

## Regular Feature - Librarians in Interesting Roles

# **A Library Career: Spanning Public, Health and Schools Libraries in New Zealand and Ireland**

**Penny Wiggle**

The W.B. Yeats Library, The High School, Dublin

### **ABSTRACT**

This article describes a career that commenced in a public library in New Zealand, then moved to a health sciences library in Ireland and, finally, to an Irish secondary school. I describe how each setting brought its own unique challenges and rewards and demonstrate how a librarian can enjoy a great variety of work during the lifetime of a career.

### **KEYWORDS**

career, public librarian, school librarian, health librarian

My library career commenced in 1982, when I started as a Library Assistant in Birkenhead Public Library, Auckland New Zealand. A large public library, set in one of Auckland's suburbs, it serves a widespread geographical area – Auckland being a sprawling city. There I worked from the ground up – as a Junior, I was responsible for making the morning tea, doing the “bun run” to the local shop each day prior to the 10:00 am tea break, sorting and counting the daily non-fiction issue cards from the previous day (sometimes as many as 1,200 a day), and shelving all of the adult fiction. I absolutely loved it and sometimes yearn for those days of practical tasks that are akin to mindfulness in their repetition.

After a year, I was encouraged to apply to Library School. In 1983 New Zealand, the degree course was only just commencing, the main route to qualification was the New Zealand Library Studies Certificate. It was akin to an apprenticeship, one had to be first employed as a Library Assistant and then apply to the only central college, the New Zealand School of Library Studies based in Wellington. Studies were in blocks of six weeks, during which you had to live in Wellington. I was lucky enough to have my accommodation paid for by the City Council that employed me but others, particularly those in small, private libraries, had to pay for this themselves. There were three six-week blocks, with nine months in between. In those months, you had to submit assignments that were based on the library in which you worked. For example, I had to do a literature review on the craft books available in my library. Upon qualification, my Head Librarian created a new post of Circulation Librarian (known as Reader Services in Ireland), which I performed for another 5 years.

After a period of travel, I ended up in Ireland. As I was unable to secure a librarian position, I (bizarrely) retrained in the Adelaide Hospital as a nurse. Whilst I did not love working as a nurse, it assisted me to obtain a post as a part time Library Assistant in The Adelaide and Meath Hospital (AMNCH), now Tallaght University Hospital. Back in the work I loved, I eventually became the Reader Services Librarian. For one of my years in Tallaght, I was seconded to the CEO of the hospital as Research Librarian, working with members of the Management Team, performing literature searches and reviews.

Due to family reasons, I moved from Tallaght to my present employment, The High School in Dublin. I am the only librarian employed in this large secondary school. We have circa 850 pupils and are a fee-paying Church of Ireland co-educational school.

In an odd quirk of the Irish education system that the majority of fee-paying schools in Ireland have librarians but only 30 of the 235 publicly funded Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) post primary schools do. The DEIS schools that have a librarian are funded through the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP). This is an Irish Department of Education intervention programme for post-primary students at risk of early school leaving or academic failure. However, only schools who can create the space for a library qualify for this funding, which was limited, despite initial promises.

This means that currently, in Ireland, approximately only 80 of the 720 secondary schools in Ireland have a library staffed by a qualified librarian. I have often heard said amongst school librarians that a room full of books in a school, manned by a teacher, supervisor or pupils is not a library, it is a room full of books.

Being a school librarian in Ireland generally means that you do everything: circulation, acquisitions, cataloguing and classifying, user services, shelving and deselection. But this is one of the things that I love about my job. If I get bored of cataloguing, I can go and do some shelving, for example. Very few schools have more than one member of staff in their library. I am lucky, as I am autonomous in what I do. I report to the Academic Deputy Principal, but I am trusted to work independently by school management, ensuring I keep the Deputy Principal and Principal up to date with the library and its activities. We all occasionally discuss ideas or upcoming events but, overall, I am left to do what I do best.

A large part of the role is, like many librarian roles, pastoral. The library always attracts the quiet or lonely children. It is one of my school's designated Safe Spaces and we advertise this to our incoming parents and children. I ensure that there is no bullying, excessive noise or disruptive behaviour. It is important that schools have such an environment to give children that need this a place to feel included.

I work closely with the English Department. I host first and fourth year English classes every week, where the focus is silent reading. As the Librarian, I support the teacher in this, providing up to date material and giving recommendations – especially to reluctant readers or those who require support for learning. At other times I host other subjects, such as science. During national event weeks, Science or Space Week for example, the teachers bring in their classes to read the science books or to do word searches or crosswords. I maintain a noticeboard at the entrance to the library, and this changes weekly, according to the school calendar and weekly events.

Increasingly, Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate subjects require project work. Over the years, my role in this has also expanded, giving lessons on referencing and basic research skills. I find the glazed expression on the children's faces quite amusing – I always assure them that these skills will be carried on into their college life, and that they'll thank me then.

As Irish secondary teachers have been known to say, there are three reasons to be a teacher – June, July and August. I am extremely fortunate to have the same contractual holidays. But I would do this job anyway. I am very glad to have done my training in a large public library – I had the opportunity to learn all aspects of a librarian's role and had fantastic colleagues to train me. A public library gives one the experience to deal

with all types of people with a variety of social problems. Working in a school library has similarities – you need to have the ability to work with children of all personality types and educational needs. This can be very challenging at times, especially when combined with behavioural issues.

In comparison, working in Tallaght University Hospital Library for eight years, was a very different experience. An academic library is very different to both a public and a school library. It is a more structured environment, with a far greater need for a detailed catalogue (both in terms of cataloguing and classification of materials). For example, in the public library that I worked in, we greatly simplified Dewey numbers and subject headings, and this is done to an even greater degree in my school library. An academic librarian also deals with a more specific clientele (neither any less challenging), with different outcome requirements to a school library.

I'm not convinced I could have done this job as a young, newly qualified librarian, but it is an amazing and privileged role in which I will be ending my career. It is now up to Irish policy makers to gain the foresight to employ librarians in every school in the country.

