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Literature and Technology Skills for Entry-Level Children's Librarians:  
What Employers Want

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Abstract:

Public libraries are increasingly advertising for children's librarians with "technological savvy." In a field that used to be dominated by books and reading, this new focus on technology has been somewhat unexpected. This article uses two methods to investigate the role that technology and juvenile literature play in hiring new children's librarians: a content analysis of children's services job announcements and interviews with public library employers about hiring children's librarians. The content analysis, which looked at children's librarian job announcements over a 30 year period, suggests that knowledge of juvenile literature is no longer the *sine qua non* of youth services librarianship, and that technological skills are in the ascendant. Interviews confirmed the importance of basic technological skills. However, these interviews also reinforce the notion that children's librarians need to have a love of the literature in order to effectively work as a children's librarian.

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*Introduction*

Children's librarianship has traditionally been geared toward connecting children and literature. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, libraries started adding computer-based media. Children's services were seen as an area in which computer technology was inappropriate, a "refuge of calm in a turbulent world."<sup>1</sup> However, children growing up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century multimedia world accept and embrace technology, sometimes to the exclusion of books.<sup>2</sup> For the children's

librarian, therefore, a question arises: is it more important to know books or to know computers? Do employers privilege knowledge of one over knowledge of the other? The question has implications not only for new librarians, but also for their employers and library school educators. To determine how much emphasis employers placed on knowledge of children's literature and knowledge of technology, an analysis of children's librarian job advertisements was performed, and library administrators from several libraries which advertised for children's librarians were interviewed. Several research questions guided this investigation.

- Is knowledge of children's books still an essential criterion for new children's librarians?
- Has knowledge of technology in any way superceded knowledge of print sources as an employment criterion?
- When did technology skills start being required of children's librarians?
- How do employers measure candidates' knowledge of the literature?
- How do employers measure candidates' technology skills?

### *Literature Review*

Children's librarianship is a relatively young field, with its origins extending barely two centuries back.<sup>3</sup> "Youth services librarianship began with specialized collections" of children's literature, and with the women hired to take care of those collections.<sup>4</sup> From the establishment of the Bingham Library for Youth (Salisbury, Conn.) in 1803 to the middle part of the twentieth century, children's librarians focused their efforts on books as the primary medium for transmitting information and culture. The "foremothers" of children's librarianship have had a

huge impact on children's book production, through reviews, awards, and the promotion of quality children's books, and they helped shape the children's book publishing industry.<sup>5</sup>

As children's librarianship focused on literature as a vehicle for increasing children's intellectual curiosity, so also has the training of children's librarians been focused on children's literature. A 1987 issue of *Top of the News* was devoted to the subject of library education for youth services, and the teaching of children's literature was treated as an accepted educational norm. One author mentioned an increased need for coursework in audiovisual materials and computer software.<sup>6</sup> In Melody Allen & Margaret Bush's survey of youth services library education, there were 82 references to literature courses being offered, compared to 49 references to "services" courses.<sup>7</sup> Continuing education was also dominated by literature and storytelling courses, with 38 offerings in these areas compared to eight continuing education courses on microcomputers.<sup>8</sup> A later survey by Susan Steinfurst & Pauletta Bracy also reported a majority of youth services courses dealt with literature.<sup>9</sup> Almost half of all respondents to a 1996 survey of library school alumni reported taking a course in children's or young adult literature.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that American librarians recognize the importance of familiarity with said literature. Knowledge of children's literature is valued internationally as well. Respondents to an international survey about library and information science (LIS) competencies desired moderate to extensive coverage of children's literature.<sup>11</sup> An earlier survey of LIS faculty in the United Kingdom found children's literature covered at eight out of ten schools surveyed.<sup>12</sup>

While children's books have been wholeheartedly embraced, youth services librarians have not responded as warmly nor as readily to computer technology for youth. Pauline Wilson suggested that the new "Electronic Utopia" would undermine children's reading abilities, and that library school students would be too busy catching up on technological skills to take youth services classes.<sup>13</sup> Respondents to Steinfirst and Bracy voiced a similar concern by mentioning that youth services courses were getting short shrift in the attempt to maximize students' technological skills.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, computer technology has so pervaded library services that one librarian wrote, "Whether the [LIS] graduate will be a cataloger, bibliographer, children's librarian, systems librarian or archivist, he or she will need to be comfortable using computers and knowledgeable enough to assist patrons in navigating multiple sources of computer-based information."<sup>15</sup> Technology is here to stay, and technological skills are essential for librarians.

However, relatively little study has been done on technology training for children's librarians in the public library. Neither Steinfirst and Bracy's 1996 survey nor Allen and Bush's 1987 survey reported on the presence of children's technology courses. A 1997 study of electronic resources reported that electronic resources were covered in seven LIS youth services courses. Four of those courses were related to children's and young adult literature.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, records of course additions reported in the *Library and Information Science Education Statistical Report* indicate that such courses are becoming a part of the LIS curriculum. Courses added have had titles such as "Children and Electronic Media,"<sup>17</sup> "Children and Technology," "Evaluating Digital Resources for Children,"<sup>18</sup> and "Wonders of the WWW for Youth Services."<sup>19</sup> While courses on children's computer technology have been available, they are additions to a youth

services curriculum already heavily oriented toward literature, reading, and library promotion. Course offerings such as “Electronic Resources for Children and Young Adults”<sup>20</sup> and “Multimedia Texts for Young People”<sup>21</sup> also suggest a broadening orientation toward technology as a purveyor of story. This orientation is supported by the development of the International Children’s Digital Library, a computer-mediated source of children’s texts, and children’s CD-ROMs which combine the features of a story and a game. Technology, as it relates to children and libraries, is story-focused.

### *Method*

Two methods were used to gauge literature and technology competencies for children’s librarians: a content analysis of job change, and interviews with public library employers. The content analysis used 285 youth services job advertisements published in *American Libraries* in five-year intervals, from 1971 to 2001.<sup>22</sup> Ads for teen and young adult librarians were excluded from analysis, leaving 269 ads for children’s librarians. The job preferences or requirements of those ads were reviewed, to determine whether the positions indicated that the incoming children’s librarian should have either knowledge of children’s literature or technological skills.

After reviewing the advertisements, a follow-up study was conducted to determine the preferences of libraries currently hiring for children’s librarian positions. In issues of *American Libraries* published between June/July 2002 and May 2003, 20 libraries advertised for children’s or youth services librarians. Library administrators and human resources staff from seven of

those libraries were interviewed about their hiring preferences. Employers were specifically asked how important it was for their new children's librarian candidates to know children's literature, current technologies, and how such knowledge was assessed at the interview. To preserve the privacy inherent in the hiring process, employers' names and libraries have not been revealed.

### *Results*

*Job Advertisements:* Youth services advertisements in 1971 were concise and to the point. In 85 words or less, they indicated the type of position advertised, salary, and community amenities. Frequently, the only special knowledge mentioned in 1971 ads was knowledge of children's literature. The number of ads appearing in 1971 was relatively small; this number has increased significantly in the past 30 years, starting with a low of 13 ads in 1971, peaking at 79 ads in 1986, and settling at 49 ads in 2001. Compared to a 1971 advertisement, ads from 2001 go into more detail about the traits and features of the ideal children's librarian. In 2001, ads were likely to request interpersonal skills, love of children, ability to manage resources, and technology skills as well as knowledge of children's literature. For most years analyzed, between 10 and 20 percent of ads appearing each year request children's librarians with knowledge of juvenile literature. This percentage dropped to 7 percent of ads in 1976, and shot up to 37 percent in 1996. Figure 1 indicates the percentage of children's services ads requesting knowledge of children's literature and computer skills.

[Insert Figure 1 here.]

From 1971 to 1981, all ads that requested knowledge of children's literature specified that as a required competency for children's librarian candidates. "Sound," "extensive," and "broad" were the terms used to describe the desired depth of knowledge. In 1986, one advertisement out of 15 indicated that knowledge of children's literature was preferred; other ads required someone with "substantial knowledge," "a good understanding," and "demonstrated knowledge" of children's literature. Only 12 percent of ads indicated knowledge of children's literature as a criterion for employment in 1991, and only one ad required knowledge of children's literature. Other ads indicated that knowledge of children's literature was "desirable," and that the employer was seeking a candidate "interested" in children's literature. However, by 1996, all but three advertisements were requiring knowledge of juvenile literature and were again using terms like "comprehensive," "broad," and "extensive" to describe that knowledge. The percentage of ads requesting knowledge of juvenile literature declined from 37 to 20 by 2001, but only one ad indicated that such knowledge was preferred rather than required. However, by this time, libraries were not asking for comprehensive or broad knowledge, and only one ad requested "solid" knowledge.

While knowledge of children's literature has been consistently requested, computer skills is a more recent development. The first mention of computers in children's services occurred in 1981, when an ad indicated that the library had a microcomputer club. However, that ad did not ask for computer skills from the children's librarian. In 1986, three ads out of 79 said that the ideal candidate would have computer skills; however, these skills were preferred rather than



required. Two of these three ads suggested that the need for computer skills were motivated by the installation of an online public access catalog (OPAC). Another ad mentioned the future installation of an OPAC as a selling point for the library. Between 1986 and 1991, the percentage of ads requesting computer skills increased by 18 percent. Even so, 1991 ads indicated that computer literacy was a preferred qualification rather than a required one. By 1996, 24 percent of ads asked for computer skills. However, by this time, all but one ad specified that computer skills were required. While 1991 ads asked generally for computer knowledge, 1996 ads tended to be more explicit, indicating what kinds of knowledge were needed: “basic PC applications,” CD-ROM skills, Internet, and specific library automation packages. The number of ads requesting computer skills jumped another 8 percent between 1996 and 2001, and again, all but one ad indicated that computer skills were required of children’s services staff. By 2001, children’s librarians were being sought to provide computer instruction to youth, run children’s computer centers, select electronic materials for children, and maintain library web pages in addition to Internet searching skills and basic applications. Technological skills seem to have become as important as knowledge of children’s literature.

*Employer Interviews:* While job ads present a précis of the job, it is employers who control access to that job. To more fully investigate what employers want to see from children’s librarian candidates, seven public library directors and human resources personnel were interviewed about what they expected from candidates and how they measured candidates’ skills. Employers were asked whether candidates were expected to have extensive knowledge of juvenile literature and how the employer assessed that knowledge during an interview. Two employers indicated a

desire for extensive knowledge of children's literature; however, the remaining five indicated that while extensive knowledge was 'somewhat' important, they were really looking for an enthusiasm about children's literature. Said one employer, "We're looking for someone that has a passion about children's literature ... to watch them get excited and passionate about a particular piece of literature or a bibliography they've put together is really inspirational."

Employers' emphasis on enthusiasm appears to rank that quality before extensive knowledge of children's literature. However, a candidate who is excited about children's literature is not necessarily conversant with the depth and breadth of books written for children, even at the most basic level. Enthusiasm, tempered by knowledge, implies the ability to critically assess both current and previously published children's literature for collection development and reader advisory purposes. The enthusiastic librarian can recommend a great book; the veteran children's librarian can assess the book's potential for literature extension activities, suggest how the book might affect children at different developmental stages, and compare that book to books for similar age groups and on similar subjects. The growth or extent of that knowledge occurs over time as youth services librarians become more experienced. Employers' comments indicate that being excited about children's literature is at the top of the list of candidate considerations. Nonetheless, employers want to know how much knowledge the candidate actually does have. Employers ask questions and pose problems that probe the depth of candidates' knowledge about children's books.

Employers use a variety of methods to determine the applicant's knowledge of children's literature. Four of the employers indicated asking questions about children's literature. They asked interviewees to name their five favorite children's books published in the last year, their favorite authors, and which children's books they have enjoyed. Some employers said they asked open-ended, problem-based questions, such as, "A teacher called and said 'Give me 15 to 25 good books for third graders.' What do you put into the pile?" One employer recalled asking open-ended questions about the selection process, to determine candidates' understanding of the principles of quality literature. Several employers acknowledged that they were recruiting people directly from library school, and were aware that "not everybody knows everything about children's literature." To evaluate students' knowledge of children's literature, these employers checked transcripts for previous coursework in children's literature. Three employers asked the candidate to put together a story time presentation during the interview, to assess the candidate's ability to share literature, and to select literature appropriate for particular communities. "When I ask someone, 'What book would you build a preschool storytime around?' and they say 'Tomie dePaola,' well, I've got nothing against Tomie dePaola, but I'm not sure that's where I'd start if I wanted to make an impression on an African American teacher in a school that's 80 percent black." A sample of seven employers may not indicate a dramatic shift in the views of all employers, but these employers, at least, are seeking a balance between enthusiasm for and knowledge of children's literature.

In addition to asking about employers' preferences for knowledge of children's literature, employers were also asked what sorts of computer skills they sought and how they assessed

those computer skills. In general, the computer skills sought by employers were fairly minimal. One library administrator said, “We’re not looking for [our children’s librarian] to be a computer programmer or a network administrator, but it’s hard to imagine we would hire anyone who didn’t have basic Internet skills or the ability to use Microsoft software.” Another employer from a large metropolitan system said that when youth services candidates discussed their computer hardware and software skills at great length, “it can be a flag that they’re not going to be happy here, because we don’t allow anybody to do that [i.e. install and configure computer technology]. We have a separate department” for computer-related work such as installing software, setting up networks, and designing computer interfaces. However, representatives from smaller libraries indicated that increased computer ability would be a plus. Said one employer, “A children’s librarian who could come in and implement technology to improve service to kids, that would be a huge plus.” Employers see a connection between children’s services, professional librarianship, and technology skills. The professional children’s librarian, in their view, uses her technological knowledge to improve service to children.

Beyond children’s services, employers seek candidates who can operate effectively in an increasingly technology-based profession. All employers sought people who could use office software such as word processing. During the interviews, five employers mentioned Microsoft products such as Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Three employers said they wanted candidates who could search for information from online databases as well as the Internet. Two employers mentioned that they sought familiarity with integrated library systems, and one wanted a candidate with the ability to imagine how a database was structured. One employer mentioned

special graphic design software, but indicated that the library was willing to train an employee on that package. All employers sought candidates who were comfortable and confident in their abilities without being arrogant. One employer shared a cautionary tale about an interviewee who called the library's platform choice "stupid." That employee did not get the job. When assessing candidates' computer skills, most employers said they relied upon asking the candidate about her or his experience with computers. "We rely upon the honesty of the candidate," said one, "and if they don't mention a [program or product] that we're specifically interested in, we'll ask." However, another employer mentioned a brief computer test at the interview stage, and a third questioned a candidate's technological skills upon receiving a typewritten resume. Based on these results, employers seem to want someone who can help patrons with their computer problems, work with their colleagues who use e-mail and office automation products, and who can apply their technological expertise to serving children.

### *Conclusion*

For the aspiring children's librarian, which is more important: knowing children's literature or knowing computers? In recent lean economic years, this question takes on a new significance. A review of *American Libraries* shows why. While 49 public libraries placed unique advertisements for children's librarians in 2001, less than half that number placed ads between June/July 2002 and May 2003. Empty public library positions are being frozen and new hiring greatly reduced. These are the places where children's librarians are most likely to be employed. It becomes imperative for job candidates to present themselves in the best possible light, demonstrating their knowledge of the skills employers demand. In this case, it seems that

employers demand basic computer skills and a solid foundation in children's literature, upon which a career can be built.

Knowledge of children's literature has been a historic criterion for children's librarians, and remains highly desirable today. In the 1970s and 1980s, ads requested considerable knowledge of children's literature. These requests dropped off in the early 1990s, but rose again in 1996 and 2001. However, employers indicate that they are recruiting applicants directly from library school, and they seem to realize that those applicants will not have the comprehensive knowledge of children's literature that a 20-year children's services veteran might. Because comprehensive knowledge of children's literature is hard to come by, employers indicated that they often look for enjoyment of children's literature and enthusiasm for sharing that literature with children.

Based on published job advertisements, it seems that computer skills worked their way into children's services in the late 1980s as a supplementary skill to complement the installation of integrated library systems. Between 1991 and 1996, computer skills became a children's services requirement, rather than a supplementary skill. The introduction of the World Wide Web in 1994 probably spurred this new requirement. Children's librarians had always mediated the relationship between children's materials and adult librarians' understanding of those materials; 1996 job ads suggest that they were also being required to mediate the relationship between new technology, patrons, and staff.

While one cannot say that knowledge of technology has superseded knowledge of literature in terms of importance, some technology knowledge is now assumed from the population of children's librarian applicants. What should the children's librarian know? Word processing, database searching, and Internet search skills are considered mandatory skills by most employers. Spreadsheets, presentation software, and integrated library systems help to sweeten the deal. Some libraries look for experience designing web pages and creating Internet applications, but this is generally not necessary for the children's librarian. Judging by several employers' spontaneous mention of Microsoft products, the aspiring children's librarian would do well to have some familiarity with Microsoft software. Even so, office software skills are transferable across platforms.

The results of this study inform various stakeholders in children's services. Job seekers benefit from knowing what sorts of skills employers expect before they are interviewed. Knowing the importance of computer and literature skills will help them prioritize their coursework, and will encourage them to play up the technological skills they may have thought were irrelevant to youth services positions. This study also has implications for practicing youth services librarians, employers, and library educators who wish to maintain a relevant curriculum. Practicing librarians and their employers benefit from knowing what skills are being sought from new candidates. Knowing what other employers are seeking helps employers gauge the field and develop expectations for children's services personnel. This helps them assess the skills

candidates possess when they interview for youth services positions. Librarians who are changing positions at this time learn which skills are expected from their competition, the new library school graduate. Library educators, particularly those who influence youth services curricula, also benefit from knowing what employers expect. They can use this information to advise students, plan new courses, or refine curriculum from older courses. The ultimate goal of library education is to produce a product that employers want, and that they will hire.

*Advice to the Applicant:* Prospective applicants to children's librarian positions should be prepared for several questions about children's literature, including what they have read, what they have enjoyed, and what books they would recommend in specific situations. Applicants would benefit from investigating demographics of the communities they are applying to, and reflecting on the children's literature most appropriate to those communities. Applicants might also want to create general lists of books appropriate for particular audiences, and review those lists before they are called to interviews. Employers want to see the candidate's ability to creatively connect children with literature. Enthusiasm is good. The holistic application of children's literature to the entire mission of children's services is better.

In terms of technology skills, applicants should be their own best advocates during the interview. Most of the employers interviewed did not test for computer skills in the children's services interview. Applicants should be ready to share information about the software they have used and which applications can be adapted to youth services. The interview is not the place for false



modesty. The candidate may mean that she doesn't know the protocol structure by which packets are transferred across networks when she says, "I don't know anything about the Internet!"

However, her potential employers will assume that she means she knows nothing about access or searching the Internet. At the same time, the applicant should demonstrate an interest in learning more about the software used at the library. The employer who has just learned that his library's software choice is "stupid" is not positively impressed with the applicant's technological skills so much as he is negatively impressed with the applicant's arrogance. Basic technological skills are good. Connecting technology to children's services is better. For both aspects of children's librarianship, the desired goal is the candidate's ability to apply skills and knowledge, in traditional and new ways, to the improvement of children's services.

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Figure 1. Percent of children's librarian ads seeking candidates with knowledge of children's literature, compared to percentage of ads seeking candidates with computer skills.

