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# The Occupational Choice Of School Librarians

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## ABSTRACT

Recent concerns over anticipated shortages of school librarians have led to an interest in discovering the motivations individuals have for becoming librarians. Such information can be used to attract qualified people to the field. The current study employed in-depth narrative research to identify and explore the reasons that five graduate students had for selecting the occupation of school librarian. Savickas' (2005) career construction theory served as the framework for understanding the vocational behavior of the participants. The primary data collection method was through life story interviews. Looking at the life stories of the participants through the lens of career construction theory provided a comprehensive picture of the complex network of elements that accompany any occupational choice. This examination revealed the substantial value placed on educational achievement by the participants and their families, and showed that the influence of a librarian was instrumental in bringing these five individuals into the profession. The study found that the reasons these individuals had for becoming school librarians are similar to those previously identified in the research literature, although one, emotional distance, appears to be unique. Finally, this study reiterated the library profession's persistent problem of the public not being aware of librarianship as a possible occupation.

## INTRODUCTION

School librarians are educational professionals who work in PreK-12 school libraries. They are responsible for meeting students' informational needs and acting as instructional partners with teachers, while also carrying out the functions of running school media centers on a day-to-day

basis. The American Association of School Librarians recommends that, in order to have an effective school library media program, every school should have a minimum of one full-time, certified library media specialist with qualified support staff (American Library Association, 2006). However, the 2007–2008 National Center for Education Statistics School and Staffing Survey found that approximately 27 percent of public schools lack a state-certified school librarian (Goldring, 2009). Additional findings from the survey state that there are only 53,880 full-time, paid, state-certified school librarians for an estimated 81,920 public schools with library media centers.

There are a variety of reasons for this disparity. Some states do not require a certified school librarian in every school and others allow non-certified personnel to staff the library (Everhart, 1998, 2000, 2002; Thomas & Snyder, 2006). Sometimes budgetary difficulties result in school librarian positions being eliminated (Harada, 1996). The Mesa, Arizona school board voted to phase out all library positions by 2011 (Dutton Ewbank, 2008). A significant reason for the shortfall is the critical shortage of qualified school librarians in the United States (Everhart, 2000, 2002).

In a 2002 staffing survey (Everhart, 2002), forty states and the District of Columbia reported severe or extremely severe shortages of certified school librarians. This situation even attracted national attention in an article in *U.S. News & World Report* (Lord, 2000) asking “Where Have All the Librarians Gone?” The answer is that many of them are retiring. By some estimates, approximately 68 percent of today’s librarians will have retired by 2017 (Lynch, 2002). While these figures refer to all librarians, they are equally applicable to school librarians.

School librarians are part of the phenomenon known as “the graying of the library profession” (Lenzini & Lipscomb, 2002, p. 88). Many practicing librarians were born during the Baby Boom years between 1946 and 1964 and are now on average forty-five years old (Matarazzo & Mika, 2006). In Georgia school library media specialists have an average age of forty-nine years and have eighteen years work experience (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2006, p. 160). A Colorado survey on recruitment and retention found that nine out of ten school librarians are forty-five years or older; almost half stated they intend to retire within five years (Steffen, Lance, Russell, & Lietzau, 2004). The problem is that when these librarians retire, there are fewer librarians to replace them. One reason is the small pool of qualified candidates (Shannon, 2004). Some of those individuals who desire to work in the information field are lured away by lucrative careers outside traditional library venues (Matarazzo & Mika, 2006). Other individuals are stymied by limited access to library education programs and strict certification rules (Everhart, 2000).

The most recent study of library education preparation programs (Shannon, 2004) shows that the number decreased from a high of more

than 200 in the 1980s to less than 173 in 2004. Many of these programs are geographically inaccessible to students. Some universities have responded to the need by offering library media certification through distance education programs (Bishop & Janczak, 2007). States are responding to the shortage by changing school library certification requirements to encourage classroom teachers and career-changers into the field. In some states teaching certification and/or classroom teaching experiences are no longer required before earning school library media certification (Thomas & Snyder, 2006). Across the nation libraries, library associations, and schools of information science have implemented a variety of recruitment programs with the goal of increasing the number and diversity of qualified applicants. According to recruitment theory, knowing what motivates individuals to enter the library profession aids these recruitment efforts (Winston, 2001).

There have been a number of studies conducted to determine why people choose to enter the library profession. However, the most recent study specifically targeting the occupational choice for school librarians is a thesis from 1964 (Lee). Given how much change has occurred in the school library field in the ensuing years (Kelsey, 2006), the need for a new study was clear.

This article summarizes a qualitative study undertaken to identify and explore the reasons that people have for selecting the occupation of school librarian. The following questions guided the study:

- How have the participants reached this decision point in their lives, both personally and professionally?
- What themes are revealed in the life stories of the participants?
- How do the life stories reveal the influence of the participants' social context on their careers?
- What commonalities exist across all participants' life stories?

#### RELATED STUDIES

A review of the literature from 1963 to the present revealed twenty-six studies that examined the reasons why people choose librarianship as a career (Jones, 2008). The majority of these occupational choice studies are quantitative studies that use questionnaires to gather data. The studies reveal a number of motivations for individuals to enter librarianship. The most prominent reasons are previous work experiences in libraries, the desire to advance their career with a professional degree, the influence of librarian or family mentors, and liking the nature of libraries and library work. The studies found that for many individuals, librarianship is not their first choice of career, but a second or third. Other reasons include a desire for intellectually stimulating work, a liking for people, and liking books and reading. It is interesting to note that these same factors

recur across all of the studies. Perhaps this is a result of the heavy reliance on survey methodology. This overemphasis may have “shaped the range and nature of variables that have been considered as well as the results that have been generated” (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992, p. 52). The existing studies tended to focus on factors such as demographic characteristics, reasons for selecting a particular library and information science program, specialization interests, timing, prior job experiences, and influence of mentor librarians on occupational choice. In such studies, rarely do the respondents have the opportunity to provide additional “outside the box” information that might lead to greater insights into the unique reasons that individuals become librarians. Such insights are more likely to be obtained by using a qualitative research methodology, which can illustrate the underlying reasons for an individual’s actions (Merriam & Associates, 2002). For this study a qualitative research methodology, narrative research, was employed because of its ties to the vocational theory, which formed the foundation of the study.

### OVERVIEW OF CAREER CONSTRUCTION THEORY

Career construction theory is the conception of Dr. Mark L. Savickas, a preminent scholar in the field of vocational psychology. He incorporated key aspects of John Holland’s personality typology (Holland, 1997) and refined and integrated Donald E. Super’s career development theories (Super, D. E., Savickas, & Super, C. M., 1996) in the creation of this comprehensive theory to understand vocational behavior. Career construction theory “asserts that individuals construct their careers by imposing meaning on their vocational behavior and occupational experiences” (Savickas, 2005, p. 43). The strength of this theory is that it focuses on the unique meaning that careers have for each individual.

Typically career theories have addressed only one aspect of vocational behavior. Career construction theory seeks to be comprehensive by representing the what, how, and why of vocational behavior. Career construction theory explains these elements under the headings vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes (Savickas, 2005). The three dimensions work together to explain “how individuals choose and use work” (Savickas, 2006, p. 84).

#### *Vocational Personality: The What*

The vocational personality component of career construction theory explains what types of work people prefer to do. Vocational personality is defined as an “individual’s career-related abilities, needs, values, and interests” (Savickas, 2005, p. 47). As people grow up in their family of origin they begin to develop an idea of the kind of people they are and eventually of the type of work they would like to do. Although these vocational self-concepts are unique to each individual, vocational psychologists have

found it useful to organize them into broad categories such as those used in Holland's RIASEC typology. Savickas acknowledges the value and primacy of Holland's theory and has incorporated it as the primary tool in the vocational personality construct of career construction theory.

According to Holland's theory there are six basic personality types and six corresponding work environments. The personality types and their corresponding work environments are labeled Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional, typically referred to by the acronym RIASEC. An individual's vocational personality type is a combination of each of these types, represented by a three-letter code. The code lists "in descending order, the three types that the individual most resembles" (Savickas, 2007, p. 84). According to Holland's concept of congruency, also known as "person-environment fit," people are most comfortable, happy, and successful when they work in an environment that matches their type (Holland, 1997; Scherdin, 1994). For example, Artistic people will be happiest working in an environment in which most of the workers are also Artistic types. The Holland types represent ideals or models. The majority of people and work environments include characteristics of all six types to some degree. The usefulness of Holland's typology to career construction theory is to provide counselors and clients with an enhanced understanding of the client's person-environment fit and lead to increased possibilities for occupational choice.

#### *Career Adaptability: The How*

The career adaptability component of career construction theory explains how individuals make occupational choices. It is defined as "a psychosocial construct that denotes an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and imminent vocational developmental tasks, occupational transitions, and personal traumas" (Savickas, 2005, p. 51). The occupational decision-making process consists of four phases. During the first phase, called orientation, the individual becomes aware of the "need to make an occupational choice in the imminent or intermediate future" (Savickas, 2007, p. 88). The following phase of exploration "enables the individual to make fitting occupational choices based on self-knowledge and occupational information" (p. 88). Exploration ends when the individual specifies an occupation. The implementation phase requires the individual to commit to that choice by pursuing the necessary training or "by obtaining a trial position" (p. 89). The final phase of stabilization involves the individual obtaining work in their chosen occupation. Each time an individual faces "new occupational opportunities or employment threats" (p. 89) this cycle of orientation, exploration, implementation and stabilization is repeated.

*Life Theme: The Why*

The life theme component “emerged from Donald E. Super’s postulate that in expressing vocational preferences, individuals put into occupational terminology their ideas of the kind of people they are; that in entering an occupation, they seek to implement a concept of themselves; and that after stabilizing in an occupation, they seek to realize their potential and preserve self-esteem” (Savickas, 2006, p. 86). The life theme reveals how a person makes meaning through his life’s work and why that work matters to the individual and to society.

Through narrative the life theme component of career construction theory is found in the career stories that people tell about themselves and their work. These stories are unique to each individual and place them in a particular place and time. No two individuals will tell the same story, although similar patterns and themes may emerge across the many stories. Through telling their career stories individuals make sense of their own lives: the paths they have taken, the choices they have made, the stops and starts, and how they have dealt with the curveballs that life may have thrown them. The stories are not necessarily historically factual. People may recreate the past in story to align with and explain the present truth. In telling their stories people reveal who they are and what is important to them. An individual’s story of his life tells the tale of the many roles he has played and their importance to him. Through story individuals explain why they make the choices that they do and the private meaning that guides these choices.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

The narrative aspect of career construction theory guided my selection of narrative research as the most appropriate research methodology. According to narrative theory, humans understand their lives in a storied form; consequently, narrative is an appropriate way to explore their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McAdams, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995). Narrative research is a particular type of qualitative inquiry that uses a “variety of approaches that are concerned with the search for and analysis of the stories that people employ to understand their lives and the world around them” (Bryman, 2004, p. 412). It is interdisciplinary in nature and includes “elements of literary, historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, and cultural studies” (Casey, 1995/1996, p. 212). The feature that distinguishes narrative research from other qualitative methodologies is that the unit of study is some form of story (Riessman, 1993, p.1).

In the past twenty years interest in narrative inquiry has increased substantially across all fields of the social sciences (Chase, 2005; Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2005). Career researchers have also advanced the “use of narrative as a paradigm for career research” (Bujold, 2004, p. 476). Bujold describes

career development as a creative process full of unpredictability and requiring individuals to make multiple decisions as they deal with “obstacles, unforeseen events, various circumstances, chance, and inner conflicts” (p. 471). In contrast to the traditional, positivistic career development research that assessed independent variables such as “career interests, job characteristics, mentor behavior, career indecision, and career satisfaction” (Inkson, 2007, p. 228), narrative research provides “a more holistic view” (Cohen & Mallon, 2001, p. 52) of the complexities of careers.

### DATA COLLECTION

As is typical for narrative research (Murray, 2003), the primary sources of data for this study were qualitative interviews. My goal was to comprehend both the motivation and the meaning that animates an individual’s career construction (Savickas, 2005) by examining the entire life from the viewpoint of the participant. For this reason I chose the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 1995) as my primary data collection method. The Life Story Interview (LSI) is the most extended version of the personal narrative interviews. It focuses on the entire life of a person from birth to the present. The LSI typically consists of a set of loosely-structured open-ended questions designed to encourage detailed, in-depth responses from the participant teller. In addition to using LSI as designed by McAdams (1995), I also used the Career Style Interview (CSI) designed by Savickas to “elicit self-defining stories” (Savickas, 2005, p. 60). Career Style Interview is similar in many ways to the LSI protocol. They both include questions about early memories and role models. Alternatively, the CSI inquires about favorite school subjects and hobbies that are not part of the LSI. I primarily used the LSI during the interviews, but I also asked my participants the additional questions from the CSI. My goal was to elicit stories that would help me learn about many aspects of my participants’ lives. I conducted several one and one-half hour interviews with each participant. Each interview was tape recorded and professionally transcribed.

### THE PARTICIPANTS

The five participants in this study were graduate students in the school library media program at a large research university. All were seeking initial school library media certification. The three women and two men ranged in age from twenty-eight to forty-one. The men were the oldest participants. All of the participants grew up in white, middle class, intact nuclear families. All of the participants went to college immediately after high school. Three of the participants were working as teachers during this study. The remaining two were full-time students. One of the men and two of the women were married with children.

## DATA ANALYSIS

For the data analysis, I followed the narrative analysis guidelines described by Riessman (1993), in combination with those of Polkinghorne (1995) and Seidman (2006). My intention in analyzing the data was to first examine the participants as individuals and subsequently to look across those findings for commonalities within and across the participants' stories. In doing this I followed the two stage process described by Seidman (2006). The first stage involved developing profiles of individual participants and then examining each participant's career story in relation to the three major dimensions of career construction theory. My rationale for doing the latter was based on one of the important functions of career construction theory: its applicability to the practice of vocational guidance counselors. In his many articles, book chapters, presentations and seminars, Savickas (1997, 2002, 2005) demonstrates strategies for counselors to use in helping their clients to successfully negotiate important vocational development tasks. During career assessment Savickas looks for specific things in the client's stories that allow him to assess each dimension of career construction theory. All three dimensions are necessary for a complete picture of the client's situation. Vocational personality tells how a person views his work interests, abilities, and preferred occupations. Career adaptability tells how a person faces the transitions of school to work, and occupation to occupation. The life theme component explains why a person made certain choices and the private meaning that guided those choices.

Savickas begins counseling for career construction by using a Career Style Interview to "elicit self-defining stories" (Savickas, 2005, p. 60). "From these prototypical stories about work life, counselors attempt to comprehend the motivation and meaning (the why) that constructs careers" (p. 58). Because I used the questions from the Career Style Interview for the same purpose, the data from my participants closely resembled the types of information that Savickas elicits from his clients (p. 58). Many of the strategies that Savickas uses to address his client's career concerns were relevant to my analysis. I wanted to assess my participants' stories, not for diagnostic purposes, but rather to determine the what, how, and why of their career construction. Instead of using them as a counselor would, I used these techniques to examine the participants' stories as they related to the three major components of career construction. Given the different purposes of my analysis, not all of Savickas' career counseling techniques were relevant to my study. Also, to effectively employ some of his techniques required professional knowledge and skills that I did not possess. Nevertheless, I was able to use Savickas' sample case studies as a model for analyzing the life stories of my participants.

In order to assess the vocational personality, Savickas views a person's interests, activities, and past work experiences through the lens of the six



RIASEC codes. I was able to approximate each of the participant's RIASEC codes using these strategies. First I familiarized myself with the attributes of each of the RIASEC types. Then I searched the participant's stories for clues that would reveal their resemblance to the types. For some of the individuals determining the primary type was easy. For example, one man was a musician and strongly represented the Artistic type. The youngest female participant's desire to teach and help others strongly reflected the Social type. Sometimes I had to ask the participants for more information about their outside interests, especially in determining the second and third types. The final RIASEC code is my best estimate of each person's vocational personality.

The second stage of data analysis entailed analyzing the interview data looking for thematic connections, particularly with regard to the participants' reasons for this occupational choice. The latter method, which involves finding codes, creating categories, and discovering themes is a common process in qualitative research.

There were no a priori categories before data analysis began, but after developing some tentative categories I compared my evolving categories against the previous research outlined in my literature review. With this new "start list" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 58) in mind I returned to the data. During this analysis if it was determined that some of the tentative categories had similar meanings as the "prior research-driven codes" (Ruona, 2005, p. 242), the category names were revised to match those found in the literature. For example "make a difference" became "altruism—service." The final analysis identified these codes as relevant to the study: parental expectations, career changers, librarian mentors, prior library work experiences, reading, library experiences, altruism—service, desire to work with children, financial stability and security, flexibility of work schedule, and emotional distance. Additionally, the vocational personality of the participants played a significant role in their occupational choice.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Parental Expectations*

The life stories of the participants show that the high expectations of the participants' parents led to the development of a strong work ethic, high academic achievement, and traditional family values. According to career construction theory, parents serve as their children's first role models as they begin to learn about themselves and the world around them (Savickas, 2002). The participants were from white, middle class families that strongly valued education. The parents instilled in their children traditional family values such as hard work, respect for others, and academic achievement. A female participant spoke often of her parents' high expectations for her to achieve in school as well as for respecting her elders. Her parents

sacrificed financially to provide her with extracurricular activities that taught her the values of cooperation, persistence, and setting goals. All of the participants' parents expected them to succeed academically.

Most of the parents were proactive in ensuring their children's education. For example, the parents of one participant moved so that she could go to a better school. The mother of another made sure that she did her homework "right" and both her parents helped her with reading and arithmetic. Both of the male participants went to private, religious schools, which they credited with having the greatest positive influence on their lives. The high academic expectations and supportiveness of the families were important factors in helping the participants to achieve.

The work lives of the parents were also an important influence on the participants' vocational development. This seems especially true of the mothers' work role. Both the men and one of the women had mothers who did not work outside the home. The other two women had mothers who chose occupations that would enable them to balance the demands of work and family. Several of the participants told stories of their mothers who were always there when they "got off the bus," and who would help them with homework and take them to their activities. This model of the traditional family, with the father the breadwinner and the mother the primary caretaker of the children, influenced the participants' future working lives. The participants who were parents chose occupations that would permit them to emulate the type of family in which they grew up. This is quite evident in one of the women's choices. By selecting to be a school library media specialist she was following in the footsteps of previous generations of women in her family who were educators. She prioritized the needs of her family, perhaps even above her own needs. One of the male participants also thought it was important to choose an occupation that would accommodate his family's needs. He believed that the long hours he had to work as a financial planner had hurt his marriage. As a consequence he explored other opportunities and eventually chose school library media. He also hoped to work in the same school that his children would attend. The stories of these participants show that, for this study, parental status was a more important factor than gender in making occupational choices.

Another significant influence of the social context on the participants' careers was in the development of their vocational identity. A person's vocational self-concept develops during their formative years growing up in their family of origin (Holland, 1997; Savickas, 2002). "When children engage in play, hobbies, chores, and schoolwork, they form self-perceptions and make social comparisons that build the attributes and characteristics that will constitute their vocational self-concepts, as well as conceptions of the work role" (Savickas, 2002, p. 162). These interactions in combination with a child's "inherited aptitudes" and "physical make-up" (Savickas, 2005, p. 46) lead to the formation of a person's vocational personality.

Experiences that occur during children's early stages of career growth, "defined as ages four to thirteen" (Savickas, 2002, p. 167) allow them to explore and develop their interests, skills, and abilities. Middle class families have an advantage over lower income families because they have the financial resources to provide their children with a variety of experiences (Bryant, Zvonkovic, & Reynolds, 2006). The families of the participants in this study were financially able to provide opportunities for them to explore the world outside their family and school. Participants spoke glowingly of childhood trips, going to the library, and extracurricular activities such as sports, theater, music, and computers. Childhood activities such as these helped the participants develop their conception of the kind of people they are and what they might like to do, in essence, their vocational personality.

#### *Vocational Personality*

The vocational personalities of the five participants were extrapolated from the interview data by examining each person's vocational self-concepts, work history, and leisure activities. One participant resembles the Artistic, Investigative, and Realistic types. The other four resemble a combination of the Social, Investigative, and Artistic types. Comparing the codes of those four participants to the lists in the most recent edition of the *Dictionary of Holland Occupational Codes* found that they have vocational personality types that closely resemble that of the Holland code for librarian, which is SAI (Gottfredson & Holland, 1996, p. 210). The remaining participant has less of a resemblance to the Holland code for librarian. None of the participants have a significant resemblance to the Enterprising type, which is the most prominent type in the Holland Code of ESA for school librarians (p. 243).

Even though the participants in this study have Holland codes that do not ideally match that of the school librarian, this certainly does not mean that they will not achieve success in this occupation. Every occupation has room for a wide range of personalities (Holland, 1997), and school librarianship is no exception.

Interestingly enough, all five participants have the Artistic type in common. In the Holland occupational typology "librarians have been placed in the Artistic category since the mid-seventies" (Scherdin, 1994, p. 108). Scherdin's (1994) landmark study of librarian personality types also found that librarians are dominant on the Artistic type. The fact that librarians are categorized as Artistic may also provide an explanation for why this occupation is one that people select later in their lives.

Eikleberry (1999) states that "there are many more Realistic and Enterprising jobs than there are Investigative, Artistic, and Social jobs. Artistic jobs are especially scarce: Only about 1.5 percent of the U.S. civilian labor force was employed in Artistic occupations in 1990. At the same time, about

9 percent of American men and 13 percent of American women were classified as Artistic. This means that there were about seven times as many Artistic types as there were Artistic jobs (emphasis in original) in 1990" (p. 15). The implication of this is that it is harder for Artistic types than for any of the other types to find suitable occupations. Additionally, there are more women than men who resemble the Artistic type (Eikleberry, 1999), thus making it more difficult for women to find compatible occupations.

According to career construction theory, as people progress from job to job their goal is to achieve a better and better fit between their vocational personality and their work environment (Savickas, 2005). For economic reasons, people who resemble the Artistic type may work in occupations in which they are not able to express their Artistic side. When these people transition to other jobs they will attempt to find a better match. Individuals who eventually become librarians may go through "a sequence of matching decisions" (p. 45) as they attempt to find an occupation where they can feel comfortable and find fulfillment. Given that the occupation of a librarian does not seem to be an obvious choice for many people, the process may take years. This provides one explanation for people to choose librarianship later in their careers. Additionally, the fact that more women than men are classified as Artistic may explain why the profession is female intensive.

#### *Career Changers*

Cohen and Mallon (2001) describe a career narrative as "the complex, baggy, sometimes contradictory, often circuitous accounts of their careers that people construct in the course of research conversations or qualitative interviews" (p. 50). This is true of the career stories of the five participants in this study. These stories show that none of the participants took a direct path to the occupation of school librarian. Prior to their decision to become school librarians all of the participants worked in other occupations. None of them had long-range plans to enter this field. This finding, that most individuals enter the profession later in their careers, is corroborated in the research literature (Ard et al., 2006; Chapman, Feis, Joiner, Reid, & Wells, 1999; Deeming & Chelin, 2001; Julian, 1979; Luzius, 2005). In fact, the average library science student is thirty-five years old (Matarazzo & Mika, 2006) and less than 10 percent of librarians are under the age of thirty (Whelan, 2003). In this study the participants ranged in age from twenty-eight to forty-one with two thirty-five-year-old participants. These figures demonstrate that librarianship is typically not a first career. For most people the choice to become a librarian occurs after they have had at least one previous job.

#### *Librarian Mentors*

During the course of their work lives each of the participants faced the need to make occupational choices due to job loss. For all the participants the current transition from their previous occupation to the occupation

of school librarian was a voluntary change. This change was precipitated by specific circumstances in their lives, which caused them to exhibit career concern. As the participants explored a variety of directions that their work might follow, contact with a school librarian directed their focus toward librarianship. Sometimes it was the librarian who identified the fit between the participant's interests and abilities and the occupation of the school librarian. In other cases the participants themselves made the connection. The library research literature has repeatedly shown that individuals are influenced by librarians to enter the library profession (Buttler & Caynon, 1992; Dewey, 1985; Heim & Moen, 1989; Hussey, 2006; McCreeley, 1963). In fact, one of the standard recruitment strategies calls for every librarian to recruit at least one new person into the profession (American Library Association, Office for Library Personnel Resources, 1989). In this study, that strategy was effective in helping the participants to see that their vocational personalities made them good candidates for this particular occupation.

#### *Prior Library Work Experiences*

Two of the five participants had previous experience working in a library, a common motivation for people entering the library profession (Ard et al., 2006; Chapman et al., 1999; Heim & Moen, 1989; McClenney, 1989). One male participant's reasons were typical of those in this category; he wanted to advance his career in order to earn a better salary than he was making as a paraprofessional. Another participant's decision to choose school library media was partially based on his remembrances of how much he had enjoyed working in the library in college. Research has shown that the enjoyment of the nature of library work is another common reason that people are drawn to the profession (Buttler & Caynon, 1992; Chapman et al., 1999; Deeming & Chelin, 2001). Working in a library as a nonprofessional allows people to "try on" (Savickas, 2002, p. 177) the occupation for fit. Library staff members are often ideal candidates for recruitment.

#### *Reading*

The love of books and reading is in all likelihood the most common reason given by people for becoming a librarian (Carmichael, 1992; Esser, 1999; Gordon & Nesbeitt, 1999; Hussey, 2006; Julian, 1979; Lee, 1964; McCreeley, 1963; Watson-Boone, 2007; Weihs, 1999). In a 2007 study, 431 library practitioners, who graduated from eight liberal arts colleges from 1962 through 2000, were asked to indicate which of thirteen factors made librarianship an attractive career for them (Watson-Boone, 2007). The top-ranking answer, the "love of books/reading, held true over the 39 years represented" (p. 93) by the alumni in the study. Likewise, the participants in the present study indicated they are avid readers. Several were adamant about having a book with them at all times because they did not

want to waste time. Almost all the participants were readers as children and loved books. One way that the participants' parents encouraged their children's passion for reading was by taking them to the library.

#### *Library Experiences*

It is not surprising that the participants who were readers as children were also enthusiastic library users. The majority of the participants were library users from a young age, which is a common characteristic of librarians (Gordon & Nesbeitt, 1999; Van House, 1988). Those participants who were not library users as children later realized the benefits of the library after working in one as adults. Being a library user and working in a library are typical motivations for choosing a library occupation.

The library itself evoked vivid memories from some of the participants. Two women spoke in almost reverential tones of the library as a special place. Another viewed the library as a safe place. The implication of this finding is that individuals who enjoy spending time in libraries might also envision themselves working in one.

There are many people who enjoy reading books and visiting libraries, but obviously they do not all choose to become librarians. What is the difference between those library users and the people who do enter the library profession? When posed that question, the participants gave similar answers. Invariably they said something like this: "I want to make a difference; I want to help people."

#### *Altruism—Service*

The participants give altruistic, service-oriented reasons for choosing to become school librarians. The library research literature confirms that being part of a service-oriented profession is a major reason that people become librarians (Gordon & Nesbeitt, 1999; Houdyshell, Robles, & Yi, 1999; Julian, 1979). The participants in this study want to help children develop information literacy skills, but perhaps, even more importantly, they want children to learn to love books and reading as much as they do.

#### *Desire to Work with Children*

A desire to work with people is a frequently cited reason people choose the library profession (Gordon & Nesbeitt, 1999; McCreedy, 1963; Van House, 1988; Watson-Boone, 2007). Most librarians are people who like people (Scherdin, 1994). The participants in this study are no exception; they genuinely like children and look forward to working with all the teachers in the school. Additionally, the participants who are teachers were eagerly anticipating working with a greater number and variety of children than they had in the classroom.

So far, the findings in this study have been consistent with those found in the library research literature. This suggests that the reasons that these five participants have given for becoming school librarians are not

significantly different than those applicable to other library specialties. This study did find other reasons that are not so prevalent in the library literature.

#### *Financial Stability and Security*

The majority of the participants were motivated by the financial stability and security provided by working in a PreK-12 school system. Of special import were the retirement benefits they would have as media specialists. This is in contrast to previous research studies that found that financial rewards were of less significance than other motives. In a study by Heim & Moen (1989) only 25 percent of the participants were motivated by salary. The study by Chapman et al. (1999) found only 12 percent of the participants were motivated by financial reasons. Only 2 percent of the participants in Watson-Boone's (2007) study indicated they were motivated by salary or other financial considerations. One explanation for the present study's finding may be that librarians who want to work with children are usually limited to working in either a public or a school library. Of those two choices, school library media specialists typically have higher salaries than youth librarians in public libraries (Maata, 2007). The addition of financial security and a flexible work schedule provided an attractive combination for the participants in this study.

#### *Flexibility of Work Schedule*

The three participants in this study who are parents were particularly motivated by the nine-month schedule typical of PreK-12 schools. They saw the possibility of working a similar schedule to that of their school age children as a great benefit. One participant, who was transitioning from a classroom teacher to a school librarian, hoped the change would provide even more flexibility in her schedule, with perhaps even the possibility of part-time work. The research literature has not been specific in identifying this as a motivation, although it may be subsumed under categories such as "working conditions" (Watson-Boone, 2007, p. 93) or possibly "enjoyment of the working environment" (Houdyshell, Robles, & Yi, 1999, p. 22). Alternatively, this may be a factor applicable primarily to school librarians since their working hours are substantively different from those of many library specialties.

#### *Emotional Distance*

This study found one motivation not mentioned in the library research literature: emotional distance. For the two women teachers the position of school librarian would provide them some emotional distance from the tribulations of the students they dealt with intimately on a daily basis as classroom teachers. The teachers doubted their ability to cope with the social problems of the students year after year. They still wanted to work

with children, and hoped that as a school librarian they could continue to make a difference. This finding has implications for further research.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

One of the goals for this study was to suggest possible strategies for recruiting people to the school library profession. The results of the study show that the influence of a librarian was instrumental in bringing these five individuals into the profession. Library associations and organizations should continue to encourage their members to serve as ambassadors for the profession (Myers, 1994). Public libraries, because they serve a diverse population, may have the greatest potential to recruit people of all ages, ethnicities, and abilities into the school library profession.

Although most of the participants in this study were library users in their youth, none of them considered librarianship as a future occupation. School librarians are in a unique position to promote the profession to young people. One way to show students that school librarianship is an appealing profession would be to involve them in a wide array of exciting activities such as producing the daily news shows or creating websites, podcasts, or wikis. By encouraging students to help with traditional library tasks such as shelving, weeding, and making bulletin boards, as well as those that are more innovative, school librarians may inspire some of them to dream of librarianship as a future profession.

As most school librarians are former teachers, teacher education programs provide a natural focus for recruitment efforts. Those school library programs that are situated in colleges of education can take advantage of that relationship by promoting the profession to pre-service teachers. One strategy might be to develop collaborative teaching opportunities between the pre-service teachers and alumni working in local school library media centers. Alternatively, pre-service teachers could job shadow a school librarian in order to gain an understanding of a typical day working in the media center.

Library educators should not neglect tried-and-true recruitment approaches such as brochures, posters, bookmarks, and mass mailings (Myers, 1994). Library educators can increase visibility of their programs through participation in local high school and community college career fairs. Likewise, they can place recruitment materials with guidance counselors and career centers in high schools and colleges.

Library educators should continue to take advantage of the great potential of the Internet for recruitment. Two of the teachers in this study elected to apply to graduate school after reading the marketing letter the school library media program coordinator sent via email to practicing school librarians. Other participants applied to the same program after searching the university's website. Consequently, these websites should be attractive,



usable, and contain current information. University school library media programs could also increase their visibility by purchasing a sponsored link on a popular search engine such as Google. Additional recruitment methods should be developed that take advantage of emerging social networking tools such as blogs or streaming video.

Given that librarians resemble Artistic types (Scherdin, 1994), thought should be given to strategies for reaching this portion of the general public. Obvious targets would be any art, music, and theater groups and associations in communities, schools, and universities. Library educators could collaborate with the art, drama, and music departments in their universities to present school librarianship as an attractive occupational option to undergraduate students in those fields.

Finally, I would like to add my voice to those of Matarazzo and Mika (2004) and call upon the profession to gather accurate data on the labor market conditions for librarianship. This study would have benefitted from having reliable workforce data on the annual number of new school library media specialists, the type of institutions they attended, as well as their demographics and work history. Information on the number of school librarians who leave the profession each year, whether through retirement or to change occupations, is also useful. This information is necessary in order for the library profession to develop strategies that can effectively address the issue of supply and demand.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size. As a rule, the numbers of participants in qualitative research studies are smaller than those in quantitative studies. In narrative studies they tend to be even smaller; sometimes only one participant is studied. This raises the issue of whether the results can be generalized to a larger population. Generalization is usually not the goal of qualitative research, and in this study, the priority was rather to understand “the particular in depth” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 28).

The study was also limited by the restriction of the participants to graduate students at one university. This was done for several reasons. One, the program has a rigorous selection procedure, thus helping to ensure that the students in the program are truly committed to school library media. Second, as a graduate assistant in the school library media program, I was in the unique position to become acquainted with the students. This helped me to establish friendly relationships and encouraged the participants to feel safe revealing personal information and feelings during the interviews. Finally, I studied individuals who had just recently entered a graduate program. My assumption was that the motivations of individuals who had just made the choice to enter a school library program would reflect their expectations of the occupation, and would not be influenced

by library work experience or the passage of time (Van House, 1988). One of the ramifications of this restriction was the possibility that the study may include participants who later discovered they had made a poor occupational choice.

A third limitation of this study was that the participants might not be representative of other master's students in school library media programs in the United States. Similar studies from other programs may result in different findings.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was one small step toward addressing the dearth of research on the occupational choice of school librarians. The qualitative nature of the study provided an in-depth look into the complex reasons that five people chose to become media specialists. Further exploration should include participants who are working school librarians and library students attending a variety of institutions. Research targeting specific populations such as men, non-educators, and first career school librarians may give further insight into the occupational choice of library media specialists. More research is also needed to understand the reasons that teachers choose to leave the classroom to become media specialists. Does the finding of emotional distance as a motivation hold true for other teachers? Future research may benefit from the use of quantitative measures that incorporate the findings of this study to see if they are applicable to a larger number of participants.

### CONCLUSION

The motivation to conduct this research was based on two initial thoughts. First, there was a lack of recent studies regarding occupational choice for school library media specialists. Second, most of the studies of occupational choice relied heavily on a survey methodology. To compensate for both, I elected to conduct a qualitative study using a narrative methodology to focus on a few individuals who had chosen this profession.

Career construction theory served as a framework for examining the vocational development of the five participants. Looking at the career stories of the participants through the three perspectives of vocational personality, career adaptation, and life theme provided a comprehensive picture of the complex network of elements that accompany any occupational choice. In contrast to the traditional surveys of occupational choice that limit the decision to a concise list of motivational factors, the design of this study allowed for the possibility of unexpected findings. Although most of the findings reflected those already present in the occupational choice literature, this study did point to some motivations that may be specific to the school library field. Additionally, this study highlighted the importance of vocational personality in occupational choice. This factor

has been neglected in traditional survey research into occupational choice for librarianship. As suggested by Scherdin's research (1994), knowledge of librarians' vocational personality types could be beneficial in developing effective recruitment strategies. This study also reiterated the library profession's persistent problem of the public not even being aware of librarianship as a possible occupation. As one of the participants affirmed "I can't understand why I never thought about a library as a career before." Through the years our profession has been trying to resolve this dilemma with campaigns to increase public awareness of our job, but the results have been less than spectacular. Furthermore, while one-on-one intervention by librarians was successful in recruiting these five people into the library field, the library profession cannot always rely on happenstance to attract bright people. In order to improve recruitment results, we must apply all of our knowledge of the reasons that individuals choose this occupation to ensure that potential librarians do not pass us by. This study endeavored to provide information to support that goal.

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