

Being evidence based in library and information practice

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Chapter 10 – Public Libraries

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In the last decade the political, social, technological and financial landscape in which public libraries operate has undergone a period of dramatic change, presenting the sector with daily challenges “in the field of digitization, changing usage patterns, and evolving expectations of patrons” (Irwin & St-Pierre, 2014, p.1). In countries such as the UK, public sector budget cuts have resulted in widespread library closures and had a negative impact on traditional metrics such as visit and lending figures (Anstice, 2015). Efficiency measures and staffing reductions have led to an increase in self-serve, community and volunteer run facilities and engendered a culture which is increasingly reliant on external funding. Yet rather than accepting their much prophesied demise (Worstall, 2014), public libraries across the world have responded to this altered environment and to a "revolutionary shift in user behaviour" brought about by the ascendancy of the "networked information landscape", by developing innovative service delivery models, multi-functional library spaces and new ways of working, and by reinventing themselves as "invisible intermediary", "memory institution", "learning centre" and "community resource" (Brophy, 2008, p.8).

In North America, early literacy and lifelong learning remain strong focuses for public library programming, as do developing and providing services to underserved populations and socially excluded groups such as homeless, disabled, and incarcerated populations. Increasingly, however, public libraries are also embracing a new identity as digital literacy and inclusion centres: providing free computer and WiFi access, and developing electronic collections which continue to be in high demand. In a 2013 national survey of Americans ages 16 and older, 77% identified free computer and internet access as a “very important” library service, and indicated a strong interest in the wider uses of technology in libraries (Zickuhr, 2013). The cumulative results of the Impact Survey (Impact Survey, n.d.) also provide good evidence of how patrons are using library technology in the U.S. and the significant outcomes and benefits they report from its use (Crandall & Becker, 2016). And libraries are responding to these needs: investing in more eBooks and diverse eResources such as magazines (Recorded Books, n.d.) (EBSCO, n.d.), comic books (Midwest Tape, 2015), and internet-based learning tools such as Gale Courses (Gale Cengage Learning, 2015) and Lynda.com (Lynda.com Inc, 2015) and facilitating public access to new technologies ranging from 3-D printers to recording studios (Zickuhr, 2014).

On an international level, public librarians are spearheading an unprecedented diversification of the sector, as libraries become centres for those seeking a vast and multitudinous range of services: from welfare support and employability skills, to digital training, film and code clubs, makerspaces, business and intellectual property centres and exhibition and installation venues. For many practitioners and commentators (Brophy, 2003; Macdonald, 2012; Doherty, 2014), the sector is at a “turning point” which offers both challenge and opportunity:

Libraries have become important community hubs, cultural centers, community destinations, resources for self-directed lifelong learning, and creative incubators.

Beyond collections, they provide media, exhibition space, theatres, cafes, spaces for collaborative activities, makerspaces, a place for public events, spaces for teaching and tutoring, and genealogy and local history research areas (Demers, 2014, p.117-8).

EBLIP in the Field

In this shifting environment where practitioners are constantly challenged to “demonstrate their value and relevance” (Irwin & St-Pierre, 2014, p.1), knowledge of the sectoral evidence base and the need for public librarians to embed "evidence based approaches into....[their] working lives" is ever more crucial (Brettell, 2012a, p.2). Such evidence, in its various forms, enables library professionals to demonstrate their own impact and that of the services they deliver. Rich, qualitative data enriches bids for external funding which in turn secure the capital needed to sustain and develop innovative services. Demonstrating the types of support being sought in public libraries builds a picture of their evolving social functions and proves their economic value as services experiencing increasing demand. Evidence of use informs decision making and assists the judicious allocation of scant resources in alignment with customer need. It helps to prove an organization’s worth to local and national stakeholders, and supports external accreditations which elevate the profile and reputation of the service.

Yet if we seek to measure public librarian participation in EBP against early definitions of EBP and Evidence Based Librarianship (EBL) as a practice which involves “critically appraising and incorporating research evidence from library science (and other disciplines) into daily practice...and encouraging librarians to conduct high quality qualitative and quantitative research” (Crumley & Koufogiannakis, 2002, p.62) then active engagement appears relatively low. This is evident in low public librarian research and publication rates, as well as the small overall percentage of LIS research articles about public library practice. The results of a content analysis study undertaken in 2005 (Penta & McKenzie) showed that over a four-year period just 3% of article authors in North American LIS journals were employed in public libraries. Even in *Public Library Quarterly*, only 14% of the authors were public librarians (Penta, 2005). A more recent commentary on EBLIP in Australia (Rundle, 2013) highlights both the international dearth of dedicated public library journals and the under representation of the public sector at national library conferences. In March 2015, a review of the evidence base for the social impacts of sport and culture in the UK noted that Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) "are lagging considerably behind other sectors in both the quantity and quality of evidence on their social impacts", being "particularly deficient in hard evidence" (Taylor, Davies, Wells, Gilbertson & Tayleur, 2015, p.9), and this despite the efforts of Arts Council England to remedy this imbalance (Fujiwara, D., Lawton. R. & Mourato, S. (2015); Arts Council England, 2014).

In 2012, a special issue of *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* (Ryan, 2012) sought to redress the situation by featuring research articles from LIS faculty and public library practitioners, as well as evidence summaries that focused on public library issues. Yet despite welcome inclusion in *EBLIP*, public librarian submissions to the journal remain notably low. Gillespie (2014) acknowledges this shortfall in relation to both the school and public library sectors when discussing her empirically derived EBP model based on the experiences of

Australian teacher-librarians: "Research is the foundation of evidence-based practice...yet very little exists that can support teacher librarians in being evidence-based practitioners" (p.3). This lack of published data makes it difficult to gauge the extent to which public library practitioners are engaging in evidence based approaches to their work, or public library administrators applying evidence to the assessment and evaluation of their libraries. Recent work by Stenstrom on the decision-making models of public library CEOs (2015) provides a first study that reveals the variety of decision-making frameworks in use, yet there is still much to do in terms of building a picture of the actualities of daily practice.

In preparation for this chapter, practitioner opinions on the use and understanding of EBP within the public library sector were sought from over 1000 subscribers to the LIS-PUB-LIBS JiscMail List (UK) (Cole, 2015); from the readers of Public Library News and members of CILIP's Public and Mobile Libraries Group. One respondent, Ian Anstice, author and editor of *Public Library News* (UK), suggested that a traditional absence of "rigour" and external scrutiny of the public library sector may be potential reasons for the lack of EBP (I. Anstice, personal communication, 2015, July 13), whilst others working in the field cited operational responsibilities and the pressures of general management, outreach and PR as decisive factors. Some followed Irwin & St-Pierre (2014, p.6-8) in pointing to the wider "organizational culture": the local or state government's attitude (or lack of) towards EBP, whilst others highlighted a growing tendency to prioritise customer service, management and IT skills over a qualification in librarianship when appointing to public library positions. Responding to a 2013 blog post (Rundle), one practitioner raises the issue of communication controls exerted on public servants by their employing organizations as a strong disincentive to participation in published research (Fiona, 2013). Whilst the Carnegie Trust's Evidence Exchange Project (2014-15) identifies a lack of access to research by those working in non-academic sectors as a defining factor: "There is a significant gap between the trustworthiness of academic research (which is very high) and its accessibility, with many who responded unable to access academic evidence" (Carnegie UK Trust, 2015).

The authors' preparatory research also revealed varying degrees of knowledge and understanding within the sector as to what is meant by EBP: from a practice based purely on peer-reviewed research, to learning via informal channels and (particularly from the perspective of the large charitable / research bodies who are active in publishing such evidence), to the undertaking and compilation of data and research reports without particular attention to how these translate into practice. There was, however, a strong consensus that something approximating EBP does take place within the sector, but often in a low-level, semi-informal capacity where evidence is shared via JiscMail discussion lists and personal emails, at regional steering groups, conferences and AGMs or, on more open platforms such as *Public Libraries News*. Respondents also voiced a belief that this form of EBP was unlikely to be recognized or taken seriously by "academics": offering a telling insight into attitudes towards EBP within the public sector. Such opinions suggest that although EBP is used by public library practitioners, it is not always acknowledged, or indeed known to be such, and that inter-sectoral prejudices need to be overcome if the evidence base is to prosper.

One area in which public librarians might be encouraged to conduct further research is in understanding how public library organizational structures encourage, or discourage, practitioners to engage in research or organizational assessment activities. Edmonton Public Library (EPL) has a Manager, Assessment and Research position reporting to the Deputy CEO, with a staff of 1.5FTE dedicated to internal assessment and service evaluation activities. EPL also supports two professional librarian internships each year with the mandate to conduct original research to inform service directions in previously unexamined areas. Such research reports and the outcomes of these internships are outlined in a recent call to action for public libraries and librarians to engage in research activities (Ryan, 2015). However, as there exists only an anecdotal understanding of how other international public libraries organize their internal assessment and evaluation positions to inform service, it is currently unknown how unique or otherwise this structure is within the field.

Wider Research

The vast majority of published research relating to the public library sector in the last five years has been commissioned or produced by large public bodies, library associations, or external interest groups, rather than by individual library practitioners. In the UK, this research has focussed on pertinent contemporary issues such as the role of volunteers, income generation, health and wellbeing, and digital skills. Key exponents are The Reading Agency, Arts Council England, The Society of Chief Librarians (SCL), The Carnegie Trust and The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) who conduct an annual Public Library Users Survey (PLUS). Recent publications include 'Digital Leadership Skills' (Society of Chief Librarians, 2014): a study designed to support the advocacy of public libraries as hubs for digital knowledge and opportunities, and 'Speaking Volumes' (Carnegie UK Trust, 2014) which seeks to demonstrate the ways in which public libraries affect well-being and which, "is based on hundreds of examples of practice throughout the UK and Ireland, as well as published evidence of impact". The Canadian Library Association (CLA) 2012 report, *National Statistical and Values Profile of Canadian Libraries*, has the goal of producing "...a Canadian snapshot of library data and library meaning for use in CLA's national advocacy role" (Schrader & Brundin, 2012, p.1). Yet the report itself relies solely on secondary sources of data already collected by other agencies, and notes with concern, that, "...no national statistical profile of library investments and activities has been assembled since the National Core Library Statistics Program (NCLSP) was abandoned in the early 2000's" (Schrader & Brundin, 2012, p.3).

Also of note in the Canadian context is the 2014 Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel report on Canada's libraries. Its recommendations for the country's public libraries called for increased sharing of research and statistics to support evidence-based practice, and included that:

32. public libraries make their work visible by posting evidence-based studies and economic impact studies on library websites for the benefit of the entire library community.
33. public libraries continue to share statistical data freely with CULC and other similar organizations.

34. library associations and organizations undertake and publish research into common issues facing the public library community

(Demers, 2014, p.120).

The latest international evidence gathering has tended to focus on horizon scanning and future trends, with examples including the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)'s '1001 libraries to see before you die': an online initiative which aims to bring together best practice examples of public library buildings and spaces from around the world (IFLA, 2014); 'The Future of Dutch Public Libraries': a ten year study revisited in in 2008 and based on trends data (Huysmans & Hillebrink, 2009); 'The State of America's Libraries': a review of public libraries across America in light of increased demand for digital material, reduced budgets and debates about book censorship (American Library Association, 2015); and the 'IFLA Trend Report' (IFLA, 2015).

Demonstrating Value

Demonstrating value has been a key theme in recent international research efforts. As Rooney-Browne notes, there is no general consensus on the ideal model for measuring public library value (Rooney-Browne, 2011) and as such, research in this area covers a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches, with no standardized measures, and uses various economic and social value lenses to define value. Huysmans and Oomes work (2012) highlights a few major studies that exemplify the growing body of research seeking to measure the value of public libraries. Examples include the 'U.S. IMPACT Study' (USA) (Becker, 2010); 'Enriching Communities: the value of libraries in New South Wales' (Australia) (Library Council of New South Wales, 2008); 'Libraries and return on investment (ROI)' (Norway) (Aabø, 2009); and 'Outcomes in everyday life' (Finland) (Vakkari & Serola, 2010). In the UK this trend is reflected in 'Income Generation for Public Libraries: a Practical Guide for Library Service Commissioners and Providers in England' (Locality, 2014) and 'A review of the Social Impacts of Culture and Sport' (Taylor et al, 2015).

Types of Evidence

The examples cited above - which fall primarily into the "open access" category of evidence outlined on the EBLIP8 Conference website (EBLIP8, 2015) - are arguably those which public librarians are most commonly encouraged by managers and advocacy groups to consult. The types of evidence they use in their daily practice, however, are multifaceted and dependent upon local factors; the organizational and financial strictures which uniquely affect the sector and the wider societal and informational zeitgeist. Traditional metrics such as visits, circulation figures (issues, renewals, reservations, ILL requests); collections data (hits on in-house and remote access services such as online journals and databases and ebook usage); user and non-user demographics; reading group memberships; audiences for adult learning classes, author events and children's activities, and registrations for national and local literacy initiatives, are all still in active use. Statistics on library usage, expenditures, and operational data are collated and made available by national library associations to provide public libraries with

useful comparative benchmarks. Examples include the Canadian Urban Libraries Council's (CULC) Key Performance Indicators (Canadian Urban Libraries Council, 2015); the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's (CIPFA) annual publication of Public Library Statistics in the UK, and the Metropolitan Libraries division of the IFLA's program to include statistical data from its membership of large urban libraries.

Yet traditional metrics are now increasingly supplemented by "rich", qualitative forms of evidence which capture thoughts, feelings towards, and perceptions of the service, and the way it impacts on the wellbeing and aspirations of its users. This type of data can be captured using formal mechanisms such as surveys and focus groups; in photographic or digital records; using discretionary methods such as comment cards, feedback boards and social media; or unsolicited sources such as observed behaviour and overheard conversations. In the public sector, such data gathering is commonly driven by three key factors. Firstly, the need to demonstrate value and worth, for, as in the school library sector, "a focus on evidence of outcomes and impacts of services in relation to the goals of the...environment" (Todd, 2009, p.88) and "The move to use evidence for accountability and performance" (Gillespie, 2014, p.6) continues to steer the concept of EBP. Secondly, the challenging informational and technological environment means that public libraries rely on such data sources to discover, understand and adapt to the changing needs of their patrons. Thirdly, in a competitive and straitened environment, public librarians and public library managers must consistently produce evidence that they are offering value for money, and use data to determine where and how to allocate limited funds. The impact of this final factor on strategic decision making, may also affect practitioners' ability to engage in original research. Andrew McDonald, a Project Manager at De Montfort University who is currently leading a strategic review of library services, believes that "the funding issue" is paramount, and that in his experience pragmatism (adopting an approach that "is know to work" or one that "is possible on a tight budget" is often a key concern (A. McDonald, personal communication, 2015, July 14).

One recent development which may help to overcome the constraints of resource and time management that can prohibit engagement with EBP has been the development of national frameworks complete with standardized tools, training and performance measures which public libraries can use to evaluate and benchmark their services, with collective results being used to determine overall national progress. Projects of note in this area include:

Project Outcome: Measuring the True Impact of Public Libraries [United States].

The Public Libraries Association, a division of the American Library Association, launched Project Outcome in June 2015. A key goal of the project is to provide standardized evaluation measures which public libraries can use to enhance their service data with outcome data in seven core service areas: Civic/Community Engagement; Digital Inclusion; Early Childhood Literacy; Economic Development; Education and Lifelong Learning; Job Skills and Summer Reading. Library patrons are provided with standardized, six question surveys following participation in relevant library programs. This is a three-year project to help develop and implement new standardized public library outcome measures and help libraries apply their findings (Public Library Association, 2015).

The Edge Initiative [United States].

The Edge Initiative is a suite of standards and benchmarks developed to evaluate public library computing and technology services. The three key benefits of participation for public libraries are: to assess public computers and their use; to identify ways to strengthen public technology; and to communicate the value of the library's computers to stakeholders and funders. It was developed by a coalition of 12 US library and government associations, including the Urban Libraries Council, the American Library Association and the Public Library Association and is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Since its 2014 launch, 20% of US public libraries have completed the Assessment portion of the Edge Toolkit (Edge, 2015).

The Impact Survey [United States and Canada].

The Impact Survey is a standardized survey tool that is the result of a successful research project from the University of Washington Information School and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. US and Canadian public libraries can currently pay to use the online survey, available in English and Spanish, that contains detailed questions about the benefits and outcomes of using technology services. The questions address the use of library-provided technology in the following areas: Employment; Education; eBusiness; eCommerce; eGovernment; Civic engagement; Health and wellness; and Social inclusion. Library patrons complete the 15 minute survey and participating libraries are able to download the survey report results (Impact Survey, n.d.).

How good is our public library service. A public library improvement model for Scotland.

This ambitious project from Scotland is a revision of the Scottish Library and Information Council's 2007 Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix (PLQIM), itself the inspiration and catalyst for an Australian "Self-Evaluation Framework and Toolkit" entitled "Being the Best We Can" (State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, n.d.). The standardized tools in this new framework are designed to help public libraries in Scotland demonstrate their service quality and define their community impact. The framework includes five key Quality Indicators: Access to information; Readers' experience; Learning culture; Individual and community engagement; and Vision, strategy, and continuous improvement. The toolkit provides public libraries with a self-assessment toolkit to measure their standing and progress (Scottish Library and Information Council, 2014).

EBLIP in Action

The following three case studies have been chosen to exemplify EBLIP in action in the public library sector: one from Canada, one from Australia, and one from the UK.

So Much More: The Economic Impact of the Toronto Public Library on the City of Toronto

In 2013, the Martin Prosperity Institute, part of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, published the results of its economic impact study of the Toronto Public Library (TPL), the largest public library system in Canada, with over 100 branches. TPL

commissioned the report, the first of its kind in Canada, to measure the library's economic impact on the City of Toronto. The valuation methodologies used sought to measure the economic value and ROI on public money invested in library operations of the direct tangible benefits, such as use of the library's collections and services, as well as the indirect tangible benefits such as the impact of library, capital, and staff salary spending in the local Toronto economy. The big number results of the study are that TPL creates over \$1 billion in total economic impact; for every dollar invested in TPL, Torontonians receive \$5.63; and the total direct benefit is as much as \$500 per TPL member.

The results of Toronto Public Library's economic impact study clearly demonstrate that Toronto Public Library delivers a strong Return on Investment, through the delivery of library services that enhance Toronto's competitiveness and prosperity and contribute to a better quality of life for all. This study is the first Canadian public library study to measure in concrete economic terms the Return on Investment for library service (Martin Prosperity Institute, 2013, p.1).

This study is important for its groundbreaking work to measure, in economic terms, the impact of dollars invested in the public library. These are increasingly important measures in today's international climate of austerity with public funds and libraries needing to prove their value for money. While economic impact studies help demonstrate the value of libraries, they are but one view on their value.

The Library Dividend Summary Report: A guide to the socio-economic value of Queensland's public libraries.

Where the TPL study focused solely on economic measures, this study also examined the social value of the public library and perceived value of the library by the community. The Library Board of Queensland commissioned an independent Australian firm, SGS Economics & Planning, to produce the report, having carried out similar earlier reports for the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network (Library Board of Queensland, 2012). The economic value research resulted in a library dividend of 2.3 dollars-worth of value for every dollar invested by state and local government, meaning that the government investment of \$207 million in Queensland public libraries in 2010–2011 resulted in nearly half a billion dollars-worth of value. The community perception questions revealed strong perceptions from both library users and non-users of the value of public libraries in providing equitable access to resources and technology, and in supporting literacy and lifelong learning.

This research resulted in the following invaluable evidence-based summary statements, useful for supporting advocacy efforts: Public libraries return between \$230 and \$410 for every \$100 invested; They are highly valued by library users; They are also valued by non-library users; Close to half of all Queenslanders are library members; and Public libraries are a vital community asset and provide an exceptional return on investment for state and local government.

The MLA's 'Inspiring Learning Framework' (GSOs and GLOs)

In 2008, The UK's Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) launched the national 'Inspiring Learning for All' (ILFA) framework. This collection of tools and templates was designed as "An improvement framework for the arts and culture", which "promotes best practice, and helps organizations to assess and evidence the impact of their activities" thus enabling the sector to define its social value in direct relation to local and national political strategy (Arts Council England, n.d.). A key element of the framework is "Measuring Outcomes" which comprises five Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs), three Generic Social Outcomes (GSOs), and "Collecting Evidence". Although widely recognized as a useful advocacy tool which enables policy makers and practitioners to use a shared language (Rankin, 2012), this framework remains arguably underused. Two examples of its practical implementation are outlined below.

In 2008, researchers at Leeds Metropolitan University utilised the GSOs to develop a theoretical framework for assessing the impact of activities connected with the National Year of Reading (NYR) in Yorkshire (UK). This longitudinal study of two contrasting local authorities (one rural, one urban) employed data analysis software to code the data and extract evidence of both "Tier 1" and "Tier 2" social outcomes. By focussing on social value rather than statistics or the activities themselves, the study was able to "show considerable evidence of NYR related activities in supporting the three first-tier social outcomes: 'Stronger and Safer Communities', 'Health and Well-Being' and 'Strengthening Public Life'" and related second tier themes. Quotes from the "practitioner voice" were used to present the evidence and "demonstrate how public libraries contribute to diverse agendas and show their value to the community" (Rankin, 2012, p.7-15).

In 2010, Becky Cole applied the ILFA framework in the creation of an Evaluation Toolkit to enable Newcastle Libraries (UK) to capture and utilize qualitative evidence of impact (Cole, 2014 (June); Cole, 2014). The GSOs and GLOs provided guidance on how to identify social return on investment, or the educational, social and economic benefits of services for library users, and to generate data that aligned with the parent organization's Vision, Values and Priorities. The resulting tools linked to local and national agendas; collected data for future planning, and assessed the effectiveness of marketing techniques. Staff training focussed on the rationale behind the data capture and its use in daily practice (as evidence for funding bids, development etc.). The Toolkit became a key element in the Libraries' 'Service Improvement Plan' as it enabled the service to capture, evidence and respond to customer need.

Future Directions and Needs

In 2007, the report *Worth Their Weight: an Assessment of the Evolving Field of Library Valuation* (USA) recommended that to strengthen library advocacy efforts and help "make the case" for public libraries in evidence-based, quantitative terms, the sector must:

Develop a comprehensive research agenda that promotes systematic valuation of libraries' contribution to education, civic participation, and improved quality of life. The

library research community should accelerate efforts to develop the conceptual models, research methods, and analytical tools required to make a unified and full case for public libraries. (Americans for Libraries Council, p.9).

Seven years later, former Head of Birmingham Libraries (UK) John Dolan called for public libraries to actively market their services via a centralised initiative "that gathers and collates research for easy access, re-use and application by communities, librarians, staff, leaders and the media...to inform service development and innovation and, importantly, to create a culture of progress and improvement within the sector" (Dolan, 2014). In July 2015, the Chief Executive of CILIP, Nick Poole, echoed this sentiment, calling for "clearer, more robust evidence around UK public libraries" and "a consistent approach to defining and measuring not only the number of libraries, but the impact of the services they provide" (CILIP, 2015). Yet despite such recurrent, prominent and public calls to arms, the international public library sector appears unwilling, or perhaps unable, to embrace the EBP championed by its advocates.

Whilst this situation might be regarded as unfortunate for those who wish to study, work, or pursue a particular interest in the sector, of greater concern is the suggestion by Poole that this persistent "lack of reliable and meaningful data is having a negative impact on informed decision making", and thus actively damaging the status and long-term prospects of the sector as a whole: "The picture of the public library service nationally is limited and open to misinterpretation...with the evolution of services and greater complexity in delivery and staffing, it is more important than ever that the facts are understood and that we have a relevant, accurate and robust evidence base to inform key decisions" (CILIP, 2015). Given the current economic and societal pressures being faced by public libraries, it is an increasing concern that its librarians are not more actively involved in becoming the architects of the evidence base in their own field of work.

So where and from whom will this evidence base come? Not (at least predominantly) from peer-reviewed articles, for public librarian contributions to such are currently not significant enough "to justify our own journals" (Rundle, 2013). Some of the reasons for this are discussed above, and it is a topic which elicits strong opinion. In 2008, the Editor of the *Journal of Web Librarianship* asked his readers "how to increase the amount of published research related to public library settings", and cited Margaret Hazel, Principal Librarian for Technology at Eugene Public Library, who suggested that "the formality of many library journals limits interest" and that "public librarians don't have time for formal studies and data gathering, much as they need it". (Fagan, 2008, p.1). John Vincent, a long-standing library practitioner and coordinator of UK information and best practice sharing body 'The Network' extends this point, arguing that peer-review and EBP are different beasts, and that the laborious nature of the former places it at odds with the modern, agile, project management methods now regularly employed within the sector: "The danger with the 'academic', peer-reviewed approach is...that there are overlays of 'research methods' which may simply not suit the reporting and sharing of good practice in public libraries" (J. Vincent, personal communication, 2015, July 27). The presence of fewer degree qualified and research-active librarians; the growing responsibilities of general management; practitioner disengagement from professional groups (leading to reductions in

memberships, conference attendance and journal readership) and the continuous pressures of fewer staff and ever tightening budgets, are other potential reasons why traditional academic / health sector approaches to EBLIP have never taken hold in the public sector.

For both Vincent and Gillespie, the key question is "what is EBP for", as "Knowing or defining the purpose of evidence gathering places ebp at the centre of evidence gathering activities" (Gillespie, personal communication, 2015, October 14). If the answer is the sharing and spreading of good practice, then this can be achieved simply and informally, and is already taking place. The challenge, perhaps is to recognize it as such: to engage public librarians with EBP and to develop an accepted definition and understanding which acknowledges that open access data and "soft" sources are legitimate forms of evidence, whilst instilling an awareness of the standardised tools and techniques that can be used to address existing deficiencies in the evidence base (Taylor et al, 2015). For Gillespie, this also means overturning traditional hierarchies and ensuring that "professional knowledge" is valued as evidence: "to term data as being hard or soft I feel serves to devalue the experiential, and incidental or unexpected data that is part of day to day practice....there is a difficulty to overcoming this hurdle and accepting many types of evidence" (Gillespie, personal communication, 2015, October 14). Furthermore, if an evidence based approach is to become a standard and integrated practice within worldwide public libraries, the sector will require wider organizational buy-in, at a practical as well as at a purely representational level:

In order for new and effective evidence-based models of outcome evaluation and decision making to take firm root within public libraries, existing organizational cultures need to be acknowledged, understood, and addressed simultaneously with the introduction of new evaluation systems." (Irwin & St-Pierre, 2014, p.8).

Positive Developments

There are, however, some encouraging indications that practical efforts are being made to increase the assessment and evaluation skills of public library practitioners. A three day *Research Institute for Public Libraries* was held in July 2015, sponsored by the Colorado State Library and the Colorado Library Consortium. Another is planned for September 2016 in Denver. The vision of the Institute is to: "...create a culture shift in public libraries to be purposeful in gathering, analyzing, and using data for decision making, strategic planning, and to prove library impact. This institute will educate change agents who return to their libraries with the tools, competencies, and commitment to lead evidence-based practice" (Research Institute for Public Libraries, 2015). Another positive strand of work is the Carnegie UK Trust's Evidence Exchange Project (Carnegie UK Trust, 2015) and the resulting 'What Works Network' for sharing best practice amongst decision makers in public services (Cabinet Office, 2014). This concept of creating national repositories; central and searchable databases of evidence has the potential to vastly enhance communication, reduce duplication and better deploy resources throughout the sector. In Scotland, the External Funding Officer at The City of Edinburgh Council is seeking to establish Edinburgh public library as a research hub in which to develop, nurture and study evidence based practices and projects.

Conclusion

In general, the current state of evidence-based practice and research on, and to inform, public library practice lags significantly behind that of other library sectors, and indeed other cultural sectors (Taylor et al, 2015). There is some encouraging leadership from national associations in defining frameworks and developing standardized tools for public libraries to use to evaluate services and define value. However, work remains to generate awareness and action from public library administrators and from public librarians to share local evaluation and research findings to build the evidence base for public library practice. In these times of rapid change and competition for public funds and the need for evidence to support our work, a greater understanding of the need for shared contribution to building the evidence base is required. If EBLIP is to become an established practice in the public library sector, then its purpose within the field must also be recognized. For “when the purpose is defined, ebp becomes an embedded practice and with heightened awareness on the part of the library practitioner, ebp becomes part of their being, or everyday work practices. It becomes something that they do. Gathering, collating or documenting and sharing evidence becomes second nature” (Gillespie, personal communication, 2015, October 14). This must be our goal.

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