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The Power of Sharing Assessment ... with Colleagues

By Rebecca J. Morris

Even in schools with lively cultures of assessment, school library-focused assessment might still be a new idea. Best practices for school library assessment today provide crucial information to learners and instructors, and its execution is an ongoing process of experimenting, refining, and building. To the school community, however, it might be news that gathering information about what students do in the library program extends way beyond the tracking of overdue books! In order for your school to fulfill its mission, your library should play a vital role. Let's capture and communicate the data to prove that it does. The rationale and resonance should extend beyond the library. It's important not to assume that colleagues and school leaders will understand the why and how of school library assessment. They need to hear of your measured success.

In sharing your practices on assessment and generating support, an approach modeled on advocacy-based communications may be fruitful. After all, sharing student learning in the library is already part of the constellation of advocacy efforts. When you communicate about assessment, identify the target audience and consider their priorities—in other words, the stakeholders' "connection[s] to themselves, their jobs, or their children" (Kachel, DelGuidice, and Luna 2012). Then present content with intention, through messages and angles that address stakeholder priorities AND serve the library program. Here are some ways to introduce school library assessment to two critical groups: administrators and teachers.

Principals

A culture of assessment is typically fostered by leadership (Lakos and Phipps, in Farkas, Hinchcliffe, and Houk 2015). But what if the leaders don't yet share the value of assessment in the school library program? Start with the priorities angle: what matters to your principal? Student achievement is likely high on the list, possibly with needs specific to your school, such as academic progress of students who are English Language Learners, or particular areas of literacy.

Request a short face-to-face meeting (arranged at a convenient time for both of you), and have this principal's concerns in mind when you explain your approach to library assessment. Instead of a vague overview, have a focal point for the conversation, such as a recent learning project or a question for which you'd like some advice. With a few examples by grade level or topic, share your practices and goals, and be sure to emphasize the learning part. When discussing assessment with principals, share your concrete examples, such as exit tickets or exemplar student work. Be purposeful in designing student feedback in an archivable format. Even something such as a simple Survey Monkey link with a few questions will help provide you with concrete evidence for your portfolio.

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As a regular practice beyond meetings, document evidence of student learning in the form of a report. As Hartzell describes, be strategic and thorough. Include specifics such as learning objectives and be explicit in the library's contribution to avoid your work being "absorbed" by other people or programs in the school. Provide circulation statistics and technology use in the context of student learning for lessons, not in isolation (Hartzell 2003). Use eye-catching and easy-to-make newsletters and reports created with Smore or Canva, and "app smash" to embed students' media products, such as digital storytelling, videos, or interactive posters. A conscious effort to capture and share photos of students engaged in learning in the library will go a long way to paint a picture of the library as a vital learning space.

Be careful not to suggest that you know all there is to know about school library assessment. Be open to your principal's recommendations, particularly those that would align the library program with other assessment efforts in the school. In a study of academic instruction librarians' assessment practices, the majority of participants reported that their knowledge of assessment came from learning they did on their own (Sobel and Sugimoto 2012). This may be true for you, or it may have been awhile since you've had formal training in assessment techniques. Take the opportunity to mention professional development opportunities like conferences or webinars that would strengthen your skills, while at the same time adding to the school's repertoire of assessment strategies and practices.

Teachers

Accountability and assessment are closely linked concepts, but the interpretation and implications of these tenets of education may differ between librarians and teachers. For teachers, student assessment outcomes may be part of teacher evaluations, depending on the district or state. Even as policies are shifting in terms of the relationship between teacher evaluations and student test scores, accountability to students and parents, the school, and the profession is measured and demonstrated through assessments of varying types. Teachers' view of assessment likely includes high stakes and for many, personal commitment and professional pride.

For librarians, a similar set of expectations holds true, in that assessment offers evidence of student achievement. Librarians are accountable to the school community, possibly through instruction, and also through learning opportunities that the program, collection, and other resources and services foster. But there's a distinct layer to accountability for the school library, in that assessment can also demonstrate the value of, or the need for, the entire operation of the library program by the professional school librarian. These are also very high stakes. The library program and the librarian's position may ride entirely or in part on evidence that students are learning. Adding more potential complexity to this picture is that librarians may depend on teachers to co-plan lessons so that they have something to assess.

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So how might we marry these two sets of perspectives on accountability and assessment—with the aforementioned advocacy orientation in mind? Remember: we're aiming to bring together stakeholders' needs with the librarian's strengths and library's assets, in ways that are beneficial across the board. How can a school librarian explain her stance on assessment, while providing value to the classroom teacher?

An obvious strategy might be to share information directly, as part of offers to co-teach and co-assess student work, either in a fully realized collaboration, or in a stand-alone library lesson that complements instruction in the classroom (or iterations that fall between). It is helpful to make it explicit that librarians wish to engage in formative and/or summative assessment. Sharing techniques and goals can add to our toolboxes and enlighten colleagues about teaching and learning in our respective disciplines. It can be tempting, however, to overemphasize that librarians "make teachers' lives easier" by sharing in assessment processes. As in many collaborative processes, many hands can make light the work. But the rationale is deeper than a chance to divvy up grading.

With teachers' and librarians' respective high stakes as a motivator, we might also reflect on the diverging and converging skill sets of librarians and teachers. Consider your (potential) collaborator as the subject area knowledge expert, in terms of both concepts and skills. As school librarian, your expertise is centered in processes and application. (Of course, across subject areas, educators teach a blend of content knowledge/skills and thinking/application. Vocabulary skills aid comprehension of text. Problem solving in math builds on foundations of mathematical procedures). Though this delineation is a simplified approach to the dynamic and often organic process of collaborating and co-teaching, it provides a practical in-road for explaining assessment from the school librarian's vantage point.

In designing a district-level model for curriculum and assessment, Shoemaker and Lewin apply a "two sides of the same coin" metaphor to describe core knowledge and strategic processes. This picture is helpful here. On one side of the coin are key conceptual ideas that characterize core knowledge; the learning outcome is comprehension. For purposes of this illustration, consider this the classroom teacher's side of the coin. On the other side are the strategic processes, "a set or series of interconnected actions that combine skills and strategies to produce a particular result," for which the desired outcome is application (1993).

In many ways, the librarian's expertise is all about process and application. We refer to the processes as multiple literacies: information literacy, transliteracy, digital literacy, and others. Librarians don't aim for students to comprehend what it *means* to evaluate information or narrow down a research question.

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Librarians want students to *do* it: work to apply core knowledge, in context, with increasing independence. In assessment efforts, librarians want to see how students are making decisions and how they are using information to respond to an information need. They want to see how students interpret conflicting data or redirect course when a research plan doesn't work. School librarians want to foster students' self-assessment of their skills and dispositions, so that they might monitor their learning and identify preferences, strengths, and next steps.

Here we have win-win potential in injecting library assessment into content learning: teachers (and students) "get" the full balance of knowledge and process. When communicating to teachers—and principals— what your school library assessments are designed to do, emphasize that librarians want students to apply their information literacies as part of their core knowledge development, not in isolated "library activities." Present this perspective and examples (across the collaborative spectrum) to teachers, and aim for a deeper rationale in sharing ideas than "helping out with grading." Ask to hear about the processes and concepts that underlie their essential questions, and identify alignment with the multiple literacies at the heart of school library standards and assessment.

MORE SHARING!

There are other stakeholder groups that might also benefit from (and contribute to) assessment in the school library. Students and parents may benefit from more direct communication about what assessment looks like in the library, especially if it's not just "grades" that constitute results of learning experiences. Subject area specialists or teachers who work with students with special needs may not know that you're "doing" formative and summative library assessment. If you consider the students and topics that are part of the library assessment picture, these teachers may well be able to use you as a bridge between their work and the classroom teachers', as well as infuse your program with specialized strategies. Library colleagues across the district or region might be interested in pooling assessment tools or sharing professional development.

Conclusion

Student assessment in the library can become part of a school's culture of assessment, but stakeholders have to know about it and invest in it for that to occur. Daniel J. Ennis writes of assessment culture in the academic library context that it's not just about doing assessment, but liking it (Farkas, Hinchcliffe, and Houk 2015). It might be the case already that you're "liking assessment" in your school library. You might have rubrics that provide vital information to you and your students, useful survey feedback for building the collection or planning projects, video and media products that reflect a range of learning outcomes, and other data from your interactions with students and teachers. As much as you like what you have going, assessment of school library learning might just become stronger and better aligned with school curriculum with the support, buy-in, and the motivation from your colleagues and school leaders.

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Data-Driven Collaboration:

Student Assessment Data as a Partner in Academic Success

By Diana Wendell

When we hear the words "student assessment data," many librarians recoil with disinterest thinking that it's a four-letter word not in their vocabulary. Nevertheless, after delving into the specifics of the types of information that can be gleaned from data (i.e. standardized tests), as detailed in this article, I have found that school librarians are eager to become part of the achievement equation. For the past five years, the Madison-Oneida BOCES School Library Director together with our local Senior Data Analyst, have offered a summer workshop aiming to help librarians together with classroom teachers examine their students' most recent state assessment data from English Language Arts assessments.

School librarians not only need this information but also can become data experts in their buildings, helping classroom teachers understand and delve into how data can improve student learning. I suggest that they go directly to their building principals and strongly request access to the data now and on an ongoing basis. With new teacher-school librarian evaluation systems that are often tied to student ELA scores, it is more important than ever that school librarians learn to demonstrate how their teaching fits into the school's overall data picture.

Getting Down to the Details

In our region and in many places in New York State, we use a system called *Cognos* to look at student assessment data. The report that we have found to be of most interest to school librarians is called the *Distractor Report*. (Each participant receives distractor reports in the subject area(s) we are examining for all of the grades in their building. Also, participants receive the test questions and supporting reading passages.)

1. Distractor reports are grouped by standard and subskill, the number of students who selected each answer is shown. The correct answer is in bold.
2. The percentage of students who answered correctly in the building is provided as well as the percentage who answered correctly in the region. (Our region has 52 school districts.) The percentage assists with determining how difficult individual questions were.

Standard	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts	1 pt	0 pts	No Resp.	District % Full Credit (n=75)	District % Pts Earned (n=75)	BOCES % Pts Earned (n=839)	Gap to BOCES	RIC % Pts Earned (n=3037)	Gap to RIC
Reading-Informational Text												
Craft and Structure												
RI.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.			31	42	2	0	41.3%	69.3%	67.3%	2.05%	68.3%	1.06%
RI.8.5 Analyze in detail the structure of a specific paragraph in a text, including the role of particular sentences in developing and refining a key concept.			32	39	4	0	42.7%	68.7%	68.5%	0.13%	64.4%	4.28%
Key Ideas and Details												
RI.8.1 Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.			36	36	2	1	48.0%	72.0%	66.6%	5.43%	65.8%	6.21%
			39	31	5	0	52.0%	72.7%	70.3%	2.40%	70.9%	1.72%
	13	16	28	15	2	1	17.3%	57.0%	54.4%	2.62%	52.8%	4.24%
RI.8.3 Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).			37	36	2	0	49.3%	73.3%	69.0%	4.32%	70.1%	3.23%
Reading Literature												
Craft and Structure												
RL.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.			32	36	7	0	42.7%	66.7%	61.7%	4.93%	63.6%	3.18%
Key Ideas and Details												

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Examine the Subskill Reports

In looking at each subskill and the corresponding percentages, we used a traffic light system. With red, yellow and green markers, the school librarians and teachers examine the report and identify possible target skills, color coding them. This gives everyone a framework for looking at the data and overall makes

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it less intimidating. The subskills that are assessed on our standardized reports include:

- Identifying main ideas and supporting details in informational texts,
- Reading and understanding written directions,
- Making predictions and drawing conclusions,
- Understanding inferences about events and characters,
- Summarizing main ideas and supporting details from imaginative texts, and
- Distinguishing between fact and opinion.

Listed below are five ways to examine the report to identify possible instructional target areas:

1. On which questions did the students in the building perform better than the students across the region?
2. With which questions did the students in the building experience more difficulty than the students around the region?
3. Review the percent correct information stated in the region column. Which questions had the highest difficulty? What are factors in these questions that made them more challenging?
4. Look through the answers to the questions. Identify incorrect answer choices that have a high number of selections. Reference the test. Why do you think the students answered in this manner? Was it vocabulary they didn't understand? Was it at the end of the test and perhaps they were tired?
5. What patterns do you see regarding how students in the building answered the questions? Identify these building-wide trends.

> Looking at the ELA Assessment Data has prompted me to be more vigilant of what skills students may need to work on throughout the year. I then adjust some of my curriculum and lessons to focus on whatever skill may be needed. For example, if I saw that the majority of the 5th grade class had trouble making inferences, then I would be sure to work with them in 6th grade on honing that skill.
> *-Amanda Ingalls, Library Media Specialist, Stockbridge Valley CSD*

> There was a year where the students did poorly on figurative language. From that I created a form for them to fill out when they are reading, to make them more aware of figurative language. The Language Arts teachers use the forms when they review figurative language and when the kids read for books for book reports and SSR. Then they display them, or I do during April. We print them on colorful paper and the kids use them as bookmarks when they read.
> *-Amy Austin, Library Media Specialist, Vernon Verona Sherrill Middle School*

So How Does this Relate to School Librarian Teaching?

It is easy to see how school librarians, when armed with the knowledge of their students' strengths and weaknesses, can work on weak areas when teaching to support research projects, when reading stories to children, when helping students select literature and appropriate websites, databases, and technology. Librarians could easily prepare lessons to target weak skill areas. A simple read-aloud can be transformed into a lesson on prediction, main idea, inference, and more. Most librarians are often doing this anyway, so why not get credit for it and specifically aim to triage weak skill areas?

We also group participants so that they can share their discoveries with those that teach earlier grades and later grades in their district. Are there things they have discovered where they can better vertically align their curricula?

At the end of our workshops, we have the school librarians and teachers share and post on flip charts the student weaknesses they have discovered and the lesson ideas that they already do, will do, or will improve to address these areas (see table below). For instance, if a grade-level was very low on "inferencing," then a librarian could plan a couple of lessons using books such as *Snowed Under* or *Five Secrets in a Box* to practice inferential meaning. Or, a librarian could use graphic novels and explain how inference is often found in the pictures. Then instruction can move to a book to learn meaning that is "hidden between the lines." The ability to metacognitively model inferential deduction is a difficult skill but can be learned with what we call "mentor texts." Perhaps the largest list of mentor texts is found on wikispaces and was originally compiled by two dedicated librarians. Check this page out to get ideas for matching books to identified skills: http://best-book-lists.wikispaces.com.

Data Driven Practice Plan for ______________________________

Grade	My Students' Skills Strengths	My Students' Skills Weaknesses	What I currently do to address these	What I will change in my program to address these	How I will communicate this to my Administrator

Become Achievement Partners with Your Classrooms

In our world of data-driven instruction, librarians can and should use data to help foster student success. Reaching out to your classroom teachers for their students' weak areas is a collaborative way to work with classroom teachers on academic success—rather than always thinking "collaboration" means research.

Always look for ways to assess your teaching, continually ask for and look at your building's data to improve student learning. As states across the nation begin to "measure" teacher's effectiveness based upon "scores" rather than the quality of their teaching, creativity, and other qualitative assessments, we must pay more attention to the data which will help our students' academic achievement as well as our colleagues and our Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) scores.

Diana Wendell is the School Library System Director at Madison-Oneida BOCES in Verona, NY. She holds a CAS in educational leadership from SUNY Cortland. Previously Wendell has worked as a school, public, and medical librarian.

Further Reading

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Notes from the Field

Mentor Texts to Maximize Achievement!

By Andrea Williams

If you are like most public school librarians, you might be looking to optimize the time you have with your students with meaningful lessons that connect to the classroom curriculum, or help target grade-level concerns identified via testing. Well, using mentor texts to help introduce a new way of writing, to make inferences, to teach questioning, or to connect a narrative biography to a fictional literary character could be the answer you've been looking for.

With limited class time, a picture book can transform any lesson from just an old fashioned story time into an in-depth meaningful lesson that connects back to their classroom curriculum. My fifth grade classes are departmentalized and one of the ELA classes utilizes our state-crafted curriculum. So, I collaborate with teachers to help students draw additional connections that enhance their learning and their writing. One example is when I use *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* by Kathleen Krull. This is an excellent example of how a biography picture book can help students draw parallels to the fictional character Esperanza from Pam Munoz Ryan's book *Esperanza Rising* which is part of the classroom state curriculum.

Using stories like *Mr. Marlowe's Mouse* as an example of a ***personal narrative*** with foreshadowing allows me to support that skill instruction. Mr. Marlowe's story about his promotion and his decision to treat himself to a *live mouse for lunch* will provide students with an example of a snapshot of one day—one event or one milestone—that their teacher is asking of them to provide in their own writing. Students love to tell a good story, but when asked to write a personal narrative they seem to struggle with how to put it down on paper. As a librarian you can use this entertaining picture book to show students how details, conversation, and sequencing are important when piecing together their own personal narrative.

With older students, we also can model using "think marks," a teaching technique where students are asked to note, or mark, varying ideas, reactions, responses, and things they question, or are "thinking about" as they read a text. This technique transforms a passive reading model into an active reading model where students read and react with the story, thereby helping them get to deep meaning. With limited time, I choose to pick mentor texts like *Crow Call* by Lois Lowry. Students are being asked more and more to look for the deeper meaning and this story is an excellent way for them to see why it is so important to pay attention to the little details and inferences that the author is trying to make. I have students make predictions about this book before I read it aloud. They record notes via *think marks* and share their ideas with each other. The heartfelt story draws the students in, and it surprises them when the story really has nothing to do with crows—or calling them for that matter.

With younger students you can use the book *Where Do Balloons Go? An Uplifting Mystery* by Jamie Lee Curtis to begin teaching students how to formulate research questions. The book will help encourage students to share their own "heart wonders" which lead to great discussions and writing opportunities back in the classroom. In the library it can serve as a springboard into developing "I wonders" that can be answered through the research process.

Andrea Williams is a library media specialist at Wood Road Elementary School in Ballston Spa, NY. She has more than 20 years teaching experience in both Virginia and New York. Andrea enjoys working with her students on research projects, enhancing their classroom instruction, fostering a love of reading, and creating lifelong learners.

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