The Leadership Potential of School Librarians

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The Graduate School of Education and Human Development of The George Washington University certifies that Angela Powers Smith has passed the Final Examination for the degree of Doctor of Education as of February 21, 2013. This is the final and approved form of the dissertation.

The Leadership Potential of School Librarians

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Dedication

To Danny, your support and encouragement made this dream a reality for me. You make the good days great, and the bad days disappear. Thank you for loving me.

To Jacob and Emma, you are my happy. Thank you for reminding me that life is more important than writing a dissertation. You have been so patient and understanding while I was on this journey. I hope one day you will find education as exciting as I do.

To Mom and Dad, I realized a long time ago that I won the parent lottery. Thank you for believing in me when I didn't even believe in myself. Every single day I am grateful for you and for the lessons you've taught me. I will not waste my blessings.

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When I began this journey several years ago, I walked the road with doubt. I remember entering orientation repeating in my head, "You belong here. You can do this." Somewhere along the way, my reservations subsided and were replaced with quiet confidence. This change occurred gradually, almost unnoticed. And while I cannot pinpoint the moment when it happened, I can tell you who is responsible.

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Finally, thank you to my family. No one accomplishes anything alone. This journey required countless hours of reading, typing, studying, writing, and working. I cannot imagine traveling this path without you.

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Abstract of Dissertation

The Leadership Potential of School Librarians

Since their origin in 1925, standards for elementary school library programs have outlined role expectations for the school librarian. As the passage of time introduced new technologies into the world of education, these standards were reviewed and revised. After each revision, the standards, which were later referred to as guidelines, reflected an updated view on the school librarian's position with additional responsibilities listed in the form of roles. Researchers have explored perceptions of educator groups regarding these roles, to determine if they were accepted by the members of the school community (Church, 2008; Dorrell & Lawson, 1995; Gustafson, 1982; Kaplan, 2006; McCracken, 2001; Mohajerin & Smith, 1981; Person, 1993; Roach, 1989; Schon, Helmstadter, & Robinson, 1991; Scott, 1986; Shannon, 1996; Shelton, 2002). Repeatedly, findings indicated disagreement among the educator groups and an overall lack of support of these roles from teachers, administrators, and even school librarians themselves, in some cases. If a lack of support for the fulfillment of these roles exists, the school library program cannot develop to its full potential. Consequently, the school librarian cannot fully contribute to student achievement, and a valuable resource is wasted. This study explored perceptions held by educators at the elementary level on the roles of the school librarian, in light of the latest revision to the guidelines (American Association of School Librarians, 2009) which added the role of leader to the list of expectations for school librarians, to determine if a lack of support for the fulfillment of these roles persists.

Keywords: school librarian, role theory, role conflict, perceptions

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Librarians are almost always very helpful and often almost absurdly knowledgeable. Their skills are probably very underestimated and largely underemployed."

~Charles Medawar, *The Social Audit Consumer Handbook* (1978)

Overview

Through this research I examined expectations for school librarians working at the elementary level held by administrators, classroom teachers, and school librarians themselves. Since their origin in 1925, standards for elementary school library programs have outlined role expectations for the school librarian. As the passage of time introduced new technologies into the world of education, these standards were reviewed and revised. Figure 1 represents a historical progression of the standards.

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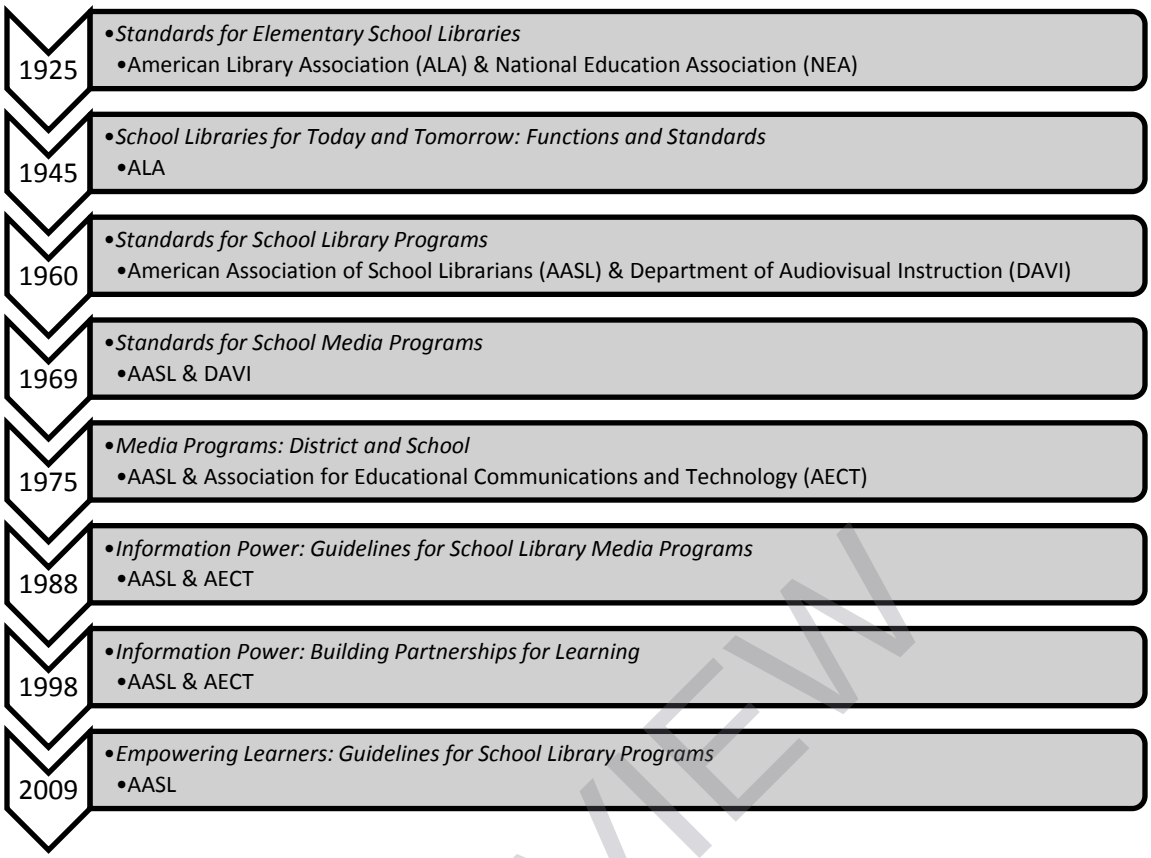

Figure 1. Historical progression of AASL standards.

After each of the seven revisions, the standards, which were later referred to as guidelines, reflected an updated view on the school librarian's position with additional responsibilities listed in the form of roles. To complicate matters, as the guidelines evolved, the label used to describe the individual in charge of the school library program evolved as well, reflecting societal changes in response to technological advancements and higher demands for accountability and leadership. Once referred to as the librarian, these individuals received new titles as the years passed, including teacher librarian, library media specialist, library teacher, media coordinator, school library media specialist (SLMS), and school librarian. The changing titles for this profession became the subject of concern over the years. The lack of a consistent title presented problems

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for the profession as many school librarians considered their title as a reference to the role most performed in their position (Abilock, 2004). Franklin (2009) targeted this issue for her research, asserting future school librarians needed to get involved in the discussion about an appropriate title for their position that would establish their importance in the school and professional community.

In 2010, the debate over an appropriate title prompted the American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) Board of Directors to hold a "Mega Issue Discussion." The discussion centered on the need to identify one name that would help school librarians "achieve universal recognition" (AASL, 2010, p. 2). Using the knowledge-based decision-making process facilitated by Paul D. Meyer, Principal Partner of Tecker Consultants, the Board investigated the issue. Throughout the process, the members reviewed research that indicated stakeholders, including school administrators, the media, school community members, parents, and students, were confused by the variation of labels employed by school librarians (AASL, 2010). As a result of their discussion, the American Library Association (ALA) issued a press release on January 16, 2010, documenting the AASL's motion to officially endorse the title school librarian (ALA, 2010).

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These changes—the perpetual revision of guidelines and the lack of a consistent moniker—resulted in role confusion surrounding the school librarian's position and a lack of awareness regarding the school librarian's responsibilities. Researchers explored perceptions of educator groups regarding these responsibilities, to determine if the roles put forth by the AASL were accepted by the members of the school community (Church, 2008; Dorrell & Lawson, 1995; Gustafson, 1982; Kaplan, 2006; McCracken, 2001;

Mohajerin & Smith, 1981; Person, 1993; Roach, 1989; Schon, Helmstadter, & Robinson, 1991; Scott, 1986; Shannon, 1996; Shelton, 2002). Repeatedly, findings indicated disagreement among the educator groups and an overall lack of support of these roles from teachers, administrators, and even school librarians themselves, in some cases.

Lack of awareness regarding the role of the school librarian not only affects these individuals personally—potentially producing negative effects on job satisfaction, job performance, and working relationships—but the school as a whole is affected as well. School libraries staffed by certified school librarians make a measurable difference on school effectiveness (Francis, Lance, & Lietzau, 2010; Lance, Hamilton-Pennell, & Rodney, 2000; Lance & Hofschire, 2012; Lance, Rodney, & Russell, 2007; Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; *School Libraries Work!* 2008). If a lack of support for the fulfillment of these roles exists, the school library program cannot develop to its full potential. Consequently, the school librarian cannot fully contribute to student achievement, and a valuable resource is wasted.

In 2009, the AASL released its newest set of guidelines, outlining five roles to be fulfilled by school librarians: leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator. They placed the newest role, leader, at the top of the list. Using these five roles as a basis, the participants in my study were asked to rate to what degree they felt the roles should be fulfilled by the school librarian. I analyzed the data to determine if the educator groups held congruent or conflicting expectations for behavior.

Statement of the Problem

The position of school librarian has evolved over the years to encompass a range of roles and responsibilities for its incumbents. According to the AASL, the roles of the

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school librarian include that of instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator. These responsibilities were defined in detail in *Information Power* (1998):

> - As instructional partner, the library media specialist [school librarian] joins with teachers and others to identify links across student information needs, curricular content, learning outcomes, and a wide variety of print, nonprint, and electronic information resources.
> - As information specialist, the library media specialist [school librarian] provides leadership and expertise in acquiring and evaluating information resources in all formats; in bringing awareness of information issues into collaborative relationships with teachers, administrators, students, and others; and in modeling for students and others strategies for locating, assessing, and evaluating information within and beyond the library media center.
> - As teacher, the library media specialist [school librarian] collaborates with students and other members of the learning community to analyze learning and information needs, to locate and use resources that will meet those needs, and to understand and communicate the information the resources provide.
> - As program administrator, the library media specialist [school librarian] 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. (pp. 4-5)

Current literature in the field expands upon these responsibilities. As a result, school librarians are often expected to take on additional roles, including acting as specialists, advocates, and technologists.

As a specialist, the school librarian is expected to be knowledgeable of best practice, using research to guide instructional decisions (Moreillon, 2009). Attendance at professional conferences in school librarianship, reading instruction, children's literature, and educational technology is necessary for the school librarian to remain an expert in the field. Additionally, some education professionals look to their school librarian to keep staff informed of trends in education and educational reform (AASL, 1998; Everhart,

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2007). Access to professional publications and online journals can assist the school librarian in fulfilling this need.

As an advocate, the school librarian is expected to document his or her influence on student achievement, which often means changing the perceptions held by colleagues, thus advocating for his or her place in education during the age of accountability.

> Advocacy rests only on the shoulders of librarians in the field. . . .Because most principals aren't taught about it in their university training, their greatest source of information about the value of school library media programs and school librarians is their own school library media specialist [school librarian]. (Hartzell, 2007, p.34)

The school librarian is encouraged to constantly promote the library and its value to all members of the educational community. In addition, changes in the larger political and economic climate have increased the demand for school librarians to act as advocates. As new evaluation measures are implemented across the state of Virginia, this role becomes even more important. In May of 2011, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) approved the revised *Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers* (2011) indicating that teacher evaluation should include the documentation of student academic progress. In fact, the document suggested 40% of the evaluation should come directly from measures of student academic progress. This change made the evaluation of instructional personnel—including school librarians—more demanding, placing stress upon practicing administrators. Administrators who hold a limited understanding of the school librarian's role may find these requirements particularly difficult. The guidelines acknowledged that school librarians might need "modified performance standards," (VDOE, 2011, p. 5); however, the VDOE did not

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provide any specific guidance to administrators who must put these guidelines into practice. Now, more than ever, school librarians must advocate for their role in the workplace.

As a technologist, the school librarian is looked upon to assist in the evaluation and use of emerging informational and instructional technologies, as well as to direct staff and students in the appropriate use of these resources (Farmer, 2005). This expectation is not new. More than a decade ago, Simpson (1998) asserted "librarians must become proficient in the use of the new technologies to promote them and instruct students and teachers in their use" (p. 38). More recently, the AASL (2009) noted the significance of the role of the school librarian in the digital age: "In this increasingly global world of information, students must be taught to seek diverse perspectives, gather and use information ethically, and use social tools responsibly and safely" (p. 2). School librarians are positioned to assist in this endeavor as information specialists and instructional partners, and the expectation for their performance in this role is evident.

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As the roles and responsibilities of school librarians have accumulated—instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, program administrator, specialist, advocate, and technologist—an interesting trend has taken shape. A common thread interwoven in all the descriptions noted, and present in current literature, suggests a new role has emerged: the school librarian as leader. Coatney (2009), emphasizing the need for leadership skills in the performance of the school librarian's instructional role, suggested,

> School librarians are uniquely positioned to be instructional leaders and to support the instructional mission of the school. They have the instructional training (as teachers) and information specialist training (as librarians) to help students

> formulate questions, find answers, and achieve learning goals. In this multifaceted role, an accomplished school librarian will be able to provide leadership that will impact instruction within the school over time. (p. 43)

The emphasis on leadership skills as necessary to the effective fulfillment of the expectations of the school librarian of the 21st century is evident. In order for school librarians today to perform all the roles expected of them, they must become leaders within their schools. Furthermore, researchers found students in schools with school library programs staffed by certified school librarians who fulfill a leadership role scored higher on achievement tests (Lance et al., 2007; Lance & Hofschire, 2012). Consequently, in the latest revision of guidelines for school library programs, the AASL (2009), recognizing the increased responsibilities for the school librarian and the dramatic changes affecting the school library profession, redefined the roles of the school librarian, adding the role of leader to the top of the list. "Leadership is integral to developing a successful 21st century school library program. As information literacy and technology skills become central to learning, the school librarian must lead the way in building 21st century skills throughout the school environment" (p. 17). As the profession continues to evolve, the need for school librarians to embrace the role of leader is essential (AASL, 2009). This need further expands the role of the school librarian, and creates additional confusion over the school librarian's primary function.

In sum, the role of the school librarian has expanded in scope and scale, making it difficult for any individual, including the school librarian himself, to organize all the expectations of this position into a single definition. Therefore, many education professionals today hold conflicting expectations for the school librarian with whom they

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work, potentially affecting job performance, job satisfaction, and working relationships. In order for these individuals to ensure their effectiveness as educators and fully contribute to the total academic program in their schools, a common understanding of the role of the school librarian is vital.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of administrators, lead teachers, and school librarians at the elementary level on what the role of the school librarian should be; specifically, what did these educators expect of the school librarian. I sought to determine whether or not a statistically significant difference existed in the expectations of these educator groups regarding the roles and responsibilities of the school librarian. In particular, the leadership role, as outlined by the AASL in 2009, requires school librarians to perform in a leadership capacity that was yet to be explored.

- RQ: Is there a statistically significant difference in the expectations held by administrators, teachers, and school librarians at the elementary level regarding the roles of the school librarian as measured by the Role Expectations of School Librarians (RESL) instrument?
    - Which roles, if any, present statistically significant differences in expectations between the educator groups?
    - Which role statements, if any, present statistically significant differences in expectations between the educator groups?

If school librarians are to fulfill the expectations for performance outlined in the guidelines (AASL, 2009), they must have the support of the administrators and teachers

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with whom they work. Collecting these data is a necessary step towards identifying where support may be lacking.

Statement of Significance

Educators today must address increasing demands for accountability while adapting to changes brought about by technological advancements. School librarians, in particular, and their job responsibilities are impacted by these changes. The newest set of guidelines for this profession highlights the pressure for accountability and changes caused by technological advancements as factors impacting the role of the school librarian (AASL, 2009). School librarians face greater responsibility and demand for performance than ever before.

Changes in responsibilities for these educators, however, are not a new development. In fact, the standards for elementary school libraries have been rewritten a total of seven times since their creation in 1925 (see Figure 1). The near constant redefinition of role associated with this position has taken its toll on school librarians. Researchers have documented the confusion surrounding the formal job descriptions and titles for this position (Franklin, 2009; Riedling, 2001; Yates, 1997), the internal struggle school librarians experience when attempting to implement the ever-changing guidelines (Person, 1993; McCracken, 2001; Shannon, 1996), in addition to conflicting expectations held by other educator groups often resulting in a lack of support (Dorrell & Lawson, 1995; Mohajerin & Smith, 1981; Roach, 1989; Scott, 1986). A misunderstanding of role not only affects the experiences of the school librarian—potentially influencing job satisfaction, job performance, and working relationships—other educators are affected as well. Teachers and administrators are often unaware of the services and expertise

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available to them in the form of the school librarian. In order to obtain licensure in the state of Virginia, the school librarian must first be a licensed teacher. In addition, this individual must complete training in areas including the "selection and utilization of library-media materials and equipment," "production of media materials," and "theory and management of reference and bibliography," (8 VAC 20-22-10; § 22.1-298.1). Further training is required on "the role of the [school librarian] as a resource person for students and professional staff in curriculum design and the integration of library-media services in instruction," (8 VAC 20-22-10; § 22.1-298.1). These individuals must demonstrate proficiency in the evaluation and use of emerging information technologies. Consequently, the school librarian is positioned on the cusp of developing technologies that impact the world of education. What better person to lead other educators in navigating the Information Age than an individual trained to teach others how to locate, evaluate, and use information in a variety of formats?

As documented by research, there is confusion surrounding the role of the school librarian—a position constantly in flux, which is taking on more administrative responsibilities each year. An examination of the expectations for the role of the school librarian held by administrators, classroom teachers, and school librarians adds to the body of knowledge in this area. In addition, this research could shed light on a persistent problem—a lack of understanding among these educator groups, thus hindering school librarians from contributing to the academic achievement of students through their capacity to lead.

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