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# In the Trenches: A Comparison of Public Children's Librarianship and School Librarianship

Editorial by Lindsey Miller Beck

## Introduction:

So you want to work with kids?! And you want to work in a library?! Prepare for pure magic. Work in the public sphere, especially in terms of work with children, is demanding of an employee's time, patience, and knowledge, but is exceptionally rewarding. Over my years of service to children I have found many different jobs that fell within education and programming, some of which are very well known- such as school librarianship- and others that were less obvious, such as Afterschool Programming Director. It's good to know your options, particularly in children's library service, early on in your pursuit of your Library Science master's degree and even better to start researching them during your undergraduate studies. Time spent evaluating your options in relation to your goals can save you time and money, and can considerably add to your professional accomplishments.

While there are some niche positions available in the field of children's library service (I once heard of a non-profit orphanage with a part-time librarian) the two most common areas for a librarian interested in serving children are public librarianship and school librarianship. Though at first it may seem as if these two positions would be very similar due to the presumed audience, they are vastly different. Each comes with its own sets of benefits and considerations.

Public children's librarianship and school librarianship share some sweet similarities. You'll receive many hugs, have an incredible impact on the growing literacy development of small minds, and have as many books as you can read... children's books are the best books, of course! Some of the main differences come into play when considering required education and subsequent pay, the structure of programming and scheduling, and the responsibilities and additional duties of both.

## Overview of Public Children's Librarianship:

As a public children's librarian, your day might be spent conducting story times on site, writing grants for future programming, interviewing for a television spot, or cleaning toys and sorting books. The variety

of tasks is astounding, and confusing to those who may think that reading books to children is all this job consists of. People typically react with surprise upon learning that you may have to wake up at 4:00 am to go on the air at 5:00 am to publicize a program. That's what it takes to bring in the audience of public librarianship! Whereas in a school one could send home notes to parents, a children's librarian must utilize other advertising outlets, including press write-ups for local papers, social media, the radio, and the local news. Be prepared to work on public speaking and creative writing if you want to really excel at these aspects of the job.

The programming you publicize will most likely be broad in its goals. One week you could be working with the educators of special needs students, while the next you're working with bilingual families on group story times, or helping 3<sup>rd</sup> graders who are struggling with reading. All programming will be based on the needs of the various communities you serve, but all communities will show a range of needs that must be met in different ways with targeted services. It's the children's librarian's job to provide the specific resources to make substantial impacts while also managing funding for the present program and future programming. If the librarian is lucky, they may have a very active 'Friends of the Library' group that is willing to support their programs. They might, however, have to pursue additional funding options, such as grant writing, sponsors, and community partners. A little tip: know what your community and state has to offer! Utilize free presenter resources such as university education extension services and state health resources. These kinds of partnerships save your library money, look great on grant applications, and probably check a box on the community partner's list as well!

Scheduling for your programming will be specific to your audience, surveys should be conducted before scheduling programming to see what the best times are for your target audience. Every librarian knows the sinking feeling of a beautiful program with tons of refreshments and no attendees. A children's librarian must be smart with their scheduling. First, remember that many school age children- even into their teen

years- will require a ride, making most programming an after 5:30 pm or Saturday event. Second, programming aimed at parents or educators might be best done on Saturdays or during lunchtimes on a weekday. Third, do not neglect the stay-at-home parents with their children! Typically known as the 0-5 age group, they can be some of your strongest funding advocates and best word-of-mouth publicity. Treat them well with consistent and friendly service and they will repay you tenfold. Their children will also repay you in colored art, and one can put no price on such a valuable display of impact!

In addition to being mindful of when you schedule programming, it is wise to ask at your job interview what additional scheduling might be required of you. Some libraries might require a Saturday or nightly rotation depending on their hours. Others may only ask for the normal working hours a week with built in time off for after hours or Saturday programming. Asking questions at the interview will make you look thoughtful and invested. Some other good questions to ask would be about additional job duties, pay, benefits, and retirement plans. The vague "other duties as required" on a job description should be fleshed out as much as possible before accepting a position. Depending on the library, this may entail the aforementioned additional rotations, or tasks ranging from volunteering for committee work to managing the money box. These extra tasks might seem small, but they can take up time and place additional levels of responsibility on your shoulders. Know, however, that additional duties that may seem to have no connection to children's services are all part of being a staff dedicated to public service and insuring that the library as a whole is successful.

Pay for children's librarians varies widely by state, county, and library system. The smart job applicant would be wise to look at ALA's mean salaries by state chart to check in on what they should expect, while taking other factors into consideration as well such as the setting of the library (American Library Association, 2015). For instance, a rural, two-library system might pay less than a highly populated, urban, multi-branch system. Almost all libraries struggle with funding, and this extends to employee compensation. While youth services positions are highly competitive, they may not be the high dollar job that an outsider to the working budgets of libraries would expect.

Additional benefits might offset the salary though. Health insurance can be quite expensive out of pocket versus through an employer, along with retirement plans, which might be built in as a state employee. Libraries are also usually open to hiring children's librarians on the condition that they finish or pursue their master's degree in the field. Be sure to ask about possible scholarship programs available through the library itself or through the Friends of the Library group in addition to the prospect of a pay raise upon completion of the degree.

With any job in the field of Library Science, one might find it necessary to relocate in order to obtain a position. This is not always the case but it is certainly not every day that a youth services position becomes available. If Library Science is your career path of choice, then being willing to work in positions outside of youth services may be a smart start on your road to landing your dream job. Another smart option is to find work related to children's programming outside of the library that puts you into the same types of circumstances you might experience if you were already working as a children's librarian. The key word in that last sentence is experience! Luckily, jobs such as this are fairly plentiful and exceptionally interesting. Great places to look into are children's museums or activity centers, school districts, YMCAs, non-profits, and universities. If you're very brave, you might go into teaching if you cannot find a position available when you begin your search. Teaching provides terrific experience with lesson planning, record keeping, working with parents, and developing reading skills in young minds.

Any of the aforementioned possible employment opportunities would most likely make you eligible for student loan repayment plans that could drastically reduce your monthly payments. Some of them might also give you entry into that specific state's retirement plan, narrowing the years between you and a bathtub in a field at sunset.

Whatever path you choose on your journey to a public children's service position, do not neglect the continuing of your education. Invest in yourself for maximum success! Your employer might even require a certain amount of required CEU's per year. These can be easily obtained through the right research. Check with the state department entity for your

organization. Also check with local universities and scroll through online resources. More and more trainings are provided online through webinars, often for free. Ask your employer what type of training they would like you to make a priority and balance that out with your own areas of interest. This will insure that your continued education is well rounded and provides you with knowledge that adds to your passion for the field.

### **Overview of School Librarianship:**

If you know already that school librarianship is your career of choice, it's best to start early with an undergraduate degree in education and licensure. Depending on the requirements of the state, it may also be necessary to pass the Library Media Praxis exam in order to have the credentials you need to be the official Library Media Specialist. Alternately, obtaining an undergraduate degree in education and a subsequent master's in Library Science should provide you with the necessary credentials for your Library Media licensure certification without the burden of an additional Praxis exam. Make sure to check your state's education requirements by calling the state's Department of Education to receive a full overview of the paths available for certification. The University of Southern Mississippi actually provides an MLIS option with school licensure (The University of Southern Mississippi, 2015).

While attaining the correct paperwork and licensures for school librarianship might be harrowing when it comes to making sure all the paperwork is in order, it definitely has its perks. For one, there are readily available options for government-run student loan repayment plans that will have you smiling. The Public Service Loan Forgiveness plan is one such avenue that any public servant (school or public library) may qualify for based on some very simple criteria (US Department of Education, 2016). Check with your loan service provider to see what your options are before your repayment period begins for the biggest rewards. There are also retailer discounts available for services you most likely use daily, such as your cellular service and internet provider. Just because these discounts aren't advertised doesn't mean you should be wary to ask about and take advantage of them!

Once you are in the school you may have some intense flashbacks to school lunches, going to the principal's office, and of course checking out books from the library. You'll see your old teachers' lives from a whole new perspective. In the public library, you are most likely able to escape to your office if you have a hard day or intense interaction with the public or a co-worker, but in the school, the show must go on. Be prepared to be prepared! Programming will look much different in comparison to that of the public library. Depending on the school, you may or may not be expected to teach classes along with the daily routines of library and readership maintenance. This is just one of the questions that should be asked of the principal or interview committee during the interview. If you will be expected to teach classes, take note from them of what they want the actual curriculum to look like. Some schools might want you to teach from the state's English Language standards, while others may want you to teach technology skills.

Some other smart questions to ask the interviewer would be who you will report to, what the expectations are for collaboration with teachers, and what extra committees the school librarian usually serves on for the school. Committee work could have you working with crisis management plans, school testing, or special events. As previously mentioned, additional duties are a given with any position, but knowing up front if you will be expected to assume important leadership roles is something you'll need to consider if offered the position. There is very little room for error in positions such as school testing coordinator, for example, and if handed that role as an 'additional duty,' you'll need to decide if you're up for the challenge. Be aware of your state education department's regulations for school libraries to insure that your position is not taken for granted. Schools work within the same budget limitations as public libraries and are also expected to do more with less staff. Don't let this stop you from claiming your rights and also saving the school from library audit violations in the long run.

Any given day in the school library will have you teaching students, managing checkout, and maintaining the collections. Say goodbye to parents and hello to class full of students staring at you to make something happen! In the public library you

definitely develop your speaking skills and taking charge of a room; but school librarianship takes it to the next level. Not only are you providing educational programming, but you're also working as the sole authority figure. Create a classroom management plan and don't let them smell your fear! Tweak as the year goes along with plenty of emphasis on positive and negative consequences based on their behavior. Find your counterparts in the school, such as the music teacher or P.E. coach, and develop a behavior management plan across the board. Children are able to work best when their basic needs are met and when they are presented with a stable environment where the teacher's expectations are clear and consequences are consistent.

Program planning is most easily done in units as a teacher/librarian. That means choosing a topic within the standards for that grade for that state and utilizing them to plan weekly lessons. This unit might cover nine weeks of lessons or two. It's really up to the teacher, and all of them can be tuned to the format of story times for your younger students if that's your comfort zone. Remember, you can't go wrong if you incorporate the five basic principles of *Every Child Ready to Read's* National Initiative: reading, singing, writing, talking, and playing (American Library Association, 2015). Good lesson planning will be helpful when your evaluation time rolls around. Evaluations typically happen twice a year and in Mississippi they follow the MSTAR rubric. As of this year, there is also a Library MSTAR which will stand as an additional rubric. Become familiar with this evaluation tool. Make a binder to help you keep up with each category and to make it an easy process for your principal.

While you most likely will not have to keep up with grades as the school librarian, you will have to come up with a system for scaffolding reading growth. The Renaissance-created Accelerated Reader program is commonly purchased by school districts to act as an electronic resource for tracking student reading and organizing books in the library. It's up to the school librarian to set up a schedule for student checkout, assessment of reading, and practical celebrations for students who meet their goals. Remember that while your library may have some funding on a separate budget line, this money will need to go towards the

yearly purchase of office/class supplies, new books, and cataloging materials.

August through May will be a whirlwind of activity. It will be your choice as to whether or not you will participate in extra programming, such as after school teaching or the coaching of a club. Teaching and coaching after school usually provides an additional stipend to your paycheck but will put your hours back along the lines of a typical 9:00 am to 5:00 pm job, and you'll still have to be at the school between 7:00 am and 8:00 am in the morning. Be wary of hidden contract caveats. Some schools might make it mandatory for you to continue your coaching position until your position changes or your job is terminated. Aside from these personal choices, you will have the sweet summer schedule that you may not have enjoyed since you were in elementary school. School Librarians, without the additional tasks of grading, are usually out of the building by 3:30 pm. They receive school holidays and summer break begins about mid- to late May. There may be training available during the summer, it may even be required, but if your goal is to have the same schedule as a growing family, it fits the bill perfectly. In the public library, your busiest times will be summer and holidays.

One of the perks of working as a school librarian is that you continue to get paid throughout the summer. You will also receive state retirement and paid insurance. The salary will be contingent upon your number of years of experience, in addition to your level of education, plus the allotment that the district gives on top of what the state requires. You can check with your state department of education to receive the base salary schedule before additional district allotments. This will give you an idea of where your salary might fall before taxes. If you have worked previously in a public library as a children's librarian, you will probably find a pay raise through the transition and the ability to have your years there count towards your years of experience scale. Sometimes all it takes is a phone call and a notarized piece of paper to change your salary range. Take advantage of this possibility! Time spent in the realm of public children's librarianship is valuable, non-traditional teaching experience (probably with the same children if you stay local) that will extend into your school library programming.

Advancement in the public library and the school library looks very different. Jobs for school librarians are typically posted in the spring semester and might be open until mid-summer, while jobs at public libraries could become available at any time. For both positions, depending on your personal preferences of working hours, it might be necessary to take a different position within a library system or a school district and apply for the coveted children's/school librarian position when it becomes available. Make sure to keep up all of your necessary paperwork and training during the time in between so that you will be a competitive candidate. This includes CEUs and licensure renewal for schools. Once in your chosen position, your options vary for pay raises and promotions. Public libraries rarely add or drop branches within their systems, so if you're looking to advance to more of a children's services coordinator role, it might require moving to a larger library system. If advancement is your goal and you are ready for a change you might decide to move up to an assistant director or director position. In a school it is more likely that you would retain your position and receive pay raises based on the amount of work you are willing to put in. For example, obtaining a higher level of education or working towards and completing your National Board Certification would provide you with considerable pay bumps (Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, 2016). Again, if advancement is your goal and you are ready for a change, you might decide to work towards a degree in educational leadership, making you eligible for administrative positions.

### **Conclusion:**

What are your goals? Make two lists, one for career goals and one for personal goals. Think ahead six months, then a year, then five. You might be surprised by what you find out about yourself and what you consider success. Evaluating where you find yourself in comparison to where you want to go can help you determine solid plans of action for your career and your personal life. Whichever path you choose, make the extra effort to get involved with professional organizations. These could be on the state or national levels. Attending conferences and trainings will introduce you to a variety of professional contacts and groups that might pique your interest. It's worth it to increase your knowledge

and your impact. These organizations will help you fight for your worth as well. Budgets for libraries and schools are typically on the chopping block in state legislative meetings, and it has never been more necessary to join groups that fight for the literacy rights of children.

Working with and for children is one of life's most rewarding decisions. Each of the above career paths comes with its own benefits and challenges. One of the biggest challenges of both is that you may not be able to see the impact of your work right away. Do not be dismayed. As a public children's librarian or a school librarian, you are in the trenches of education. You are on the frontlines of insuring that the next generation comes out better than the last. Eventually you WILL have a teenager or an adult approach you and ask, "Do you remember me?" because even though it may not seem like it in the moment, they will remember you. They may not remember every lesson plan, but they will remember your passion. Share this with them and your impact will be immeasurable.

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