

Creating Community in the Library: A Sociological Exploration of the
Importance of Teen's Access to Equitable Third Places

by

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Community is critical. It provides resources, serves as a social outlet, and creates a sense of belonging, purpose, and togetherness. For youth, most time is spent at home or school. While these spaces can provide community, they are compulsory. Consider: what spaces are accessible and desirable for youth to *choose* to spend their time at and forge community? And, how can these third places be used to challenge systems of inequality and oppression? My research is a sociological exploration of the importance of third places for youth, with a specific focus on public libraries as that third place. I utilize both a literature review and interviews to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the role libraries play as third places in teens' lives. My conclusions will be discussed through a comparison between my findings and the pre-existing literature. I anticipate this project will expand the understanding of the dynamic between public libraries, youth, and inequality and, ultimately, draw larger conclusions about why having equitable access to third places is vital for youth.

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Introduction

Third places – public places outside of the home and school or work – are critical to the social fabric of society. They provide a social outlet, resources, and a place to hang out and call one’s own. Think of, for instance, a pub, a knitting group, the local rec center, or a playground. Third places, however, chronically exclude or are hostile to a key demographic: teenagers. Existing research points to third places, as they currently exist, as being largely unfriendly to teens. This is largely due to both the financial barriers often required to enter third places and the expectation that teens will cause a disturbance. These issues reflect a greater problem which is that few third places exist *for* teens. This prompts the question, why is it then that there are so few third places designed with teens in mind? And, why does teens’ access to – or lack thereof – third places matter?

In my thesis I explore the subject of teens and third places by studying a third place that *is* accessible to teens: public libraries. I focus specifically on three public libraries in Oregon that have teen rooms, teen programming, and/or general teen services. My conclusions are drawn from interviews with four librarians who work specifically with teens at these three libraries, as well as a literature review. These two pieces will, in conjunction, allow me to better understand the importance of third places for teens and the ways in which public libraries can fulfill that role.

Research Questions

The following questions are what guided my research for my literature review, my interview sessions, analysis, and concluding thoughts for my thesis:

1. Why is it important for teens to have equitable access to third places?
2. How can public libraries fulfill the role of third place for teens?
3. Why is the community created by libraries important for teens?
4. How do third places, like public libraries, challenge systems of oppression and inequality?

With these guiding questions in mind, I sought to better understand the ways in which public libraries are uniquely situated to support teens and be an equitable third place for teens.

Methods

My research consists of a literature review and a series of four interviews with public librarians in the state of Oregon who work regularly with teens. All four librarians were located either in major cities of Oregon or suburbs of major cities in Oregon. It should be noted that two of the four worked at the same library but held different positions. Their titles include: Teen Services Librarian; Teen Librarian; Community Engagement Librarian; and, Youth Services Supervisor. My goal for conducting interviews was to develop a better understanding of how teen spaces function and what contributes to those spaces succeeding as an equitable, welcoming third place for teens. I will use the information gleaned from my literature review in conversation with my interviews to draw my conclusions.

Participants for interviews were recruited in two ways. First, I cold emailed librarians whose email addresses were posted online asking if they or anyone they knew would be interested in being interviewed and included a brief description of my project and its goals. Second, I uploaded a recruitment flier that was posted to a Facebook group specifically for librarians in the Pacific Northwest. I also included a brief description of the project and its goals. Interviews took place both in person and via Zoom. All names and other identifiable information have been changed to protect the identities of interviewees. It should also be noted that my research was deemed exempt by the IRB because of the low risk it posed to those interviewed.

Literature Review

Third Places

Third places are “informal public gathering places” that are accessible to the community and serve as a space for folks to spend time together, exchange ideas, and form relationships (Oldenburg 1996: 6, 8). Think of, for example, community centers, coffeeshops, parks, restaurants, and bars (Jeffres et al. 2009). The theory of third places positions the home to be the first place and work – or school – to be the second. While home and work or school are compulsory spaces, third places are those where folks elect to spend their time; it is where they choose to be in community with others.

There are several characteristics that classify a space as a third place. In his book, *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg lists these characteristics as being: on neutral ground; a social leveler; a place where conversation is the main activity; accessible and accommodating to all; having the presence of “regulars”; a place with a low profile; having a light mood; and, serving as a “home away from home” (1999: 22-42). Third places, as conceived by Oldenburg, are an inviting, accessible, and enjoyable space. I will dive further into the following characteristics that are important for this study: *leveler* and *home away from home*.

An important characteristic to highlight is what Oldenburg refers to as third places being a “leveler” (1999: 23). *Leveler* refers to the way in which status is minimized in a third place setting. In contrast to the first and second places which are (typically) driven by power dynamics, the third place offers an opportunity for all attendees to be on an equal level. No one plays “host” or sees their fellow attendees as in less or more power than themselves because power dynamics are non-existent (Goosen and Cilliers 2020; Jeffres et al. 2009: 5). The third place is, as Oldenburg explains, “...by its nature, an inclusive place,” because of its accessibility and lack of

exclusion (1999: 24). Consequently, social status that exists generally in the world (such as socio-economic status, age, race, etc.) is minimized in third places, allowing folks of all “socio-economic strata” to not just be included but also flourish socially (Jeffres et al. 2009: 5; Oldenburg 1999: 24-25).

Leveler, in the context of libraries, is complicated. While power dynamics do not exist from library user to library user they certainly exist between users and librarians. However, I do not believe these power dynamics exist in the same way they would between a parent and child, teacher and student, or boss and employee, for example. This is because, while librarians are in charge of the library, their role is centered around helping users; their role is akin to customer service, not a boss.

Another characteristic of third places that is key to my research is the feeling of the third place as being a “home away from home” (Oldenburg 1999: 38). In his explanation, Oldenburg highlights a particular definition of home as being “a congenial environment” and argues this definition is much more aptly fit to describe a public environment, like a third place, than a private one (Ibid.). “The home *roots* us,” Oldenburg continues, “...it provides a physical center around which we organize...” (Ibid.). And while such a definition can apply to the literal home, it can also be applied to third places which can provide the same grounding through their reliable and welcoming presence in individuals’ lives. Both the place itself and the regulars who occupy it, serve as a stable presence in one another’s lives, like a family would. Further, the third place acts as a home away from home by allowing its participants to exist freely in the space (Oldenburg 1999: 40-41). This, according to Oldenburg, manifests as both an ability for attendees to make the space their own as well as feel comfortable *being* in the space (Ibid.). For example, one might refer to a third place they frequent as being “my” or “our” hangout, etc. The

use of possessive terms like *my* or *our* communicates a sense of ownership over the space; it reveals the levelness of the third place; everyone is able to feel like the space is *theirs* to exist in (Oldenburg 1999: 40). Additionally, this indicates folks' comfortable being themselves in the space. While at work or school, for example, one may have to put on a false front to fit the environment, the third place allows folks to simply be. Oldenburg explains this is "a matter of leaving one's mark" on a space (1999: 41).

Benefits of Participating in Third Places

Participation in third places is beneficial to the well-being of the people they serve. Generally, having access to a third place increases the quality of life – both real and perceived – of community members individually and collectively (Jeffres et al. 2009: 13). Access to third places "offers stress relief from the everyday demands of both home and work," for individuals, and, "provides the feeling of inclusiveness and belonging associated with participating in a group's social activities, without the rigidity of policy or exclusiveness of...membership," (Jeffres et al. 2009: 6). Oldenburg lists the key personal benefits third places provide as being: a vehicle for novelty in day-to-day life; a method of gaining perspective and improving one's outlook; a source of one's "daily pick-me-up"; and, an easy place to commune with many friends at once (1999: 43-44).

"Novelty" is one of Oldenburg's key benefits of third place participation (Oldenburg 1999: 44-48). Novelty is the conglomeration of the unexpected and unpredictable occurrences and interactions in a person's day (Ibid.). For example, the pleasant interaction with a stranger on the basketball court; running into an old friend at the mall; etc. Third Places create novelty for folks in many ways. For instance, third places' loose, informal structures create spontaneity and unpredictability to attendees' experiences; no two days at a given third place are the same

(Oldenburg 1999: 46). The fluidity of experiences starkly contrasts the typically predictable nature of the first and second places.

Novelty, Oldenburg explains, is largely created by conversation – one of third places' defining characteristics (1999: 26-31, 46-47). Conversation functions differently in the first and second place in comparison to the third. While in the first and second places, conversation is largely used to resolve issues (e.g. what are we going to have for dinner?; did you file the report?; etc.), in the third place, the primary function of conversation is entertainment (Oldenburg 1999: 46). For example, conversations of gossip, debate, and catching up are commonly found in the third place. And while entertaining conversation can occur in the first or second places, the power structures that exist in these spaces (for example, boss and employee, host and guest, parent and child, etc.) can impact the conversation in a way that a peer-to-peer conversation in a third place would not. Having access to third places provides a place for entertaining conversation where no one person has to take on the burden of leading the conversation, as a host might at a dinner party. Instead, everyone is equally invested in the conversation being entertaining and successful, everyone is on equal ground.

A key aspect that lends itself to the novelty of third places is the diverse population served by a third place. Diversity and novelty are undeniably linked to the greater perspective participation a third place creates. Through its accessible, welcoming nature, third places serve as a place to engage a wide range of people, all of whom have a wide range of experiences (Oldenburg 1999). Consequently, there is a greater opportunity for folks to engage with those whom they typically would not (Ibid.). Oldenburg explains:

There is a tendency for individuals to select their associates, friends, and intimates from among those closest to them in social rank. Third places, however, serve to expand possibilities...third places counter the tendency to be restrictive...by laying emphasis on qualities not...status... (Oldenburg 1999: 24).

Access to a third place is access to a diverse array of lived experiences, ideas, and perspectives. Such access is increasingly important in a society that remains segregated in many ways. Without such perspectives, people would (and often do) remain in a bubble, shielded from any lived experience different from their own. Exposure to those different from one's self helps foster a more empathetic and thoughtful society. Third spaces are a vehicle for that exposure to occur.

Novelty also refers to the mental relief third places provide for their participants. Individualism is an increasingly rampant ideology in the United States (Oldenburg 1999: 10). Engaging with public others, like the bus driver or store clerk for example, is discouraged through the social norms and structures of the "urban, industrialized society," which are "not conducive to good human relations" (Oldenburg 1999: 48). Third places, Oldenburg argues, counteract such obstacles and bring people together to share one another's company to create and unify the community (1996, 1999). And, importantly, while many would agree that "cultivating...social relationships and giving them their due" is critical to maintaining one's well-being, most people still "[err] in drawing [their] social circle too small" (Oldenburg 1999: 50). Further, Oldenburg asserts that the areas Americans tend to find stress relief in, focus on comfort over stimulation (think of, for example, online shopping or watching television), ultimately causing many Americans to increasingly spend time isolated in the home (the first place) (1999: 44). The alienation individualism creates is detrimental to the well-being of both individuals and the communities they occupy.

Participation in third places counters this issue of isolation and drawing one's social circle "too small" through their reliable and robust populations. Having a community to fall back on – even though who makes up that community on a given day is ever-changing – is important

to creating novelty in one's day-to-day life. Journalist Pete Hamill observes, "the most stopped-up, intellectually constipated, and unhappy [people] I know are those who work all day and go straight home to eat, watch TV, and sleep," he continues, "they have jobs and they have homes but they don't have a place to hang out" (Oldenburg 1999: 45). Hamill's point calls out the need for novelty in the human experience and highlights how such novelty can be created by participation in third spaces. Finding community with folks at a cafe or in a crafting group can bring excitement, stimulation, and fun to one's (possibly) otherwise mundane day.

Third places' light, easy-going energy also lends itself to humorous and fun interactions; the interactions within a third place are "a matter of 'making other peoples' day'" (Oldenburg 1999: 55). For instance, a space where one might crack a joke with a stranger or ask them how their day is. Oldenburg refers to the ease of third places as the German word, *gemütlich* (1999:56). He explains, "[a *gemütlich* place] carries an obligation of helping others feel at home," and it is a "...setting [that is] inviting to human beings –all of them" (Ibid.). The space a third place offers for friendly interaction and connection, regardless of identity, is what makes it a *gemütlich* place. A third place is a place for people to connect and for everyone to belong.

Are American Third Places Truly Equitable?

Third places, as previously established, refer to places of informal public life outside of the home and work (or school) where folks can relieve stress, socialize, and just be (Oldenburg 1999: 10). However, an area of concern with regards to third places is their increasing inaccessibility.

Inflation in the United States has been on the rise since taking off in mid-2021 and in tandem with the continued effects of the coronavirus pandemic (Egan 2023). Since the start of the pandemic, the cost of consumer goods has continued to rise while at the same time wages do

not, making it increasingly challenging for Americans to afford essentials, let alone luxuries. Take for instance a common example of a third place: the cafe. Between 2018 and 2022, the price per pound of coffee rose by over \$1, from \$1.03/lb in November 2018, to \$2.39/lb in August 2022 (Lerman and Wright 2023). Further, the cost of dairy milk has risen to “\$4.36 a gallon, up \$1 from four years ago, according to the U.S. Agriculture Department” (Ibid.). Consequently, the cost of coffee has risen, making the accessibility of the coffee shop as a recurring third place unsustainable for many. This, in turn, highlights why access to third spaces with no financial barriers is so important. Having access to community that is not contingent on a person’s socio-economic status is critical to ensuring third spaces live up to one of the defining characteristics of third places: everyone is welcome.

Third Places & Teens

An important dynamic to consider is the distinct relationship teens have to third places. Recognizing the unique experience of teens in third places is critical to recognizing teen as a unique age and stage of life. It would be unrealistic to expect teens to relate to third places the same as adults or children would. Oftentimes third places are built with strictly adults or children in mind. Think of, for instance, a bar or a playground. Neither of these places have space for teen use. There are few third places built specifically for teens. Instead, they are often forced into spaces too adult or too childish for them and consequently, the relationships teens have with third places is often strained. Owens notes, “the most frequent activity of teenagers,” is simply, “hanging out,” yet there are very few third places specifically built with this in mind (2002: 161). Further, places that might be more conducive to *hanging out*, like a cafe, have a financial barrier to entry, hindering many teens from entering frequently, if at all.

Additionally, while adults are readily welcomed into third places, there is often an apprehension toward teens; an assumption is made that any behavior or taking up of space is done so maliciously (Owens 2002). Commonly, “merchants, home-owners, and other...adults...ask teens that are not obviously engaged in inappropriate behaviors to go somewhere else because it is assumed that they will soon be causing trouble” (Owens 2002: 156). A study that focused on teen presence in malls in the UK found that 73% of boys and 69% of girls interviewed felt like they were being constantly surveilled while at the mall (Matthews et al. 2000). Various interviewees recalled times adults in the mall assumed their presence in the mall meant they were up to trouble (Ibid.). A teen recounted, “we were...just chatting,” when an adult came over to them and said, “we couldn’t stand there as we were blocking the way, yet there was plenty of space for people to pass” (Matthews et al. 2000: 289). Another interviewee elaborated, “they [adults] make you feel that you do not belong” (Matthews et al. 2000: 290).

These teen experiences at the mall illustrate the way teens are increasingly denied or limited in access to third places and the way in which rules are created that inhibit teens’ use of the space (Bernier 1998). This phenomenon of “systematically and intentionally [excluding]” teen and tween patrons is also referred to as the “geography of ‘no’” (Agosto et al. 2015: 24; Bernier 1998). Bernier explains, these third places, like the mall, “[design teens] out of physical space” by enforcing rules and policies banning specific behavior that targets teens (Bernier 1998: 52). A common example is the widespread implementation of skateboard ordinances that “[restrict] the use of skateboards in defined public areas” (Owens 2002: 158). These ordinances are often justified as preserving the public areas by “[removing] skateboarders from areas where they [could] interfere with the...enjoyment of others” (Ibid.). While this rule and others like it do not directly call out teens, they do impact them at a high rate, as skating is a popular

activity/sport for teenagers. The citation of skating interfering with others' enjoyment of the space clearly denotes the space as being built for everyone *but* skaters. It is through these ordinances, teens are told no and to go elsewhere; this space is not for them to enjoy.

Consequently, teens and tweens are limited with where they can freely behave like the young people they are (Bernier et al. 2014: 167). This is troublesome because it leaves few places for teens to congregate outside of the first and second places (home and school and/or work). Oldenburg highlights how this is an issue, describing, "The...teenager...soon acts like an animal in a cage. He or she paces, looks unhappy and uncomfortable...there is no place to which they can escape and join their own kind" (1999: 6).

Teens' relationships to third places is uniquely complicated because it is entirely antithetical to what a third place should be and provide. As previously mentioned, third places are defined by characteristics such as a lack of hierarchy; they are accessible with "no physical, policy, or monetary barriers"; and they "[provide] the feeling of inclusiveness and belonging" (Jeffres et al. 2009: 5-6). Yet, teens are not given the same opportunity as adults or children to experience the inclusivity, warmth, and welcoming third place when they are expected to cause trouble and are purposefully excluded from spaces. The speculation and intense regulation disproportionately cater to adult audiences and ultimately make the space unwelcoming specifically for teens.

Youth, Inequity, & Third Places

While this research primarily focuses on third places, it is important to recognize the impact the first (home) and second (work/school) places have on a person. Understanding the relationship between a person and the first and second spaces in their life can help to better conceptualize the role third places play.

For youth, typically, there is not much, if any, autonomy in their first and second places. Both home and school are rigidly ingrained into youths' lives; most young people rely on their caregiver(s) for their basic needs and attendance at school is compulsory. Thus, young people are bound to these first and second places. And, consequently, the home and school serve as the primary and secondary avenues for socialization. Meaning, the home and school – and the people, attitudes, and values within them – have a lot of influence not only on what youth view as important but also on who they are as a whole.

Teens' relationships to the first and second places in their lives highlights why it is so vital that they also have access to third places. Third places, unlike first and second places, are an opportunity for teen independence. Unlike home and school, that are ruled by power structures (for example, the dynamic of parent and child; or, teacher and student), third places are a space where teens can exercise their independence and have the “freedom to be” (Oldenburg 1998: 41). This notion of *freedom to be* is crucial because it allows teens to exist in a space without the pressure of performing for other peoples' values. Instead, it is an opportunity for them to explore who they are and what is important to them outside of their family and school. Further, it is a place for teens to explore their identities *together* and find shared values, shared interests, and foster community.

Public Libraries

Libraries are another example of a third place. There is no fee, restriction, or qualification to be at the library. All are welcome. Consequently, libraries have been deemed “*the last true public space* in our cities” (Freeman and Blomley 2019: 200). In the following sections I discuss the history of libraries in the US; the dynamic of teens in the library; and libraries as a third place.

An Abridged History of Libraries in the United States

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, public libraries began to boom throughout the United States (Kevane and Sundstrom 2014: 117). The growth of public libraries was a result of the “nation’s broader educational movement,”; widespread access to public libraries meant greater access to educational tools which ultimately helped support the country’s new compulsory schooling mandate (Kevane and Sundstrom 2014: 118).

Many public libraries in the US began as what was referred to as “social libraries”; social libraries were a private, collaborative collection of books put together by a group of people who paid to be a part of the group (Kevane and Sundstrom 2014: 126). While social libraries offered access to both reading materials and a group to socialize with, their financial barrier made them inaccessible to the general public. Simultaneous to the existence of social libraries, was the slow growth of local public libraries. Public libraries benefitted from the existence of social libraries as “when the members of library society lost interest in their collection, they often turned it over to the town government” who then used such resources to equip the local public library’s collection (Ibid.). The growing collection and free access to the public libraries drove its membership while social libraries’ membership declined (Ibid.).

The switch from social libraries, which excluded those who could not afford to be a member, to public libraries is a reflection of the aforementioned initial goal of libraries: making knowledge and educational tools more accessible and widespread (Dain 1996). Currently, public libraries seek to meet the same goal for their patrons. By offering free membership, access to knowledge is “[equalized] and [enlarged],”; folks who may not have access to the internet, quality education, or the ability to buy books are able to obtain such resources (Dain 1996: 72). Such access is particularly pressing because of the educational inequities that exist within the

US. Urban schools, whose populations are typically to be students of lower socio-economic statuses and/or students of color, tend to have fewer and, often, inadequate resources for their students (Taines 2010: 423). Consequently, students at urban and rural schools often do not have the same opportunities for academic success as their suburban peers.

Historically, like many other institutions in the US, libraries were originally developed to only serve white Americans. Like school, libraries were segregated and significantly less accessible to or robust for Black Americans. While white communities throughout the nation received generous grants from Andrew Carnegie to build, refurbish, or expand libraries, Black communities often relied on grassroots fundraising to establish a library for themselves (Kevane and Sundstrom 2014: 130; Fultz 2006: 341). And while throughout the 20th century (prior to the abolishment of de jure segregation) Black libraries continued to grow, this growth was not sustained nor was it equitable in comparison to white Americans' libraries (Fultz 2006: 342).

Notably, some libraries in the southern US began to desegregate prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954; a "survey of chief librarians in...13 southern states" found that "African Americans in 59 localities had "free use/full service" of the main public library; 24...provided African Americans with some degree of "limited service"...; and 11 had one or more branches that served patrons regardless of race" (Fultz 2006: 346-7). However, it should be noted that though these libraries took steps toward desegregation, such action did not come easily. Black activists organized "read-ins" (much like the sit-ins of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s) in which they would sit in the "whites-only" section at libraries, the first of which occurred in 1939 in Alexandria, Virginia (Fultz 2006: 347-8). These sit-ins were an organized, peaceful way to communicate the desire for access to equitable library services.

Despite the desegregation of the public library, racial bias within the library persisted. It was not uncommon for formerly segregated libraries to retain limitations “on borrowing books and reference materials” as well as “the use of periodical collection, and on where African Americans might sit” (Fultz 2006: 347). Black youth were specifically targeted through sporadic policies that restricted resources in the library by age (Ibid.).

Libraries both reflect and disrupt systems of oppression. Despite working to make resources available for everyone, disparities still exist among libraries and the lingering consequences of segregation and racial discrimination remain. Like schools and other tax-funded institutions, libraries face the consequences of gerrymandering which work to maintain modern day segregation (Nelson 2015). Consequently, libraries in historically poor, BIPOC communities, receive less funding, limiting the resources and services they can provide the communities they serve.

Libraries & Teens

The goal of having a “Young Adult” (often referred to as YA) section in a library is to promote literacy and reading for youth and that can only be done if teens want to be there (Jenkins 2000: 118). A 2005 study of middle schoolers’ perceptions of public libraries concluded “that the overall image of the public library declines steadily with [the respondent’s] age” (Howard 2011: 322). The question then becomes, how do you tailor the YA space to be appealing to its desired teen audience?

While the graduation out of the children’s section of the library may be liberating for some teens, it can also be difficult to navigate. The design, or lack thereof, of the YA section of a public library is an example of the aforementioned “geography of ‘no’” – the systematic and intentional exclusion of teens from a given space – and is, therefore, a barrier to teen presence in

the library (Bernier 1998: 52.; Bernier et al. 2014: 167). While most libraries have a YA section, they are often diminutive in comparison to the children's and general (adult) sections of the library (Agosto et al. 2015: 23). Some teens described the YA section of their local library as a "creepy corridor," "like a jail cell," and "depressing...dark and dingy" (Howard 2011: 340). And while, in actuality these teens' libraries are likely not like a *jail cell*, the attitudes and perceptions of the teens are real and valid. Though it may not be intentional, the space given (or not) to teens sends a distinct message: the library does not care about teens.

In addition to the physical makeup of a YA space being important to teen attendance, so are the programming and services offered (Agosto et al. 2015: 25). A 2006 study of attitudes of a newly designed YA section found the "quality and character of the activities and services" to be an important factor in determining if a teen would go to and stay in the space (Ibid.). Because of the impact the service and programs offered have on teen attendance, Agosto et al. urge librarians to consider the bigger picture when imagining a teen space (2015: 26). Rather than focusing only on "what should *be* in a space," librarians should shift their focus on "what should *happen* in the space," which requires the consideration of "structure, design, and purpose" in conjunction with one another (Ibid.). Structuring a YA space around set goals for what librarians want participants to get out of the space allows them to be more successful in reaching their goals.

In addition to considering librarians' goals for the space, it is vital to consider the wants of the teens using the space. A 2011 quantitative and qualitative study of Canadian youths' perceptions of public libraries found that most surveyed had a positive opinion of the library (Howard 2011: 322). And while positive perception is important, it is not enough; the same study also found that 40% of surveyors "rarely visited the library because they simply did not think

about it” (Ibid.). Such data suggests including and listening to teen voices and perspectives can help make the YA spaces, and overall library, a more welcoming, desirable place to be for teens. In 2012, the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) – a branch of the American Library Association chiefly concerned with promoting library attendance for teens and the implementation of “equitable, diverse and inclusive teen services” within the library – published a set of guidelines for creating an effective and engaging YA library space (Young Adult Library Services Association National Teen Space Guidelines: 2012; Agosto et al. 2015: 24). Their guidelines included the following: “making teens feel included and welcomed..., designing spaces to support teens’ informational needs, and designing with flexibility in mind to meet the evolving goals and purposes of public library services” (Agosto et al. 2015: 24). YALSA’s guidelines were created to address and combat the disconnection so many teens reported feeling toward their public library. Publishing YALSA’s guidelines sparked an uptick in conversations and research into how to better design YA spaces leading to researchers to point to one overarching solution: the design of the YA section of a library should be driven by the specific wants, needs, and ideas of the young adults it intends to serve (Velasquez 2016: 49; Howard 2011: 324; Bernier et al. 2014: 175; Agosto et al. 2015: 25). Including teens in the design process of their space will lead teens to “be more likely to accept and use the library” as they will feel more ownership and agency over it (Agosto et al. 2015: 25).

A survey of twenty libraries throughout the United States, including the eight libraries with the highest youth participation index, “reported that their YA spaces are actively administered by a YA advisory group” (Bernier et al. 2014: 175). Meaning, there is an association between direct input from teens on how a YA section of a library should look and function and youth participation within and satisfaction with their library. A teen-driven model

strengthens teens' relationships to their community, creates a sense of ownership within the teen intended space, and ensures that librarians can hone in on addressing what is important to teens, rather than what adults (often falsely) perceive to be important to teens (Ibid.; Velasquez 2016: 49). Researcher Vivian Howard's 2011 study on teens' attitudes toward public libraries found that many participants expressed wanting the library to serve as a social outlet (2011: 340). However, this want directly challenges the historical quietness of the library. Spaces in the library are typically designed to suit the purpose of reading and researching, which is incongruent with the teens' desire to socialize. This error in design and lack of accounting for teens' needs from the space can, perhaps, dissuade teens from then using or being in the space. Howard's research yielded suggestions from teens such as placing couches, bean bag chairs, and other relaxed seating options that allow for both socialization and comfort when reading in the YA section (2011, 341). By focusing first on how the space will function and then on what designs will support such outcomes, librarians can better meet the needs of teens. Shifting the design of the YA section to be teen-driven, libraries would become a warmer, more inviting space for teens, ultimately helping the library work toward its goal of encouraging reading and literacy (Elmborg 2011: 340; Jenkins 2000: 118).

Despite the research pointing toward youth involvement having a positive impact on youth participation in the library, a 2014 survey of library and information science professionals found that a "majority of survey respondents indicated low levels of youth participation in the design of their YA space" (Agosto et al. 2015: 26). These findings reflect the aforementioned "geography of 'no'" that teens so often face (Bernier 1998). There is, perhaps, an assumption that teens do not care or that they will not take participation seriously, etc. In turn, the decision of participation in teen room design is made *for* teens rather than *by* teens. And, this points to a

disconnect between libraries and the teens they serve and poses the question of how librarians can not only make teens space for teens to voice their opinions and needs regarding the libraries, but also create a situation where they feel comfortable doing so.

Libraries As a Third Place

For the purposes of this thesis, I focus specifically on public libraries as a third place. Public libraries meet the definition of what qualifies a place as a third place: they are a free, accessible space where all are equally welcomed, and can socialize. Libraries “[anchor] people to community,” and, “[foster a] sense of fellowship, civic participation, democratic life” (Dain 1996: 72).

Libraries, as previously mentioned, are often regarded as the “last true public space in...cities” (Freeman and Blomley 2019: 200). This is largely because of their radical acceptance of all who enter. A core value of many public libraries is that it is a space that is “open and inclusive,” and where “everyone is welcome” (Freeman and Blomley 2019: 211). Unlike a cafe, for example, which typically requires attendees to purchase something in order to occupy the space, libraries are absolutely free. The aforementioned rising cost of goods and services leaves libraries as one of the few third spaces that are accessible to folks who may struggle financially. This is especially pertinent for those who are unhoused, and may not be welcome in other public or third places. Access to a third place, like the library, is increasingly important for unhoused folks as the criminalization of homelessness continues to increase in the United States. The National Homelessness Law Center found that between 2006 to 2019, citywide bans on camping increased by 92% and, “during that same time frame, citywide bans on sleeping in public increased 50 percent; on sitting and lying in public spaces by 78 percent; on loitering by 103 percent; and on living in vehicles by 213 percent” (Dholakia 2022). The library can be a

sanctuary from this criminalization unhoused people face simply for being unhoused. It is the equalizer; a place to *be* without fear.

The library's inclusiveness offers ample opportunity for informal socialization to occur. This is because, like Oldenburg described, libraries present the opportunity to meet folks one might not interact with in other contexts. Libraries are a space where everyone in a neighborhood can commune together; it is a neutral space where everyone belongs. Consequently, third places “[strengthen] community ties,” and “[provide] a feeling of safety and security” within a given community (Jeffres et al. 2009: 6).

In addition to their inclusion of all, libraries also work to actively challenge various disparities – most notably economic inequality – plaguing marginalized folks who are systematically denied equitable access to quality and robust resources. This is because in addition to being free to attend, libraries also provide free resources to community members such as books, access to the internet, access to outlets to charge devices, various classes, and reading groups to name a few. It is important to understand, in the United States, “economic resources and social-structure differentiation in general...are spatial...Income, education, [and] housing stock...are distributed unevenly across geographic space, often in conjunction with ascribed characteristics such as racial composition” (Sampson 1999: 247). The systematic denial of resources makes both the material resources and social capital provided by libraries all the more important and impactful. *Material resources* refers to the physical resources provided by the library, like books or access to the internet. Access to such resources “equalizes and enlarges access to knowledge”; as a result, more people are able to access information they might not otherwise have access to and, consequently, systems of power and oppression are challenged (Dain 1996: 72). The other kind of capital libraries provide, social capital, refers to the non-

physical resources the library offers, like community. Access to community creates opportunity through connection; for example, it may open doors to jobs, support groups, and other opportunities a person may not know about or have access to otherwise. Both the literal and social capital created through libraries and their resources work to better the lives of community members and challenge the systems of oppression they face.

Findings

In my analysis I break down the key themes that make public libraries equitable, welcoming, and a successful third place for teens. I analyze my interviews with four librarians who work directly with teens in three different libraries in the state of Oregon. I utilize the context and content derived from the previously existing literature to enhance my understanding of, and to frame my analysis of my findings from the interviews, with the ultimate goal of understanding how public libraries can fill the role of third place for teens. Further, I identify the ways in which libraries uniquely meet the needs of teens. The three overarching themes I explore are: “I’m Your Librarian”; “More Than Just Books”; and, “Everybody’s Welcome.”

“I’m *Your* Librarian”

The first unique characteristic of teen services within public libraries is their specific dedication to *teens*. Teen services are, as in the name, services *for teens*, and teens only. In my interviewees’ respective libraries this manifests as each library having a space dedicated for programs, events, books, resources, and librarians specifically for teen use.

Creating dedicated spaces for teens is vital because, as previously stated, there are few spaces in public society dedicated specifically to teen use (Owens 2002: 156). Further, teens are regularly and systematically excluded from general public spaces because of the popular assumption that they will misbehave or cause a disruption (Ibid.). In this section, I examine the ways in which libraries foster an environment specifically catered to teens and delve further into why such spaces are so pivotal to successfully meeting the needs of teens.

Teens Only

As mentioned, one of the key characteristics of teen services is their sole dedication to teens. Having a space designated specifically for teens is important beyond literally having somewhere for teens to go (though, that too should not be taken lightly). It is a validation of teenhood and the needs and wants of teens as unique and important. Louise, a Youth Services Supervisor, explained, having a dedicated teen space allows the library to better meet the needs of teens. Throwing teens in with children's services or the general library (which is aimed to serve an adult audience) would, likely, not meet all, if any, of the wants and needs teens have of their library. Louise elaborated:

[Teens] want and need a different kind of community than some of our adult patrons who want to come in and do research...most of our teens are not coming here to do research, they're coming here to see their friends or play the Xbox or make some art...or whatever it is we're doing [in the teen room].

Louise further emphasized what's most important is "creating a space that caters to what [teens] want to explore," in a way that is suited specifically for them. Having a space for teens only allows librarians, like Louise, to create that *different kind of community* and space that teens need. This is because it allows librarians to hone their focus on meeting teens' specific needs, rather than trying to please a wide range of folks, all of whom have different needs of the library.

It should be noted that not all teen programs and teen spaces function the same. Sam, a Community Engagement Librarian, explained that his library's policy has been lax regarding who can and cannot be in the teen room. Previously, the library staff had been looser with enforcing the "teens only" rule. Sam disclosed in the past they had allowed adults to use the computers in the teen room. While adults are no longer allowed to use the teen space computers,

Sam shared, “we don’t completely bar adults from the [teen] space,” explaining, tutors are often present to help teens study or complete schoolwork.

Sam’s library’s policies starkly contrast the other two libraries’ who are strict that the space is exclusively for teen use; all adults, besides librarians, are not allowed. Quinn, a Teen Librarian, explained it is only by barring adults from the space that it can truly be for the teens. By excluding adults from the space, Quinn shared, “[teens] have a sense of ownership,” over the space; it is *theirs* and *theirs alone*. This, again, relates back to the fact that there are few, if any, public spaces designed for and delegated to teens. Having a space of their own allows libraries to specifically meet the needs of teens and serve them in the most effective way.

Within teen services, something that is important to briefly note is the way libraries classify who is and is not a teen. For instance, Sam’s library classifies eligible members of the teen room by grade. He explained the teen room was dedicated for folks in “grades six through twelve.” Meaning, the teen room would have sixth and seventh graders occupying the space who were likely still “tweens” (11 and 12 year olds) alongside the teenagers (ages 13 through 18). In contrast, Dylan, a Teen Librarian, explained, for her teen room, “*teen* is 13 to 19.” She elaborated that extending teen to include 19 “gives [teens] one extra year of cushion to have...a gentle...handoff into new adulthood.” The distinction of who is and is not a teen matters when considering the goals of a given teen program. Dylan reflected:

It's very silly that society is like ‘Oh, once you turn 18 suddenly everything is magical and good and you will be fine.’...there's still so much that you have not yet experienced at that age that you are still learning about.

Extending teenhood both to include 6th and 7th graders who are likely not yet teens, as well as nineteen year olds recognizes those folks as existing in a limbo; they are in transition in and out of teenhood, both of which benefit from some cushioning.

Trusted Adults

All of the librarians interviewed communicated that their goal for teens services is for everyone to feel welcome, and librarians play a large role in fostering that energy. While how they take up the space varies, librarians are the grounding, ever-present force of the teen room. Several librarians brought up the important aspect of their role of being a consistent, trusted adult for these teens and how that impacted the culture of the space.

It was clear that librarians' intentionality in fostering relationships with the teens they serve is impactful. Louise explained, for example, how her staff is specifically trained on how to build relationships with teens. Louise specifically pointed out the importance of learning teens' names. She recounted:

I cannot tell you how many times a teen will come in and one of our staff members will be like, 'hey, whatever your name is,' ...and the teen will be like 'Oh! You know my name!' ...you come in every day. Of course we know your name. But it's a big deal to have your name be known. And I think that's a huge part of relationship building.

Knowing a person's name, as Louise pointed out, is the first step in fostering a relationship. It is opening the door to further connection and build trust. It sends the message you are known here; people care to know you.

Learning names was also emphasized among two of other librarians interviewed¹. Quinn added that one strategy she employs with her fellow teen librarians is challenging them to consider how they felt in public spaces as a teen: did *they* feel welcomed? Through these trainings she encourages staff to use their reflections of how they felt as a teen to fuel how the staff interact with teens in the library. She emphasized to me not only the importance of knowing their name but also asking "How are you?". She explained:

¹ It should be noted that one of the two worked at the same library as Louise and was operating under the same set of guidelines

We might be the only adult in their life who asks them how they're doing that day, which seems small...but it's actually major. If a teen feels invisible and unseen or unwelcome, to have an adult stop and say, 'hey, how's your day going?'...can make all the difference...I know them, I see them, and I want to talk to them and hear how they're doing.

Not only does this action of greeting strengthen the relationship between teens and their librarians, it also, again, works to foster a safe, welcoming environment for teens. It sends a clear message: you are seen, you are important, and you are welcomed here.

Consequently, several librarians interviewed described having strong relationships with the teens, especially those who came to the teen space regularly. Establishing a rapport grants some teens the comfort to let their librarians into what is going on in their lives; the feeling of safety created allows teens to not only share but also come to their librarians for help. This, Dylan shared, is the goal of teen librarianship. She elaborated:

If I'm doing my job right...at a certain point, we've built up a certain relationship of trust where [teens] feel like they can come to me and ask me questions about stuff. Things that they maybe don't feel comfortable asking their...immediate family or their teachers.

By building relationships, librarians are able to serve the role of trusted, safe adult for teens in the library. Dylan's point distinguishes the different roles different adults play in teens' lives and why that diversity of support is so important. She explains her role as "a safe person to talk to," who "[has] no skin in the game." This characterization is a direct contrast to the roles family members (1st place) and teachers (2nd place) have in a teen's life. While family members and teachers' goals in their relationships with teens connect back to them (for example: instilling values reflects on the family; performing well academically reflects on the teacher/school, etc.), librarians' relationships with teens is unique in that their goal is simply to support teens. The librarians exist in the space to meet and support teens, as directed by teens. This brings me to my next finding, the importance of meeting teens where they are at.

Meeting Teens Where They're At

An important point brought up by all four librarians was the consideration of teens' perspectives, wants, and needs. Though what meeting needs looked like in action differed among the librarians, the sentiment was the same: *I'm their librarian; I'm there to meet them where they're at; I'm there to serve them.* Meeting teens where they're at is the product of creating a safe place for teens and getting to know the teens being served. By fostering a strong, trusting relationship between librarians and teens, teens are able to feel more comfortable expressing their opinions, wants, and needs of librarians and the space and, in turn, librarians are better able to meet these wants and needs and, as Louise framed it, "connect with teens when they are ready."

Similarly, Quinn described her and other librarians' role as being "a part of [teens'] lives where they're at." She elaborated, "we just try to get to know them and where they're at and work with them where they're at, with what they want and not what we think they want or need." Both Quinn and Louise's teen-driven strategy highlight the way relationship building strengthens the overall effectiveness librarians can achieve in meeting teens' variety of needs. By strengthening relationships between teens and librarians, teens are better able to express their needs of the library, and, in turn, librarians are able to meet that need, ultimately, further strengthening the relationship.

In practice, meeting teens where they're at looks like a yes first approach. This directly contrasts the previously mentioned, the *geography of 'no'* that dominates teens' lives in the first, second, and other third places. Quinn explained:

'No' is not my first answer. It's always 'okay, let's see if we can figure it out.' And sometimes we can't, but then we work together to figure out another way or [how] to do something differently...[the teens] know they have a say; I work for them.

By working with teens to prioritize and enact what teens want out of the library, librarians are able to communicate to teens that their voices are important and matter. While in the first and second places, teens have limited, if any, autonomy, this yes forward policy grants teens ownership over the space.

“I...think it’s very easy to feel as a teen that you don’t have a voice or that nobody cares about your voice,” Louise observed. Listening to and working with teens to bring their ideas to life, not only bolsters the relationship between librarians and teens, but also validates teens’ ideas as important and valid. Further, bringing teen ideas to reality positively affects teen attendance and participation in the library. Dylan reported she and her colleagues noticed a positive correlation between teen attendance and participation in the library and seeing the library, librarians, and programs offered reflect teen interests and explicitly expressed desires. She explained this then often snowballed into teens bringing friends to the library and so on. This phenomenon reflects Oldenburg’s “home away from home” characteristic of third places (Oldenburg 1999: 38). The more input from teens is actualized, the more ownership teens feel they have over the space, ultimately making the teen room a space of and for the teens. Further, making teens feel heard and enacting their ideas ultimately works to make the space a more welcoming environment.

“More Than Just Books”

The second unique characteristic of teen services within public libraries is the resources they provide for teens. While libraries are generally regarded as a place where anyone can loan books, libraries always have and continue to provide so much more than books. In this next section, I highlight both the material resources and social capital libraries provide teens and why such resources are so critical.

Community

Something all four librarians interviewed brought up was the aspect of community within their library's teen room and services. In contrast to the stereotypical conception of the library which positions books as the focus, my interviews demonstrated that in the teen room community comes first.

The point of third places is to provide a space for people to be in community. Like adults and children, where teens find community is not a one size fits all situation. Different third places are (and are not) able to meet the needs of different teens. While some teens may find solace in organized religious groups or sports teams, others may not feel comfortable in or enjoy such spaces, let alone be able to access them. Teens need community and, as Quinn explains "that can be the library." Notably, all interviewees provided examples of both formal and informal programming, such as leaving art supplies out or hosting a book club. Such opportunities provide teens with the space to interact with their peers outside of school and find a community that suits their needs.

The library also provides teens with the opportunity to meet and create community with peers they otherwise might not meet or meaningfully engage with. The lack of barriers to participate in the library allows for the aforementioned *novelty* of third places to blossom; anyone can come so, in theory, a diverse group of teens can be found in the library. Diversity is a notable benefit of third places as they expose participants to perspectives different from their own and, in turn, expand their world view. Similar to Oldenburg's concept of novelty in third places is the theory of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors." Professor and children's literature scholar, Rudine Sims Bishop's essay on the subject argues for the use of literature as a tool for both representation and empathy building (1990). Books are opportunities to observe the

experiences of others (windows), see yourself reflected (mirrors), and build empathy for the experiences of others and better imagine (and live in) the reality others face (sliding glass doors) (Bishop 1990).

While mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors can be found in (and traditionally refer to) literature, they can also be found in the interactions and community created in the teen room, posits Dylan. Like reading a book, interacting with peers in the teen room grants teens the opportunity to engage with peers who are similar and different from themselves. Such experiences can both validate their own experiences as well as grant them perspective regarding the experiences of others.

Libraries are a space where teens can meet peers with similar interests, lived experiences, and identities (mirrors). While teens may not feel like they fit in with their peers at school, the library gives them another opportunity to connect peer to peer. For example, Sam spoke of a teen who consistently attended the library's Dungeons and Dragons group. He recalled, "I had a teen, you know, say once that...he was kind of really coming out of his shell, a little bit more through D & D." The recurring group offered the teen a safe place to explore roleplaying games and bond with others who shared the interest. Being in community with peers who have a similar interest, identity, or lived experience works to make teens feel less isolated. The teens see themselves mirrored back to themselves through their peers; it validates that they are not alone.

Teen services also act as windows and sliding glass doors. In addition to bringing together teens of similar interests, lived experiences, and identities, libraries also connect teens radically different from themselves (Windows). During our interview, Dylan brought up the important point of youth homelessness; it is especially high in her city and she reported that some of the teens her library serviced were currently or had in the past faced being unhoused.

Like how Oldenburg describes third places, the library gives teens the opportunity to interact and connect with peers who have lived experiences and identities different from their own, like being unhoused. The same goes for teens with different interests, races, religions, genders, sexualities, lived experiences, etcetera. A teen who has a stable home life might not interact with an unhoused peer. However, the library presents an opportunity for the two teens to meaningfully engage with one another. Teens are able to recognize the experiences of others, gain perspective, and perhaps even imagine the reality of living those experiences themselves (sliding glass doors). Exposure to peers different from one's self not only provides perspective on the lived experiences of others but also builds empathy for those dissimilar than one's self.

These opportunities for connection with both similar and dissimilar peers are important to building community in the teen space. Being in community teen-to-teen, much like being in community in other third spaces is characterized by the diversity of people who occupy that space. Dylan explained:

Teens deserve to hang out with their peers. They deserve to be able to meet teens from all over the city. You know, it's allowing them to spread out their community. It's allowing them to meet people who might have similar interests to them, meet people who don't have similar interests to them, but they can learn to respect each other.

Dylan's point, as well as the theory of Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors, highlights the impact engaging in a diverse group has on teens. They can feel seen, represented, and validated by their peers who are like themselves while also building empathy for and learning from peers who are dissimilar. The respect built by engaging teen-to-teen Dylan refers to building is critical to fostering a healthy, accepting community within the teen space.

Resources

Public libraries also provide teens with material resources. Public libraries, generally, offer more than just books as resources for community members. As previously mentioned, resources like access to the internet, tools, movies, gadgets, classes, and more are often available at the public library. These resources are especially relevant for teens who face wealth disparity and may not have access to such resources otherwise.

Something that frequently came up in my interviews, and will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, was the aspect of economic disparity and the role libraries can play in combating it. One of those ways is through the resources the library offers. “Books are very, very expensive...computers are expensive...phones are expensive,” Dylan explained. These resources are not equitably available, yet they are important to everyday life for most folks. Access to these resources is important for everyone, not just teens. Being able to come to the library and use the computer or the free wifi is a form of autonomy. Dylan described it as being able to “tap into resources that you don't have at your immediate disposal.” This, Dylan explained, has the potential to provide a level of financial autonomy. She explained, access to technological resources can help someone, for example, create and print resumes. Being able to access these technologies, especially for teens, is liberating. It allows them to make choices, like applying for a job, that impact their life in a meaningful way.

Similarly, Quinn highlighted that the library's resources can also be fun. She explained that her library has several video game consoles teens can use. The thought process behind the consoles was as such:

If [a teen comes] from a poor family and they don't have an Xbox series X, that's okay, because they can still play the games here and still talk to their friends about it and not tell their friends they don't own one.

Access to resources like an Xbox series X is a form of economic relief to these teens. It can bring a sense of normalcy to their lives that they may be missing. Rather than feeling left out because of their socio-economic status, teens are able to camouflage in with their peers.

Some of the librarians interviewed highlighted the programs offered within the teen room as resources for teens. Sam, for example, brought up his library's "Young Writers" group in which authors speak to the teens about writing. He reported, "we have about...anywhere from fifteen to twenty teens that come every time. And I've heard from teens...that it's really...improved their writing and that they really enjoy doing it." Implementing a program like *Young Writers* as a part of teen programming not only can help build a passion for writing and reading but can also, as stated by Sam, improve teens' writing abilities. Access to free additional school help makes a difference, especially for teens who may not be able to afford tutoring services otherwise.

Similar to the *Young Writers* group, Dylan informed me about a program within her teen room: the "Revolving Resource Fair." Dylan characterized the *Revolving Resource Fair* as one way her library combats teens' inequities by making access to resources freely and easily available. Resources include: nonprofits aimed at assisting youth facing homelessness; Planned Parenthood; scholarship programs from universities; etc. The goal of this program, Dylan explained, is making resources as accessible as possible for teens by bringing the resources to the library. This is so "teens don't have to go across town," rather, they can come to the library, a place they (likely) already frequent and know they have access to.

These various resource examples help the teens who use them because they are tailored to meet the specific needs and wants of teens. By implementing what teens actually need and want from the library, as opposed to what librarians *think* teens need and want from the library, they

are more effective in delivering desirable and meaningful resources. And, while these resources are available to and impactful for all teens, they make the biggest difference in poor teens' lives by supplementing the areas teens may be struggling in.

“Everybody’s Welcome”

The final unique characteristics of teen services within public libraries is their radical acceptance of *all* teens. Other than agreeing to follow the rules, teens do not face any barriers to entering the teen room and teen programming. All are welcome. In this section I explore what factors contribute to making the teen room and teen services accepting of all teens who enter.

A Safe Place to Explore Yourself

A critical point made by all four librarians interviewed was the respective libraries' open arms policies. The interviewees all stressed that creating an environment that is welcoming to all, in turn, creates an environment that is safe for teens to explore themselves. As Louise explains:

As [teens] get older it becomes conversations and opportunities to explore...autonomy around like who you are in a space without your grown up; who you are in a space with your friends; who you are in our volunteer teen team program;...how you interface with other people.

This sentiment reflects the goal of the library is to be a space for teens to explore who they are, what matters to them, how they show up in the world. The library is uniquely situated to give teens the space to do this type of exploring. This is because, in contrast to school or home, there are no expectations of teens other than to, as Louise explains, “abide by the library rules and be a respectful human to other humans...there’s nothing else they’re required to do.”

Another way libraries contrast school and home (particularly school), and provide teens the space to explore themselves, is the way in which libraries give teens the room to safely fail and grow. In school, everything teens do is tied to a grade and is, therefore, tied to academic

success. Messing up in school has consequences for teens in a way that the library does not. For example, Louise recounted to me a program where the teens experimented with adding different toppings to food. Naturally, some of the combinations were gross, yet, at the end of the day the teens' whose food failed were just as okay as those whose toppings were successful. Louise reflected, "you can make a thing at the library and it's terrible...and the only person that you harmed was yourself, and you feel like 'oh, well maybe I shouldn't have done that...right?' It's not the end of the world." The successes and failures that take place in the library are inconsequential. Consequently, teens may feel more safe to take risks and explore different interests, ideas, and identities at the library.

The library's focus on growth and safety to fail especially come into play when teens break the behavioral expectations of the library. In school, misbehavior is traditionally handled with punishment and an assumption of ill-intent. In contrast, the librarians interviewed described a conversational and growth-focused approach in the library. Louise explained in her library they "have a conversation about the *whys*"; for instance:

Why it's not okay to do this; why we're asking you to modify your behavior...;why maybe you can do that thing or say that word outside of the library, but it is not okay to use that [here].

Quinn concurred, stating, "if a teen's misbehaving, we would never just kick them out. That's a conversation." By shifting toward a conversation-centric approach, the librarians are able to guide the teen(s) toward understanding why what they did is not okay and guide them through reflecting on and correcting that behavior. This, as Dylan puts it, provides teens "an opportunity to...be thoughtful adults," and "actively [grow] into the adults that they will become."

Further, like the food experimentation, behavior does not have dire consequences for teens. They are not banned from the library for acting out nor is there, as Quinn puts it, "a record that 'oh you were bad last time so I already know you're bad.'" Rather, "if you come back [after

being asked to leave for misbehaving], you just start clean, and we welcome you with open arms,” said Quinn. Again, this provides teens an opportunity to reflect and grow into the person they would like to become and be in the library. This approach recognizes the fact that teens are not yet adults; they are still growing and learning. Prioritizing conversation and reflection over punishment grants teens the space to process their behavior and the ‘whys’ of why what they did was not okay. Louise compared this interaction to when a child falls down; she explained:

When you work with littles, oftentimes they fall down, right? Something doesn’t go right and you’re like, ‘it’s okay, get back up. You got this, it’s alright. You’re practicing, you’re gonna get it, it’ll be fine.’ We...dust them off and maybe they cry a little bit but you’re like ‘you’re fine, you’re fine. You’re not bleeding.’
...How often do we do that for teens? How often do we let them fall and then be like, ‘it’s okay. You fell and it’s okay.’

Louise’s point illustrates the way in which adults perceive teens as “miniature adults.” However, they are not adults. And, because they are still teens, there are so many things out of the realm of what they have done or have had to think about before. Consequently, mistakes happen, teens misbehave, yet this does not indicate that they are inherently ‘bad.’ No one is inherently bad. And rather than treat the teens as ‘bad’ for making a mistake, the librarians interviewed, and others alike, present teens the opportunity to reflect, learn, and grow.

Accepting

Part of the library being a safe place for teens to explore themselves is the core tenant of acceptance. This manifests in many different ways, however, one that I will specifically focus on for this section is acceptance as it relates to teens’ sexualities and gender identities.

Acceptance of LGBTQ+ teens helps create an environment in which all teens feel welcomed, respected, and validated in their identities. Building the aforementioned strong relationships between teens and librarians as well as establishing behavioral expectations of respect creates an environment where teens feel more comfortable exploring and expressing their

various identities. Making this safe space is especially pertinent because teenhood is oftentimes the age where adolescents are critically thinking about their gender and sexuality (Kar et al. 2015). And, as Louise reminds us, research demonstrates “that queer and trans teens often have the highest rates of suicide and mental health issues.” As such, having a space where your identity can change or be fluid and is consistently respected, no questions asked, is important for teens. Part of getting to know the teens, Louise explained, is also “honoring the identities that they are exploring.” She elaborated, “even having one adult in your life who calls you by the name you want to be called by and use the pronouns that you use can make a huge difference.” Having the librarians respect a teen’s name, pronouns, sexuality, etc. is a form of validation, both in the teen’s identity and in their belonging in the library. Because of this, Louise and her fellow librarians at her branch make it a point to be an adult figure in these teens’ lives who honor and respect their preferred name and pronouns. It is important to note that respecting and accepting teens for who they are and the effects of such respect and acceptance go beyond sexuality and gender. Any and all acceptance of an identity or lived experience (e.g. immigration status, ability, weight, ethnicity, etc.) is validating.

Zooming out, the librarians interviewed all expressed that the library should be a welcoming place for *everyone*. Sam explained, “[libraries are] one of the last...public spaces...where people from all different walks of life can...get together and be equal,” he continued, “a lot of teens...may not fit in at school...so it’s important to have a space where...everybody can come and everybody’s accepted for who they are.” Quinn concurred, “it doesn’t matter: your gender, your sexuality, your income. It doesn’t matter. You’re welcome.” Both Sam and Quinn’s sentiments reflect the value of inclusivity and illustrate the role librarians serve in creating a welcoming space for all teens who enter.

Free

As previously mentioned, the library and its resources are free. The free nature of the library is impactful for everyone but this is especially so for teens who are poor. As Quinn points out, “not everyone can afford to go hang out at Starbucks,” where they are expected to, and sometimes required to make a purchase to stay. Sam explained the library is “not a space where we expect people to buy something or spend money. And those are...really rare spaces nowadays...where...you can just come in and...there’s no commercial intent to it.” When considering the impact of having a free third place, like the library, it is important to consider what other places are free for teens to hang out at. There are not many. Quinn and Sam’s points illustrate why being free is so critical for teens; financial barriers create inaccessible third places. Having the library means having a third place you, as a teen, can go to regardless of your socio-economic status. There are no financial barriers to accessing this third place and its benefits.

In our interview, Dylan pointed out, “not a lot of free spaces exist for youth to just be a part of for an amount of time that is their choosing.” This, of course, contrasts places like school or work (for teens who have jobs) where teens are required to be and for a prescribed duration of time. However, unlike Starbucks, work, and school, the library is a free, indoor space where teens can *choose* to be, coming and going as they please. For example, Dylan explained her library’s proximity to a large bus station made it a prime location for teens to use it as a meet up spot or place to hang out while waiting for the bus. Unlike a cafe which would typically require a purchase in order to occupy the space, the library can be a warm, safe, and free space for teens to wait and just *be*. Importantly, this is in direct opposition with the aforementioned “geography of ‘no.’” Like the “no skateboarding” ordinances, “no loitering” ordinances hinder teens’ ability to occupy public space. These ordinances are common in places like parking lots and public parks

— notably places that have no cost barrier. “No loitering” policies criminalize teens² for occupying public space. However, unlike the third places that abolish loitering, the library welcomes it. Dylan’s example of the library being a common meet up or waiting spot for teens demonstrates that the library, especially the teen room, is a place *built* to loiter. The freedom to loiter, be in the library without paying, and the ability to come and go as teens please are all examples of teen autonomy in the library. No adult or amount of/lack of money commands how teens use the space; they are empowered to use it as they wish.

In addition to the space being free to enter, some libraries have taken additional measures to provide an even more equitable service to their respective communities. For example, Quinn informed me that while many libraries issue fines for overdue books, hers does not. She explained:

They [library users] can check out a book and if they end up keeping it six months, yeah, they’re gonna get a bill for it. But as soon as they return the book, we take that [fine] off...we’ve just tried to make it as accessible as possible...and not have those barriers, especially when it comes to money. Because...it provides an inequitable service to charge fines.

Quinn’s final point poses the question of who can, and cannot, afford to pay fines. Issuing fines does not affect all library users the same. Class and socio-economic status traditionally dictate who can and cannot afford to return library resources late, ultimately making access to and use of the library inequitable. Notably, a 2022 survey indicated a notable decrease in the percent of libraries in the US that charged late fines; the percent dropped from 92% in 2017 to 36% in 2022 (Gerber 2022). This trend indicates a shift in the library community similar to Quinn’s opinions on financial equity as it relates to libraries.

² Among other groups; notably unhoused folks.

Where To Go From Here?

In this final section of my findings, I briefly discuss the goals and hopes for the future of teen library services as expressed by interviewees. I highlight the interviewees' hopes for the future so as to demonstrate the ways in which library services for teens can be improved and where these librarians feel that improvement is most needed.

When asked about her hopes and goals for the future of teen services in the library, Dylan focused her response on the physical space given to teens. She shared the room her library allocated to teen services was not designed with teen use in mind; rather, it was an available space. Consequently she described teens using the space as often being “crammed” and not always conducive to the type of programming occurring in the space. Consequently, Dylan expressed in the future she would like to see libraries be more “intentional teen space as far as like the architecture of the room because it makes a big difference,” she continued, “how you plan a space is huge.” Dylan’s wish for the future is another example of how teenhood could be validated. Curating a space specifically to teens’ wants and needs of a space recognizes those wants and needs as valid and important. Like the yes forward approach previously mentioned, respecting what teens need to make the space theirs and work for them, affirms their belonging within the library.

Sam expressed his hopes and goals for teen services as being that the library continues to be a welcoming space for teens and a safe place for teens to explore themselves and their interests. He explained:

I would hope that it's a place...where teens can come in and kind of pick and explore their interests...and get questions answered, and you know, answered in a non judgmental fashion.

Sam’s goal reflects the value of the library being a welcoming place for everyone. His goal highlights acceptance as a core tenant of librarianship. Hoping for a continued culture of

welcomingness at the library points to how truly important this aspect of the library is; without acceptance, the library would be hostile and impersonable. The welcoming attitude is the baseline for forming and maintaining community.

Quinn's goal for the future of teen library services is that more librarians capitalize on the potential services the library can offer beyond books. She explained she hopes more librarians:

Realize that libraries aren't about books anymore. Of course, we still have books and that's still part of our services, but that's just one layer one level of the services were really I mean, my job really is to be a programmer. So to create events that teens will show up to and have fun out and have good experiences, that is really my job and I would like to see that.

Recognizing what kinds of services libraries can offer beyond books allows librarians to meet more needs of library attendees and ultimately make the library a more relevant place, especially for teens. Quinn's description of her job as being more of a programmer than a librarian reflects this shift in ideology as to what libraries' teen services can be. Quinn explained, "I'm just trying to bring in...experiences so that everyone can share them together. And I think that for me is what teen service is about is most, it's about experiences and creating community with each other." Quinn's response points to the potential for the resources offered at the library to continue expanding both in scale and scope.

Finally, Louise's hopes and goals for the future was for libraries to continue fighting for and working toward making the library a more equitable place. She explained:

Our society fails our most vulnerable youth over and over and over again, right? Those are always the youth you see; the ones furthest from educational justice, bipoc teens, like all of those vulnerable populations are the ones that...tend to have the least amount of opportunities in our society. And while I think that libraries are in some ways available to everyone,...we are still a structure built on white supremacy. We still have rules and policies that uphold those things.

Louise's hopes for the future of teens services highlight the ways in which oppression still exists in libraries. Her call to action is a reminder that though libraries are welcoming to everyone, they are not devoid of or immune to the structural racism and discrimination that is built into the United States.

Discussion & Conclusion

In my thesis I explored the ways in which public libraries function as a third place for teens. I collected this information through my literature review as well as my four in-depth interviews with Oregon-based librarians who work with teens. Through this exploration I found that the equitableness within libraries is created primarily through it being both a noncommercial and inclusive space. Such characteristics create opportunities for more people to access the library and the community and resources it offers.

My research has also demonstrated some of the key benefits a sense of belonging within the public library has for teens. Libraries provide safe, consistent adults (the librarians); community; and, material and social resources; all of which grant teens the comfort to explore who they are, their interests, who they want to be, and how they want to show up in the world. Having a safe adult to talk to, a friend who shares a common interest, access to a printer, or wifi, for example, are things many people take for granted. Yet, for some people these social opportunities and resources the library provides are not ones they'd be able to easily access, if at all, without the library. These benefits are a critical type of support for teens and the library is a free way to access them.

These aforementioned benefits and my research, overall, illustrate why teens' access to third places is so critical. The third place provides teens the opportunity to have a voice and autonomy in a way that the first (home) and second (school/work) places don't. While at home teens typically have to fulfill the role of child and at school they must fulfill the role of student, within third places teens have the autonomy to show up in a way that feels authentic to themselves and that they have control over. There is not that same expectation to fulfill a given role. Rather, the role they must fulfill is simply being themselves, however that looks. As I found in

my research, the teen space in the library works intentionally to foster a safe and comfortable environment for teens to practice flexing that self-discovering muscle and decide for themselves the person they want to be. Similarly, my research has illustrated the ways in which a library is and can be so much more than just books. Libraries provide resources for users but those resources extend beyond books and include a supportive community; adults who respect and listen to the needs of teens; a safe place to fail and grow; and, a place specifically for teens.

An important caveat to make is that public libraries as an institution are not void of inequity. While libraries can, as demonstrated in my research, be a place that alleviates inequalities and provides, in many ways, equitable services for its users, inequities still exist from library to library. Much like schools, the funding of libraries is primarily determined by city and county taxes. Meaning, the socio-economic makeup of a city greatly impacts the funding a given library has. Because my interviewees were all in mid-size cities and suburbs the funding of their libraries would be greater than if they were in rural Oregon, for example. Consequently, they have a greater financial ability to sufficiently fund teen programming at the libraries in a way other libraries may not.

Additionally, an important limitation to recognize is the scale of this research project. Because this project was completed as part of my undergraduate thesis, I was limited in the scale and scope of my project. I chose to hone in on four in-depth interviews as a larger scale project would have been unrealistic given the constraints. Because my sample was so small and two out of four librarians worked for the same library it is important to recognize that the circumstances and opinions expressed in my findings are not representative of all libraries, librarians, and teen programs in the state of Oregon. I want to specifically point out the lack of librarians from rural areas in Oregon; my interviewees were all located in major cities or suburbs and, therefore, are

not representative of all Oregonians. The exclusion of rural librarians was not done on purpose; my interviewees reflect the librarians who I either was able to get a hold of via email or who responded to my digital recruitment flier.

Looking forward, my research points to the importance of future research on teens and libraries being done on a larger, more representative scale. Such research may be better suited at answering important, large-scale questions such as: How does teen programming vary throughout the state of Oregon, the Pacific Northwest, and the United States? How does the way librarians conceptualize teens vary throughout the state of Oregon, the Pacific Northwest, and the United States? How does access to public libraries relate to inequality similarly and differently throughout the state of Oregon, the Pacific Northwest, and the United States? What are libraries doing well to support teens and how can such successes be implemented on a larger scale?

I want to conclude my thesis by reiterating two questions I began my thesis with: why is it that there are so few third places designed with teens in mind? And, why does teens' access to – or lack thereof – third places matter? Reflecting on my thesis as a whole, it is abundantly clear that teens' access to third places matters. Like children and adults, teens, too, need access to a social outlet where they can hang out, make connections, build community, and just be. And yet, even though this is true, there is still tension when teens occupy spaces designed for adult or children's use. Because of this, I posit that there is unequivocal value in creating more spaces specifically designed for teens. Through both my literature review and interviews it is clear that when teens' voices and ideas are heard, validated, and brought into fruition that teens' needs are able to be met. This thesis illustrates the key point that teens are a unique demographic and recognizing them as such is critical to creating a space and/or program that sufficiently supports, meets the needs of, and is enjoyable for teens. Creating more intentionally teen-centric places is

an important and relevant goal for the future of third places in the US. The creation of third places made especially for teens means that these third places, like the teen space of public libraries, can be deliberate with their goals and means of achieving them as they relate to teens.

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