).
- x **outcomes evidence:** “User-reported evidence shows that the learner changes as a result of inputs, interventions, activities, and processes” (Todd 2015, 9). This evidence is derived from action research.

evidencebased practice: in school librarianship: “an approach to professional practice in school libraries that systematically engages research-derived evidence, school librarian-observed evidence, and user-reported evidence in iterative processes of decision making, development, and continuous improvement to achieve the school’s mission and goals” (Todd 2008, 18–19). This process can include action research (practitioner gathered evidence), but also includes practice informed by evidence from other sources.

practitioner research or classroom research: original data collection and analysis conducted by practitioners in education. A process sometimes referred to as action research. See also action research.

pre-service school librarians (PSSLs): graduate students earning a Master of Education degree with an endorsement in school librarianship, preparing to become K–12 school librarians.

research pedagogy: the instruction of research methods and practice to pre-service school librarians at the university program described in this paper.

research sequence: the two courses taken by pre-service school librarians in the graduate program at the authors’ university. The first course provided instruction on research methods. The second course provided an opportunity to practice those methods through a research proposal, data collection, and reporting.

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