According to the US Census Bureau (2016), youth make up 22% of our population. Despite making up such a large portion of our population, teens are oftentimes expected to sit quietly, with no place in society to make a difference. As a part of the larger community, the public library is an optimum place for teens to gain important leadership and advocacy skills. This case study looks at how and why librarians throughout the United States are incorporating activist-focused programs and events for their youth. Interviews were conducted and coded for themes that emerged from connected learning theory and critical social youth empowerment theory. The results suggest that librarians must first understand the whole community they serve, cultivate relationships with youth, and allow for interest driven programming. These suggestions lay the groundwork for further youth activist work in libraries.
YOUTH SHOULD BE SEEN AND HEARD: A CASE STUDY ON YOUTH ACTIVISM IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

by
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# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ............................................................................................................. 3  
**Glossary** .................................................................................................................. 9  
**Literature Review** ................................................................................................... 10  
- Youth Services in Public Libraries ........................................................................... 10  
  - Youth Spaces ....................................................................................................... 11  
  - Youth Programming ............................................................................................. 13  
- Connected Learning ................................................................................................ 15  
- Harry Potter Alliance .............................................................................................. 17  
- Teen Activism and Participation ............................................................................ 18  
  - Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment .................................................. 19  
  - Benefits of Youth Activism .................................................................................. 21  
**Methodology** .......................................................................................................... 22  
  - Sampling ............................................................................................................. 22  
  - Data Collection ................................................................................................... 23  
  - Data Analysis ...................................................................................................... 24  
**Interview Analysis** ................................................................................................. 25  
  - Relationships ..................................................................................................... 26  
    - Listening to youth ............................................................................................. 27  
    - Facilitating ...................................................................................................... 28  
  - Interest Driven .................................................................................................... 32  
    - Community ..................................................................................................... 34  
    - Partnerships .................................................................................................... 35  
    - Physical Space ............................................................................................... 37  
**Discussion** .................................................................................................................. 40  
  - Interest-Driven Programming ............................................................................. 40  
  - Participation ....................................................................................................... 41  
  - Adult Power ....................................................................................................... 41  
  - Welcoming Environment .................................................................................... 42
Introduction

Public libraries provide a unique space at the intersection of formal and informal learning. These spaces are more than simple book depositories, instead providing access to the internet, technology, and other informative programming. As a profession, we like to believe that we can help to break down the walls of inequality. For example, during the riots in Ferguson, Missouri, the public library stayed open, despite schools closing. The public library provided a space for the community to come together during that tough time. Different national news companies, like NPR and NBC reported on how the library provided children with books and packs to take home. These initiatives were great, but we can’t let occupational awe blind us from the large issues at play here. A simple book pack is not going to right the wrongs of institutional racism. The articles also fail to mention how the library served teens, but that’s because, in many cases, they weren’t. The teens weren’t in the library, instead they were out on the streets protesting (Dohrn & Ayers, 2016).

While many librarians are transforming their program offerings, the institutional norm of libraries is to define their space as “neutral.” Despite its prevalence across the discipline, librarians are starting to understand “neutrality” as problematic. Some have begun to tear into the concept of “neutrality,” equating it with “passive diversity.” Gibson et al (2017) delved into the political implication of “neutrality,” arguing that “choosing neutrality (or disengagement) in times of conflict is choosing to maintain status quo at the
expense of one portion of the community,” as well as likening it to “…a practice in embedded whiteness” (p. 754). Neutrality only benefits the white majority who can continue to play social justice warrior, while turning their backs on systemically disadvantaged populations.

Amelia Gibson and Sandra Hughes-Hassell (2017) recounted a devastating library encounter that illustrates how a marginalized population is affected by racial profiling in a library space. Dr. Gibson attempted to recruit African American teen girls for a study on health information seeking at a public library in Durham County. While waiting in the library area she watched a security guard come up to the teen girls who were talking quietly together and yell at them to sit down and be quiet (p.317-318). The teens left the library shortly after and Dr. Gibson attempted to piece together the reason behind the interaction. Unfortunately, this is an example of how library spaces unequally service diverse populations. Even though “creating a welcoming and inspiring library environment” is part of the strategic plan, there is a disconnect between the idealized environment and the reality (Durham County Library, 2014). Issues like this indicate a need for libraries and library staff to look inwards at their policies and how they are enforced.

Mike Males (2013) discussed the division between youth and adult spaces in libraries. He stressed that the division exacerbates differences between a largely dominant white aging population and a largely diverse youth population. These differences contribute to policies that cater to the white majority instead of the diverse population, like the incident at Durham County Libraries. Males (2013) advocated for a “symbiotic” relationship between the older and younger populations, saying that “libraries are in a
unique position to boldly lead the way to redefine youth as genuine citizens” (p. 152).

Youth librarians are working to create inclusive spaces to allow for all teens to cultivate their voice and to practice civic discourse. However, norms around “neutrality” will need to be evaluated before youth can truly move forward with agency.

According to the US Census Bureau (2016), youth make up 22% of our population. Despite making up such a large portion of our population, teens are oftentimes expected to sit quietly, with no place in society to make a difference. As a part of the larger community, the public library is an optimum place for teens to gain important leadership and advocacy skills. In this study I hope to dig into the details of youth activism in the public library setting. I will ask: how can librarians provide youth meaningful programming that cultivates youth voice and agency? How is the library as a space changing to allow teens a brave space?

Just last year the Young Adult Library Service Association (YALSA) released a new set of “Teen Service Competencies for Library Staff.” In these competencies YALSA explicitly addresses concepts of youth leadership and voice. In content area 5 on youth engagement and leadership library staff should:

“...support [teens] in developing personal agency, and in cultivating cultural, personal, and social relationships. Providing teens with opportunities to engage in youth voice experienced centered on colearning and codesigning library and community projects is essential” (YALSA, 2017)

Meaningful programming and youth development are becoming part of the professional priorities. Former president of YALSA, Sandra Hughes-Hassell (2018), stated that YALSA and youth librarians need to build teen leadership and amplify their voices (p.3). She continues to speak about how youth want to change their community and need a
place to learn the skills to enact changes. With the leadership of Hughes-Hassell, librarians in the field are realizing the importance of spaces were teens can learn to lead. But research on specific initiatives in the library is sparse.

Youth activism broadly is not a new concept or phenomena. Throughout history youth have lifted their voices, speaking out against segregation, war, racism, and more recently gun violence. In 1963 the nation saw children and youth come together in Birmingham Alabama to protest segregation. During these non-violent marches the youth were taunted, attacked by police dogs, sprayed with fire hoses, and ultimately jailed (Stewart, 2013). Despite these abuses the youth of Alabama continued to march and speak up against the systemic racism of the 60s. Some of the youth who marched continued to speak out against racism as they grew older. One such youth was C. Virginia Fields, who marched at seventeen years old, later to become a Manhattan borough president in NYC and the president and CEO of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS (Stewart, 2013). When asked about her part in the children’s march at the 50th anniversary Fields said “This [the march] started me on a path and believing that using my voice, I can make a difference.” (Stewart 2013).

Think recently of Black Lives Matters, the protests at Standing Rock, and the latest protests against gun violence in schools. Youth continue to show the nation that they have a voice and are capable of advocating for change, despite the prevailing belief that youth are apathetic and disconnected from political conversations. Bernardine Dohrn and William Ayers (2016) noted in their chapter on Black Lives Matters that black youth are aware of the risks when they stand up to police violence (p. 82). Our youth are extremely resilient, especially youth from marginalized communities. They are
continually working to create a better society no matter how many barriers adults and society try and put in their way.

Schools and public spaces are encouraged to be “apolitical” or “neutral” spaces. Grassroot organizations and other organizations are often the places that help to organize youth to action. Social media also plays a significant role in coordinating youth to action. Black Lives Matter started with the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on twitter after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri (Dohrn & Ayers, 2016). The latest string of protest surrounding the Parkland school shooting also began from tweets and other social media from youth around the country. In a multi-year survey Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer (2018) investigated how nonpolitical online activity contributes to political action online. They discovered that youth who use social media are more likely to participate in politics eventually, including discovering and connecting with networks that “expose them to political information and mobilize them to participation” (Kahne and Bowyer, 2018). Currently, youth are extremely creative with how they are cultivating a political and activist culture. However, libraries could utilize their resources more effectively to provide relevant events and programming that work to provide youth opportunities to speak up and make a difference.

Librarians, especially youth librarians, need to create a space for teens to be brave and to learn to speak out against injustice and racism. No longer should “neutrality” be an acceptable professional norm. Our polarized culture is ripe with situations to practice and teach activism and community leadership skills to teens. Youth need to feel comfortable and empowered in our space. Librarians already provide a variety of programs and activities, and many of these can be tailored to provide youth more agency. We should be
teaching students to take their voices into the community at large. This paper will look at how and why librarians throughout the United States are incorporating activist-focused programs and events for their youth. The purpose of this case study will be to lay the groundwork for other libraries to incorporate activism into their programming.
Glossary

Youth: Around the age of 12-18. Also considered teens.

Teen Advisory Board: A group of teens who apply and are chosen to be a part of a leadership group in the library. Often they help with programming, fundraising, etc. These groups are not limited to the library setting.

Book Club: A group of people who come together to talk about a book they have all read regularly.

Brave Spaces: Emerging terminology to replace “safe spaces” in academic conversation. Brave spaces acknowledges that we are challenging students in these conversations.

YALSA: The Young Adult Library Services Association. A division of the wider professional organization ALA (American Library Association).

Youth Activism: Teens having a voice in important decisions in the community. They know how to respond to different situations in the community and enact change.

Connected Learning: The learning theory from University of California Irvine about how youth learn in interest driven instruction. Incorporating concepts of technology in the theory.
Literature Review

Youth Services in Public Libraries

Youth services is an important piece in the overall library experience. There is a whole section of ALA dedicated to youth services: the Young Adult Library Service Association (YALSA). Youth services focus specifically on youth between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Typically, these services and departments work as a bridge between the world of children and adults. Growing up, my public library didn’t have a teen area and honestly, I never used that library after I matured because in that time between childhood and adulthood I didn’t see a space for myself there.

Conversations about youth participation and programming are constantly changing throughout the field. Leaving behind the concept of “libraries as silent spaces,” youth service librarians are working to break access barriers to create functional teen spaces that reflect the needs of a twenty-first century teenager. Professionals are pushing against the perception of libraries as the “book place;” creating multimedia focused programming, building makerspaces, and working to include youth in the decision-making process. Currently librarians are investigating how to incorporate “fun” programs within the informal learning spaces: “…libraries offer an excellent option to tie together the informal learning that youth do in purely interest-driven spaces with the formal learning of schools (Martin, 2017, p. 45). This inclusion of interest-driven learning aligns with the new learning theory “Connected Learning,” to be discussed in the next section. The shift in programming focus equalizes the relationship between adult and youth. The
adult is no longer the ultimate authority, but instead is moving over to create space for youth voice.

Youth voice has recently gained attention. Juan Rubio wrote about best-practices for incorporating and including youth voice in programming, based on his experience working to create a youth-driven game design project. Rubio (2017) said:

Unless learning institutions such as libraries begin to incorporate youth voice as an integral part of their offerings, youth and especially minority youth will continue consuming and producing media that frequently has nothing to do with how they conceive of their world and their community” (p.71).

He linked youth voice to relevant content creation. This doesn’t mean that the adult completely disappears or stops working with teens all together. Rubio (2017) stressed that youth and adult partnerships should be equal (p. 74).

Youth Spaces.

While programming is a great way to include youth voice, some librarians are incorporating youth voice in their space redesign projects. Recently, the Boston Public Library sent a survey to their teens, looking for feedback on their ongoing renovations to the youth space (Snow, 2017, p. 66). Basing their tentative plan on Ito Mizuko’s (2009) research on youth living and learning in the twenty-first century, Snow said they wanted to incorporate space for “hanging out, messing around, and geeking out.” Snow (2017) said that they asked how, why, and when youth used the library, as well as to rank the importance of programming types (p. 67). Despite reporting that youth engagement has “skyrocketed” in the new space Snow still felt like the library struggled to reach the youth who need and want the more maker focused programming (even with interest on their survey). To combat this issue BPL is reaching into the community to collaborate with outside organizations to reach marginalized youth and learn about their specific
technology needs (p. 67). The continual effort of library staff to communicate with youth, instead of just deciding what is best illustrates the shift around youth voice.

Other libraries are also including similar spaces that transform youth experiences in the library. In 2009 the Chicago Public Library (CPL) system opened a teen space called YOUmedia in their Harold Washington Library Center. Before this space opened there was no youth space in the library. With a grant from the MacArthur Foundation, CPL was able to purchase new digital media, redesign space, and connect with a community organization to assist with program development (Chicago Public Library & Bannon, 2012, p. 33). Mizuko’s “hanging out, messing around, and geeking out” study, influenced the design and programming of YOUmedia Chicago. Despite growing pains, the YOUmedia space has been extremely successful in engaging youth in content creation and using the library space. Among the products, youth have coordinated and published a gaming review website (Library of Games) as well as an online literary magazine (YOUlit) (Chicago Public Library & Bannon, 2012, p. 34).

Based on the set up of the Chicago space, a library in the Miami Gardens neighborhood (suburb of Miami-Date County) created their own YOUmedia space. With a robust digital lab youth are able to access technology and attend informative workshops. In the Miami Gardens neighborhood, 43% of youth who use the space lack internet access at home, and 41% of youth use the library as their internet access point (Santiago, 2012, pp. 37–38). The youth of Miami Gardens gain access to not just internet, but the innovative tools and application that can be crucial for involvement in our high-tech society.
Librarians work to build developmentally appropriate spaces that push teens to learn and explore. In the past conversations have considered these spaces “safe spaces.” Safe spaces have been used in the past to designate places where minorities could gather together (Ali, 2017). However, due to recent complications with the phrase “safe spaces” in higher education, researchers are embracing a new phrase – “brave spaces.” Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013) defined 5 key elements to a brave space:

1. “Controversy over civility,” where varying opinions are accepted
2. “Owning intentions and impacts,” in which students acknowledge and discuss instances where a dialogue has affected the emotional well-being of another person
3. “Challenge by choice,” where students have an option to step in and out of challenging conversations
4. “Respect,” where students show respect for one another’s basic personhood
5. “No attacks,” where students agree not to intentionally inflict harm on one another

These key elements describe a space where tough conversations can be covered, but with the expectation that students will participate in those conversations. Vulnerable populations can still opt out of the conversation, but this space allows for support for students to opt in to healthy conversation.

**Youth Programming.**

Book clubs and summer reading programs are just a couple of the traditional programs that come to mind when thinking about library programming. Another example of programming that specifically focuses on youth leadership skills is Teen Advisory Boards (TAB). Teen Advisory Boards have been a place for youth to find a voice in the past. However, a lot of the time these kinds of groups are looking at books or helping with pre-existing library events (often as unpaid labor or “volunteers”), as opposed to working on meaningful issues around the community.
In a 1994 article, Margaret Brown and Pat Muller recounted a comprehensive TAB program that culminated from a collaborative partnership with a middle school and public library. While the TAB program was considered successful, the prevailing goals fell short of creating a space for teens to engage in meaningful community engagement, instead focusing on library buy-in (Brown & Muller, 1994, p. 257). The only instance of reaching out to the community cited was youth speaking at a budget meeting on library funding. This is a nicely packaged story, but what about the students who have to work a paying job? What about the student who wants to help provide programs in her neighborhood instead of helping with a library event? What about immigrant youth who are constantly seeing the media demonize their culture? These students often fall between the cracks of library programming. Librarians are starting to look beyond what students come to the library, focusing on who isn’t there and what barrier might keep them from these spaces.

Wendy Schaetzel Lesko is the founder and president of Youth Activism Project, an online initiative that promotes and supports youth lead campaigns in the United States and the wider world. In a recent article Lesko (2017) outlined advice to librarians for implementing youth activism programs in the library space. Youth are often conditioned to expect that lawmakers won’t listen to their voice, despite the lasting impacts laws have on their life. However, because youth librarians are often “infomaniacs,” Lesko (2017) argued that they are perfect advocates for youth voice (p. 12). The knowledge of current topics, as well as community resources make libraries a central location for youth to come to learn and connect. Lesko (2017) suggested that small events and interacts with
youth that foster respect can be a great way to slowly change the institutional norm towards advocacy and activism:

Youth activism can be sparked by a brief conversation about banned books, competing in a poetry slam, being a TAB member, or perhaps by a high school student who doesn’t hang in the teen zone. The snowball effect will move in unpredictable directions (p. 13).

Like the Boston Public Library, and the YOUmedia programs, other libraries are working to cultivate and support youth voice and activism. Different programs include repeated advisory boards, coordinated community outreach, or one-time events/symposiums. Erin Hoopes (2017) worked with her students to create a Social Justice Symposium for Teens after hearing teens discuss a local march protesting police brutality (p.24). The symposium became a community event, incorporated multiple library branches, as well as funding from the Free Library of Philadelphia. Workshop topics included human trafficking, education crisis, homelessness, and mass incarceration. These topics indicate that teens want to talk about the “political,” and libraries have the resources to provide information and programming for these topics. Hoopes (2017) highlights many other librarians incorporating social justice topics in their programming, including choosing topical books for book clubs and allowing teens to express their experiences through “open mic nights,” (according to the librarian poetry slams always have a “major social justice vibe”) (p. 24). It’s time to acknowledge that as a profession it’s time to get out of the stacks and into the community.

**Connected Learning**

As I discuss youth voice and advocacy, Connected Learning is a powerful lens to consider the effects of interest-based learning. A large portion of literature on learning and teens considers the current disconnect between the classroom and the real world.
Whether about the racial inequities of classroom content, or issues of youth interest, researchers and teachers realize that too often, the content of our classes don’t match the reality of our students. The Digital Media and Learning Research Hub at University of California Irvine dug into this disconnect. Through their research they developed the theory of “connected learning,” defined as “learning that is socially embedded, interest-drive, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity,” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 6). Part of the importance of connected learning is providing students with adequate support to pursue passions and interests, meanwhile linking these lessons to their wide educational world.

The creators of connected learning stressed that this method of interest-based learning works to fight growing inequities in education. Researchers reported that:

There is also a growing gap between the progressive use of digital media outside of the classroom, and the no-frills offerings of most public schools that educate our most vulnerable populations. This gap contributes to widespread alienation from educational institutions, particularly among non-dominant youth,” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 7).

Students from higher socio-economic families have the financial ability to attend clubs, camps, etc, and take advantage of the shifting dynamics of digital learning opportunities. However, those students on the other end of the spectrum lack access to these kinds of innovative technology and new learning opportunities. The underfunded schools, out of date technology, and criminalization of student groups largely hinders interest-based learning for minority youth. Students don’t learn in a vacuum separate from their out of school world. Learning is more “…meaningful when it is part of valued relationships, shared practice, culture, and identity…” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 24). Connected learning
strives to bridge this gap and offer all students a learning environment that is relevant to
themselves.

**Harry Potter Alliance.**

The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) exemplifies the tenets of connected learning and youth advocacy. A large online-based community, HPA began with a group of teens inspired by the concepts of social justice and activism central to the plot of the *Harry Potter* novels. In the books Hogwarts students take part in a student group called “Dumbledore’s Army” to practice their own agency separate from adults. In a study on fan activism, Klighler-Vilenchik et al. (2011) interviewed HPA members and analysis of the HPA website to investigate how fan activist organizations recruit and maintain youth participation in civic action.

HPA unites youth members through the shared experience of reading *Harry Potter*. Their vision statement simply states they want to “solve the world’s problems” (HPA, 2017). However, members use these shared experiences to “connect stories from the content world to real-world issues,” despite a wide interest in topics (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2011). Members interact with the national organization online, create vibrant local communities and create/share media with the community, indicating that many youth want to help the world. Example HPA projects include a HPA conference, a book drive, youth voting registration initiatives and many more. The Harry Potter Alliance is an almost perfect example of connected learning. While this learning doesn’t typically happen in a classroom, HPA members learn from their peers through this informal learning environment. However, even though connected learning focuses specifically on youth inclusion in digital spaces, Kligler-Vilenchick et al., (2011) point to
a lack of ethnic diversity throughout the HPA membership. As stated above, the majority of HPA members come from a higher socio-economic family where they can afford to volunteer their time. Again, youth of color and from lower socio-economic status (those who really need a voice) are left out of the conversation.

**Teen Activism and Participation**

Connected learning extends active learning theory to prioritize youth participation with civic and political outcomes (Ito et al., 2013, p. 63). Outside of conversations of learning, scholars have researched and investigated teen participation and youth activism. Jerusha Connor and Sonia Rosen (2016) defined activism as “undermining structures that privilege particular social actors and marginalize others…It paves pathways for inclusion, access, and equity” (p.2). In opposition to true activism, the authors used “consumer activism” to describe initiatives by the state to keep youth from questioning the status quo (p.10). Other important distinctions include divisions between minority youth and white middle- to upper-class youth.

As discussed earlier, connected learning looks at the difference in youth participation between these two groups (minorities and white youth). Youth activism research also investigates the way that society responds to the voices of these two groups. Recently, the nation has seen a large youth response to the 2018 school shooting in Parkland Florida. Many have lifted the voices of these teens through social media, interviews, and large community marches. However, Black activists have pointed to the racial make-up of Parkland, a largely white and affluent school, and compared these reactions to the vilification of Black youth activists who rally against police brutality and normalized gun violence against their communities (Ruiz-Grossman, 2018). Like the
Alabama’s children’s march in the 60’s, youth protesting police violence after the 2015 death of an unarmed Black youth were met with tear gas, rubber bullets and curfews (Conner & Rosen, 2016, p. 10).

**Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment.**

Jennings, Para-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin (2006) developed a comprehensive youth empowerment theory by reviewing four different youth empowerment model. These models look at youth empowerment from different angles, including psychology and sociology. Jennings et al (2006) compiled a list of 6 key factors for successful youth participation from their review:

1. A welcoming and safe environment
2. Meaningful participation and engagement
3. Equitable power-sharing between youth and adults
4. Engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes
5. Participation in sociopolitical processes to effect change
6. Integrated individual and community level empowerment (pg. 41.)

These factors combine the personal and the political to create a usable roadmap to begin working on effective teen participation. The critical social theory of youth empowerment considers teen development, as well as effective strategies of empowerment and participation.

**Youth-Adult Relationships.**

Youth-adult relationships play an important role in the critical social theory of youth empowerment. Many researchers credit positive relationships with adults with productive and successful activist work. In his study of three different youth activism organizations, Ben Kirshner (2008) discussed three types of “guided participation:” facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work. During facilitation the adults are a resource that youth can come to for help. However, in apprenticeship and joint work the adults
work actively with the youth throughout the project. Kirshner (2008) explained that in joint work youth receive less coaching and instruction compared to apprenticeship, allowing youth and adult literally work side by side (p.89).

All three of the groups successfully provided youth opportunities to practice activism. In his analysis, Kirshner observed that age and experience of the youth affects the type of guided participation. In the group with older high school students, the participation method was joint work, where the youth and adults shared a deep partnership throughout the project (Kirshner, 2008, p. 90). Another group, based in a school setting and partnered with a local university, exemplified what Kirshner considers apprenticeship. Central to apprenticeship, adults are mentors/coaches to youth. Their role is like a teacher, actively working with youth to provide learning opportunities. As a method, facilitation is more hands-off. In Kirshner’s (2008) study his example facilitation group called youth “youth organizers,” stressing peer relationships (p. 68). The title of “youth organizers” emphasizes youth power so that it makes sense that adults take a smaller role.

Like Jennings et al (2006), Kirshner stressed the importance that students have access to adult experiences and mentorship. He also explained that adults need to allow students to start with an “authentic civic problem,” a problem that is meaningful to youth (instead of something assigned) (Kirshner, 2008, p. 93). Youth choice is a repeated theme throughout the literature. In two qualitative studies Gordon and Taft (2011) interviewed youth activists about political socialization. In these studies youth reported that typical “adult-sanctioned civic engagement opportunities” (like student government) “do not always give youth real opportunities for full participation” (Gordon & Taft, 2011, p.
While adult guidance often helps youth, peer-group relationships are also a key way that youth develop during activist programs. Resonating with connected learning, peer learning and interest groups help to facilitate youth voice and in turn youth activism.

It is important to consider the delicate balance between adult guidance and youth empowerment.

**Benefits of Youth Activism**

Youth activism benefits the wider community, as well as the individual youth. Communities see improved results in citizen participation, as well as collective and political participation when teens are engaged and empowered (Jennings et al, 2006, p. 51). The real benefits impact youth development. Youth develop “increased self-efficacy and self-awareness as well as positive identity development, positive social bonding, awareness of organizational operations and interpersonal relations, a sense of purpose” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 51). Kirshner (2007) discussed that youth shift from an individual focus to the group focus. He specifically noted the developmental theory “zone of proximal development” referring to how activism makes youth more aware of what they can do alone and what they can collaborate on (Kirshner, 2007, p. 370).

In this study I will look at how connected learning and critical social theory of youth empowerment can bridge the gap between youth activism and library spaces and programming. My research questions are as follows: how can librarians provide youth meaningful programming that cultivates youth voice and agency? How is the library as a space changing to allow teens a brave space?
Methodology

For this study I conducted a case study to investigate how youth librarians are incorporating youth activism into their programming around the country. David Gray (2004) noted that case studies are useful when the research focus is contemporary events (p.124). Youth activism programming has only recently emerged in the library field and conversations, with little scholarly discussion focused on examples in libraries. The intent of this study was to produce rich qualitative data to dig into the practical and theoretical elements of youth activism programming in the library.

I studied the programs of three different libraries through semi-structured interviews with youth librarians. Using in-depth qualitative data on youth activism in libraries, this study builds a base of research on youth activism. By looking at different programs, this study is a “multiple-case study” with a focus on “theoretical replication” to compare cases of youth activism programming that differ slightly in important ways (i.e. reoccurring programming, one-off events, etc.) (Choemprayong & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 54).

Sampling

This study focused on the work of youth librarians in public libraries. Geographically, I looked across all the United States to identify librarians coordinating and facilitating youth activism programming. Because youth activism is not incorporated commonly in library programming, the case study has a geographically diverse focus. I
used a purposive sampling frame, selecting participants from recent YALSA blog posts that featured teen activism in public libraries. These blog posts are short and informative summaries of specific programs that librarians have led. The blog posts ensured that the participants I approached addressed youth activism in their programs. There was the possibility of a snowball sampling, in the case that some librarians knew of other colleges in the youth librarian field that they were incorporating youth activism into their programming. However, I didn’t find any new participants and just remained with my three original librarians. For recruitment, I emailed librarians of interest for this study.

The librarians selected for this study came from all different kinds of libraries and communities. One library (Library A) is situated in a midsized city in the North-east with one of the highest poverty rates in the nation. Another library (Library B) is located in the center of a large metropolitan city, also located in the North-east. This library branch is located in one of the wealthiest parts of the city, despite inequities throughout the city. The last library (Library C) is located in a midsize city in the Pacific Northwest, near one of the larger city areas. This library was part of a geographically large county system with a variety of locations and communities, including military, tribal, and suburban.

**Data Collection**

This study pulled rich data from phone interviews with participants. I used semi-structured interviews from selected youth librarians, collected through video and phone interviews. Because of location limitations I was unable to interview librarians in their workplace. A limitation of the wide geographical focus is that I won’t be able to directly observe any on-going youth activism programming. Yin (2003) noted that direct observation is most often paired with case studies, however case studies are not limited to
direct observation (p.x). Case studies are also typically not generalizable, due to the specific and deep analysis of specific programs/cases, therefore I will not generalize based on my results. Other considerations include the ethics of data collection. For participant confidentiality I have made results anonymous, using fake names for qualitative data and facts.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze the data I used tenets of connected learning and critical social theory of youth empowerment. The questions combined the different theories to capture a full image of the work behind the programming in order to suggest best practices for facilitating youth activism in library spaces. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. After interviewing the librarians I transcribed each interview for analysis.

Transcripts were then hand coded over multiple rounds of data analysis. I started by coding for community, relationships and youth agency, these themes pulled from my two foundational theories. As I continued to code additional themes developed through the data including partnerships, culture/interest, and physical space. I also decided as I coded for youth agency to split up the larger theme into more descriptive sub-themes: listening, facilitating and design thinking.
**Interview Analysis**

In this section I present my findings organized by research question and theme, alongside my interpretations of the findings. To protect the identities of my participations I have developed pseudonyms to use during the interview analysis. Donna, from Library C, is a STEM and Learning librarian, as well as a former teen librarian. During her time as a teen librarian she worked to develop and facilitate weekly teen spaces/advisory boards. Paige, from Library A, manages the teen space in her library as well as coordinates programs, including a teen forum and a teen-lead unconference. Lastly, Nancy, from Library B, is a branch manager with a passion for youth services. Her library system doesn’t employee dedicated youth service librarians, so Nancy makes it her job to provide services and programs to her teens. Over the past couple of years she has coordinated a symposium around youth social justice topics. The combination of these programs illustrates the wide possibility in youth activist programming.

**RQ 1: How can librarians provide youth meaningful programming that cultivates teen voice?**

You’ve had a brain blast, you came up with a great idea and you planned the program, but then when it’s go time, your audience doesn’t show. It’s a frustrating factor that a lot of librarians’ struggle with daily in their programming. However, the three librarians interviewed focus first on teens before planning programs or deciding what to do. To provide meaningful programs that cultivate teen voice, librarians must first and foremost get to know their teens and build relationships with their community.
Youth activism programming doesn’t happen overnight. Instead, it is being built upon the process of developing trust. In their study on critical youth empowerment theory, Jennings et al (2006) listed “a welcoming and safe environment” as vital for teen participation. When asked how they created welcoming environments for teens, all three librarians in this study spoke of relationship building as essential for creating an environment conducive to youth activism. Librarians discussed various ways of building these relationships, including facilitating instead of leading, as well as listening to teens and being there for them.

**Relationships**

Relationship building includes being intentional about how librarians run their space and interact with the library community and the broader community of the city/town. At the most basic level, all three of the librarians said that knowing the names of the youth who use the library is essential. But true relationship building is more than just memorizing names. Donna, a STEM and Learning librarian, discussed going out into the community to build relationships:

“…there is a public housing community and I did some embedded work there as a teen librarian. But I learned so much about the community just by hanging out and being there and not necessarily…programming at people…I tried to go in there and learn as much as I possibly could and listen.”

Donna put aside the traditional “librarianship” agenda to prioritize building relationships with her community. Instead of waiting for them to come to her though, she went out into the community to “hang out.” Nancy, a branch manager in a large urban system, explained her relationship building process using similar terminology. She said “I think everything starts with relationships…it started with just hanging out with them and spending time.”
In addition to prioritizing relationship building for librarians, any other adult or mentor in the space needs to similarly understand the importance of relationship building. In her library Paige hires mentors with specific skills to teach and work with teens. Their last hiring search for mentors lasted 7-8 months. Paige said the search was long because “we wanted to make sure that the folks we were bringing in were really going to foster a connection, relate to our young people. We wanted to make sure that there was no space for adultism in their practice.”

**Listening to youth.**

When asked to discuss how they empowered teen voice in their programming, the librarians all spoke of the importance that adults listen to youth. Validating the lived experience of youth is essential to empowering their voices. Paige discussed the power of Paulo Freire’s work of “critical conscious” in informing her work with youth, the idea that “in educational systems there’s no way that you can teach a new idea to a young person if you aren’t validating their lived experience.” When librarians listen to their youth, often they will tell the adults what they need.

Donna had built a weekly event for her teens when she was hearing a lot of her high school aged youth talk about experiencing bulling at school because they identified as queer or trans. She emphasized in her interview that “it always has to come from them,” when developing programs. Because of the experiences she heard from her youth, Donna created the weekly event with a “welcoming circle” that allowed youth to speak and be heard. During this circle, one youth creates a question that all the youth answer before the content of the meeting. This is a protocol that Donna adapted from her local LGBTQ+ center. Donna shares that her group became more socially conscious not
because of anything she said, but because a youth reached out to her. After the Orlando night club shooting a youth emailed Donna, saying that they wanted to talk about the event in their weekly group.

This work is not without the struggles, though. Donna admitted that she was scared to discuss the Orlando shooting with her teens:

“First of all, this is a really emotional topic. Any violent event is really difficult to talk to youth about…But I think it’s important to have these critical conversations with youth, because like that young person told me, if we don’t who will?”

However, this work is important, not matter how difficult the topic or the conversation. Our schools don’t address these topics because they are “too political” or “too serious” for youth to handle. But like Donna has shown, the youth want to talk about these topics. Adults just have to listen.

In her interview Donna also discussed restorative justice, as a theoretical framework that helps her to handle these larger, more difficult conversations. But on the scale of library programming “it’s more of a circle conversation, kind of like our welcoming circle. It’s nothing they aren’t already expecting. But try to not implement something they don’t want, it just has to come kind of naturally.” No matter what librarians do, it’s vital that they keep youth needs and expectations in the front of their mind.

Facilitating.

An essential part of listening to youth is allowing them to lead and express their own ideas. Part of the critical social theory of youth empowerment is the equitable power-sharing between youth and adults (Jennings et al, 2006, p.41). Facilitating means accepting that you aren’t the expert. Donna shared that “You don’t have the answers, but
you just ask guiding questions and try to set the tone.” As adults, librarians have access to resources and knowledge that teens don’t. Sharing these spaces and power empowers youth. Donna said: “It’s about you the adult recognizing that you can’t be the loudest voice in the room, right? So the place that I am cocreating with my youth, for them, and with them.” Donna is mindful that as a facilitator, listening to teens is paramount, as well as allowing them space to voice their opinion.

When approached by youth, Paige embraced her facilitator role. She used her knowledge of event planning to provide youth with options, but ultimately the decision of how they organized the event was up to them. Paige recounts that “I would sit in on their meetings, but I wouldn’t say much. I sort of used myself as that accountability tool. I’m going to set the meetings, you’re going to show up, but then you’re going to run the meetings.” With her support, the youth succeeded in creating their event, but Paige still addressed her anxiety during the process.

Paige shared that at some planning meetings that youth would catch up and talk to each other. Instead of telling them that they shouldn’t be talking and hanging out, Paige proposed extending the meetings from an hour to an hour and a half, so they could build in time for catching up and talking. Facilitator work must be embedded in developmentally appropriate ways. Librarians can’t expect that after seven plus hours of school that youth will be able to strictly focus on more specific tasks. They need time to just be and this doesn’t make them unable to handle larger projects.

Similarly, Nancy shared responsibility for planning a symposium with her youth as well. While planning their symposium, Nancy shared budget details with her youth. At one point they were approached by a children’s author who wanted to present in their
library. The money for this author would come out of the budget for the symposium.

Nancy talked with her youth, going over the “pros and cons of that and I told them it was totally their decision and I would go with whatever they decided, which they really really liked.” These spaces allow for youth to experience the leadership and decision-making process.

Both Nancy and Paige shared their own reservations throughout the process. Despite being strong allies to their youth, it’s important to note that this work asks for librarians to consciously set aside their power and sometimes that is hard.

“I think that when it starts to get messy, even for myself, when it started to get messy, I got nervous…and I had to check myself when I felt the desire to take control and say that this is what we need to do.” – Paige

It was difficult for me because I liked to just do stuff. And so having to do things, like sort of on teen timeline was hard for me…you do have to check your, I don’t know, I think it’s not unusual for a librarian to do a lot of programming to have a “no, this is how I do this, this is how I get things done.” And you have to check that and say “no there are other ways to run a successful program.” – Nancy

For both Paige and Nancy, the great work their youth would do outweighed the discomfort of not being completely in charge. But they had to consciously address the discomfort and check that when working with their youth.

*Design Thinking.*

Design Thinking came out of the Stanford Design School, a design theory based on iterative design. Throughout this process the founders stress the importance of testing and reflection throughout the process.
All of the librarians interviewed alluded to concepts that are reflected in the design thinking process. Paige explained that teen lead work is “…really iterative, it’s nonlinear, and it’s messy.” It’s a process that’s different then what is taught in grade schools. It facilitates exploration and failure as part of the design process, important skills for building grit and flexibility in our students. Public librarians have the flexibility to work separate from the strict testing curriculums of schools.

As she worked with her youth, Nancy facilitated discussions around the general vision of the symposium, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of it. These general discussions touch on “define” and “empathize” steps of design thinking, allowing youth to plan with purpose and knowledge. Nancy shared that youth really wanted to improve attendance of the program, but that

“we didn’t quite get there…So we debriefed afterwards and kind of talked about how you can set goals and what happened when you don’t meet them exactly. How do you evaluate?”
It’s important that as we work with youth and provide these opportunities, we also provide a space for reflection. Reflection and assessment are essential to any program we implement, it’s also a step that we must share with you.

**Interest Driven**

Often, little of schooling connects to the interests of youth. Connected learning looks at how youth connect learning to their interests for transformative experiences. The Harry Potter Alliance is a larger, national example of how youth turn their interest into activist focused activities. However, library programming is a space with many possibilities for allowing youth to connect their interests to learning. In her space, Paige explains that youth interest is the focus of their programming, saying “what that means is if youth are interested in something that’s what we’re focusing on. And if youth aren’t interested in something we need to come to break.”

For Paige this means employing mentors with skills that you are interested in, but it also means taking what she hears from teens and turning it into an opportunity for conversation and action. She planned and lead the teen forum, but the idea came from the youth.

I was listening to young people come in and talk about the election and I was listening to all this misinformation and it really burned my ears and so I said to a couple of young people, you know there is a lot of groundwork that needs to be laid for us to have these conversations. If I do this [teen forum] would you come? And their response was yes. So in that way they gave me the idea…But then that gave us the jumping off point for them to then do the unconference.” – Paige

Her work illustrates the power of listening and working alongside youth. Bringing the ideas to them before we start spending our money and effort shows that we see youth as a voice at the table, a partner in content creation.
The “unconference” inspired by the teen forum was completely youth planned and lead. Unlike a normal conference, the unconference focuses on attendee participation. One of the youth was particular informed about oppressive systems and frustrated with the lack of information from her school surrounding black power movements. Her passion led her to bring incorporate the Black Panther’s Ten Point Plan as the format for the unconference. Similar to Donna’s youth who reached out through email, the library is a place for youth to connect their interests to actual action. These youths began conversations in their community through the programming at their public libraries.

The success of this work connects to the relationships and environments that these librarians have created in their space. Listening to youth and providing a space where they feel safe and welcomed is required groundwork for youth activist work. Paige takes it a step further by embedding herself in the information that young people are receiving every day. For example, she explained that when Childish Gambino released “This is America,” she watched it non-stop that morning:

“...I think I was late to work, I could not take my eyes of f it. And I was like, you know what I imagine if this is how I’m receiving this, I can only imagine between now and the end of the school day, like how many young people are going to interact with this and how few people are going to have the lens and the language to talk about it” – Paige

So when she got to work that day, after the school day, she put the video up on the library’s television and they played the video, paused it, and talked through the ideas and concepts in the video. Even though this wasn’t a formal program, it shows how Paige creates interest driven spaces for youth to explore. In turn this engagement will empower students to raise their voices and critically consume the media in their life.

RQ 2: How is the library as a space changing to allow teens a brave space?
Vital to providing youth with meaningful and transformative programming is the acknowledgement that as librarians, we can’t do it all. All of the librarians that I interviewed spoke of their community with knowledge and passion. From this knowledge of the community the librarians were able to partner with different organizations throughout the community. Community partnerships allow for librarians to create spaces that are connected to the wider community of the town/city. Through these partnerships, the library space becomes more civically focused and youth can make substantial change in their communities.

**Community**

Of the three librarians I interviewed, no one community was the same as another. However, all the librarians spoke of their community with passion and love. When asked about their activist focused work both Paige and Donna expressed the necessity of anchoring their work in the community.

“The community is at the center of what we do” – Donna
“For me, Doing this work doesn’t make any sense if the community isn’t involved.”
– Paige

To know the community is to listen and observe outside of the library bubble. Both Paige and Donna identified their service community as their community as well, connecting with the community separate from their work as a librarian. As members of the community, they authentically engage with the community conversations. The work means something deeply personal to them.

The librarians also have a nuanced knowledge of the communities they serve. Paige explains the harsh realities of her town, explaining the high rates of poverty.
However, despite these facts she describes the community as “…a vibrant community of artists, professionals, young people…” understanding that this community is more than their statistics. She pushes against the deficient model, that might define this community as lacking, instead seeing it for all that it does have.

Donna describes her community as “dynamic,” touching on the various parts of the community that make up her wider county system. This includes a transit military community, tribal communities, and affluent suburban communities. This detailed knowledge of her community means that Donna knows that even in her system, programs in one area might look completely different in another area of the county system.

Nancy explained the realities of funding in her large, urban library system. Because of her location, Nancy’s branch is located in one of the wealthiest areas in the system. She uses this knowledge and knowledge of inequities throughout the city to inform her programming and the communities she targets. Nancy explained how their robust transportation system allows for teens to access the branch regardless of where they live. She describes that despite the wealthy neighborhood, attendants of her teen programs are largely from lower socio-economic neighborhoods. Their knowledge of the community allows for these three librarians to create purposeful spaces and target certain groups with an understanding of the community makeup.

**Partnerships**

Not one of the librarians interviewed did this work completely on their own. Emerging from the data is the importance of community partnerships. As essential as knowing the community, is knowing the different organizations that are doing work out in the community. Both connected learning and critical social theory of youth
empowerment stress the importance of meaningful engagement that is socially focused.

Donna shared that she asks herself three questions when considering community partners:

1. Who can help me learn?
2. Who can I collaborate with?
3. Who am I not reaching?

These questions allow for Donna to consciously address questions of equity and access. She stresses that question two is the least important of the three. While programs are important, if we just think about programs and what we can do, we limit our scope and miss the larger community picture.

Of her questions, the first question asks “who can help me learn?” Paige repeats this concept in her interview, saying that her approach to partnerships is to “know what you don’t know and find someone who knows it and work with them.” This indicates that part of community partnerships is to always be learning about the resources outside of the library.

For Donna and Paige this looked a little different. Donna focused on getting to know her local LGBTQ Center. As a teen librarian she would go to the center and got to know the people who worked there and the youth who went there. The themes of “hanging out” and “building relationships” reoccur as Donna builds relationships for future collaboration. Paige, on the other hand, reached out to lots of different community organizations when she began her library job. She let them know that she was there and what she did. She admits that not all the information she received at the time was relevant, but that it was important for her to just have “stuff in your back pocket and you always know who is doing what so that when it makes sense for y’all to work together, you know who to contact.”
When reaching out to partners these librarians cultivated relationships before thinking of programs. Their authentic engagement with the community is based on relationships that span years, not just a single event. Their work with the community is continuous, their programs relevant to community needs because they are connected to the community in various ways. Just like when building relationships with youth, librarians must build relationships with the community, listening and learning before plunging into program development.

Youth librarians are often part of small teams. Some library systems, like Nancy’s, don’t even employee strictly youth librarians for their spaces. That means that when these librarians want to create something big, they need to build a team. Community partnerships can provide more hands and heads for larger project work. Paige shares that when she worked with community partners:

“we sat down and we had several meetings of how are we going to support these young people, who want to organize this conference to do that. And we spent a lot of time being really intentional how do we, as the adults, who have access to resources create space for these young people to do this on their own with our support”

It’s important when working with partners to choose ones that share similar beliefs and values when it comes to student voice and empowerment.

**Physical Space**

The physical space of libraries is also vital to cultivating youth voice. Reflecting on the key tenants of “brave spaces,” giving youth the option to opt in or out of the conversation is essential (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Librarians must create spaces were youth with varying opinions are accepted and acknowledged. Donna spoke of creating the space for the weekly youth event. In this space she emphasized that librarians must be
comfortable if someone decides to leave the space for whatever reason, especially during difficult conversations. It’s a part of creating that brave space. Librarians do need to be aware of who is leaving the space during these conversations though, because there is a difference between one youth leaving because they can’t handle a topic that day and a large minority population feeling unsafe in the space.

Youth spaces give youth a place to be young away from the strict expectations of most adults. However, just having these spaces isn’t enough, there needs to be staff in the spaces to cultivate those relationships and to build that welcoming space.

“When young people walk into our door, everyone greets them. It’s everyone’s job to know a young person’s first name. When training the new mentors I make sure to let them know, your job is to know their name and at least one or two things about them that are interesting…we want this to feel like a family” – Paige

By having people in the space, the teens are invited and welcomed into the family of that space. As mentioned earlier in the results Paige works hard to ensure that the adults in the youth space will treat the youth as full fledge humans. Their wonderful resource for the space is not the norm for many youth spaces around the country.

Nancy works in a system without any dedicated teen staff. That means that across the library system teen services isn’t prioritized (though some staff, like Nancy, do prioritize teen programming). So, while Nancy’s branch has a teen space, there is no guarantee that there will be staff in the space, or that staff present understand youth. When Nancy was hired to her branch she was told that teens didn’t come to this branch, which broke her heart because teens were her passion. So she went to work to finding how to draw teens to her space.

One strong program throughout her library system is a youth internship program, that hires three students for every branch in the system. While Nancy didn’t have teens
coming freely, she did have three teens being paid to be at her library. At the beginning these were her only youth in the space, so she built relationships and got to know her youth employees. What began was a long process of building relationships. Nancy states that she had to consciously set aside time to schedule herself in the teen room during the afterschool hours. She ensured that there would be someone in the space and ensured that she began to build relationships. As she got to know her interns and they collaborated on programs, the interns in turn invited friends to the space. The youth that Nancy now have come from a variety of communities throughout her city and they come because of word of mouth from other teens.
Discussion

Youth activist work has great potential in public library spaces. However, this work takes time and effort to organize and coordinate. Before this work can happen, librarians must build relationships and listen to what work youth are interested in and immerse themselves in the information and culture of youth. These programs aren’t scripted curriculum, but require authentic engagement between the librarian and the youth. It has to come from a place of passion and compassion for youth in their community. The below recommendations for youth-activism programming emerged from two youth-centered theories: connected learning and critical social theory of youth empowerment.

Interest-Driven Programming

Best practices for youth activism programming emerge from the connected learning theory. Connected learning stresses the importance of community resources and interest-driven learning. In their report, Ito et al says “connected learning takes root when young people find peers who share interests…and when community institutions provide resources and safe spaces for more peer-driven forms of learning” (2013, p. 8). Their research also advocates for schools to embrace interest-driven learning. But as a community institute, regardless of school systems, public libraries can share their space and resources. Both Paige and Donna’s programs illustrate the power when librarians partner with the community. They both reached out to the community to build relationships and ensure that their programs were appropriate and relevant to their youth.
Participation

These librarians also demonstrated how librarians in general can create programs with meaningful participation. As Paige and Donna facilitated instead of led youth programming, their young people were able to practice important life skills throughout the different programs. Connected learning stresses the importance of preparing “…young people for contributing and participating in social life, which includes economic activity but also civic society, family and community” (2013, p. 34). These programs connected youth with outside partners. Specifically, Donna’s weekly teen program gave teens a space to participate in both their social life and in the community. Similarly, the youth at Paige’s library participated in civic society by partnering with various community organizations to facilitate a critical conversation around their local school district.

Adult Power

Connected learning critiques how “learning is most commonly organized in a structured, standardized and institutionalized format, guided by adults, and social relationships center on adults who have the power to offer rewards and recognition” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 65). These librarians disrupt this system by providing youth an opportunity to explore learning outside the structured norms of schools. Paige and Donna shared what this kind of learning looks like. It is iterative and messy and especially uncomfortable for adults who are used to leading. As the adults in the room, it is important to check that privilege, and to give youth a voice in the planning and implementation of the program.
Welcoming Environment

Library spaces themselves are changing to accommodate different and innovative programs. Quiet corners in the library and spaces filled with just books don’t foster the sense of community and comradery that’s essential to youth activist work. Librarians working with youth need to understand that before any activist work can happen, youth must feel comfortable in the library space. Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment (CYE) highlights the importance of welcoming social environments, describing it as:

“a social space in which young people have freedom to be themselves, express their own creativity, voice their opinions in decision making processes, try out new skills and roles, rise to challenges, and have fun in the process” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 41).

Despite not having a dedicated teen librarian, Nancy transformed the teen space into a community reflecting the above quote. She fostered relationships with her youth interns, engaging them in dialogue to ensure that the space was welcoming to other youth. In their other spaces, Donna and Paige provide various social spaces for youth to be themselves and hang out.

Critical Reflection

As librarians create spaces and opportunities for youth-focused programming, space for critical reflection is essential to successful development of socially active youth. Critical reflection goes beyond basic assessment and reflection of program activities. Jennings et al (2006) explain that the challenge of critical reflection is to

“provide youth opportunities to engage in integrated participatory cycle of critical reflection…with the goal of creating change in sociopolitical processes, structures, norms, and images” (p. 47).
For librarians to create these opportunities they must be attuned to the realities in their communities.

The librarians in this study all demonstrated in-depth knowledge of the socio-economic realities of their communities. Nancy understood that while her branch was in a wealthy neighborhood, this was not representative of the larger city community. Donna knew the breakdown of her various communities in her county, touching on frustrations regarding inequitable public services that reflect the larger economic inequities in some communities. Similarly, Paige understood the harsh realities of her community, but also understood these harsh statistics of poverty did not entirely define her community. These librarians had the knowledge that helped them to guide youth in their own critical reflection.

However, it’s impossible to know everything and community partners can help to fill a void of knowledge on a topic. As Donna explained, her youth were speaking up about experiences with bullying because of their gender and sexual identity, she acknowledged that she might not have the full set of skills to assist youth. She partnered with the local LGBTQ+ center to learn more the community, and the resources. When librarians partner with community organizations they bring in expects on all kinds of topics that in turn can create opportunities for youth to critically reflect.

Lastly, the method of reflection is also important to consider when creating these spaces for youth. Jennings et al (2006) said that “in addition to developing skills in facilitating critical reflection, adult leaders need to consider methods that appeal to young people. Photography, music, theater, and graphic arts can serve as triggers for reflection” (p. 48). Paige described this when she provided space for youth to reflect on Childish
Gambino’s piece “This is America.” Popular culture allows for youth to connect these deeper conversations to their interests. As Paige said, if you walk up to a youth and ask if they want to talk about “critical consciousness,” there response will likely be “get out of my face.”

**LIS Education**

The above tenets are a roadmap to creating and providing spaces that empower youth to raise their voice. But I had to ask – is current library science education preparing librarians for this kind of work? The librarians interviewed all received library science degrees from an ALA accredited institution. However, they didn’t all feel that their programs had prepared them for activist conversations in their spaces.

Librarians are reaching out into the community, but our education still focuses on the building and the books and the resources. While this information is important librarians, especially public librarians, should focus more on community development. Donna said “I think there was always sort of this idea that librarians are activists…like our principles will make us activists. But in practice, more often than not, those principles create kind of a binary that gets in the way of just being human.” LS education should be more reflective about current policies and practices that create these barriers. Librarians should actively work to disrupt this binary. It is a direct barrier to creating the kinds of welcoming and brave spaces that are needed to provide youth activist programming.

Paige explained that in her program “We did not talk about oppressive systems, you know what I mean? There is no social justice class.” Without even talking about “activism,” library programs need to discuss realities of oppressive systems and address the history of libraries in these systems. The frustration youth feel and the stories they
advocate for are things that often don’t have a place in classrooms. Youth want to speak out against oppression and inequality, and they need places for critical reflection. Unless librarians learn the basics of systemic oppression they won’t be able to provide these places. The librarians in this study all educated themselves, either from taking classes in other departments or reaching out to community partners. But because this work is essential to providing youth spaces to be activist, these concepts should be taught in LS classes.

For the profession to avoid the “binary” that Donna spoke about library science education needs to become more interdisciplinary. Paige suggests that any library science program educating public librarians “should have social work courses embedded into the curriculum.” Many schools have social workers on the staff and some public libraries employ social workers. There’s not consistent representation of social workers in library spaces, but it is a growing trend in the professional conversations. Paige spoke about how many of her middle-class white colleagues experienced burn-out their first year as a public librarian because they were unfamiliar with severe poverty. Library classes need to respond and create programs that graduate informed librarians, prepared to work with all their patrons.
Conclusion

The librarians in this study transformed their youth programming to provide spaces for youth to lead with purpose. In order to provide youth activist focused programs, librarians need to fundamentally shift the way that they organize programs and interact with youth and the larger community. The work here indicates that teen librarians can do so much more than just check out books and run summer reading programs.

Librarians need to build relationships with their youth community before any kind of programming is developed. Relationships lay the ground work for the sometimes-difficult conversations that come with youth activist work. Trust must be built between adults and youth before youth feel comfortable raising their voices. Libraries provide a place outside of school where youth can build those relationship with adults, spanning many years, because unlike the school year, youth won’t change librarians every year.

Part of building relationships with youth is providing a space to listen to them. Youth should feel like the library staff cares about them and wants to hear what they have to say. Librarians need to listen to youths lived experience, their interests, their hobbies. Listening to youth helps librarians to ensure that any programs or ideas that they have are meeting the needs of their youth. Donna’s youth had a very specific need for a safe space to discuss their experiences as LGBTQ youth. On the other hand, Paige’s youth wanted to express their frustration about their school district and larger systems of oppression.

Librarians need to ensure that as they provide opportunities for youth to speak out that they aren’t the loudest voice. Part of the power of youth activism is the space for
youth to organize, lead, and make their thoughts known. Some adults love to look down on youth, saying that they are too young for this. But, as we’ve seen when youth organize, their actions have power. Librarians need to take the role of facilitator, supporting youth and providing resources as the youth call the shots. As community employees, librarians are perfectly situated to connect youth to other resources and organizations that can help them raise their voice. Part of being a facilitator is understanding that you can’t know it all.

The spaces were these programs take place look different from typical library spaces with an emphasis on books. Youth spaces in libraries should enable relationship building and hanging out. This means emphasizing conversation more than quiet. Librarians are also incorporating more digital tools and resources to connect youth to more resources and to provide for more creative collaboration. As more librarians work to incorporate youth activism into their practice youth all around will be able to raise their voice. In an interview with a youth activist, youth pushed back against the narrative that they are amazing because it “assumes that most youth are not capable of such involvement. In making youth activism extraordinary, they argued, the discourse of specialness or exceptionalism associates the social category of youth with inaction and inability” (Gordon & Taft, 2011, p. 1506).

As librarians open their hearts and spaces to their youth, providing that essential place for youth activism, we need to ensure that we aren’t continuing this narrative of exceptionalism. There is a balance between empowering youth and upholding a harmful narrative that excludes some from raising their voice. If more librarians work to listen and uplift the youth voice, this assumption of youth apathy can be discounted.
Limitations of study

Professional organizations like YALSA and NCTE are continuing conversations around youth activism and student voice. Everyday librarians are listening to students, connecting with new partners, building activist programming and sharing their stories with the larger professional community. However, at the time of my research the conversation around youth activism in the library was limited. My three librarians had already run through their programs, so all my research was based in reflection and recollection. I was also physically limited in my location. While I would have loved to observe the spaces and see the teens interact with the librarians, I was limited to interviews.

Future Research

As the conversation around youth activism expands, so will the opportunities for research. My study focused on public libraries, but school librarians also organize student activist work. I hope to expand my research to the school library. A lot of research focuses on youth or teen activist work, with little consideration to children. A future study could look at how schools and public libraries are teaching children about civic engagement, how can elementary age children participate in the community and let their voices be heard? Hopefully, the conversation about youth activism and advocacy will only grow.
Works Cited


https://durhamcountylibrary.org/about/


https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-lives-gun-violence-florida-shooting_us_5a8f1a11e4b00804dfe6a466


Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Background:

Must Ask:
- How long have you worked as a librarian?
  - Did you have a job before pursuing librarianship?
- How would you describe the community you serve?
- How much of your job involves planning and implementing programs for youth/teens?

Time-permitting:
- Why is youth activism important to you?
  - Have you seen any benefits in your community? What kind?
- Was activism an interest of yours before becoming a librarian?
  - What started your interest in activism?

Critical Youth Empowerment
- How did you cultivate a welcoming environment for your teens?
- Have you partnered with any community groups or schools related to your teen activism programs?
  - How did this partnership improve or hinder your program[s]?
- How would you describe the balance between yourself and the teens in terms of who plans and leads the programs?

Connected Learning
- How does teen interests factor into your teen programming?
- Are there pop-culture connections to your activism program?
- Were there any existing online communities or organizations that helped you in developing the program

Training (Time-permitting)
- What community partnerships have you developed when planning youth activist events?
- Did your LS degree help equip you with resources for this kind of work?
- Are there any local groups, Communities of Practice that help you in developing activist programming?
Appendix 2: UNC IRB Approval

OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS
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Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7097
(919) 966-3113
Web site: ohre.unc.edu
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #4801

To: Brittany Soder
School of Information and Library Science

From: Office of Human Research Ethics

Date: 8/31/2018
RE: Notice of IRB Exemption
Exemption Category: 2. Survey, interview, public observation
Study #: 18-1932

Study Title: Children Should be Seen and Heard: A Case Study on Youth Activism in Public Libraries
This submission has been reviewed by the Office of Human Research Ethics and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Study Description:
Purpose: My study will look at how youth service librarians create and support youth activism programming in their libraries. Using Critical Youth Empowerment Theory and the Connected Learning Pedagogy, I want to explore if libraries are a place, outside of the classroom, that can help to teach youth, typically marginalized, how to use their voice for good.

Participants: Participants will be adult librarians, employed at various libraries around the country.

Procedures (methods): This project is a mixed-methods study. Interviews with librarians and content analysis will be the main methods of this study.
Investigator’s Responsibilities:
If your study protocol changes in such a way that exempt status would no longer apply, you should contact the above IRB before making the changes. There is no need to inform the IRB about changes in study personnel. However, be aware that you are responsible for ensuring that all members of the research team who interact with subjects or their identifiable data complete the required human subjects training, typically completing the relevant CITI modules.

Please be aware that approval may still be required from other relevant authorities or "gatekeepers" (e.g., school principals, facility directors, custodians of records), even though the project has determined to be exempt.

CC:
Casey Rawson, School of Information and Library Science