The Future of Youth Public Librarian Education Project: Initial Findings

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Despite evidence suggesting that current LIS curricula might be inadequate to prepare students for the realities of today's public library youth services work, little research has addressed potential changes to the LIS curricula in this area. This paper reports findings from the second phase of an IMLS-funded project exploring how LIS programs might better prepare students to work in public libraries with youth. Through a combination of surveys, informal virtual meet-ups, and focus groups, we collected data addressing two primary research questions: What is the job of a public youth services librarian today, and how has that job changed in recent years? What do practitioners, library administrators, LIS faculty, and other youth services providers perceive as the gaps in current LIS graduate curricula for pre-service youth services librarians? Findings indicate significant changes to the nature of public library youth services work in recent years, as well as misalignment between traditional LIS curriculum and the actual knowledge and skills required to succeed in this work.

Keywords: diversity, equity, and inclusion, LIS curriculum, public libraries, youth services librarianship

The nature of public library youth services (YS) work has changed dramatically over the past decade. As the world and the nation have encountered demographic shifts, economic crises, political unrest, an exploding information landscape, rapid technological advancements, and a global pandemic, so too have the country's libraries. As Jennifer Howard (2019) stated, these massive disruptions have meant increased pressure on public libraries in particular to "be all things to all people, and to meet a vast range of social needs without correspondingly vast budgets. These days, a branch librarian might run story hour in the morning, assist with a research project at lunchtime, and in the afternoon administer life-saving medical aid to a patron who's overdosed on the premises" (para. 4).

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KEY POINTS:

- While participants varied in how they described the day-to-day work of a youth services librarian, all respondent groups characterized this work as primarily people- and community-focused rather than materials-focused.
- Children and teens, their families, and librarians themselves are dealing with unprecedented levels of financial, emotional, academic, social, and mental stress, and this has implications for how pre-service programs must adapt to better prepare library staff.
- Participants saw an urgent need for LIS programs to center equity and inclusion throughout the curriculum.

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners and scholars alike recognized that graduate library and information science (LIS) education might not be adequately preparing students for the realities of public library youth services work. In 2014, Virginia Walter noted that LIS students preparing to work in this area faced an alarming "downgrading or elimination of coursework for children's librarianship at the major research universities" and concluded that "an ALA-accredited MLS program may not deliver a good foundation for the future development of the ALSC competencies" (Walter, 2014, p. 27). Five years later, Anthony Bernier (2019) argued that master's-level courses in youth services must become more interdisciplinary and critical to keep pace with rapidly changing professional environments. As he stated, "increasingly buffeted by disruptive cultural and technological challenges, the profession calls out for a fulsome youth services pedagogy more urgently than ever" (p. 136).

Despite the recognition that current youth services LIS curricula might be inadequate, little research on potential changes to the LIS curricula has specifically addressed YS work within public libraries. Similarly, while several national forums have been held to address the future of LIS education in general, none has focused specifically on YS curricula. In 2019, we received a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services to address this gap and to explore how LIS programs might better prepare students to work in public libraries with youth. Our goal for this project is to create a set of recommendations LIS educators can use to develop and implement a revised curriculum for YS librarianship. The project involves three phases: (1) planning; (2) facilitating a national conversation with multiple stakeholders about the current state of youth services in public libraries; and (3) co-designing curricular recommendations with youth services (YS) librarians, library administrators, LIS educators, and professionals who work with youth in out-of-school settings.

In this paper we share the findings from phase two, the national conversation, which focused on two questions:

- What is the job of a public youth services librarian today, and how has that job changed in recent years?
- What do practitioners, library administrators, LIS faculty, and other youth services providers perceive as the gaps in current LIS graduate curricula for pre-service youth services librarians?

Literature review

Professional competency documents developed by organizations such as the Association for Library Services for Children (ALSC) and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) are intended to "help graduate schools, library administrators, and library staff guarantee that all [youth] receive high quality service from their public and school libraries" (YALSA, 2017, p. 2). Library master's programs use these competency documents, as well as accreditation standards from the ALA, to shape their curricula. However, while both ALSC and YALSA competencies were developed with input from practitioners (Campbell & Carmack, 2020; YALSA, 2017), they may not reflect a complete or universal understanding of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by YS library staff. There have also been major changes in the field and in the world at large since these competencies were published, even though the documents are fairly recent (the ALSC competencies were last revised in 2020, and the YALSA competencies in 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, is responsible for many of these rapid and recent shifts, though other factors—such as extremist backlash against progress toward equity nationally and a recent wave of censorship battles in libraries (Ellis, 2022; Sullivan, 2022)—have also contributed.

Since 2020, the realities of public library work have undergone massive, disruptive changes. Shifts toward the provision of online programming and a sudden need for additional e-materials arose early in the pandemic, but now, as most libraries have reached full reopening, additional challenges are coming to the fore. Among school-aged youth in particular, the pandemic has resulted in or coincided with an increase in mental health and substance abuse issues, heightened risk of abuse and violence in the home, and significant learning loss (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021). What's more, this same report shows that all of these impacts have been concentrated among groups who were already vulnerable before the pandemic (including BIPOC youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities), further deepening existing disparities in access and opportunity. For public libraries, this means an increased number of patrons in crisis, especially in light of studies which have found that "[public] libraries are disproportionately frequented by vulnerable populations, including those experiencing mental illness, substance use, and homelessness, as well as recent immigrants and children," for reasons including libraries' provision of physical shelter and technology (Morgan et al., 2016, pp. 2031−2032).

Numerous studies have examined graduate LIS curricula to explore the extent to which these programs emphasize particular competency areas aimed at meeting the needs of library users and their communities. For example, several studies published in the past four years have all explored the extent to which diversity, equity, and inclusion are included in LIS coursework in the United States (e.g., Alajmi & Alshammari, 2020; Cooke & Jacobs, 2018; Poole et al., 2021; Ren et al., 2021; Villagran & Hawamdeh, 2020). Relatively few, however, have focused on YS curricula specifically, and none that we found looked holistically at YS coursework. Instead, these studies have looked at one specific element of YS work or competencies, for example family and community engagement (Caspe & Lopez, 2018) or performance skills like puppetry and storytelling (Worthington, 2017), to explore the extent to which they are covered in YS coursework.

Similarly, several studies have explored the broad question of what competencies or KSAs (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) are necessary for public library work, but most of these either consider public library work in general (as opposed to youth services work specifically) or narrow in on one smaller set of competencies to explore. In the former category are studies such as the nationwide survey completed by Rachel Williams and Laura Saunders (2020), which asked respondents to rank the competencies they considered to be "core" for public library work. The latter category is exemplified by the following studies:

- Rachel Williams and Lydia Ogden (2021) conducted focus groups to investigate the KSAs needed for public librarians to effectively interact with patrons in crisis (e.g., because of homelessness, substance abuse, mental health);
- Devendra Dilip Potnis, Joseph Winberry, and Bonnie Finn (2021) explored competencies necessary for public library staff to manage innovations;
- Margaret Caspe and M. Elena Lopez (2018) interviewed LIS faculty to identify competencies that librarians need to engage families and communities.

Only one recent study has explored broad competencies within the youth services domain. Yu-Ping Peng (2019) interviewed 12 children's librarians in Taiwan to develop a competency framework for children's public library services. This study resulted in a list that included "specific knowledge and skills" (10 items), "general knowledge and skills" (11 items), and "personal attitude and characteristics" (six items).

Overall, our literature review points to massive changes to public library youth services work over the past decade, along with a widespread recognition that the skills and knowledge necessary for this work may not be fully represented in existing professional competency documents or taught in LIS graduate programs. This study addresses identified gaps in the literature by examining the current realities of work as a public youth services librarian, as well as perceptions of how LIS curricula are, and are not, preparing students for this work.

Methods

Data collection for phase two of the project included online surveys, informal virtual meet-ups, and focus groups. These methods were chosen to include the broadest possible sample, to allow for both synchronous and asynchronous participation, and to build a robust qualitative dataset related to our research questions. Special efforts were made to ensure that our sample included stakeholders representing diverse communities by coordinating our recruitment with the ALA Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services.

Surveys

Survey invitations were distributed via listservs and personal contact lists in December 2020. The survey, left open for approximately one month, consisted of screening questions, several open-ended questions, and optional demographic questions focusing on the respondent's work context. Three versions of the survey were distributed to library workers, library administrators, and LIS faculty, respectively. Table 1 contains the open-ended survey questions for each version of the survey.

Table 1: Open-ended survey questions

Intended population	Question #1	Question #2	Question #3	Question #4
Library workers	In your opinion, what are the most significant changes that have occurred in youth services public library work within the past 3–5 years, and what changes do you anticipate to this work in the next 3–5 years?	What KSAs do you believe are most important for success in public library youth services work?	What training or professional development, if any, have you received on the job or pursued individually that you feel has filled gaps in your pre-service LIS education?	If you were in charge of reimagining LIS education for future youth services public library staff, what would your curriculum include that you feel is NOT currently being taught in these programs, and what might you leave out?
Library administrators		What KSAs do you look for when evaluating prospective youth services library staff that would indicate to you that these candidates are prepared for this work?	What training or professional development, if any, does your library or library system provide to youth services library staff to help fill gaps that might exist in their previous education and experience?	
LIS faculty		What KSAs do you believe are most important for success in public library youth services work today and in the future?	N/A	

Focus groups

Purposeful sampling was used to identify focus-group participants from a range of stakeholder groups who were then contacted by email. Potential participants were identified through online searches and conversations with the grant project's advisory board members. Table 2 contains the set of questions we asked each group.

Virtual meet-ups

Three virtual meet-ups were planned as drop-in events at which participants responded to the prompt, "If you were in charge of reimagining LIS education for future youth service

Table 2: Focus-group questions

Stakeholder group	Questions
Library staff who work with youth	• How would you describe the work you do? • What do you think the role of the MLS degreed YS librarian is and how is that different from non-MLS folks? • What mindsets and soft skills do you bring to your work and do you need for your work? • If you could serve youth and families in the best way possible, what would that look like?
Library administrators	• If someone asked you what the work of an MLS librarian working with youth and families entails, what would you say? • When you are hiring youth services staff that have an MLS, what mindsets are you looking for? What leadership skills or knowledge are you looking for? How important is it that they have pre-service experience? • In what ways do libraries need to change so that BIPOC individuals see the MLS youth services librarian position as a career opportunity? • What do you think LIS education should do to help prepare pre-service youth staff in building skills and knowledge they need to support youth and families?
State youth services consultants	• If someone asked you what the work of an MLS librarian working with youth and families entails, what would you say? • When someone brand new to the MLS profession contacts you for the first time, what do you wish they already knew? • When you talk to library directors or branch managers who oversee youth services staff, what do they see as the role of youth services library staff? What is their biggest concern about the current training or education of youth services staff? What do they wish they could do or that they knew? • How do you think differently about the role of the MLS youth services librarian now that you are working at the state library?
Out-of-school time (OST) providers	• What do you think are the community needs that OST seeks to fill (and/or does fill)? • What are the challenges you face when working with youth and families? • What's a day like for you or the OST staff and/or providers you work with? • How does your program/organization collaborate/work with other OST providers? • Who are your go-to people when looking to solve problems, brainstorm ideas, etc., in order to succeed in OST work? • What are your experiences with libraries and OST?

public library staff, what would you include in the LIS curriculum that would prepare library staff to equitably connect with youth, families, and communities, and why?" Moderated virtual whiteboards were created to provide a space for people who were unable to attend the meet-ups to share their thoughts. Announcements about the meet-ups, including links to the virtual whiteboards, were posted on listservs for ALSC, YALSA, PLA, and ALISE. Invitations were distributed to the ALA Affiliates and Roundtables by the Assistant Director for Recruitment and Retention in the ALA Office for Diversity, Literacy & Outreach Services.

Results

Surveys were completed by 229 respondents, comprising 176 library workers, 42 library administrators, and 11 LIS faculty members. Library workers and administrators who responded to the survey represented a variety of library communities. Among this sample, 17.4% ($n = 38$) categorized their library or library system as rural, 39.0% ($n = 85$) as suburban, 12.8% ($n = 28$) as urban, and 30.3% ($n = 66$) as a mix of these. These categories included respondents with a wide range of experience within the field of librarianship, though in both cases the majority of respondents reported having worked in librarianship for 11 or more years. Among LIS faculty, all but two respondents reported having been in the field for at least 16 years; one faculty member reported being in the field for 6–10 years, and another 11–15 years. Faculty represented fully online (five respondents), fully face-to-face (one respondent), and hybrid (five respondents) programs, and they taught a broad range of youth services courses.

Seven focus groups were conducted with 32 stakeholders composed of 14 YS library staff, six library administrators, six state library youth consultants, and six representatives from OST programs. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes and was conducted via Zoom. The size of the focus groups ranged from three to seven participants. With their permission, discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Three 90-minute informal virtual meet-ups were held via Zoom. A total of 19 individuals attended the meet-ups, involving five YS library staff, one former YS consultant, three OST providers, and 10 LIS faculty. With permission, discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis. A total of 32 topics were added to the virtual whiteboards.

Themes

Data analysis, which took the form of "iterative pattern coding" (Miles & Huberman, 1994), spanned several months, and resulted in a rich and extensive set of codes and themes. Standard methods for ensuring trustworthiness of the analysis were employed, including the use of multiple coders, relying on participants' own words for first-round codes, and reference to quotes to support code categories and themes. To ensure space for participant quotes, only the major themes will be discussed below, with responses from all data sources integrated together. Additional findings from the project, including a complete list of KSAs, will be shared in the final grant report.

People-focused work

While participants varied in how they described the day-to-day work of a YS librarian, all respondent groups characterized this work as primarily people- and community-focused rather than materials-focused. As one survey respondent summarized, "my job ISN'T about books, it is about people." Some respondents also noted that this reality is not always well understood by others, including people training to join the field. One participant stated, "I have had many visitors and interns from library school come and shadow at my library and what strikes me as shocking is how many students wanting to pursue teen librarianship truly love teen literature, but are not excited to work with the teens themselves."

In addition to working with youth themselves, participants emphasized that the job also involves working closely with parents and caregivers, library colleagues, schools, other public services institutions, and community organizations. Respondents noted many specific forms this work can take, including but not limited to

- educating and providing research-based knowledge to youth, parents and caregivers, and other library staff members;
- conducting community asset and needs assessments;
- identifying and building relationships with community partners; and
- mentoring youth and other library staff.

Participants felt strongly that few LIS programs prepared YS librarians to work with today's youth, who they described as having multiple identities (i.e., gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic, and religious/spiritual) and statuses (i.e., immigrant, housing). One participant put it this way: "We need better training for working with kids who don't fit the narrative of what a library user 'should' look like. They aren't all Matilda and we should stop acting like they need to be." Another added,

> Our job is supporting their social, emotional, and academic growth, supporting their identity development, supporting and nurturing healthy connections to and with the self, and to and with peers, and to and with adults, to and with the community, helping to create that sense of belonging, tapping into their innate power, and [providing them] with a space to make meaning of their life and the world around them, to think civically and to be civically engaged.

Participants talked about the need for YS librarians to see youth "as their authentic selves" and to "allow them agency in finding solutions and working towards their goals." Above all, they argued that YS librarians need to "trust young people." One participant explained, "this is a critical piece for libraries. We don't trust them to come in the door. We don't trust them to behave. We don't trust them to return books on time. We just think of more and more ways to explain how we don't trust them." Another added, "we need education that pushes empathy and respect for youth."

Mental health, social work, and scope creep

Many participants noted that the humanistic, people-centered elements of their work have become more vital, but also more challenging, since the start of the pandemic. Respondents noted a marked difference in the mental health of youth and their families over the past two years. One librarian reported a "deep anxiety" among youth, who "do not anticipate a positive future for themselves. They are anxious about the world, school and their well being. . . . Where teens of the past assumed they were safe, my current teens do not feel like they are safe anywhere in the world." Some respondents also noted that librarians themselves are struggling with mental health issues:

> I think a lot of us are realizing that while we may love our jobs, have great relationships with many of our patrons, and even be a little more outgoing than we thought, there is

> also a very real sense of how fatiguing, draining, and stressful that was for a lot of us that may have built up so slowly over time that we didn't notice it until it was gone.

In addition to mental health needs, respondents noted that increasing numbers of youth and their families are facing basic needs insecurity; challenges such as homelessness, substance abuse, and hunger were frequently mentioned as critical issues impacting YS library work.

While respondents seemed to generally agree that these issues are prominent and pressing for today's youth, opinions varied on whether and how they should be addressed by libraries and librarians. Many respondents argued that librarians need formal training in child and teen mental health, trauma-informed practice, and de-escalation. One LIS faculty member argued that more than just adding topics is needed, saying "we need to develop our own vision of who young people are at every age level, rather than thinking of them as subjects or caseloads or people with problems and needs, and moving much more toward a vision of young people as productive members of the community."

Some noted that their libraries are already shifting some of their services to help provide users with basic and social-emotional needs "that are not being met elsewhere," for example by setting up summer lunch programs or including free snacks at programs, stocking medication used to treat opioid overdoses, and developing programs focused on social-emotional outcomes. Other respondents, however, cautioned that lines between library work and the work of other professionals like social workers and mental health providers need to be maintained. As one survey respondent stated,

> Needless to say, libraries' expanded responsibilities have not come with any increase in funding or staffing. While some of these changes are beneficial . . . overall this trend is extremely damaging both to library staff (who are suffering incredible burnout due to mission creep) and the communities they serve. . . . we need to open and fund actual homeless shelters, social and health services to get people the expert and effective help they need instead of relying on library staff to fix serious social problems that they are not trained or qualified to address, and that prevent them from fulfilling the basic mission of the library to provide information, materials and community connections for self-education and enrichment.

As this quote demonstrates, participants viewed issues of "scope creep" in public library youth services work as related to broader trends of decreased funding for public services in general and the related pressure on public libraries to be seen as "essential" in the eyes of funders and policymakers. In the words of another respondent, "When we're faced with the question 'Is this our responsibility?,' the answer now is always 'yes.'"

Diversity, equity, and inclusion

When asked about ways in which their work has changed in recent years, many participants noted an increased emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in libraries. Respondents noted that many library workers have realized that "simply ordering and promoting [diverse] materials aren't enough . . . librarians [are] realizing that we actually have to do the work to make our libraries and services truly inclusive to our communities." Aspects of

this work noted by participants include critically examining and revising hiring practices; working toward more inclusive programming; identifying and working to dismantle racist, ableist, and homophobic library systems and practices both individually and organizationally; engaging in continuous professional development; and conducting equity-focused assessment of library systems and services. While none of our respondents expressed any reservations or hesitation about engaging in DEI work, some did note resistance within their communities. One librarian reported "white supremacy and a push-back against diverse voices" in the community surrounding her library, while another noted that "we have seen a growing divide between communities who embrace diversity, celebrate it, invite it, and continue to learn from one another—and those who reject it."

Participants saw an urgent need for LIS programs to focus on DEI. One participant went so far as to call it an "egregious omission from the curriculum," adding that YS librarians are receiving an "incomplete education if they're not given in depth course work devoted to anti-racism and anti-oppression concepts." Most of the participants reported having had no coursework that included DEI in their LIS programs. If they had, it was only one course, often an elective, which they believed was insufficient. One participant explained, "I'm seeing a lot of staff just being really unsure how to address marginalized groups. When things start to get further than a very surface level conversation, they don't have the theory or the education to really take this conversation further than 'we should create a book list' or 'we should do slightly different programming.'" Another added, "One class is not effective. It's almost like a check box." An LIS faculty member agreed, adding, "it needs to be woven throughout the entire curriculum which means the entire faculty has to be on board and has to do the work of educating themselves on these topics."

Participants of color noted that if DEI is discussed in LIS classrooms, it often "centers the white experience," which they described as problematic. One Black participant explained, "Addressing EDI and anti-racism and social justice is still very heavily focused on centering the white experience, the white reaction to all of this. Right now the conversation is focused on those people, those groups, and it's very othering." Another participant offered that "these courses should be informed by community organizing and abolitionist models in other areas of society and analyzed to determine how those models can make similar effective changes in library settings." Participants reported that most of the DEI discussions in LIS classes seemed focused on serving patrons, ignoring the fact that library staff themselves may belong to marginalized communities and thus face bias and discrimination in the workplace.

Participants of color also reported that the burden of DEI work, whether in LIS programs or in libraries, falls disproportionately on BIPOC individuals (faculty, students, library staff). They described how this "unpaid labor" puts an "undue burden" on BIPOC individuals. One Black participant explained it like this:

> I can start the conversation but as soon as it treads into uncomfortable territory, as soon as I make someone else feel like I'm shaming them or guilting them or as soon as they start to feel that way, I find the brakes get put on really hard, really fast and there's usually some accompanying "you're a terrible person." I mean not said quite like that but you know,

> there's like some reaction. I hear unprofessional a lot, like it was very unprofessional of you to make us think about this thing or feel this way and then the conversation stops and then there's no progress because you fall back to well what is safe, what is neutral, what can we keep just doing to keep things moving?

Community engagement and partnerships

Many participants talked about the need for YS librarians to build partnerships with community members and other organizations that serve youth and families, which requires not only having a collaborative mindset and thinking strategically about partnerships, but also knowing how to learn from community members (including youth), listen to what their needs and wants are, and engage in co-designing programs and services with them. One participant noted, "it begins with asset based community research and saying 'I'm not in your community, you're in your community, tell me about it . . . and let us know what role we can play, or what you're needing and we'll see if it's something we can do.'" Another agreed, adding, "Being community centric, rather than library centric . . . and being reflective of the wishes and hopes of the community, what initiatives and outcomes the community wants to see."

Participants agreed this approach to community engagement and partnerships differs from the typical outreach approach many of them learned in their LIS programs, where the focus seemed to be on working for communities as opposed to working with communities. They described the outreach approach as a deficit model, one that views marginalized communities in particular as broken and needing to be fixed by the library. As one participant explained, "I think a lot of times librarians get stuck in this kind of 'know it all mindset.' We don't necessarily know what's good for everybody in the community, we haven't lived their experience." Another added, "Instead of how do we create programs, [it should be] how do we do community organizing?"

Instruction and pedagogy

While creating formal and informal learning opportunities for children, teens, and families was identified as a main function of YS librarians, many participants felt most LIS programs continue to focus primarily on how to plan storytimes or summer reading programs, as opposed to how to develop "a good learning experience" focused on STEAM, digital literacy, career readiness, connected learning, youth activism, and summer of learning. They also noted that while conducting intergenerational and family programs had become more prevalent, this too was a skill set many YS librarians lacked.

Participants agreed that YS librarians also needed more instruction on how to work with adult learners. As one noted, "you have another spectrum of the community you're serving when you work in youth services. . . . You need to be able to talk with grandparents which is different than talking to parents which is different than talking to foster parents." Most reported that YS staff are also tasked with providing training for other library staff on "things like child development, customer service as it applies to children and families, building relationships with schools and community partners," and how to develop, deliver,

and assess programs. One director explained, "In my organization I have relatively few YS librarians [with degrees] compared to the number of folks I have interacting with youth on a regular basis. I need [the YS librarians] to lead and supervise, model and set up other staff to do the work."

Leading and negotiating

Participants emphasized that effective youth services library work requires skills in leadership and advocacy. This involves not only understanding the library as an organization and how YS fits into that organization but also understanding how the library's systems and services interact with those of other institutions and organizations. As one participant stated, "organizational savvy is really important, just being able to read the room and . . . understand what your library is doing and context of what everybody else is doing, and know what your role is and how you can fit in and make changes."

On a day-to-day basis, this leadership work takes many forms. One participant noted that much of her time is spent "in front of my computer doing reports, grant writing, composing e-newsletters, and social media posts. This is becoming an increasingly bigger part of my workload than programming or collection development." In this type of work, participants noted the importance of understanding the library's mission and communicating that understanding to stakeholders: "When I do my reporting I report directly to the director . . . so when I write up my report I make sure to include mission alignment with what my initiatives are as well as strategic goal alignment for the organization, because it makes it really hard for them to say no when it's in alignment with what the organization is about."

Participants also noted that YS leadership and advocacy work cannot be done in isolation from other departments within the library or from other organizations doing YS work in the community. One participant referred to this as "breaking out of your silo" and noted that this work begins with "building a good reputation for yourself but also relationships within your organizations."

Participants felt strongly that LIS programs needed to focus more on developing students' leadership skills and their understanding of how to work within (and across) institutional structures and systems. The importance of understanding how to navigate the politics involved in working within organizations and systems, or even that politics would be part of the job, was mentioned over and over as a necessary skill set. One participant put it this way: "I wasn't prepared for the mental fortitude I would need for this job . . . for getting people to see my perspective and shift theirs. I found myself tongue tied because I didn't know how to break through to different leaders in our community or in the library."

Several participants shared that while they had a management class in their LIS program, it focused on specific topics like "how to do a budget and how to do a performance review," leaving them unprepared for being able, for example, to advocate for more developmentally appropriate policies, propose and implement new initiatives, and compete for scarce resources—work that often leads to conflict and requires negotiation with other staff members, library administrators, and community organizations. One director explained it this way:

> [YS library workers] need to get more practice and [become] comfortable with debate space, that's really important so we can move forward in a meaningful way. . . . Asking questions so we can deeply understand what you're trying to accomplish is supporting all of us to move forward in a better way.

Working with data

Knowing how to collect, analyze, and use data to identify what communities want and need, to ensure that library services are responsive, to measure impact, and to communicate with stakeholders was frequently mentioned as an important part of the job. One manager explained, "in our system we have an annual practice of being curious about how our data has changed and what that means for how we do service and what we're doing." Another added, "I spend a lot of time working with our data analyst making sure [user-experience] questions are asked in ways that really create space for our young people to give a voice and to not just give us what they think we want. So even if it's like a hit in the gut . . . like oh, we totally missed the mark, it's okay."

While working with data has become integral to their jobs, participants agreed it is under-emphasized by most LIS programs, leading to what one participant called "fear of assessment." For most participants, the focus of their LIS programs had been on strategies for measuring outputs (i.e., circulation statistics, number of program attendees), not on measuring outcomes, determining impacts, or aligning the goals of youth services to the library's mission, vision, and strategic plan. One participant put it bluntly: "I wish that public librarians knew how to gather data outside of outputs, because outputs don't tell us anything." Another questioned why libraries continue to produce "annual reports that are beautiful but they're all graphs and charts of attendance and visits" instead of "impact stories."

Internships and practical experience

Participants agreed that LIS programs did not provide enough opportunities for students to gain practical hands-on experience which could help them develop skills and knowledge in all of the areas discussed above. One participant bluntly stated, "folks graduate [from] library school and then don't actually know how to do any of it"; "they have absolutely no idea how to practically apply anything [they] are learning in school." Another noted, "I've seen new graduates come out with a romanticized traditional view of what a library is," not understanding that "librarianship goes beyond just sitting at the desk and that we love children's books . . . it's not just stuff. It's very much a people centered empathetic profession." They saw internships and field experiences as one way for students to learn how to translate theory into practice, develop mindsets and skills not taught in the LIS curriculum, set realistic expectations about what the work of a YS librarian entails, and even determine if working in a public library with youth is the "right fit" for them.

One group of participants suggested that opportunities for practical experience should extend beyond libraries, arguing that there is value in YS students interning in community organizations that work with youth and families (e.g., United Way, Boys and Girls Clubs,

children's museums, etc.). These participants argued that completing an internship in a nonprofit or government agency that works with youth or families would broaden students' knowledge about the issues youth and families face, help them understand that libraries are part of a complex network of interconnected organizations that support communities, and help them envision how libraries can partner with other organizations to address community needs, while still getting experience with things like working with youth and families, planning programs, and collaborating with colleagues. One participant summed it up this way: "It feels like there's just such an internal focus in general with libraries. It's like we're either talking to each other or we're looking at what other libraries are doing instead of what other youth organizations in our area are doing."

While participants agreed that internships were valuable, concerns were raised about the burden such a requirement places on students, especially when internships are unpaid (as most are). For students who are working while attending graduate school, finding time for an internship is not only challenging but is also asking them to engage in unpaid labor. For students who have already worked in a library or information organization, the requirement ignores the practical experience they already have. Required internships can be particularly problematic for students who live in rural communities or on tribal lands, where libraries are often scarce. Participants cautioned that LIS programs must be careful to consider whether the advantages of internships outweigh the obstacles they create, especially for the underrepresented students the field needs.

Discussion, limitations, and conclusions

During phase 2 of our project we set out to (1) understand the current role of YS librarians and how their jobs have changed, and (2) identify perceived gaps in the LIS curriculum. Our analysis reveals that the work of YS librarians continues to evolve as libraries transform from repositories of information to community hubs. The results also expose gaps in LIS curricula that must be addressed in order for YS librarians to successfully work with today's youth, their families, and their communities.

Limitations of this study include the reliance on listservs for survey recruitment and on purposive sampling for focus groups and meet-ups, with the result that these findings may not be generalizable to the entire population of interest. However, generalizability was not the aim of this study; instead, our intention was to capture a wide range of experiences and opinions about the nature of public YS library work today and the skills necessary to succeed in this work.

In describing what the job of a YS library worker is today, participants emphasized people and communities over materials. Today's YS librarians work closely with not only children and teens but also caregivers, non-YS colleagues and administrators, other youth-serving agencies and organizations, and a wide range of community partners. Notably, participants discussed the fact that children and teens, their families, and librarians themselves are dealing with unprecedented levels of financial, emotional, academic, social, and mental stress. While COVID-19 has been a factor in some of this, these issues predate the pandemic and are likely to continue now that the pandemic has begun to subside. This means that regardless of whether librarians are trained in trauma-informed approaches or

social work services, and regardless of whether they see these practices as within the scope of their jobs, they are interacting regularly with people who need these services, and this has impacted the nature of the work these professionals are tasked with performing. Focusing only on the collection or attempting to otherwise ignore these issues is simply impossible in a people-focused position.

Overall, participants saw a need for revising the LIS YS curriculum. As one participant put it,

> We need a curriculum that isn't built on super outdated ideas of what public librarianship looks like. There's a lot of nostalgia and LIS students are encouraged to indulge in their own beliefs of what libraries should look like. LIS students need to be challenged to let go of these expectations because it can be damaging for their future communities.

Many of the gaps our participants identified, including DEI (Cooke & Jacobs, 2018), navigating library and community politics (Williams & Saunders, 2020), and community engagement (Caspe & Lopez, 2018), mirror those discussed by other scholars. As recently as 2020, Anthony Bernier repeated his assertion that LIS "remains mired in a dated conceptual framework about the human experience," calling once again for LIS education to "engage with interdisciplinary youth studies" (2020, p. xi). Similarly, the need for hands-on, practical experience has been identified as an important component of LIS education for decades. Practitioners and educators alike have argued for LIS programs to provide structured opportunities for students to complement their coursework with workplace experience (Berry, 2005).

While the gaps our participants identified may not be new, what stood out to us was the urgency with which our participants called for changes to the LIS YS curriculum. Individual YS faculty have made changes to their courses to include topics like cultural competence, outcomes-based assessment, community asset mapping, and adaptive leadership. Many have incorporated pedagogical practices such as project-based learning, experiential learning, and critical reflection into their courses. However, as one library director said, "It has to fundamentally shift in every single library school. . . . What I want almost more than anything is a strong partner [at the LIS schools] to say how are you evolving your program, what do you think about this, and here's what I'm seeing." There was even a robust discussion among the participants about whether the LIS degree is still relevant, with some librarians and administrators arguing that perhaps a degree in youth development or social work would better prepare YS librarians to work with youth and families.

Clearly, now is the time to reimagine the LIS curriculum to ensure that YS students have the KSAs they need to successfully work with youth, families, and communities in public libraries. Higher education is full of administrators and faculty who are resistant to change. The structure of higher education itself supports inertia. In the LIS field there has been decreased support for YS programs, as in recent years, many iSchools have shifted their focus away from libraries to data and information science. However, there is a new generation of public library youth services workers in the pipeline who are passionate about justice and inclusion for all youth and their families. If the LIS curricula can change to prepare these students for people-focused, equity-centered, trauma-informed praxis, children and teens

across the nation will realize the benefits. The next phase of this IMLS project will work toward such a re-envisioned curriculum, and we are eager to engage the field in co-creating a path forward.

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