



## The Name Game: What Shall We Call Ourselves?

by Dr. Renee E. Franklin

"Words have meaning and names have power." (Author Unknown)

### Introduction

In 2007, after a meeting with several Library and Information Studies (LIS) program faculty members at Syracuse University, I had a discussion with one of my colleagues. I'd noticed that during the course of the meeting, he'd constantly used the term 'teacher librarian' when referring to individuals who administer a school library. I used several terms interchangeably—librarian, school librarian, media specialist—but never teacher librarian.

I pulled my colleague aside and asked him why he continuously used the term. His response was that it was important to emphasize the instructional role of the school librarian. He went on to add that in conversations with students in the school media program, most of the individuals with whom he'd spoken preferred teacher librarian. For some reason, this both annoyed and intrigued me. Surely, I retorted with a condescending smirk, he didn't really think it mattered one way or the other: a librarian is a librarian is a librarian...right? Why would anyone make a big deal over such a little thing as a title anyway? And to myself I wondered why I hadn't given more thought to emphasizing the fact that school librarians are very much involved in the teaching process.

Though my initial thought was that the topic of job titles was an insignificant issue, the conversation stayed with me and I found myself searching the research literature for evidence that anyone actually cared about the issue of what to call school librarians. I discovered that quite a number of people cared and now I was one of them!

### Literature Support

Researchers within and outside of the LIS field have discussed the fact that job titles serve as a means of identification. More specifically, these researchers have suggested that it is necessary for job titles to accurately reflect both the nature and level of the work performed by the title bearer (Garvey, 2000). The duties that school library administrators are expected to perform have been altered and defined differently over time. In consideration and acknowledgement of these changing duties, the idea of needing to select an appropriate title has been examined by several researchers. Some authors (for example Braun, 2002 and Cummins, 2001) assert that it is necessary to appropriately reflect the importance of the job, the relevance of the work associated with it, and the status of the administrator in his or her respective school community.

At one time, school library administrators were known simply by the title 'librarian.' In order to reflect the place at which services were rendered, the title 'school librarian' emerged to describe an individual who served patrons at an elementary, middle, or high school library. When school libraries began to include increased numbers of multimedia items, the term 'media specialist' gained popularity over the standard title of librarian (Johnson, 2005).

Several publications (among them, the well known Information Power) stressed that school library administrators must be viewed as responsible for far more than hissing "Sshhh" and checking books in and out. In actuality, these individuals had multifaceted roles of: (1) information specialist who serves as "advisor to students as they select appropriate resources for personal and academic needs" (2) teacher who (sometimes in collaboration with other school instructors) is "responsible for ensuring that skills, knowledge, and attitudes concerning information access, use, and communication are an integral part of the school curriculum", (3) instructional consultant in which capacity the school library administrator acts as "consultant to teachers [and] employs a wide range of resources and teaching methodologies to meet the intellectual and developmental needs of students," and (4) program administrator who "works collaboratively with members of the learning community to define the policies of the library media program and to guide and direct all the activities related to it" (AASL/AECT, 1988 pgs. 26-34; 1998, p. 5).

Most specifically related to the topic of this article, in 1992, John McGinnis (then the dean of the Library and Learning Resource Center at Cerritos College in Norwalk, CA) published a piece that revealed the results of a survey of school library professionals throughout the state of California. The purpose of the survey was to decide upon "an official title [that best represented their] credentials" (McGinnis, 2002, pg. 8). The survey revealed that there were 93 unique titles by which school library administrators were referring to themselves. Since that study was conducted, there is no evidence of another statewide study nor has there been a national examination of the topic. This writing describes my efforts to collect perspectives about the topic of most appropriate job title for school library administrators.

### First Step: Pilot Study

In early 2008 I conducted a pilot study that used students enrolled in a school media program as respondents. The pilot study served as an entry point to begin to find an answer to a single research question: What do future school library administrators believe is an appropriate title for their position? Respondents were asked to select what they believed to be the most appropriate from the following titles:

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- Librarian
- Library Media Specialist
- Library Media Teacher
- Media Specialist
- School Librarian
- Teacher Librarian
- Respondents also had the option to select "Other" and provide a unique title.

Thirty one future school library administrators participated in the pilot study. Not surprisingly, the most frequently chosen job title was 'teacher librarian' which was selected by ten respondents. The table below shows the selection frequency of all of the titles.

Table 1: Pilot Study Frequency Responses for Preferred Titles

Job Title	Response Count	Response Percent (Rounded)
Teacher Librarian	10	32%
School Librarian	6	19%
Library Media Specialist	4	13%
Librarian	3	10%
Library Media Teacher	3	10%
Media Specialist	0	0%
Other	3	10%
No Response	2	6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100%</b>

The results of the pilot study put forth broadly descriptive data that were important for presenting a general picture of the survey respondents. These data also served as a starting point for answering the question of what job title each believed was most appropriate based upon her understanding of the roles and duties of school library administrators. However, the number of respondents was not large enough to draw any definitive conclusions about job title preference. The results of the pilot study caused me to become even more intrigued. To study the topic further, I used comments from the pilot study to improve the questionnaire and set about conducting a national study to gather perspectives from school media students across the nation about appropriate school library administrator job title.

## National Study

From October through December 2008, I conducted a survey which collected data from school media students enrolled in schools throughout the U.S. Convenience sampling was used to recruit survey participants. That is, a message explaining the study's purpose was sent via email to program directors (or other administrative liaisons) at Schools/Colleges of Information Studies and Education with ALA or NCATE accredited school library media programs. Included in the message was a call for participation [CFP] that each administrative contact was asked to distribute to currently enrolled school media students. Respondents could then participate in the study by either clicking a link to the electronic questionnaire within the CFP or copying and pasting the link into their browser.

Following several demographic questions, respondents were instructed to consider their perceptions of the qualifications and responsibilities of a school library administrator. They were then asked select which job title they felt was the most appropriate descriptor for them once they began working in a school library.

## Findings

A total of 213 usable (i.e. fully completed) questionnaires were generated in this national study. The results were a bit different than those of the pilot study. Whereas 'teacher librarian' was chosen most frequently in the previous study, it was selected by 39 participants as the most appropriate job title and thus was not the first choice amongst the national sample of future school library administrators. Nor was it the second choice; this title was the third most frequently chosen after 'library media specialist' (with 47 responses) and 'school library media specialist' (with 44 responses). The table below displays the entire response count and percentages from the national study.

Table 2: Response Counts and Percentages from National Study

Job Title	Response Count	Percent (Rounded)
Library Media Specialist	47	22%
School Library Media Specialist	44	20%
Teacher Librarian	39	18%
School Librarian	28	13%
Library Media Teacher	19	9%
Librarian	12	6%
Media Specialist	12	6%
Other	12	6%
Total	213	100%

In addition to the original question for which I sought an answer, I also wanted to determine: What reasons do future school library administrators give for why they chose a particular job title as most appropriate? To obtain responses to provide answers to this question, an open-ended item was included that asked respondents to describe in their own words why they chose a particular title. Each response was examined then placed into one of four categories that emerged naturally during content analysis. Below is a listing of these categories along with a description of each and an example of a participant's actual response.

### Category 1: Tradition

Participants whose responses fell into this category made comments that suggested they chose a particular title because it was one that had been in use for a long period of time and was universally understood. Many believed that using a different or “newer” title would confuse library patrons or was simply unnecessary.

- “Children learn this title from spending time with parents in public libraries. It is simple to leave it as is when referencing the person in charge of the library/media center.” (Respondent who chose the title ‘librarian.’)
- “Other titles get confusing to people who are not in the field of education.” (Respondent who chose the title ‘school librarian.’)

### Category 2: Duties/Responsibilities

Respondents whose comments fell within this category suggested that they chose a particular title because it placed focus on the types of activities they expected to perform as school library administrators. Moreover, responses in this category spoke to the all-encompassing nature of the chosen title.

- “It doesn’t just suggest that you check out books. I believe it lets others know that you have specialized media training as well.” (Respondent who chose the title ‘library media specialist.’)
- “When I taught English, I was the English teacher. When I taught math, I was the math teacher. Now that I will be teaching library media, it seems appropriate to be titled the library media teacher.” (Respondent who chose the title ‘library media teacher.’)

### Category 3: Level of Respect

Many respondents were concerned that the title they selected should convey a sense that the head of the school library is an individual to be respected.

- “The word alone commands respect!” (Respondent who chose the title ‘librarian.’)
- “I think this best describes the key role of the position. Although many other tasks are part of the job, this title would send a clear message to teachers and other administrators about what we do.” (Respondent who wrote in the title ‘school library administrator.’)

### Category 4: Teaching/Education

Responses in this category placed emphasis on the idea that a school library administrator is and must be considered by the school community as a trained teacher who is responsible for educating the people who enter the library.

- “My main focus is empowering students and teachers to be more information literate. I am—first and foremost—a teacher.” (Respondent who chose the title ‘teacher librarian.’)
- “I believe our primary role is to teach library patrons how to use information effectively.” (Respondent who chose the title ‘library media teacher.’)

## Conclusion

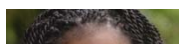
As the opening quote indicates, names are powerful. However, the results of the two studies described in this writing make it clear that our profession has not reached consensus about the most appropriate title for individuals responsible for managing a school library. In fact, the survey data suggest that more important than choosing a single most appropriate title is to understand and celebrate the fact that our future school library administrators are as diverse as the collections they will one day manage. Because of this, perhaps no such thing actually exists (or ever will) as a “most appropriate” or universal name by which to call all school library administrators.

It is important for the next generation of school library administrators to take an active role in establishing themselves as necessary components in both the school at which they render services and the broader professional community. In order for this to happen, each practicing library administrator must make a contribution to the conversation about his or her preferred title, the meaning they associate with it, and the meaning they desire for others to associate with the title. In doing so, individuals served by the school library administrator have both a name and a meaning that helps them better understand what they may expect when visiting the school library.

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## About the Author



Dr. Renee E. Franklin is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. She teaches courses that focus on topics within school library

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