

Improving School Library Practice through Research

Audrey Church

churchap@longwood.edu

It is an honor to write the first of what will be a regular “Research into Practice” column for *Knowledge Quest*. To get started let’s unpack what we mean by “research into practice.”

The *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science* defines “research” as “systematic, painstaking investigation of a topic, or in a field of study, often employing hypothesis and experimentation, undertaken by a person intent on revealing new facts, theories, or principles, or determining the current state of knowledge of the subject” (Reitz 2020). (Sidebar: I am slightly troubled by the use of the word “painstaking,” although I understand that it implies care and preciseness.) Merriam-Webster defines the noun “practice” as “actual performance or application” (2020).

If I were to define these terms more simply in my own words, I would suggest that research involves gathering and reporting empirical evidence to answer questions on a topic of interest and that practice is what we do as school librarians on a daily basis. The question then is how does research inform practice? What makes research findings practical and useful? As a practicing school librarian how can I use findings from research to improve my school library, enhance my instruction, and, quite simply, be a better school librarian?

My primary area of research interest is administrators’ perception of school librarians’ instructional role, and my studies have shown that 92 percent of principals in Virginia learn what school librarians do from the librarians with whom they work. Administrators are not typically exposed to the instructional role of the school librarian in their educational leadership coursework, the journals they read, or the conferences they attend (Church 2008, 2010). *Research into practice*: Each of us must communicate clearly and consistently with our administrators to make sure that they understand the essential role that we play not only in fostering a love of reading but also in enhancing instruction through the curation of quality resources and in teaching critical information and digital literacy skills. *Takeaway*: Administrators learn what we do from us.

As we explore the usefulness of research into practice, I look to my school librarianship educator colleagues and the research they have done. Dr. Karla Collins’s primary research interest is in color vision deficiencies. Approximately eight percent of our male K–12 students experience color vision deficiency, commonly referred to as color blindness (2013). Yet how often in our school library environment and instruction do we code things

by color? Think handouts, signage, directions, spine labels, and more. *Research into practice*: Training should be provided to ensure that school librarians (and other educators) are aware of the prevalence of color vision deficiencies, and we should use multiple methods to communicate information rather than rely solely on color. *Takeaway*: We need to be cognizant of and careful with our use of color to convey information in our libraries.

Dr. Jen Spisak has investigated the difference in secondary students’ perception of their information literacy skills and their actual skill level. The results of her study show that all groups—6th, 9th, and 12th graders—overestimated their information literacy abilities and, as their self-efficacy levels increased, their overestimation also increased (2018). These findings come as no surprise to us as school librarians, yet our administrators and fellow educators often assume that today’s learners are information and digitally literate. *Research into practice*: While our students have grown up with devices in their hands and ready access to information, they do not possess the skills necessary to effectively evaluate and use that information. It is essential that we teach students to access information efficiently, evaluate information critically, and use information ethically. *Takeaway*:

Today's students need information and digital literacy instruction.

Looking beyond two of my Longwood colleagues' research I'll highlight two recently published articles from the 2019 volume of AASL's scholarly refereed research journal, *School Library Research*.

Dr. April Dawkins and Dr. Karen Gavigan explored the circulation and use of e-books in high school library collections. They found that e-books are most utilized when they align with curriculum needs and student interest and when they are marketed effectively to students and teachers (2019). *Research into practice*: We can easily apply the methods that were used in this study to determine the use of e-books in our own collections and consider Dawkins and Gavigan's recommendations when purchasing e-books. We can also implement some of the strategies they identified to market our existing e-book collections. *Takeaways*: Many factors are involved in e-book collection development, and marketing is needed if e-books are to be used to their full potential.

Danielle Bolden, Lauren Pellegrino, and Joanna Gerakios studied action research as a method of professional development. They found that when practicing school librarians engaged in year-long action research as structured professional development, collaboration with various stakeholders increased, support for the school library increased, and school librarians felt personally validated (2019). *Research into practice*: In addition to serving as professional development, action research provides data to improve practice and raises awareness of the role of the school library and librarian in teaching and learning. *Takeaway*: Action research has many benefits.

AASL adopted a new strategic plan in June 2019, and the third of its three

goals is Research, "AASL advances research that informs school librarian practice." Three objectives are outlined under this goal:

- Facilitate evidence-informed school librarian practices.
- Increase visibility of research related to school librarians.
- Communicate research findings to practitioners and other leaders. (2019)

With the advent of this new "Research into Practice" column, our professional association will address each of these objectives. In future issues this column will provide a vehicle to communicate research findings from the field, increase the visibility

of research around school libraries and school librarians, and seek to facilitate evidence-informed practice in your school library.



Dr. Audrey Church

is professor and graduate program director of school librarianship at Longwood University in

Farmville, VA. She is a past president of the Virginia Educational Media Association (now the Virginia Association of School Librarians), past president of AASL, and current editor of *School Library Research*.

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