Librarians' perceptions of the greatest
needs in school libraries

Yunfei Du
Assistant Professor
University of North Texas
Denton, Texas, U.S.A.

Barbara Stein Martin
Hazel Harvey Peace Professor
University of North Texas
Denton, Texas, U.S.A.

Marjie D. Lorica
University of North Texas
Denton, Texas, U.S.A.

Abstract

*School library media specialists in the United States were surveyed to
determine their perceptions of the most critical needs in their school
libraries. The purpose of the survey was to develop information to be
shared with grant-making agencies and foundations to provide
suggestions in determining how money might be appropriated for
spending. Results of the survey may also be used to compare the
priorities of the general population of school library media specialists
with those of specific subsets, such as those serving disadvantaged
populations.*

School library media specialists, needs assessment, funding priorities

Introduction

Although the literature on school libraries in the U. S. is quite large, there is little empirical data on the perceptions of practicing school library media specialists on the priorities for the uses of grant funding to supplement the collections and services in their institutions. Analysis of responses to an open-invitation survey provided insights that may reveal disparities across demographic and socio-economic categories.

Literature Review

Needs assessment is process of collecting and analyzing information to identify the needs of a community or a group of people. Data obtained from needs assessment can be used in planning, decision making and in delivering services to meet those needs. According to Newhouse (1990), the use of needs assessment is a critical tool for library organization and administration. It provides a quantitative and qualitative measurement of the extent that the collections, services, and programs of a library meet the needs of its users, with the over-all goal of improving performance.

Conducting needs assessment has several purposes. It can demonstrate and document a known community need. As an added benefit, it involves the public and the community in problem solving and goal setting (Iowa State University Extension, n.d.) An accurate assessment of the situation in a community group or organization is crucial when making decisions allocating public or private resources. Data from needs assessment represent the attitudes of a broad range of individuals, as well as their attitudes and opinions.

Likewise, needs assessment helps determine a problem, establish a goal, and develop a solution to fill in the gap. It explores the "way things are" and the "way they should be" by identifying both the current situation and the desired situation (Rouda and Kusy, Jr., 1995).

According to Evans and Saponaro (2005), the focus in needs assessment for school library media centers are: how well the collection meet the needs of curriculum, the degree that the collection assists teachers in their class preparation activities, the right balance between print materials and media, the amount of budget that can/should go for electronic resources, the relationship of the school library with the local public library, and the extent students depend on public library collection and resources to complete class assignments (p. 44). Rouda and Kusy, Jr. (1995) also pin pointed some questions to ask during needs assessment such as problems, impending change, opportunities, strengths, and new directions.

Needs assessment is an integral part in the planning and delivery of services. In fact, the legislation establishing the Improving Literacy through School Libraries (LSL) program requires grant applications to contain a needs assessment on the need for school library media improvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Further, the legislation states that the needs assessment should be based on the age and condition of school library media resources, including book collections, access of school library media centers to advanced technology, and the availability of well-trained, professionally certified school library media specialists, in schools served (p.21).

Methods

An online survey using Survey Monkey and was posted openly on LM-Net, a listserv directed to school librarians, with a request for all to participate. The online survey questionnaire included five major areas: information about the respondents (position, length of service, educational background and age); information about the respondents' school (level, type, location, faculty size, sources of funding for school library media center, category of population served); respondents' perceptions of current needs in U.S. school libraries; respondents' perceptions of priority needs of US school libraries that outside funding agencies should address; and respondents' perception of criteria to determine need level of school libraries.

Statistical analysis of the demographics and content analysis of the open ended questions were used to analyze the data. The study is limited because respondents constitute a self-selected sample. Also, since answers were not required (except for the State of the respondent), some respondents opted to skip certain questions.

Results

Information about the Respondents

Of the 129 respondents, 124 (96%) were female and 5 (4%) were male (Table 1). In terms of respondents' position / title, a great majority of respondents, 111 out of 130 (85 %) were certified school librarians. Four were school librarians (3%) currently enrolled in a certification program, and 4 (3%) were teachers with library responsibilities without college coursework in school librarianship (Table 2).

Table 1- Gender of Respondents

Response	No.	%
Female	124	96
Male	5	4
Total	129	100

Table 2 – Position /Title of Respondents

Response	No.	%
School Librarian, certified	111	85.4
School Librarian, currently enrolled in a certification program	4	3
Teacher with library responsibilities, no college course work for school librarianship	4	3
Clerk with library responsibilities	1	0.8
Administrator with library responsibilities	1	0.8
Other Library Assistant/Technician 4 School Librarian, No certification 2 School Library Media Consultant 1 District Library Media Coordinator 1 Professor 1	9	7
Total	130	100

Thirty-two percent of respondents served as school librarians for 1-5 years, while 24% served for 6-10 years. It is noteworthy that almost 15 % of respondents were school librarians for more than 20 years (Table 3).

In terms of educational background, out of the 120 who responded to the question, 72% had MLS/MS degrees while 28% had Post Masters. Of the 120, 58% had school library certification (Table 4).

Table 3- Total Length of Service in School Librarian's Position

Response	No.	%
Less than 1 year	10	7.8

1-5 years	41	32
6-10 years	31	24.2
11-15 years	23	18
16-20 years	4	3.1
more than 20 years	19	14.8
Total	128	100

Table 4- Educational Background

Response	No.	%
School library certification	69	58
MLS/MS	87	72
Post Masters	34	28

Multiple responses; n=120

Information about the Respondent's School

Respondents came from 41 States within the U.S., and 1 respondent cames from Europe. Texas had the highest number or respondents at 17. Other states with relatively good number of respondents were Virginia (7), California (6), Georgia (6), New York (6), Minnesota (5), New York (5), Pennsylvania (4), and Washington (4). All other States had between 1 to 3 respondents.

As to the school level of the respondents, 40% were elementary schools, 39% are high school, and 30% were middle school/junior high (Table 5). Ninety percent of respondents served as school librarians in public school (Table 6). In terms of location, 50% were in suburban areas, 27% in urban- and 23% in rural areas (Table 7). Almost half of the respondents (48%) came from schools with faculty size of more than 51 teachers, and 41% came from schools with faculty size between 26-50 teachers (Table 8).

Table 5- School Level

Response	No.	%
Pre-school	17	15
Elementary	46	40
Middle School/Junior High	34	30
High School	45	39

Multiple responses; n=115

Table 6- School Type

Response	No.	%
Public School	105	90
Charter School	1	1
Private School	10	8
Alternative School	1	1
Total	117	100

Table 7- School Location

Response	No.	%
Urban	32	27
Suburban	61	50
Rural	28	23
Total	121	100

Table 8- Faculty Size

Response	No.	%
1-10	2	27
11-25	61	50
26-50	28	23
51+	121	100
Total	118	100

On funding for the school library media center, 92% of respondents stated that school library funds were their major source of (funding) support (Table 9). In addition, about one-third of respondents derived funding for their school libraries from donations. External grants both from foundations/non-profit organizations (26%) and Federal/State funds (23%) were also sources of additional funding. Other sources mentioned by respondents were funds generated from book fairs, PTA and other fund-raising events, and from library fines.

Table 9- Sources of funds for the School Library Media Center

Response	No.	%
School Library Funds	107	92
External Grants (Foundations/Not-for-Profit Organizations)	30	26
External Grants (Federal/State)	27	23
Donation	39	34

Multiple responses; n=116

On the question whether respondent's school library is serving disadvantaged populations, two-thirds (67%) answered on the affirmative (Table 11). Disadvantaged populations were categorized by free and reduced lunch count (FRL), schools with a big

percentage of students who are English language learners, immigrants, and minority, and Title 1 funding recipients. Title 1 is a provision of the legislation "Improving America's Schools Act of 1994" which aims to provide funding support to schools and school districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families (Improving America's Schools Act of 1994).

When asked of the free and reduced lunch count for the respondent's school, 61% said that their schools had 49% and below FRL count, while 22% said that their school library served a student population with 74-50% FRL count (Table 12).

Table 11- Type /Category of Populations Served by the School Library

Response	No.	%
School libraries Not Serving Disadvantaged Populations	39	32.5
School libraries Serving Disadvantaged Populations	79	67.5
Total	118	100

Table 12-Free and Reduced Lunch Count for Respondents' School

Response	No.	%
100-90 %	8	7
89-75%	12	10
74-50%	25	22
49% and below	71	61
Total	116	100

Respondents' perception of current needs in US school libraries

Respondents considered print materials as the "most needed" resources in their school libraries. These are followed by non-print materials, equipment, and databases which respondents considered as "needed" resources. Periodicals fell under the neutral category, while shelving and other furnishings were deemed "least needed" (Table 13).

Table 13- Greatest need to be purchased for respondent's school library

	Least needed		Less needed		Neutral		More needed		Most needed		
Item	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Print Materials	3	2.7	2	1.8	13	11.5	47	41.6	**48**	**42.5**	113
Non-print	7	6.6	6	5.7	26	24.5	**49**	**46.2**	18	17	106
Databases	10	9.2	12	11	30	27.5	**35**	**32.1**	22	20.2	109
Periodicals	11	10.2	22	20.4	**45**	**41.7**	21	19.4	9	8.3	108
Equipment	4	3.8	7	6.4	19	17.3	**45**	**40.9**	35	31.8	110
Shelving and other furnishings	11	10.2	22	20.4	**45**	**41.7**	21	19.4	9	8.3	108

In terms of print materials, respondents rated high interest-low vocabulary materials, followed by non-fiction, multicultural materials, fiction, books for leisure reading, and materials for special populations as "needed" resources in their school libraries (Table 14). Paperbacks and reference materials belonged to the "neutral"category, while picture books were "least needed".

Table 14 -Greatest Need for print materials for respondent's school library

	Least needed	Less needed	Neutral	More needed	Most needed	

Item	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Fiction	3	2.7	9	8	22	19.6	**53**	**47.3**	25	22.3	112
Non-fiction	1	0.9	1	0.9	4	3.6	**56**	**50**	50	44.6	112
Reference	7	6.5	11	10.2	**34**	**31.5**	33	30.6	23	21.3	108
Leisure reading	4	3.6	7	6.4	34	30.9	**46**	**41.8**	19	17.3	110
Paperbacks	31	29.2	10	9.4	**43**	**40.6**	19	17.9	3	2.8	106
High interest-low vocabulary	1	0.9	8	7.4	14	13	**58**	**53.7**	27	25	108
Special Populations	9	8.8	16	15.2	28	26.7	**35**	**33.3**	17	16.2	105
Picture books	**41**	**38.7**	14	13.2	21	19.8	23	21.7	7	6.6	106
Multicultural materials	6	5.6	8	7.5	25	23.4	**54**	**50.5**	14	13.1	107

Respondents' perceptions of pressing needs in US school libraries that funding agencies should address

On their perceptions of the greatest need of school libraries that funding agencies should address, more than 50% of respondents considered hiring/insuring additional qualified school librarians as the "most needed" (Table 15). This was followed by providing money for collection development (50%), and providing library instruction to school administrators (47%).

The items that respondents perceived as "needed" to be addressed by funding agencies were: providing continuing education for school librarians (49%), providing library instruction to teachers (45%), providing money for equipment (46%), and providing money for special projects (41%).Providing money for furniture and providing money for establishing new libraries were about equally deemed in the "neutral" category, at 39% and 38%, respectively.

Table 15- Greatest need of school libraries in general that outside funding agencies can address

	Least needed		Less needed		Neutral		More needed		Most needed		
Item	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
insuring qualified school librarians	0	0	3	2.3	16	14	34	29.8	**61**	**53.5**	114
Providing money for collection development	1	0.9	0	0	10	8.8	45	39.8	**57**	**50.4**	113
Providing library instruction to school administrators	1	0.9	2	1.8	16	14.3	40	35.7	**53**	**47.3**	112
Providing library instruction to teachers	2	1.8	2	1.8	19	17	**51**	**45.5**	38	33.9	112
Providing money for special projects	3	2.7	4	3.6	32	29.1	**45**	**40.9**	26	23.6	110
Providing money for establishing new libraries	2	1.8	16	14.7	**41**	**37.6**	40	36.7	10	9.2	109
Providing money for equipment	0	0	3	2.7	15	13.6	**59**	**45.5**	42	38.2	109
Providing money for	6	5.4	17	15.3	**43**	**38.7**	33	29.7	12	10.8	111

furniture												

When asked (in an open-ended question) of the most pressing needs in school libraries that funding agencies and donors should address to supplement collection and services, nearly 50% of respondents reported collection development/updating of collection age. Further, 17% of respondents mentioned computer software/hardware/new technology and equipment; 13% reported database/electronic resources; 10% cited the need for certified media specialist in every school; and 7% raised the need for funding support for library staff/personnel.

Respondents (7%) also mentioned the need for funding agencies to support training and professional development, particularly library instruction/training for administrators to better understand value of school libraries and how to support them, training on new technology, and continuing professional development for librarians (Table 16). Respondents (8%) also raised the need for funding agencies to support advocacy of or to provide assistance to certain issues affecting school libraries such as legislative requirements for school librarians; policies and guidelines in obtaining grants/ordering books in a much easier way, matching needs with school population, helping underfunded schools, not limiting grants to schools with high FRL counts, and generating local community's support to school libraries.

Table 16- Most Pressing needs that grant-making agencies and donors should address to supplement collections and services in school libraries

Response	No.	%
Collection Development/Updating Collection Age/Buying New Books	35	46
Need for Certified Library Media Specialist in every School	8	10
Databases/Electronic Resources	10	13
Non-print/audio/visual materials	5	7
Computer software and hardware/New Technology/Equipment	13	17

Funding Support for Library staff/personnel	5	7
Training/Professional Development	5	7
Advocacy/Issues	6	8

Multiple responses, n=76

Respondents were also asked how funding agencies could better serve school libraries: by providing small amounts of money to many libraries or by providing large amounts of money to fewer libraries who could serve as models. Overwhelmingly, 92% of respondents were in favor of providing small grants to many libraries (Table 17).

Table 17- Ways by which school libraries in general are better served by outside funding agencies

Response	No.	%
Provide small amounts of money to many libraries	103	92
Provide large amounts of money to fewer libraries who can serve as models	9	8
Total	112	100

Criteria to determine need level of school libraries

To serve as guide for funding agencies, respondents were asked the best way to determine the need level of schools. More than 80% of respondents said that the school library budget, the number of students, and the current collection size combined should be the basis for determining schools with the greatest need level (Table 18). Further, 22% of respondents said that librarian's description should be used, while only 9% of respondents suggested that the FRL percentage be used.

Table 18- Best Way to Determine Need Level of School Libraries

Response	No.	%

Evaluate School Library Budget, Number of students and Current Collection Size	91	82.7
Use Librarian's Description	24	21.8
Use FRL Percentage	10	9.1

Multiple responses; n=110

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked the criteria that funding agencies and donors should consider in providing funds to school libraries. Respondents gave an impressive enumeration of criteria (Table 15). One-fourth of respondents mentioned collection age, followed by school population size (15%), and current library budget (12%). These three criteria were earlier mentioned as the best way to determine need level in schools. The presence of certified librarians (10%), FRL percentage (8%), and the demographics/levels of income of the population served (7%) were also mentioned by respondents.

Noteworthy among of the suggested list of criteria were: the plan of the school for long-term sustainability of the program/funding request; availability of matching funds from the school; school district commitment to quality libraries/level of support from administration; past grant performance; conduct of needs assessment study by requesting schools; local community support; collaboration between MLS and classroom teachers; presence of special populations; and creativity of the proposed program.

Table 19- Criteria for Grant-making Agencies and Donors to Consider in Providing Funds to School Libraries

Response	No.	%
Collection Age	20	25
School Population Size	12	15
Current Library Budget	10	12
Presence of Certified Librarian	8	10
Free/Reduced Lunch Percentage	7	8
Plans for Long-term Sustainability of the Program/Request	6	7
Demographics of the Population Served/Levels of Income	6	7

Matching Funds from School	3	4
Collection Size	8	10
Technology Needs/Gaps	3	4
Needs of the Community/those with greatest needs	6	7
District Commitment to quality libraries/ Level of support from administration	3	4

Multiple responses, n=81

Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, respondents in this survey were predominantly female, majority were certified school librarians, in their present position for the last 6-10 years, and had MLS/MS degree. In general, a great number of respondents served in public elementary schools located in suburban areas with more than 51 teachers. Their school libraries served students in disadvantaged populations.

The greatest needs of respondents' school libraries were for print materials, followed by non-print resources, and equipment. In terms of print materials, the greatest needs were for high interest-low vocabulary, non-fiction, multicultural materials, fiction, and books for leisure reading.

The greatest needs in school libraries that funding agencies should address: hiring/insuring additional qualified school librarians; providing money for collection development; and providing library instruction to school administrators. In addition, respondents considered the school library budget, number of students, and current collection size as bases for determining need level of school libraries.

The results generated valuable information on school librarians' perceptions of the most pressing needs in their respective school libraries and in US school libraries in general and for priorities for the application of funding. The findings from this survey may help grant making agencies and foundations understand the needs of school libraries as reported by school librarians. This knowledge may be helpful when agencies determine and formulate the guidelines for how grant money will be awarded, assess their funding priorities, or to allocate more resources for urgent school library needs.

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Biographical notes

Yunfei Du is Associate Professor in Library and Information Sciences at the University of North Texas since 2008 and his research topic is distributed education and cognitive styles.

Barbara Stein Martin is the Hazel Harvey Peace Professor in Library and Information Sciences at the University of North Texas since 1984 and her research topic is cognitive styles and school librarianship

Marjie Lorica is a graduate student in Library and Information Sciences at the University of North Texas. She earned a doctorate degree from the Philipines.

Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the authors and that the paper was conceived and written by the authors alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others are referenced.