

School Library Advocacy Success- Perceptions in Context

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Abstract:

School librarians must be able to articulate the value of the educational impact they have on students and do so in a manner that is meaningful to their stakeholders (Kirkland, 2012). Little research (Ewbank, 2011; Haycock, 2003; Oberg, 2006) exists examining effective advocacy practices or the perceptions of school library programs by stakeholders when school librarians are strong advocates for their programs. This study addresses this gap and explores perceived advocacy success by school librarians, as well as their stakeholders, and the strategies implemented to gain support for the school library program.

This study employed a mixed method explanatory research method to examine the experiences of practicing school librarians. Advocacy behaviors were explored through qualitative data. Drawing on responses of a large national sample, a criterion sample of eighteen participants representing six sites, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participant experiences with advocacy. The school librarian was the primary participant at each site, interviewed in addition to a co-teacher and an administrator to discuss perceptions of the school librarian's advocacy success. Interview data were coded and analyzed; themes were identified. This led to the exploration of two subthemes- formal and informal measures of perceived success.

For the purposes of this study, advocacy is defined as the deliberate sustained effort to foster understanding of the library program while influencing the attitudes of key stakeholders. Study participants articulated multiple activities that build relationships with a variety of stakeholder groups in their communities in such a way that the perception of the school library was redefined. Using this model, targeted advocacy plans may be constructed to assist school librarians to become stronger advocates. Stakeholder perceptions of the impact school libraries make on the educational landscape can be influential in building continued support.

Keywords: School Libraries, Advocacy, mixed-method research

Introduction and Purpose

To ensure that others in the school community are aware of the benefits of a strong school library program, under the direction of a qualified school librarian, school librarians must be vocal advocates. As the trend (Keaton, 2012) to eliminate school library programs and school library positions continues in the US, stakeholder perceptions of the value of a library program are critical. The American Library Association (ALA) lists advocacy as a competency of basic knowledge all librarians should know and be able to apply (ALA, 2008). To ensure that the school library program is valued and considered essential to student learning, it is critical that school librarians can successfully advocate for their program.

There is an immediate need for school librarians to know how to build relationships of support among their stakeholders. The first step in this process is educating each stakeholder group of the value that school libraries add to the school culture. This can be achieved by changing the perception of the role the school library plays among stakeholders within the educational community. School librarians who are able to identify and engage in activities and strategies that align with the purpose of advocacy to foster stakeholder relationships and gain their support build a perception of influence for the school library profession (Hartzell, 2003). Examining the practice of school librarians who articulate engaging in advocacy in a successful manner provides insight into successful practices of advocacy behaviors. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine participant's perception of advocacy success. It also addressed the perceptions of advocacy success held by other stakeholders in the school community. It was guided by the questions:

What advocacy activities are practicing school librarians engaging in?

To what extent are K-12 school librarians engaging in advocacy efforts perceived successful by themselves and by their co-teachers and administrators?

For the purposes of this study, *advocacy* is defined as the deliberate sustained effort to foster understanding of the library program while influencing the attitudes of key stakeholders. Librarians must be able to articulate the value of the educational impact they have on students and do so in a manner that is meaningful to their stakeholders (Kirkland, 2012). In this study, *success* is not defined in a quantifiable measure, but rather left to each respondent and participant to situate along their own unique continuum of understanding and develop through the perceptions of their program.

Perspective

The school library field has the expectation advocacy is understood and implemented by school librarians, but little research exists examining this practice and it rarely explores how these practices influence the perspective of the library program among stakeholders. Although a growing body of literature discusses strategies for program advocacy, most discussion focuses on how to engage in program promotion (Bush, 2007; Hand, 2008; Johns, 2007; Kerr, 2011; Leverett, 2001; Levitov, 2007). Thought leaders in the field have written extensively on the subject however, to date the school library field lacks substantial research examining advocacy activity in K-12 school libraries.

To guide this study, it was first necessary to identify actions school librarians identified as advocacy. Hartzell's (2003) advocacy framework establishes the first stage of building influence as fostering the relationships required to gain library advocates. Using Hartzell's framework of building influence, actions described as activities beyond simple program promotion that create a position of leadership or influence for school librarians help identify school librarians engaging in mature advocacy within a school library setting.

Haycock (2003) and Oberg (2006) discuss the perceptions of other stakeholders when school librarians advocate for their programs. Haycock (2003) reminds school librarians that teachers and principals often see them as support staff and it is critical for this perception to be changed. School librarians must be ready to show their acceptance of a new role and shed negative stereotypes. School

librarians must demonstrate they are capable and willing to become leaders. If stakeholders view the position of school librarian as indispensable, they will not support defunding the position and will ensure that the school library program is maintained as an essential program in their schools. In order to investigate the success of advocacy within the library program, it is necessary to explore advocacy where the school librarian is perceived to occupy an influential role within the school community.

This directly correlates to the definition of advocacy and furthers the message by ensuring that school librarians are first demonstrating that they are seen as vital and instrumental to the school community and places school librarians in influential leadership roles where their message is more likely to be heard (Hartzell, 2003). Little research exists examining effective implementation of advocacy in the field. Only Ewbank (2011) examines the practices of school librarians themselves and their understanding of how school librarians conceptualize the actions of advocacy. A comprehensive search of ERIC, Education Research, and Library Literature and Information databases revealed there has been no empirical research linking the effectiveness of advocacy efforts on school library programs. This study addresses this gap and explored the perceived success of strategies used in school library programs by the school librarians, as well as their stakeholders, when advocacy for the school library program was implemented.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed method design (Creswell, 2012) and sought to explore the perceptions toward advocacy practices of school librarians engaging in high levels of advocacy, then examine their perceptions of success of these practices. First, quantitative data were gathered through a survey distributed to a purposive national sample of school librarians employed in large school divisions (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010) in the United States. Distributed through district library supervisors, 36 supervisors emailed the survey link their school librarians and 815 school librarians representing 17 states responded.

Next, qualitative phenomenological research methods were used to examine the lived experiences of the participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). Qualitative data were collected through interviews with a small criterion sample of six school librarians who self identified as highly active in advocacy engagement on the survey instrument. A single interview with each school library participant was conducted. An interview protocol was developed and all interviews followed a semi-structured format. The interviews were conducted using video conferencing technology (Skype, AdobeConnect). Interviews with school librarians were approximately 1 hour in length, recorded then transcribed. As further interviews occurred the researcher continued to document thoughts and record memos. Since qualitative research is recursive and data collection occurs simultaneously with data analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012, p 294) these memos became additional sources of data.

Following the interview with each school librarian, an additional interview was scheduled with a teacher and an administrator from each participant's school. These semi-structured interviews were scheduled after the interview with the school librarian. An interview protocol was developed to guide these interviews. The interviews were conducted via telephone or using video conferencing technology (Skype, AdobeConnect) and were recorded then transcribed. Stakeholder interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes.

Data profiles for each site, therefore, consisted of the school librarian completed online survey, memoing completed by the researcher, a transcript of the school librarian recorded interview, and accompanying transcripts of a teaching colleague and administrator from the school setting in which the school librarian works. In total, eighteen participants representing six sites were interviewed to explore their experiences with school library advocacy.

Table 1 provides demographic background on the six sites that comprise the participants for the qualitative analysis of this study. In an effort to maintain confidentiality but allow for a general description each school site, each school librarian was assigned a pseudonym and each school was given a fictional name. A short site description for each site is available in Appendix A to provide additional site context.

Table 1.

Participant demographics

Site	Participant	Years in School Library	School Level	Co- Participant #1	Co-Participant #2
1	Rose	23 years	High School 9-12	English Teacher	School Principal
2	Kelly	5 years	Elementary PK-5	3 rd Grade Teacher	School Principal
3	Sharon	7 years	Elementary PK-5	5 th Grade Teacher	School Principal
4	Lori	4 years	High School	English Teacher	Assistant Principal
5	Joy	7 years	Combined PK-8	4 th Grade Spanish Immersion Teacher	Teacher Leader
6	Linda	17 years	Middle School 6-8	English/Social Studies Teacher	School Principal

Data Analysis

Responses to the survey were entered into statistical software and descriptive analysis was run. Participants were asked to rate their perceived success for each advocacy activity in which they participate as either successful, not successful, or to select they have not participated in the activity. Responses were analyzed to determine engagement in school library advocacy activities based on frequency of selection. Additionally, a multiple linear regression correlation was run to determine statistical significance between the perceived success of the advocacy activities and the demographic variables of the population.

Moustakas' Horizontalization (1994) for phenomenological research analysis was the methodology used to analyze the transcribed data. Analysis began with coding of transcripts. Data was analyzed for information relating to advocacy activities and resulting altered perceptions of library programs. Each expression relevant to advocacy was coded on the transcript, using transcript lines as units of analysis. The process of horizontalization regarded each expression equally, with no one code, experience, or expression having more or less weight than any other. Assigned expressions or codes were then analyzed for reduction or elimination. Horizons that remained were those possible to label and characterized as experiences of advocacy. These were then grouped into themes that emerged from the conversations. Codes were identified and clustered to identify units that describe the advocacy experiences of the participants. These textural descriptions were supported through direct quotations from the participant transcripts. Finally, a structural description of the themes was presented to fully represent the engagement of advocacy experience for the group of participants as it relates to their practice and a narrative was created to represent the findings of the study. This narrative provides a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the meanings of the experiences of the participants, including the group as a whole. This led to the exploration of two subthemes- formal and informal measures of perceived success.

Confirmability and authenticity were established through member checking. The semi-structured interview format allowed both the researcher and participant to clarify statements during the interview. All participants were provided a copy of their transcript and were able to make clarifications and elaborations. This ensured the participant voice was accurate and the lived experience of the participants was authentically represented in the study. Direct quotations were included in the findings whenever possible. Additionally, a research team was used. The research

team commented on the researcher interpretations of the data to help mitigate researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Team members participated in creation of the interview protocol and participated in data analysis. To increase reliability and credibility of data analysis, two coders participated in consensus coding the data. The research team members independently coded the data from the interview transcripts. These codes were then compared with the codes of the primary researcher to determine the inter-rater reliability.

Findings

A broad look at a large sample of practicing school librarians was explored to interrogate the perception of success of activities typically identified as advocacy for the school library program. Using results from the implemented survey, a multiple linear regression correlation was run to determine statistical significance between the stated success of the advocacy activities and demographic variables provided by the population.

Survey respondents were asked to rate their perceived success with activities that involve building partnerships in an effort to build an educated group of supporters for the school library who will in turn act as supporters themselves of the library program. Compared to overall survey responses (n=815), the number of respondents who participated in each of the activities was not high. However, participants who did engage in the activities generally perceived them to be successful. This provided a basis for understanding in which activities the respondents do engage, as well as informed which activities the participants perceived as successful in practice (See table 2).

Table 2
Perceived success of advocacy activities

Activity	Total Participating In Activity	Perceived Successful		Perceived Not Successful	
	N	N	Total (%)	N	Total (%)
Organize meeting w/ admin	432	372	86.11	60	13.89
Read/distribute literature	371	289	77.90	82	22.10
Provided comments to decision makers	319	246	77.12	73	22.88
Committee/volunteer work	299	255	85.29	44	14.72
Encourage others to write or speak	272	189	69.49	83	30.51
Conducted PD for staff	228	186	81.58	42	18.42
Spoke at School board/PTA	201	178	88.55	23	11.44
Sponsored an advocacy event	185	146	78.92	39	21.08
Attended a legislative demonstration	118	81	68.63	37	31.36
Established an advocacy committee	109	73	66.97	36	33.03

Overall, respondents who engaged in the assessed activities perceived the greatest amount of success in activities in which they had direct communication with community members. The perceived success of speaking at a school board or PTA meeting was highest (88.55%). Reaching out to parent and community stakeholders was perceived to be effective by most stakeholders who attempted to

engage in this type of advocacy. The greatest number of respondents reported communicating directly with administrators. Organizing a meeting with administration to discuss the library program showed 86.11% of those who reported participating in this activity (n= 432) stating this to be successful.

While all of the reported activities had a high perception of success, those activities that were further removed from the immediate school community were perceived to be slightly less successful. Additionally, fewer respondents have engaged in these activities. Attending a library legislative demonstration (68.63%) and encouraging others to write or speak on behalf of the library program (64.34%) were perceived by respondents to be slightly less successful than other more community focused efforts.

Advocacy in Context

Qualitative results examined the perception of success at 6 sites where advocacy activities were identified as highly engaged and perceived successful. Each participant brought a unique perception of what it meant to be a school library advocate. Additionally, as advocacy is directed toward other stakeholders, it was useful to understand other stakeholder perceptions of school library advocacy. For the purposes of this examination, the definition of success was contextualized to the unique circumstance of the advocacy engagement and environment. Perceived success was documented through self-report of the participants. The use of personal interviews established the participant voice (Hays & Singh, 2012). At each of the six sites, the school librarian, as well as an administrator and teaching peer, provided input on the advocacy activities in place and the perceived advocacy success of the school librarian. Participant interviews at each site led to findings suggesting that success in practice is perceived through informal and formal output measures.

Informal Measures of Perceived Success

Study participants stated that the best measure of success for advocacy that has created strong relationships and support for the library programs is found in the form of anecdotal evidence. The co-teacher from site #2 explained the overall impression of his students about the school library learning commons and the excitement the school librarian has managed to create for the space,

I was just reflecting upon my students and their general demeanor when it comes to the library and just... How excited they get to go, and how they are when they are there. They are totally engaged and really into being in the space and learning.

School librarians and interviewed stakeholders perceived advocacy success through intangible measurements viewed through the experiences the students and teachers demonstrate from successful relationships with the school library program. Teacher and administrator stakeholders equated this perception of success to how students and teachers react and interact with the library program. The administrator at site #2 described how when she informally asks students, “What is the best thing about our new school, what do you love about our new school? They’ll say something in connection to the library.” -showing excitement and enthusiasm for the programs and the opportunities it offers. Linda described building lessons that engage students in discovering real-world situations. Her teaching peers shared materials that have led to robust collaborative lessons that “meet standards and engage the student’s interest.” Her administrator shared, She probably teaches more than any school librarian I have ever worked with”.

School librarians correlated success in advocacy to a new perception of importance for the school library. Their activities demonstrate relevance and authenticity of the program to their stakeholders. Joy explained one way she measures her success is that the school library has become a frequent visit on orientation tours for the school. This showcasing of her space demonstrated an elevated status for her program by building-level stakeholders. Kelly explained that she was invited to not only host a district principal’s meeting in her school library space, she was then invited to lead part of the

meeting. This elevation in perception among stakeholders demonstrated success in that the school library and the school librarian were influential in building new relationships.

Formal Measures of Perceived Success

Though informal measures were significant, there was a sense of need for an objective evaluative component. Some participants relied on traditional library output measures to form their perception of success. The administrator of Site #1 felt advocacy was part of the school librarian's job description and could be evaluated by circulation numbers and scheduled use of the school library. In order to gain the perspectives of some of her stakeholders, the school librarian at this site did include a survey distributed to building-level stakeholders, such as students and teachers, to obtain their perspective on the success of advocacy efforts throughout the year. Through this type of objective measure she engaged the perspective of multiple stakeholders in her program.

The administrator at Site #2 intended to use formalized outputs, but evaluate them in a more informative manner. Instead of simply measuring the percentage of time the library learning commons was used and the amount of collaborative lessons that were planned, she and the librarian hoped to track the percentage of time these interactions were initiated by teachers other than the school librarian. It is intended that tracking these interactions will provide a deeper understanding of the success of the school library program's position in the school culture. This will occur with the informal measures they already feel provide plentiful data on the success of their school library program and the relationship it has within the school.

Other school systems have followed the new norm in education where accountability is tracked using standards and began to formalize the evaluative process. Site #6, located in a state currently updating the state evaluation tool for school librarians, will reflect advocacy as an evaluation area. Both the school librarian and the school principal were aware that to address this new standard, a formalized measure of success would be necessary. This opened new dialogue between the school principal and the school librarian on new initiatives to implement, as well as a means to evaluate the success of these efforts. Their conversations were reflected in a plan for next school year that will identify under-served stakeholder groups and create opportunities for programming and support for these groups.

Limitations

While the respondents have the opportunity to rate success as either highly successful or moderately successful, there is no opportunity to operationalize their measures on the survey and responses rely solely on the respondents' individual, internal continuum of perceived success. Future research may consider alternate means of collecting this data to ensure internal validity.

Further, the sites used for the research are selected to represent a random sample, however participants at each site location are co-teachers and administrators selected by the school librarian participants themselves with no selection criteria provided. Most school librarians choose a co-teacher with whom they have successfully collaborated. Future research may interview a wider variety of stakeholders at the site to explore a greater perception of experiences with advocacy in practice.

Conclusions and Implications

Identification of advocacy activities by a large national sample of practicing school librarians provides context for those actions school librarians are engaging in to build relationships with stakeholders. Moreover, of those in which they do participate, a statistical analysis demonstrates those activities practitioners perceive to be most successful. For respondents in this study, personal advocacy with those within the school community are perceived as most successful. This suggests that those school librarians hoping to make an immediate impact should focus their advocacy outreach to those

stakeholders immediately accessible to the school community such as administrators, teaching peers and parents.

Successful advocacy cannot be objectively defined, but rather left to each respondent and participant to explore and make their own understanding. Success for respondents may be quantified and described as added administrative support, increased teacher collaboration, increased parent use, and addition of staff for the library program.

The participants interviewed at the six sites are able to articulate multiple activities they engage in that build relationships with a variety of stakeholder groups in their communities in such a way that the perception of their school library is redefined. They are quick to point out the multiple informal measures they use to evaluate the success of their advocacy efforts. By defining success through these measures, the school librarians and the interviewed stakeholders demonstrate that the perception of the school library has shifted in their settings. Use of student and stakeholder perception, though intangible and not measureable, demonstrates to these participants a rejuvenated excitement in the school library program offered at their schools. Their programs are supported in their school community. This feels like success to them. Additionally, participants also use formal measures to measure their success. High circulation numbers, as well as the constant use of each of the participant's physical space lead the participants to conclude that stakeholders perceive the school library to be an essential, indispensable program.

Each of the school librarians in this study is careful to shy away from equating successful advocacy with student achievement. They speak about student learning in terms of supporting the teachers with whom they work. Most of the co-participants, whether supporting informal or formal output measures allude to student performance in classes or on standardized tests in direct correlation to experiences in the school library. Only Rose feels compelled to explicitly address student achievement in direct relation to advocacy.

I really think that I need to say something about student achievement because if you do advocate for your library and you can point to the number of students who come into your library and that you're somehow effecting enough students to make a difference in test scores, and that is really hard to measure, but if you feel like your students are gaining some kind of knowledge or skills because of the program and you put out- It's like a big circle. Because if your principal supports you with the staff and the money to make your library nice so kids want to come in, and if you run a program where kids want to come in and check out books and use your resources- the student achievement will go up.

When examining advocacy success, it is important to consider not only traditional formal measures, but also the perceived informal measures. Stakeholder perceptions of the impact school libraries make on the educational landscape can be influential in building continued support. Collecting anecdotal and supplemental evidence to demonstrate the perceptions of indispensability can be powerful indicators of success. As Schuckett (2004) suggests, school librarians have a unique connection to each member of a school faculty and, by extension, an opportunity to influence them. If the activities of building relationships by engaging with PTA and school Board members and meeting regularly with administrators have been perceived successful, other school librarians can direct their energy in this area as they look for possible strategies.

This study analyzed engagement in advocacy activities and the perception of successful strategies of advocacy. The intent is to examine perceptions of advocacy success currently held by practitioners in the field and the stakeholders they work with so that strategies and models of advocacy can be built on an educated foundation. As there is limited empirical research examining school library advocacy, this study contributes to the gap in existing school library research examining advocacy and will strengthen the field's knowledge on practitioner beliefs.

Additionally, the strategies shared by the school librarians and their administrative and co-teaching stakeholders represent success stories of advocacy the school library field is eager to hear. The advocacy initiatives implemented to build stakeholder support and foster relationships are done in such a way that the perception of the school library and the position of the school librarian were altered within each of the six explored school communities. Hamilton (2011) discusses the nature of a participatory culture in school libraries, where the school community comes together to learn, and share and create information. This philosophy can be found in these six sites; students are eagerly seeking out the school library and stakeholders view the library as an essential component to their school community. By exploring the dynamics of the individual library programs, other school librarians can generalize the strategies used to gain stakeholder support and alter the perception of the library in their unique setting. These stories provide a vision of the impact of advocacy on the profession.

This study has been exploratory in nature. While the findings identify beliefs about advocacy, additional research should explore strategies that can be replicated to demonstrate efforts that can be measured in a quantitative and or qualitative manner. Using the model of those school librarians and stakeholders who do perceive success in their program, targeted advocacy plans can be constructed to assist school librarians to become stronger advocates and build relationships that alter the perceptions of what defines an effective school library program.

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Appendix A

Site #1 “Mako High School” Rose has been the school librarian at Mako High School for 12 years. Mako High School is a large suburban school in the southeast that educates over 3,000 students. There are 2 full-time school librarians and two full-time library clerks. In addition to the print collection, the school library has 45 computers and 3 computer labs are located off the library. A student cafe run with a grant co-authored with the business department operates out of the library. The school library has been the recipient of the state school library award. A 9th grade English teacher and the school principal were each interviewed for this study.

Site #2 “Thresher Elementary” Thresher Elementary school is a brand new school in the mid-Atlantic region. Kelly, the school librarian, has been an elementary school librarian for 5 years. The school refers to the library as the “Library Learning Commons” and has adopted the learning commons model. Because of this philosophy, the library space is very flexible and interactive. The library includes resources to develop multiple literacies and elements of “makerspace” functions giving it a playschool feel. The school principal and a 3rd grade teacher in his first teaching assignment participated in an interview for the site.

Site #3 “Blue Elementary” Blue Elementary is an urban elementary school located in the south. Rose has been the school librarian at Blue Elementary for 7 years. She is the only librarian in her school and she does not have an assistant. Her PreK-5th grade library operates on a fixed, biweekly schedule where she sees Pre-K through 2nd grade week one, then 3rd through 5th grade week two. The remainder of the time she collaborates with teachers on units and projects to support the curriculum. The school principal and a fifth grade teacher also participated in interviews at the site.

Site #4 “Great White High School” Lori has been the school librarian at Great White High School for 4 years. Great White is located in a large suburban district of a mid-Atlantic state. Lori is one of two school librarians staffed at the school in addition to one library assistant. Lori’s efforts with collection development, facility updates and collaboration with teachers have been her top priority. An English teacher and Assistant Principal participated in interviews as stakeholders to represent the school community.

Site #5 “Bull Combined School” Joy is the school librarian at a Combined PreK-8 school in an urban district in the Northeast. The school is a dual language immersion school, offering instruction to students in both English and Spanish. Joy has been the school librarian at Bull for 7 years. Joy and the library program are viewed as innovators in technology use in the school, especially with the introduction of the new technology demands brought forth by the Common Core and the assessments that support these standards. A bilingual fourth grade teacher and Teacher Leader participated in an interview for the study.

Site#6 “Tiger Middle School” Linda is the school librarian at Tiger Middle School, located in a large suburban city in the southeast. Linda has been at Tiger for 11 years and has one full time assistant who is a retired school librarian certified in another state. Tiger Middle School library has a large print collection, as well as a full computer lab. Linda, as well as her co-teacher and administrator, consider her primary job to be a teacher and primarily defines her program on this teaching role. An English/Social Studies teacher and the school principal each were interviewed at this site.