Towards a Common Terminology in School Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

School libraries exist in most countries where they play an important role in education. However, the diversity of educational philosophies, policies, resources, infrastructure and technology have led to wide variations in what constitutes a 'school library', and its associated terminology. This diversity affects communication, collaboration, synthesis of evidence, and translation of research findings. If we are to promote school librarianship internationally, it is important to have a common terminology. This paper presents the preliminary findings of an international survey on the terminology and characteristics of school libraries, Based on responses from school library stakeholders from 19 countries, it was found that the more common term used to describe the facility was 'school library', while term used for the person managing it was 'school librarian' or 'teacher librarian'. While few countries had a formal definition of a school library, the respondents were able to provide the desired characteristics of a school library and of a teacher-librarian. These findings can be used to develop consistent and internationally-applicable terminology and definitions for school librarianship.

Keywords: School Library, Teacher Librarian, Terminology, Common Language, Comparable Data

INTRODUCTION

School libraries play an important role in education. The UNESCO/IFLA School Library Manifesto (1999) states that school libraries

> *provide information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens.*

The more recent International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) School Library Guidelines (2015) state that

> *the goal of all school libraries is to develop information literate students who are responsible and ethical participants in society.*

Many studies, both from the library and pedagogical perspectives, have shown that school libraries contribute towards better educational outcomes. School libraries promote a love for reading, provide a conducive place for work, support students in their studies, help them keep abreast with current developments, broaden their outlook, serve as an access point for information, and support students, teachers and administrators in many other ways.

The importance of school libraries has been acknowledged internationally. The existence of organizations such as the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Section on School Libraries is recognition of the existence of school libraries in many countries. The various international and regional conferences are also testimony to the recognition of school libraries internationally.

It is thus generally accepted internationally that school libraries are important in the educational process.

However, variations in national and local policies, availability of resources, differences in curricula, changing technology, and other factors lead to school libraries taking on different shapes and forms. School libraries also evolve with time. Rapidly changing technologies, for example, leads to variations in what is considered to be a school library. While in some ways, this diversity is healthy and

necessary for progress, it is also important to have some commonality in discussing school libraries. In particular, there is a need for commonality in terminology and understanding what a school library is.

The Issue

There is much diversity in terminology in the field of school librarianship. The literature uses many different terms to describe a school library, including 'school media centre', 'school resource centre', 'centre for documentation and information', 'library resource centre', 'learning commons', 'knowledge centre', and other terms. The recent IFLA School Library Guidelines (2015) acknowledge this diversity in terminology.

Similarly the designation for the person managing the school library also varies, with terms such as 'teacher librarian', 'school librarian', 'library media teacher', 'resource centre manager', 'school library coordinator' and others being used.

There also appears to be no common agreement on what constitutes a 'school library', and how it differs from a 'media center', a 'resource center' or a 'learning commons'; similarly with the term 'teacher-librarian', and how he or she differs from a 'school librarian', or a 'school library coordinator' or a 'resource center manager'.

The recent *IFLA School Library Guidelines* (2015) define a school library as

a school's physical and digital learning space where reading, inquiry, research, thinking, imagination, and creativity are central to students' information-to-knowledge journey and to their personal, social, and cultural growth.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in its schools and staffing survey, defines a library media center as

an organized collection of printed and/or audio-visual and/or computer resources which is administered as a unit, is located in a designated place or places, and makes resources and services available to students, teachers, and administrators (NCES, 2013).

The [Colorado] Library Research Service, uses the following definition:

a dedicated facility located in and administered by the school that provides at least the following: an organized, circulating collection of printed and/or audio-visual and/or computer-based resources, or a combination thereof; paid staff; an established schedule during which services of the staff are available to students and faculty; instruction on using library materials to support classroom standards and improve student research and literacy skills (Library Research Service, 2014).

This diversity of terms hampers communication and collaboration, makes collection and comparison of statistics difficult, limits the synthesis of evidence, and the linking of research findings from diverse settings. Improving uniformity of terminology can help address some of these challenges. There is a need to adopt a simple universal terminology in school librarianship that can be applied across all countries. If we are truly to promote the development of school libraries internationally, it is important we have a common terminology to describe ourselves and what we do. A well-accepted terminology can ensure a common meanings, and support data collection, reuse and integration. A common terminology also can allow studies to build upon previous findings and to reuse data collection tools.

The need for a simple universal terminology for the respective fields has been expressed in areas as diverse as **software measurement (Garcia, 2006),** fish reproduction (Brown-Peterson *et al*, 2011), health practices **(Colquhoun *et al*, 2014), biobanking and human genetics (Fransson, 2015), climate change (Fisichelli, 2016), play behaviour (Miller, 2017), and other domains.**

The field of school librarianship too needs a common terminology and clear definitions.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Examine how different countries use key terms related to school librarianship, how they define them, and
2. Provide recommendations for moving towards a common terminology in the field of school librarianship.

METHODOLOGY

The study involved a survey of selected respondents from countries across the world. They were asked about the terminology used in their respective countries or organizations, their definitions, and what they considered to be essential features of a school library and the person managing it.

A simple four-question open-ended questionnaire was designed and distributed electronically to 30 respondents chosen from among members of IASL, one from each country, in May 2017.

Findings

Nineteen usable responses were received and examined using content analysis. The countries that were represented in the responses are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Responding Countries

Antigua & Barbuda	Fiji	Japan	Singapore
Australia	Hong Kong	Malta	Sri Lanka
Botswana	India	Nepal	Turkey
Colombia	Ireland	Netherlands	Zimbabwe
Croatia	Jamaica	Russian Federation	

Terminology

Respondents were first asked to indicate the term used in their respective countries to describe the facility and/or service that supports the students reading, inquiry and research.

The majority of the countries use the term 'school library'. However other terms were also used, as shown in Table 2 below, in some countries.

Table 2. Terms used to Describe Facility / Service

School library	Media resource library
Resource center	Learning commons
School resource center	Learning hub
Learning resource center	iCenter
Library resource center	Leadership center
Knowledge center	

It was interesting to note that there were sometimes variations within a country itself, with different terms being used in elementary (primary) and high (secondary) schools, and in public and private schools. There were also variations reported depending on whether the facility had computers. In one country, several libraries within one school constituted an information center. Part of this diversity could have been, as one respondent indicated, the term library is associated as a book repository, and in an effort to reflect the difference between the traditional and the contemporary library.

Respondents were also asked the term used for the person managing the facility / service. The more commonly used terms were 'School Librarian' and 'Teacher Librarian', depending on whether the person had a pure library qualification or combined with a teaching qualification, and their roles.

Table 3. Terms used for Person Managing the Facility / Service

School Librarian	Library Officer
Teacher Librarian	Library Coordinator
Librarian	Resource Center Coordinator
Library Manager	Media Coordinator Teacher

Definitions

The next set of questions asked respondents for definitions of 'school library' and of 'school librarian / teacher librarian' (or associated terms) used in their country.

Few respondents were able to provide or point to clear definitions. Some respondents pointed to official documents that pointed to characteristics or services of a school library and how they could be measured, but did not define it.

In the absence of a definition, respondents were asked what characteristics they would include in describing a school library. The consolidated responses are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Characteristics of a School Library

Dedicated facility	Free access to users
Managed by a trained person	Dedicated funding provided – initial and on-going
Has a collection of purposefully selected resources	Consistent with, and support for, national / school mission, goals and policies
Collection is organized according to international norms / standards	
Provides services for learning, informational, recreational and cultural needs	

There were also some variations based on local policies, needs, available resources and other variations.

A similar situation was with the definition of a school librarian or teacher librarian. Very few respondents were able to point to clear definitions. Some respondents pointed to documents that pointed to services to be provided, but did not define it.

In the absence of a definition, respondents were asked what qualities they would include in characterizing a school librarian or teacher librarian. The consolidated responses are summarized in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Qualities of a School Librarian / Teacher-Librarian

Has a teaching qualification	Collaborates with other school staff
Has a library qualification	Has adequate support staff
Is a full member of the school staff	Service oriented
Has a management role to develop the school library	Has support for continuing education
Has a teaching role to further the aims of school library	

Significance of Findings

These findings, though preliminary, can be used towards developing a common terminology, which can lead to the better communication, development of norms and standards, facilitate the collection of comparable statistics, and enhance collaboration in the development of school libraries internationally. A common terminology and consistent definitions would also help to communicate with non-library persons, including administrators and policy makers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study are provisional due to the limited sample size. The study needs to be extended to cover a wider sample and gain more input. However, the preliminary findings in this study can be used a basis for further study. The draft terminology can be refined through feedback and consultation with the various stakeholders, and tested for usefulness through application and evaluation.

The eventual aim would be to reach consensus on the terminology and definitions of key terms used in school librarianship.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the terminology of key terms used in the field of school librarianship. While no definitive conclusions can be drawn from the study due to exploratory nature and the small sample size, it nevertheless provides foundations for the development and use of a common terminology for the betterment of school libraries, their management and their services.

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