

Professional Focus and Environment

My professional focus in the library setting is centered on working in an elementary school library, serving students approximately ages 5–10. At this developmental stage, I believe children are forming foundational literacy skills, social relationships, and a sense of identity. The school library should not simply be a resting place for books, but serve as a dynamic, inclusive “third place” that fosters belonging, while supporting the diverse developmental needs, and promoting equitable access to knowledge and opportunity for its patrons. Drawing on course readings and professional frameworks, this paper outlines how I would design a library environment that reflects my goals.

The concept of the library as a “third place,” introduced by Sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999), describes a space separate from home and school where individuals can gather, connect, and feel a sense of belonging. In youth services, this concept is especially critical, as libraries function as safe, flexible environments that support both social and academic development for its visitors. Course readings emphasize that libraries function as community-centered spaces that support connection, creativity, and holistic youth development, rather than serving solely as soulless repositories of information (McChesney, 2024). Unlike the classroom, in an elementary school setting the library can offer students autonomy, choice, and opportunities for exploration without the pressure of evaluation. Community-based literacy environments demonstrate that physical design alone is insufficient to drive engagement; instead, meaningful participation emerges through relationships, trust, and culturally responsive practices (McChesney, 2024).

To cultivate this environment, if I had ample space, I would want to design the library as a flexible and inclusive space that meets the diverse needs of the community. This includes quiet areas for reflection, collaborative zones for social learning, and creative spaces that encourage exploration. Incorporating multiliteracy through audiobooks, graphic novels, and digital media would ensure that all students can access and engage with content in ways that align with their strengths. By curating collections that reflect diverse identities and experiences, the library becomes a space where students see themselves (mirrors) and learn about others (windows), fostering both belonging and empathy (Reading Rockets, 2015).

Understanding developmental stages is also essential to designing effective youth services. Libraries play a key role in supporting literacy development by providing diverse, high-interest texts that encourage curiosity and continued engagement. Socially and emotionally, children in this age group are developing relationships, empathy, and a sense of belonging and libraries can support these needs by creating inclusive environments where differences are normalized and valued.

Inclusion would be a must in my library, particularly for students with disabilities or neurodiverse learning needs. I would strive to make everyone feel welcome by removing barriers, providing multiple formats, and creating adaptable environments that meet students “where they are” helping engagement with literacy in ways that reduce stigma and increase accessibility for all. This could be accomplished by integrating storytelling hours, student art, and collaborative projects, so the library supports both cognitive development and identity formation.

My interest in working in an elementary school library is both personal and professional. As a parent and volunteer in my children's school library, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of their thoughtful, engaged librarian can have on students' experiences. The library often becomes a space where students naturally gather, particularly during unstructured times like lunch, reinforcing its role as a third place within the school community.

Professionally, my background in tech working as a Quality Assurance Engineer and focusing on user experience has shaped my approach in which I see as directly applicable to library work. Designing inclusive environments, identifying barriers, and improving access are all central to both fields. I am particularly passionate about supporting neurodiverse learners, informed by my own experiences with ADHD and my need for a safe space during lunch hours. My experiences reinforce my belief that educational environments should evolve alongside students' needs, rather than forcing students into rigid systems. As our understanding of child development continues to grow through emerging research, we have both the knowledge and the responsibility to create more adaptive learning environments.

My philosophy aligns closely with the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards Framework, which emphasizes inquiry, inclusion, collaboration, and engagement as foundational to student learning (AASL, 2018). Research further supports this vision by highlighting how libraries address educational inequities through providing access to resources, fostering literacy, and supporting underserved populations (Neuman & Celano, 2012).

Finally, my interest in local history connects to a broader goal of addressing representation and epistemic gaps. By integrating local inclusive narratives into library collections and programming, students can engage with their community in meaningful ways, developing both critical thinking skills and a sense of belonging while shaping how knowledge is constructed and shared. My commitment to creating these safe spaces is rooted in my own need for such places as a student and my profound gratitude for those who created them before me. I aspire to honor their work by ensuring the next generation of students have the same refuge, comfort, and support.

References

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