Principals' Evaluation of School Librarians: A Study of Strategic and Nonstrategic Evidence-based Approaches

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Principals have a range of strategic and nonstrategic approaches available to them that they could potentially employ to gather evidence to evaluate school librarians. This study surveyed principals on how frequently they used each of these possible/arms of evidence. Results show that principals are proactive, deliberate, and strategic in seeking the evidence they use to evaluate their school librarians. They are more likely to use their own observations, interviews, and data analysis than to rely on evidence provided to them by the school librarian, particularly in the form of reports.

Introduction

No one in the field of education can dispute the effect a principal has on the school library media program. Professional practice and a substantial body of international research (see, e.g., Oberg, 2006) has clearly established that principal support enables school librarians and programs to thrive and that the lack of principal support can decimate programs.

School librarians in Canada have indicated that the principal shows support for the program in three ways: by working directly with teachers to develop their understanding of the program; by clearly demonstrating personal commitment to the program; and by using the management role of school leader to enable the program. More specifically, this support is shown by "making explicit statements about the value of the program, being visible in the library, by being a model for teachers by using the program in his or her teaching" (Oberg, 1995, p. 224). Henri, Hay, and Oberg's (2002) study involving principals in Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Japan, Scotland, and South Korea focused on principals' influence and information services in schools. Principals and school librarians in those countries ranked belief statements about principals' and school librarians' roles in development of an information-literate school community. The most important future tasks for principals identified most frequently by both groups were: encouraging and facilitating the professional development of staff; supporting the development of a resource collection that is current and relevant to the curriculum needs of the school; and advocating and facilitating the development of an information-literate school community. Flexible scheduling, a practice usually under the principal's jurisdiction, can have a formidable effect on the school library program.

Principals are credited for making flexible scheduling work by devising solutions to the problem of providing planning time for teachers and librarians (Zweizig, McAfee-Hopkins, Wehlage, & Webb, 1999); setting the tone for how teachers will respond to flexible scheduling (Shannon, 1996); setting expectations for collaboration and team planning (Donham van Deusen & Tallman, 1994); demonstrating confidence in school librarians by allowing them to implement flexible scheduling as they see fit; being physically visible in the library; and being involved in initial planning meetings (McGregor, 2002). The 16 student achievement studies compiled in *School Libraries Work* (Scholastic Research Foundation, 2006) also lend credence to principals' influence. Most of the library media program variables linked to student achievement are under the direct control or influence of the principal: budget, professional and support staff, collection size, time devoted to teaching, and extent of collaboration with teachers.

Evaluation of the school librarian is closely aligned with the principal's effect on the school library program. In most school systems in the United States, principals conduct mandatory, formal, evaluations of teachers, counselors, nurses, and school librarians. Hartzell (2002) maintains,

> *A principal's evaluation of a librarian does more than fulfill a bureaucratic requirement. It also influences how the principal sees the library and librarian in the school, and this, in turn, influences the level of support she is willing to extend, (p. 45)*

School librarians are often at a disadvantage in the formal evaluative process because often it is almost entirely based on the teaching role (Wilson, Blake, & Lyders, 1993). Principals typically visit the school library and observe the school librarian while he or she is teaching a class and uses a form designed to evaluate classroom teachers. Rarely is there any formal evaluation of the multifaceted roles of information specialist, instructional partner, and program administrator in addition to that of teacher (Dorrell & Lawson, 1995). School librarians, most notably those who employ flexible scheduling, spend a relatively small percentage of their time teaching in the traditional classroom sense (Everhart, 1992, 1994, 2000; Donham van Deusen, 1996), which renders this type of evaluation imprecise. As a solution to this problem, some have proposed designing a unique evaluative form (Bryant, 2002; Mann, 1992) or a supplemental form (Lamb & Johnson, 1989) for principals to use that would more accurately reflect the school librarian's responsibilities. A change in format might entail training sessions for principals to familiarize them with unfamiliar terminology and definitions (Naylor & Jenkins, 1988) and with how most effectively to use the instrument (Mann, 1992). Teachers' union contracts may also specify methods of information gathering, frequency of observations, and evaluations (Strike & Millman, 1983). Bryant (2002) suggests that school librarians construct short- and long-term plans for the library in conjunction with the principal and then be evaluated on progress made toward realizing these plans.

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Principals do have opportunities to evaluate school librarians from additional perspectives that are feasible in the organizational context. Research by Naylor and Jenkins (1988) reveals that most principals rely on their own observations as prime

sources of evidence about their school librarians. Principals examine the physical facilities and observe conversations, the librarians' behavior, and students' use of the materials to support their professional judgments. Principals also value the commentary of others, including hearing complaints. Dorrell and Lawson (1995) similarly established that most principals determine the amount and kind of work being done by the school librarian from informal observation first, word of mouth from classroom teachers second, and formal observation third. A small percentage of principals rely on school librarians' reports or newsletters. Todd (2003) urges school librarians to be proactive and use evidence-based practice techniques to prove their worth by providing their principals with students' test scores, research findings, monthly reports, statistics, samples of students' work, lesson plans, and surveys.

> *What's important is that the gathered evidence highlights how the librarian plays a crucial role in boosting student achievement, in shaping important attitudes and values, in contributing to the development of self-esteem, and in creating a more effective learning environment, (p. 52)*

Communications theory and research suggest a variety of alternate strategies that principals can use to acquire information about their school librarians (Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Kellerman, 1994). Berger (2002) distinguishes between strategic and nonstrategic methods of acquiring information. Strategic approaches are active and can include direct information-gathering, face-to-face interaction, seeking information from third parties, or observing. Research on principals related to evaluation of school librarians has focused exclusively on strategic acquisition of information (Naylor & Jenkins, 1988; Dorrell & Lawson, 1995; Taylor & Bryant, 1996). A great deal of information about the physical and social world is also acquired nonstrategically, or passively (Berger, 2002). Two specific forms of nonstrategic acquisition of information are applicable to principals' evaluation of school librarians. Social dual-processing models recognize that information is processed rationally (Epstein, 1994) and examined for factual validity and logical consistency, but that it is also processed peripherally, heuristically, or experientially and is not carefully scrutinized for quality (Gilbert, 1999). Closely related to social dual processing is the automatization theory (Schneider, 1985) that proposes that practice changes controlled processing into automatic processing. For example, walking, riding a bicycle, reading, and many activities that people do every day become automatic over time. Automaticity, which has been acquired through effective repeated practice, makes it possible to process various stimuli at various stages simultaneously, as in something like a psychological and psychomotor version of a complex production line. For professionals such as principals, more

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complex tasks such as evaluation may become automatic as expertise is acquired both rationally and peripherally.

A variety of formal, informal, strategic, and nonstrategic mechanisms are available to principals as they evaluate school librarians. Research has focused on principals' mandatory use of the formal teaching evaluation and other strategic techniques. Other methods have not been studied, particularly how principals might incorporate evidence-based data and how communications and social-cognitive theory may

possibly affect principals' perceptions and attitudes in the evaluative process. It is crucial that school librarians be cognizant of any and all methods that principals use and of other factors that might influence evaluations because the outcomes of these evaluations have serious professional consequences.

Research Question and Methodology

The study reported here focused on the evaluative practices of principals in relation to the school librarian and sought to answer the following research question: What are the most frequent forms of evidence used by principals to evaluate school librarians?

In order to gather data to answer the research question, a survey was administered to 89 New York City school principals. Principals were participants in an annual conference on the campus of St. John's University in Queens. The conference provides a day of professional development opportunities focusing on best practices in urban school libraries. A requirement is that in order to attend, each school librarian must be accompanied by his or her principal. Most participating principals were from elementary and middle schools, although some headed K-12 schools.

A panel of four experts, school library consultants, generated a list of possible types of evaluation activities that principals might employ to evaluate school librarians. This list was verified with the literature, and the final list of 14 activities appears in column 1 of Table 1. Principals were asked to rate the frequency of each type of evaluation from 1 to 5 according to the scale where 5=weekly, 4=monthly, 3=once per semester, 2=once per year, and l=never. The survey was distributed during an intermission period of the conference. Principals were encouraged to reflect on the survey throughout the day and return it to a designated drop box. As an incentive, those who completed the survey were invited to select three new books for their library from a display of publishers' donations. Sixty-four surveys were returned for a 65% response rate.

Table 1
Principals' Most Frequent Type of School Librarian Evaluation

	Weekly		Monthly		Once per Semester		Once per Year		Never		Weighted Ranking	Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
1. Informal visits	57	89.1%	7	10.9%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	313	100%
2. Examine student work	30	46.9%	26	40.6%	0	0.0%	5	7.8%	3	4.7%	267	100%
3. Student interviews	24	37.5%	24	37.5%	3	4.7%	11	17.2%	2	3.1%	249	100%
4. Faculty interviews	26	40.6%	20	31.3%	2	3.1%	16	25.0%	0	0.0%	248	100%
5. Standard test scores	10	15.6%	14	21.9%	28	43.8%	6	9.4%	6	9.4%	208	100%
6. Teacher lesson plans	5	7.8%	27	42.2%	17	26.6%	9	14.1%	6	9.4%	208	100%
7. Librarian lesson plans	10	15.6%	22	34.4%	15	23.4%	0	0.0%	17	26.6%	200	100%
8. Library use reports	5	7.8%	24	37.5%	10	15.6%	9	14.1%	16	25.0%	185	100%
9. Non-teaching observation (formal)	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	9	14.1%	52	81.3%	3	4.7%	134	100%
10. Teaching observation (formal)	0	0.0%	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	55	85.9%	8	12.5%	122	100%
11. Faculty surveys	1	1.6%	1	1.6%	3	4.7%	42	65.6%	17	26.6%	119	100%
12. Budget reports	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	42	65.6%	22	34.4%	106	100%
13. Circulation reports	0	0.0%	2	3.1%	3	4.7%	7	10.9%	52	81.3%	83	100%
14. Student surveys	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	6.3%	3	4.7%	57	89.1%	75	100%

N=64.

Results were compiled and analyzed using Excel®. Frequency data for each of the responses were calculated and converted to percentages. The raw frequencies in each cell were multiplied by the corresponding Likert-scale value, and these results were totaled to obtain a weighted ranking value for each type of evaluation.

After I had studied the quantitative results, it became evident that follow-up interviews were necessary in order to illuminate and explicate the

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survey findings. Qualitative data were obtained through telephone interviews with 10 randomly selected principals who responded to five open-ended questions. I reviewed the copious notes taken during the interviews for emergent themes.

Findings

Principals consult a variety of evidence when evaluating their school librarians. The 14 possible sources of information for evaluative purposes received varying degrees of use. A ranking of principals' most frequent types of evaluation is found in Table 1. Principals evaluated their school librarians most frequently by informally visiting the school library. Most (89.1%) visited weekly, and the remainder (10.9%) visited monthly. This finding is identical to those of two earlier studies (Naylor & Jenkins, 1988; Dorrell & Lawson, 1995), where informal observation was cited as the most frequent source of information that principals used to form opinions about the school library. Another consistent finding was that principals relied on word of mouth to make judgments. Word of mouth from students (student interviews) was ranked slightly higher than word of mouth from faculty (faculty interviews). Examining students' work for evidence of library use has not been identified to date as a method that principals have reported employing to evaluate the school librarian or the school library media program. This unique finding, along with the strength of the other three highest rankings, prompted me to conduct follow-up interviews to obtain richer data about principals' approaches to the top four most frequently reported types of evaluation. Ten principals responded to the same set of five open-ended questions.

Informal Visits

The first two questions focused on how the principals might process strategic and nonstrategic information obtained during informal library visits.

Question 1: When you visit the library informally, what leads you to believe that appropriate activities are happening?
Emergent themes were:
• Students are actively engaged with books or technology.
• The librarian is interacting with teachers and students.
• There is an organized, clean, inviting environment.
• A variety of materials are available.
• There are relevant displays.

• Students are borrowing books.

Question 2: When you visit the library informally, what strikes you that appropriate activities are not ongoing?

Emergent themes were:

• The library is empty.
• Materials are in poor condition.
• Students are doing busy work.

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• Students are made to feel unwelcome.
• Materials are going unused.

Principals described the library's climate or the feel one gets when walking into the facility. Although this is a topic addressed sparingly in the literature for school librarians, the New York State Education Department's (2004) *School Library Evaluation* rubric provides a category for ascertaining climate.

Nonexistent. Facility unattractive, disorganized, and not maintained. Students do not feel welcome.

In-progress. Traditional quiet library used mainly for class visits. Few displays, but clean and functional. Students seldom initiate coming to the library on their own.

Basic. LMC safe and barrier-free. Students and teachers feel welcome. Colorful current displays abound. Well organized with clear directional signs.

Proficient. LMC inviting to all. Students actively seek opportunities to visit the LMC to research or read. LMC staff proactive in meeting student and teacher needs.

Exemplary. LMC is the hub of the school. Students and teachers flow seamlessly between classroom and LMC to meet curricular and recreational needs.

It is encouraging to note how closely aligned the principals' perceptions were with the indicators of evidence in the rubric. Although the New York State Education Department (2004) instrument is used mostly as a self-evaluation tool for school librarians, the principals showed considerable knowledge of the elements of a quality school library climate as they focused on the library's physical environment, inviting displays, librarian interaction, and feelings of welcome. This alignment serves school librarians well because there is less possibility of an inaccurate informal evaluation based on erroneous evidence. Considerable observational guidance has been provided to principals about positive and negative characteristics of climate (see, e.g., Yesner & Jay 1987), but it is not known if the principals in this study were aware of this monograph.

Examining Students' Work and Test Scores

The finding that 46.9% of principals examined students' work for evidence of library use on a weekly basis, that 40.6% examined student work monthly, and that examining student work ranks as the second most frequent form of evaluation was unexpected. Neither was reference to this type of evaluation located in the literature, so an interview question that would allow principals to expand on examining student work was constructed.

Question 3: When you examine student work for evidence of library use, what do you look for?
Emergent themes were:
• References students have consulted.
• Work that supports the school's goals.
• A literary quality to writing.
• Presenting results of inquiry in a variety of ways.

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The interviews also provided clarification about how the principals examined the students' work. Techniques mentioned included looking at displays of students' work in the library and in classrooms, examining folders provided by teachers, and looking at students' portfolios. Principals examined references from reports and projects and expressed concerns that students should not rely solely on the Internet and should use more than one source. Several of the principals interviewed supported having students synthesizing information and presenting it in the form of videos, multimedia, or group projects rather than writing the traditional report. Genre study, a focus of the New York State Education Department literature standards, is seen as an area where librarians could support classroom teachers in order for students to be able to define, read, and write about various genres. Principals examined written responses to literature for appropriateness, for staying on topic, and for whether books became internalized in students' writing. To a lesser degree, they looked for evidence of team teaching and collaboration.

Given the emphasis on testing in the US, it is not unexpected that principals examined test scores. However, it has been lamented that school administrators have not made the connection between the school library media program and student achievement on standardized tests (Lau, 2002; Hartzell, 2002) although this association has been well documented in the research (Scholastic Research Foundation, 2006). So it is unusual that a mere 9.4% of principals in this study reported never examining the reading portion of standardized test scores for evidence of school library use and that 15.6% reported doing so weekly, 21.9% monthly, 43.8% once per semester, and 14.1% once per year. This finding requires further research and unfortunately was not targeted in the interviews, so it not known why it ranked so highly (fifth). Possible explanations are that principals examine sections of the New York exams that specifically target information literacy concepts; that they are highly sensitive to anything that mentions standardized tests; or that they were confused about this item.

Student Interviews and Surveys

Although relatively high numbers of principals claimed that they interviewed students in order to evaluate the school library (37.5% weekly and 37.5% monthly), these interviews appeared to be unplanned, informal, and brief. Most interviews consisted of a single question.

Question 4: What types of interviews do you conduct with students to get a feeling that the library is operating effectively?
Emergent themes were:
• Asks students, "What are you reading?"

• Asks students, "What did you learn in the library today?"
• Asks students, "Does the library have good books?"
• Asks students, "Can you find what you need in the library?"

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The nature of the population studied (mostly K-8 principals) and the simplistic nature of the interviews may explain the high ranking of this form of evidence. Principals may have more opportunities to interact with students at the elementary level, and students in this age group would be more open to answering questions. This may also account for student surveys ranking last—89.1% of principals had never used a student survey to evaluate the school library program—although one wrote in the comments section, "It might be a good thing to incorporate questions about the library in our overall student survey."

Faculty Interviews and Surveys

Input from faculty has been shown to be important to principals (Naylor & Jenkins, 1988; Dorrell & Lawson, 1995) and is confirmed by the current results: 60.9% of principals received feedback from faculty either weekly or monthly, and none said that they never did. From the themes emerging from the interviews, it appeared that informal interviews conducted with faculty were more substantial than those conducted with students, which would be logical given the sizeable differences in levels of expertise of the two groups and the potentially larger number of students who would interact with principals.

Question 5: What types of informal interviews do you conduct with faculty to determine if the library is operating effectively?
Emergent themes were:
• Tries to find out how knowledgeable the librarian is.
• Looks to see if teachers are enthusiastic about taking their classes to the library.
• Asks teachers if they feel that staff development activities conducted by the librarian are useful.
• Tries to determine how extensively the library is being used.

Principals relied on faculty for evidence on an extensive array of topics. In addition to those listed, principals reported that they asked teachers about what types of activities should take place in the library, if the librarian was consulted before research projects were assigned, and if the librarian was capable of supporting content areas with fiction and nonfiction resources. Of the 64 principals who completed and returned the survey, 65.6% also reported receiving feedback through an annual teacher survey.

Lesson Plans

New York City educators must make their lesson plans available to principals. In some schools, teachers submit lesson plans directly to the principal on a weekly basis, and in others, the principals must have unrestricted access to the plans. It appears that principals gave some infrequent value to the contents of both teachers' and librarians' lesson plans when evaluating the school library. Most principals evaluated lesson plans monthly (42.2%

for teachers' lesson plans and 34.4% for librarians' lesson plans); 26.6% reported never examining librarian lesson plans.

Formal Observations

Bryant (2002) suggested that school librarians might be better served if they could develop short- and long-term goals and be evaluated on their progress toward meeting these goals rather than by the traditional formal teaching observation. New York City educators have the option of choosing one of two models:

> *Annual Performance Options whereby the educator can set yearly goals and objectives and choose methods for demonstrating professional growth, or Formal Observation which is the traditional classroom observation by a principal or supervisor which includes pre-and post-observation conferences and written feedback/comments. (New York City Board of Education, 2002, p. 6)*

Tenured teachers can request a combination of both methods. It would appear that this may have been the case with the librarians evaluated in this study: 81.3% of the principals stated that they conducted yearly, formal, non-teaching observations, and an almost equal number, 85.9%, stated that they conducted yearly, formal teaching observations.

Reports

Principals were more interested in reports about library use, which ranked eighth, than reports about budget or circulation, which ranked near the bottom of the list of evaluation activities, at 13th and 14th place respectively. This corroborates the responses by principals to the question on informal visits where they voiced concern about library use. Even so, only 37.5% of the principals reported using library reports on a monthly basis, and 25% reported that they never did. Budget reports about the library media program were examined by 65.6% of principals only once per year (which may be typical because budgets run on a yearly cycle); .26.6% never consulted library budget reports. An overwhelming 81.3% of principals never looked at circulation reports. This outcome requires further investigation as to whether the principals were not being provided with a circulation report or if they were simply not concerned with it. The principals' limited reliance on library reports for evaluation purposes suggests that school librarians may be better served by streamlining reporting in quantity and frequency in order to make better use of their time.

Conclusions and Implications

Results from this inquiry into New York City school principals' evaluation practices reinforces a number of earlier research studies, updates others, and suggests a change in how principals collect evidence to evaluate school librarians. In each of these

circumstances, there are implications for school librarians, principals, school library educators, and researchers.

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The predominant form of evidence that principals use to evaluate their school librarians is informal visits. This has not changed in over 10 years (Naylor & Jenkins, 1988; Dorrell & Lawson, 1995), and a plausible explanation is that drop-in visits can be accomplished in a short time and thus they can take place frequently. Principals also rely on the most prevalent source of information that they use to evaluate teachers (McColskey, Altschuld, & Lawton, 1985). Informal visits conform to the model used by top business managers called "Management by Walking Around" (MBWA) advocated by management guru Tom Peters (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Principals who characterize themselves as instructional leaders list MBWA as one of the activities representative of their work (Spiri, 2001). Frase and Melton (1992) describe them as participatory leaders, who show "a demonstrated commitment to making people the highest priority, using time efficiently, scheduling MBWA and following through, leading by example, demonstrating the improvement ethic, and openly seeking feedback" (p. 18). The three-minute classroom walk-through (Downey et al., 2004), like MBWA, has recently gained popularity with administrators.

When principals visit the school library informally, they are sensitive to issues of library climate. Principals feel profoundly responsible for the overall school climate (Whitaker & Turner, 2000), so it follows that they are concerned about the library's climate. School librarians might influence how they are perceived by principals if they are prepared for their principal to pay a visit at any moment, make students and teachers feel welcome, interact constructively with students and teachers, have a variety of activities and materials to keep students actively engaged, and maintain an attractive and clean facility. More important, school librarians should be aware that maintaining a positive library climate can promote or enhance positive self-concepts in students (McAfee, 1981) and could facilitate learning. School library educators need to consider integrating into the curriculum strategies for maintaining a positive school library climate and also conduct needed research on school library climate.

New categories of evaluative evidence surfaced in this study. It was not reported earlier that principals used student interviews and examined student work and standardized test scores to assess the school librarian. Governmental accountability, which places extreme pressures on principals, offers an explanation about the focus on standardized test scores, but questions were raised about the methodology principals might employ to analyze and subsequently use test score data. Principals exploiting data for decision-making (such as student information systems and computerized reading motivation programs) was not explored here, but in the light of their increased availability and sophistication, this appears to be an area for sustained inquiry. Student interviews and examinations of student work emerged as cursory endeavors that could have been accomplished in the context of MBWA or nonstrategic acquisition of information. It appears that principals were able to process various forms of stimuli simultaneously

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through continual practice, which substantiates automatization theory in this framework (Schneider, 1985).

It is encouraging that the principals studied did not rely primarily on the traditional teaching evaluation as has been reported in the past (Bryant, 2002). Another constructive indicator is that the principals demonstrated an alignment of their knowledge of positive attributes of climate and of school libraries in general that had been underscored in earlier literature (Hartzell, 2002). Having given up a day of work to attend a school library conference, this group of principals may have had a higher level of commitment to school libraries than is the norm. Research using a random representative sample is needed to determine if principals in general are making changes in their evaluation practices or if this phenomenon is unique to this subset of New York City principals. Further study could also compare principals' propensity to use various types of evidence to their effectiveness as evaluators and as administrators in general. The quality of the evidence-gathering and the value that principals place on that evidence would also be of interest, as would the significance of personality traits, educational background, and experience with the process. School librarians could also be incorporated into this area of research, comparing their self-assessments with principals' evaluations, using psychological tests to measure how the principals and school librarians are "in sync" from various perspectives, and comparing both groups' goals for the school library media program.

Results from this study indicate that principals are proactive, deliberate, and strategic in seeking the evidence they use to evaluate their school librarians. They are more likely to use their own observations, interviews, and data analysis than to rely on evidence provided by the school librarian, particularly in the form of reports. The growing realization that evidence-based practice can inform evaluation (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2004) needs to be communicated to principals and school librarians as widely as possible. Optimally, this should be accomplished jointly so that their partnership will have a positive effect on student learning.

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