Mind the Gap

The Overlap Between Public Libraries and OST Learning

Brittany R. Jacobs

On any given day you can find a revolving assortment of wildly eclectic items adorning my desk, including dinosaurs, arachnid specimens, sugar skulls, and galaxies. I'm not a paleontologist, entomologist, cultural scientist, or astrophysicist, but my job does require me to know a little about all those things and more.

In my official job description, I'm charged with being an "explorer, wizard, and genius." I'm an educator, but not a formal teacher. I work with children, teens, and families after school, on weekends, and throughout the summer, but I'm not part of the out-of-school time (OST) profession. I am a 21st century public librarian at Anythink, a revolution of Rangeview Libraries.

Anythink is a future-leaning library in Denver, Colorado, that has revolutionized the way libraries function. For example, we've done away with the Dewey Decimal System, opting for a user-friendly Word Think cataloging system—think of organization by genre, as in a bookstore. We use new language to reintroduce libraries to the community; for example, I'm a "guide," not a "librarian." Everything we do is modeled around the idea that *everyone* is an "explorer, wizard, and genius." At Anythink, we're all about learning through hands-on experiences. That's why an eccentric collection of materials adorns my desk at the Perl Mack neighborhood branch, where I work.

As someone who has previously worked in the OST field, I noticed many similarities between what

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afterschool programs offer and what I offer as a public librarian. I've also noticed overlap in the populations served by OST and public libraries. As libraries shift from a data-centered mindset to a human-centered one, we're starting to mirror OST sites by offering snacks, homework assistance, classes, and other activities during the OST hours. Along with these striking similarities between OST and libraries are some significant differences—differences that are necessary in order for both kinds of organizations to maintain their unique roles in their communities. If we mind the gap—attending both to the overlap between the two fields and their differences—we can appreciate how both OST and libraries offer unique opportunities for children and teens.

Data-Centered vs. Human-Centered Librarians

This century has ushered in transformations that have permanently changed our society. None have been so drastic as the shift to a new idea of knowledge. The mechanistic view of learning from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries revolved around static knowledge; information changed slowly, if at all. Mechanistic learning, which required the intervention of a teacher, upheld elitist and hierarchical systems of knowledge acquisition. Libraries were very much involved in promoting this hierarchy. Librarians acted as guardians of information, much of which was acquired through reading and rote memorization. "Many approaches to learning in the twentieth century did, in fact, work but largely because of the glacial rate of change that characterized the era" (Thomas & Brown, 2011, p. 43).

In the rapid-pace world we live in now, knowledge is fluid and quick to change. Just over 50 percent of the global population has access to limitless information—and misinformation (Kemp, 2019). In this environment, learning institutions are having to pivot quickly, assessing their pedagogy and realigning themselves with the new era of learning. Libraries have come under scrutiny. Many people believe that Google and similar tools have rendered libraries and librarians moot. However, one glimpse into a public library during OST hours tells a different story. To keep up with the times, libraries and librarians

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are shifting from being data-centered to being human-centered.

Figure 1. The Data-Centered Librarian

Figure 2. The Human-Centered Librarian

Figure 1 shows the disconnect of the data-centered librarian, who prioritizes the collection and then has to mediate between it and the public. Books, data, and resources—particularly those found in a library, where they are cataloged into a very specific order—represent organization. People represent chaos and destruction. This mindset explains why the first libraries were private. The elitism that controlled access to information prioritized resources over people. This mindset still motivates many in the field today.

Figure 2, by contrast, showcases the human-centered librarian: one who thinks first about patrons and connects them with the resources they need, including not only books, but also other people. A few lines in the diagram go straight from the librarian to a patron and no further. These lines represent services provided immediately to people in need, as the librarian administers Narcan to prevent a narcotic overdose, offers free lunches in partnership with a local food bank, or helps a job seeker with a résumé.

Librarians play an active, though often unintentional, role in the OST field. Libraries are safe spaces, resource hubs, and community centers for children and teens during OST hours; they are places for young people who otherwise might not have anywhere to go. As young people pour into libraries in the afternoons,

on weekends, and during school breaks, librarians find themselves by default participating in OST programming, though not all are trained in child development, educational programming, or behavior management. They experience a disconnect between what they trained to do in their work toward a master's degree in library and information sciences (LIS) and what they are expected to do on a day-to-day basis.

I looked at the required coursework for five highly respected LIS master's programs. Not one of them required a class that explored human development, behavior management, or informal learning, all subjects that would help LIS students prioritize people over collections. Librarians are still being trained to operate in the slow-moving and static world of information, when the reality is that knowledge is now ever shifting, and access means facilitating connected learning.

Knowledge-seekers now are their own guides. Knowledge acquisition—particularly for young learners—looks more like hanging out, messing around, and geeking out, also known as HOMAGO (Ito et al., 2009). HOMAGO, or interest-driven inquiry supported by peer interaction, is at the heart of many libraries' maker spaces and programs. In these environments, learners set their own pace; librarians are there to support, troubleshoot, and redirect when needed.

Libraries and OST Programming

Youth librarians—those who specialize in managing collections, spaces, programs, and events for children from birth through age 18—are fostering environments that look more and more like traditional OST programs. Consistent programs at libraries may, for example, offer snacks, homework help, or STEM programming. The Literacy Enrichment Afterschool Program at the Free Library of Philadelphia is a great example of an organized OST program within library walls; it offers daily literacy activities, maker projects, health and wellness programs, homework assistance, computer literacy, and library skills for students in grades K–12 (Free Library of Philadelphia, 2020). Other library systems offer drop-in programs after school, ranging from robotics club to cooking class, homework help, and beyond. At Anythink Perl Mack, we offer classes ranging from deejaying with the Denver DJ School (Figure 3) to a monthly woodshop class (Figure 4). Such programs give children and teens opportunities to experience activities and develop skills that might not otherwise be available to them.

Figure 3. Monthly DJ school at Anythink Perl Mack

Figure 4. Monthly woodshop class at Anythink Perl Mack

In 2006, a conference for librarians on afterschool programming, entitled Learning in Libraries, posited that "public libraries may have been the original afterschool providers, but they must step up their efforts if they are to be players in the fast-growing Out-of-School Time movement" (Barber & Wallace, 2006, p. 39). Fourteen years have passed since that call to action. Because of the many similarities between OST and LIS, I set out to see whether and how intentional work and partnerships are being fostered between the

two complementary but different professions. I gathered literature that incorporated both LIS and OST terminology. The overlap between the two fields seems obvious, yet the information, academic and otherwise, surrounding librarians and libraries as active players in the OST field is slim. Most research published on OST and libraries is from the OST perspective: Reports from Lights on Afterschool, Afterschool Alliance, and the like recognize the family engagement and educationally aligned programs libraries offer to young people outside the classroom.

The most telling of the documents I reviewed is perhaps the National Research Agenda for Library Service to Children put together by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC, 2019), a subsection of the American Library Association. This call for research highlights how little information is out there about learning in libraries. It recognizes the need for further research into six key areas, one of which is "learning and development for school-age children and their families" (ALSC, 2019, p. 5). This priority area focuses on encouraging and emphasizing research into how libraries support OST learning for school-age children and their families, specifically calling for study of "summer reading/learning, community engagement, particularly around family engagement, and outreach for school-age children" (ALSC, 2019, p. 5). However, the article never implies that libraries are OST spaces in and of themselves.

According to a study done by the Afterschool Alliance, the Space Science Institute's National Center for Interactive Learning, and the American Library Association, "74% of afterschool programs have worked with a public library before" (Afterschool Alliance, 2017). Of the afterschool programs surveyed, most reported that partnerships with public libraries took the form of participation in summer reading programs (65 percent) and library visits (58 percent). This survey pulled responses from 39 states, with the majority coming from California, Minnesota, New York, and Oregon (Afterschool Alliance, 2017)—all of which have large multi-branch library systems. This report shows that OST professionals have positive impressions of their local public libraries. Far-reaching and geographically broad as the report is, it completely leaves out the per-

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How Libraries Fulfill the Need for OST in Colorado

According to the Colorado Afterschool Partnership (n.d.b), in 2019, "146,856 school-age children (17 percent) in Colorado [were] alone and unsupervised during the hours after school." However, it would be more accurate to say that 17 percent of school-aged children in Colorado were not enrolled in any formal afterschool program. The correlation between afterschool hours and juvenile crime is often touted as one of the things that afterschool programs actively fight against, as "they keep kids safe and help them realize their full potential" (Afterschool Alliance, 2017). That mission sounds awfully similar to what I and thousands of my fellow youth librarians do when the kids rush to the library after school.

In January 2020, during the dead of winter, the seven branch Anythink libraries across Adams County, Colorado, offered 274 programs for kids and teens, with over 6,000 participants. In June 2019, 299 programs were offered, and more than 10,000 people participated, without having to pay a dime (Sandlian Smith, 2020). Programs at Anythink are always free, as we strive to create equitable access to our learning environments. The participant numbers don't include incidental users—the children and teens who come to the branches to hang out in a safe space without participating in programs. Thus, it is fair to surmise that a sizable number of the 17 percent of children who are "alone and unsupervised" (Colorado Afterschool Partnership, n.d.b) are in fact spending their afterschool, weekend, and summer hours with us at the library.

Public libraries in Colorado, mapped in Figure 5, far outnumber formal afterschool programs, shown in Figure 6. These libraries create a net of spaces for children and teens that are safe, free of charge, and often bustling with educational programs and events—not to mention the Wi-Fi access and the thousands of books, movies, and recordings at kids' disposal. Yet libraries don't qualify as OST centers, according to the Colorado Afterschool Partnership (n.d.b) and Colorado Depart-

Figure 5. Public Libraries in Colorado
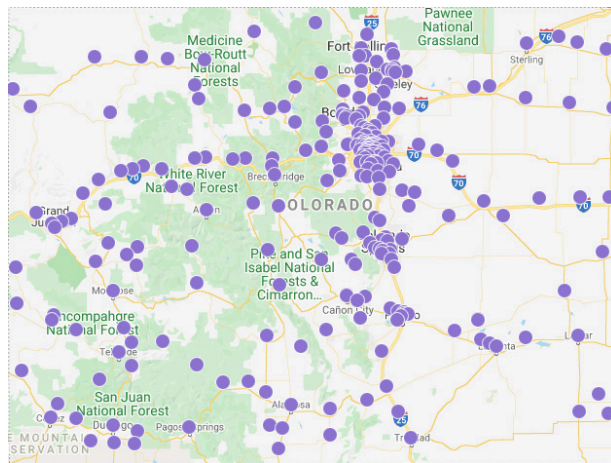
Source: Colorado Department of Education, n.d.

Figure 6. Afterschool Programs in Colorado
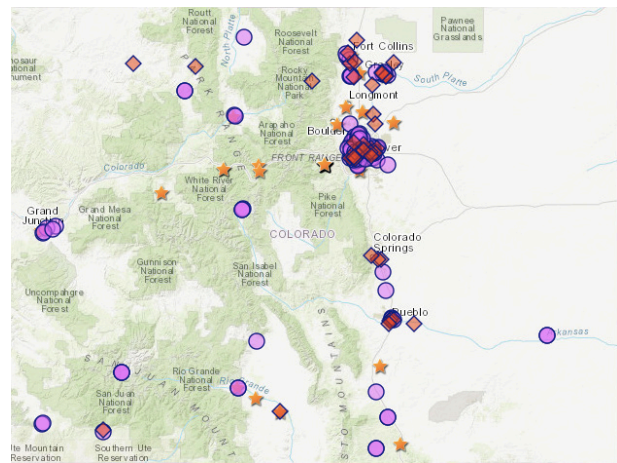
Source: Colorado Afterschool Partnership, n.d.a

ment of Education (n.d.), because they don't hit the benchmark of 12 hours of organized programming per week.

I've personally seen that libraries are key players in the lives of children and teens during OST. As a public librarian and a participant in the NIOST fellowship, I've noticed the gap between LIS and OST. Research to justify and validate libraries as participants in the OST field is yet to be conducted. Perhaps, rather than trying to close the gap by aligning libraries with the parameters of traditional OST, we should *mind* the gap: acknowledge the differences between OST programs and public libraries, but not dismiss the two settings as completely unrelated.

A New Category of OST Entities

By recognizing the valuable role public libraries play for thousands of children and teens every day, we can paint a broader picture of what OST looks like here in the US. Libraries can offer a unique perspective on OST. They can be points of refuge for children and teens who are not able to attend formal afterschool programs for one reason or another. Perhaps a new category of OST entities is in order, one where libraries are free to remain true to their nature while simultaneously qualifying as legitimate OST sites.

In order for this to happen, data needs to be collected on OST from librarians' perspectives and through the lens of LIS. Librarians need to be aware both of the role they play in OST and of the OST world at large. The similarities between OST and LIS are many, but none is greater the desire to help kids stay safe and succeed.

As Urban Libraries Council Executive Director Martín Gómez is quoted as saying at the Learning in Libraries conference, "We can't take our place at the out-of-school table for granted. We must be intentional. And we must develop systems that will help us demonstrate our impact" (Barber & Wallace, 2006, p. 39).

Human-centered librarians are already knee-deep in the OST world. We recognize the ever-growing need for children and teens to have a space to go after school where they are seen, kept safe, and encouraged to explore their interests and discover new ones. The dinosaurs, sugar skulls, and arachnid specimens on my desk are not there because I'm deeply interested in them. They're there because I've followed my young patrons' interests to create programs and collect resources that will help them explore themselves and their world. Notes, tokens of appreciation, and gifts from kids and their parents also adorn my desk—small reminders that offering a free and safe space for kids to go, where magic is still alive and anything is possible, is an important role in the community.

In 2019, 256,263 students were waitlisted for afterschool programs in Colorado, and "the demand for programs is so great in Colorado that 1 out of every 10 applications cannot be funded" (Afterschool Alliance, 2020, p. 1). Contrary to popular opinion, libraries are not a dying entity. We're innovative, and we're transforming ourselves to meet the needs of our communities. As a public librarian, I ask you to reach out to your local libraries to share resources, stories, and best practices. But please—mind the gap.

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