



LAURA BUSH 21st CENTURY LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Sample Application RE-259669-OLS-26
Project Category: Early Career Research

University of Rhode Island

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$242,676
Amount of cost share: \$0

In this Early Career Research project, Dr. Jacqueline Kociubuk at the University of Rhode Island will equip library staff to better serve self-care children ages 11-18 and their families. Self-care children, also called unattended children, are a commonly encountered after-school patron group that public library staff often struggle with determining how to best serve. The project aims to create a scalable model of training and practice by working with self-care children, library staff, and caregivers at six different libraries via case studies and youth-led co-design activities. Data from these activities will support libraries in fostering youth belonging, community embeddedness, and leadership for self-care children. Research activities will occur over three phases and culminate in the national rollout of a website with training resources.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

1. INTRODUCTION

The University of Rhode Island (URI) is requesting \$242,675.65 to fund *Project Belong: Supporting self-care children and their families*, a proposed LB21-F26 Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grant initiative in the Early Career Research Development category. *Project Belong* will take place from September 2026 to December 2028 and will be led by early career, tenure-track faculty member Dr. Jacqueline Kociubuk of the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at URI. The primary aim of this grant is to research and develop a youth co-designed, scalable model for public library staff training and practice to better serve self-care children (ages 11-18) and their families. In alignment with holistic developmental and learning outcomes for children of this age range, the model will emphasize supporting youth belonging, community embeddedness, and leadership. *Project Belong's* overarching research question asks, “how can public libraries better serve self-care children (ages 11-18) and their families by centering and incorporating children’s voices and perspectives into library practices, policies, programs, and spatial design?” Both the model and overarching research question will be informed by qualitative, ethnographic case study activities and youth-led co-design work with two public libraries in the northeastern region. The resulting model and associated staff trainings will be later refined and tested by a national cohort of four public libraries of varying sizes and geographic locales. In alignment with LB21 program Goal 2 and Objective 2.2, *Project Belong* will expand on Dr. Kociubuk’s dissertation research on self-care children in public libraries and support her long-term applied research agenda on understanding how public libraries can better support holistic childhood learning and developmental outcomes through the incorporation and centering of children’s own voices and perspectives.

2. PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

Every day across the United States (US), children independently gather in public library spaces during out-of-school time to use computers, catch up with peers, interact with library staff, and more. These unaccompanied and unattended children are referred to as ‘self-care children’ and have been a persistent and consistent phenomenon in public library spaces for decades (Smardo Dowd, 1990; Arrighetti, 2001; Simons, 2013; Kociubuk, 2025). Yet there are a variety of tensions that exist around self-care children’s use of public libraries including: staff’s feelings around caretaking responsibilities (Smardo Dowd, 1990); self-care children’s use of shared public materials, like computers and furniture (Trapskin, 2008); and self-care children’s behaviors, including play (McKechnie et al., 2006). These tensions, coupled with a long-standing history of deficit-focused research around self-care children more broadly in related social science fields, have continued to leave this subgroup of US children both mischaracterized and understudied, especially within the library. Additionally, although public libraries have been recognized as leaders for family engagement (Lopez et al., 2017), research by Kociubuk (2025) has found that self-care children do not typically engage in commonly offered school-aged and teen structured programming efforts like summer reading, book clubs, and homework. This lack of engagement can discourage library staff from offering programs and services to self-care children or leave staff unsure of how to adapt programs or services for this patron subgroup (Kociubuk, 2025). This gap in service to self-care children runs counter to professional library standards like the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights and its accompanying minor-specific interpretations (ALA, 2006). These gaps also point to a need for better understandings of self-care children in the library, the development of a model of library service to this group, an incorporation of self-care children’s voices, and targeted library staff education and support.

Understanding self-care children

Despite a seemingly endless variety of extracurricular and after-care arrangements available across the US, children and youth leave school and experience varying degrees of adult supervision, with many being without any direct caregiver supervision for some period afterschool. While structured and adult-supervised extracurricular activities have been associated with a variety of benefits for children across demographic groupings including positive socio-emotional development, decreases in risky behavior, and academic achievement, not all US children consistently enroll or participate (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Harknett et al.,

2022). Neighborhoods with lower socioeconomic standing or opportunity have limited structured afterschool opportunities that are affordable or accessible to families (Mahoney & Parente, 2009). Additionally, for many working caregivers, there may be limited choices for affordable childcare (Harknett et al., 2022), or the family as a whole may benefit in some way from not enrolling in a form of supervised afterschool care (Riley & Steinberg, 2004). Even other families without these situational constraints may willingly participate in self-care, either because children themselves want the experience (Karababa, 2022) or caregivers believe that it can help foster important life skills such as independence and self-sufficiency, ideas that some research supports (Riley & Steinberg, 2004). This results in many children spending time outside of school in unstructured, and/or loosely supervised neighborhood public spaces like public libraries (Casper & Smith, 2004; Levesque, 2016).

Though self-care or “latch-key” arrangements were perhaps most obviously prevalent and socially acceptable during the 1970-80s (Blakemore, 2015), evidence exists to confirm the continued practice in various forms, albeit potentially under or unreported by caregivers due to stigmatization (Harknett et al., 2022). While difficult to track, it is estimated that approximately 40% of all US children, ages 0-12 years old, have spent some amount of time outside of school without direct caregiver or adult supervision (AACAP, 2017). The prevalence of self-care cuts across family race, ethnicity, and class demographics (Levesque, 2016). In the US, few states have laws that set a minimum age for leaving children home alone; and even though some states have laws requiring supervision of a child, they lack detail on what is considered adequate or within the range of neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Further, there is some suggestion that circumstances from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as changes to parental work arrangements, the child care crisis, virtual schooling, and health concerns have resulted in an increase in unsupervised children in out of school contexts (Hanson, 2021), making it important to continue pursue research that increases our understanding of self-care children post COVID-19.

Self-care children in the public library

Current research into self-care children has pointed out that these children spend a significant amount out in community spaces, rather than being home. Self-care children tend to not want to be in places that overtly resemble the school environments they spend the bulk of their time in; instead they tend to favor settings with more unstructured activities, reduced power dynamics between child/adults, and a relative degree of autonomous freedom (Garner et al., 2002). Public libraries often offer an attractive alternative public location that children can easily access within their communities that match these desirable traits (Kociubuk, 2025). Additionally, public libraries remain one of the last, free, public spaces in many neighborhoods (Cabello & Butler, 2017) with a commonly held perception that they are safe locations within communities for children, families, and others (Derr, 2018). It is likely that caregivers feel more comfortable with their children spending time in this space without them than in other community locations, especially in neighborhoods with higher crime rates (Derr, 2018). Indeed, children are more likely to be involved in self-care if caregivers perceive they have a safe location within their neighborhood to be (Casper & Smith, 2004). Additionally, public libraries themselves vary widely in their unattended child policies, with some libraries allowing children as young as six to be unaccompanied by an adult caregiver in the library space (Kociubuk, 2025). Taken together, these research findings point to self-care children being a patron population that will continue to be relevant and important to consider in the coming years for public libraries.

Libraries and Positive Youth Development (PYD)

Developmental research is conflicted about the costs and benefits of self-care during childhood (see Levesque, 2016), with the location and community context where the self-care occurs appearing to have a moderating effect on potential negative outcomes (Riley & Steinberg, 2004). Given that public libraries are a destination for self-care children during out-of-school hours, and that public libraries’ role have a recognized strength in childhood learning and family engagement (Campana et al., 2022), public libraries are well-positioned to support self-care children’s holistic developmental outcomes through targeted services to this patron group.

One of the ways that public libraries might best support self-care children's holistic developmental outcomes, while addressing current shortcomings in library service to this patron group, is through the use of Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks and theory to build a model of library service to self-care children. PYD has been employed in applied research projects involving teen services previously (see Spielberger and Halpern, 2002), but has had limited use specifically with self-care children. Given self-care children's unique contextual needs and situation, some aspects of PYD might be more emphasized to achieve greater effect. Libraries' status as an intergenerational community space and a place for lifelong learning makes them particularly able to support and foster the aspects of PYD that are tied to children and teens' sense of belonging, community embeddedness, and youth leadership. Benson (2007), in doing work related to PYD frameworks, found that youth who have sustained relationships with non-related adults and deep connections within their communities and neighborhoods, both important components of belonging and community embeddedness, had more positive developmental outcomes. Further, applied research into the positive effects of youth leadership development and engagement as part of PYD related-work in community settings has been found to help support successful transition into adulthood (AECF, 2019). Thus, a model of service rooted in PYD's belonging, community embeddedness, and youth leadership ideas might help better library service to self-care children.

Child-centered perspectives and voice

Positive Youth Development frameworks and theory emphasize the importance of recognizing youth as experts in their own lives and experiences (AECF, 2019). However, both public libraries and larger societal discourses frequently marginalize or discount youth perspectives and insights. Many adults have a very narrow view of what children have to offer in terms of their mean-making, relationships, culture, and personalities (Wall, 2022), often focusing on childhood activities as something that should be productive and minimizing things like child-directed free play (Zosh et al., 2018) or unsupervised time to work on things that are meaningful to them (Graue & Walsh, 1998). There tends to be a disconnect between adult understanding and expectations of children's lives and children's own motivations, needs, aspirations, and sensemaking (Yoon & Templeton, 2019), with adults frequently underestimating both children's knowledge of the adult world and their competency in navigating it (Bluebond-Langer, 1978). These questions around competency often overlap with questions about children's autonomy and ability to enact agency over aspects of their lives (Mullin, 2019), something that children generally tend to lack in their structured school and home environment (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). As a result, there is a necessity to ensure that any research employing PYD frameworks or theory be strengths-based and focus on centering children's voices. It is with this call, that *Project Belong's* focuses on centering self-care youth voices through research activities that engage directly with them and the creation of a youth co-designed scalable model and associated staff trainings.

Primary audience and beneficiaries

The resulting youth co-designed, scalable model, associated library staff trainings, and study findings from *Project Belong* will impact and benefit several audiences and populations. The ethnographic case study efforts in regional libraries and later model testing and refinement with national library staff will provide a way for staff to share their knowledge with the larger field. These efforts will also benefit the library staff who try out initial strategies and approaches by providing insights into how libraries can foster self-care children's sense of belonging, community embeddedness, and youth leadership. Additionally, the self-care children who participate in the research activities and youth-led co-design work will benefit from having a greater voice in public library practices, policies, programs, and spatial design. Once finalized and rolled-out to the field, the *Project Belong* model and associated training will benefit libraries across the United States who want to better serve self-care children (ages 11-18) and their families by providing professional development tools and a roadmap for better library service to self-care children. This improved library service model stands to benefit future self-care children by ensuring that public libraries continue to support holistic developmental and learning outcomes for all children. Finally, findings will inform future scholarship and other research efforts in relevant fields including library and information science, education, social work, and childhood studies, among others.

Alignment with Long-term Research Agenda

Project Belong builds upon initial research Project Director and PI Dr. Kociubuk undertook as part of her dissertation work studying self-care children's placemaking processes at the public library. This extends Dr. Kociubuk's research into the applied sector by collaborating with self-care children and public libraries to create a co-designed scalable model that will be uptaken into library practice. This applied work sets the foundation for future collaborations that continue to explore how public libraries can better support holistic childhood learning and development outcomes for all children. The accompanying academic and practitioner-focused publications and presentations will position Dr. Kociubuk as an expert in child-centered research in the library and information science field, ensuring a LIS career trajectory that is both impactful and applied.

3. PROJECT WORK PLAN

This study will be guided by the following overarching research question: *how can public libraries better serve self-care children (ages 11-18) and their families by centering and incorporating children's voices and perspectives into library practices, policies, programs, and spatial design?* This broader question will be addressed through the following subquestions:

RQ1: How do self-care children (ages 11-18) and their families perceive and experience public library practices, policies, programs, and spaces?

RQ2: How do public libraries and public library staff perceive and respond to the needs and presence of self-care children (ages 11-18) and their families through their practices, policies, programs, and spaces?

RQ3: How might libraries engage in youth-led co-design efforts to inform library practices, policies, programs, and spaces that foster belonging, community embeddedness, and youth leadership?

Theoretical Framing

To provide a more equal voice for children in *Project Belong's* findings and thus align with Positive Youth Development tenets, the research design of *Project Belong* employs an epistemological approach rooted in childhood studies and critical childhood theory. Critical childhood theory deemphasizes and pushes back against deficit-focused understandings of children by inviting critiques on the larger institutional constructs that impinge on self-care children's agency (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). The employment of this theoretical framing helps to render an 'invisible group' visible (Qvortrup, 2015, pg. 76) by recognizing that children are active cultural participants and producers in their own and others' lives and should be respected as such (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Additionally, such framing assists the research team with implementing a "caring reflexivity" in research methodology, activities, and outputs by inviting a continual reflection on the power dynamics between adults and children (Kwon, 2021).

Activities & Sequence

Project Belong's research questions are geared toward the development of numerous products for stakeholders involved with self-care children and related public library services. One of the key outputs of the project will be a free and publicly accessible website that which will consist of two components: 1) a youth co-designed scalable model of library practice and policies that foster self-care children's belonging, community embeddedness, and leadership; and 2) related professional development for library staff. To investigate the research questions and achieve the desired outputs, *Project Belong* consists of three overlapping phases of work led by the Project PI and supported by the Graduate Research Assistant involving data collection, development of the scalable model and associated staff training, and dissemination as outlined below in Table 1.

Table 1: Timing and sequence of research activities and deliverables

Phase 1 Activities & RQs	Data and Deliverables
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Sept 2026 - May 2027: understanding of self-care children, families, and library staffs' perceptions. Complete and begin analysis of ethnographic case studies and related activities at two differing northeastern public libraries with large populations of self-care children. <i>RQ1 and RQ2</i>	Protocol development, IRB approval, and recruitment. 15-20 observations at each library site of self-care children and library staff; interviews with 5-10 relevant library staff and administrators; and analysis of policy and procedural documentation. Interviews with 20 parents/caregivers and 10-15 children who are within the library service areas and engage in self-care; surveys of 40-50 parents/caregivers within each library service area. Preliminary analysis to be shared with the Advisory Board for feedback and used to develop activities for co-design work.
April 2027-Sept 2027: youth led, co-design work to foster belonging, community embeddedness, and leadership. Conduct and analyze youth-led co-design sessions with regional case study libraries to inform model development. <i>RQ2 and RQ3</i>	2 focus groups with self-care children who will be involved in co-design work followed by 3 youth-led co-design sessions at each of the two regional library sites. Academic journal article based on observations, surveys, and interviews related to RQs 1 and 2. Initial development of parts of model and training following preliminary analysis work shared with the Advisory Board.
Phase 2 Activities & RQs	Data and Deliverables
Sept 2027-Dec 2027: development of model and associated training. Complete draft of model and trainings and recruit four national public library sites to portions. <i>RQ3</i>	Recruit four public libraries of different sizes and geographic regions (with a focus on rural/small libraries) with Advisory Board help. Develop draft of model and associated trainings with initial findings and draft materials for national cohort to test. Professional journal article drafted and one academic research conference presentation based on observations, surveys, and interviews related to RQs 1 and 2.
Jan 2028-Aug 2028: testing and refinement of model and training with national cohort. Have national cohort of four public libraries test aspects of the drafted model and training, and evaluate the impact of uptake through observations, focus groups, surveys, and interviews with self-care children, families, and library staff. <i>RQ1, RQ2, & RQ3</i>	One observation at each national library site of self-care children and library staff; interviews with 5-10 relevant library staff and administrators; two focus groups with self-care children and surveys of 20-30 parents/caregivers within each library service area. Analyze data from national sites and refine model and associated training before sharing with the Advisory Board. External evaluator begins work assessing project relevance and impact. Workshop presentation at ALA conference to solicit additional practitioner feedback. Begin design work for <i>Project Belong</i> website and model.

	Practitioner focused webinar through a professional organization based on RQ1 and 2 findings. Academic and professional journal article drafts based on youth-led co-design work related to RQ3.
Phase 3 Activities & RQs	Data and Deliverables
Sept 2028-Dec 2028: Nationwide rollout of model and training. Finalize model and training and complete website design prior to national roll-out. Complete all academic and professional journal articles and conference presentations.	Finalize <i>Project Belong</i> model, trainings, and website based on national cohort experiences, Advisory Board, and evaluator input. Promote website and national rollout via social media campaign, state libraries, regional organizations, professional forums, and contacts through library participants and Advisory Board. External evaluator completes work assessing project relevance and impact. Practitioner focused webinar through a professional organization based on RQ3 findings. Academic journal article draft based on project methods and/or theories. Practitioner journal article and conference presentation to promote model rollout and final results.

Methods & Analysis

The project will involve multiple research methods that build on each other to ensure the realization of the outputs and that are also aligned with the three research questions. The two northeast regional library case study sites will be recruited using PI's professional networks and pre-existing consulting relationships focused on self-care children and/or youth disciplinary policies. Both sites will have a recurrent population of self-care children (ages 11-18) that visit the library and differ in locale type (urban/rural) and size (small/large). Library staff, self-care children, and self-care children's families will be recruited at each site with the assistance of the local community partners and library staff. All research methods will be included in the team's IRB application. The project PI has proven experience in securing IRB approval for research with adults and children (including self-care children in public libraries and spaces). The team will consult with contacts in the URI's IRB office who have been supportive and knowledgeable in previously successful IRB applications.

Ethnographic observations and activities: The research team will conduct at 15-20, 2-3 hour in situ observations over eight weeks of self-care children's interactions and experiences with the public library and library staff at each of the two regional case study sites for a total of 40-60 hours of observation per site. For our research, we will conduct passive observations of self-care children in public spaces (as allowed under the purview of our IRB). Observation protocol will be based on Carspecken's (1996) priority observation critical ethnographic method, allowing us to generate a thick primary record of children and families' interactions in spaces and programs designated for play and has been previously tested with self-care children by Kociubuk (2025). Priority observations center on capturing rich written observations of the actions, interactions, and larger settings by rotating the focus between various small groups or individuals over the observational period (Carspecken, 1996). These observations will also include interviews with 5-10 relevant library staff and administrators and an analysis of policy and procedural documentation. These activities will allow for development of a deeper understanding of how self-care children and their families experience the public

library (RQ1); ways library staff are responding to the perceived needs of self-care children and their families (RQ2); and the similarities and dissimilarities between these parties' perceptions of each other (RQ1 & 2). These findings will lay the groundwork for the youth-led co-design sessions and model. Inductive and deductive thematic analysis will be used to explore interview transcripts, coding of field-notes using placemaking framework to understand observations, and discourse analysis to examine policy and procedural documentation. A similar, but much reduced protocol will be followed at the national case study sites to inform final model development and refinement.

Interviews and surveys: The research team will conduct interviews and surveys with self-care children and their parents/caregivers to help understand these key stakeholders' experiences of the public library and self-care in community spaces. The research team will recruit 20 parents/caregivers and 10-15 children who are within the service area of the two regional libraries involved in the case studies. We will conduct semi-structured interviews with parents/caregivers who have children ages 11 to 18 who engage, and we will conduct age-appropriate semi-structured interviews with their respective children. We will also aim to survey 40-50 caregivers in each library service area. We will recruit participants through the public library along with community organizations that work with underserved populations, including neighborhood community centers, as well as through flyers posted in public spaces such as grocery stores. If we are unsuccessful in recruiting the target number of participants, we will draw on snowball sampling to recruit participants who are friends or family of the participants we are able to recruit. Interview and survey questions will focus on parents'/caregivers' and children's experiences of the public library, feelings about self-care and public space use, and their perceptions of how libraries can foster belonging, community embeddedness, and leadership for self-care children. These activities are intended to provide insight into RQ1 and provide a greater voice for self-care children and their families in library decisions, services, and trainings. Inductive and deductive thematic analysis will be used to analyze interview data and caregiver surveys will undergo a descriptive analysis.

Co-design and focus groups: At each of the two regional case study sites, three youth-led co-design sessions will take place bringing together both library staff and self-care children to discuss and design elements of library practices, policies, programs, and spaces in order to foster belonging, community embeddedness, and youth leadership. Each co-design session will last approximately 1.5 hours and be audio recorded. Visual artifacts may be created for analysis to support design activities. To assist youth in successfully leading co-design sessions and to determine what self-care children feel are important priorities for the co-design work, two focus groups will be held ahead of the co-design sessions with the research team. The focus groups will last an hour long and be a mix of motivational interviewing, semi-structured prompts, and supportive leadership training. Recruitment for the co-design work will occur through pre-existing relationships from the ethnographic observations, community connections, and staff knowledge. These activities are intended to address RQ3 and provide a larger presence and voice for self-care children in study findings and outputs. Both inductive and deductive thematic analysis of transcripts and artifacts will be used.

Project Team

The research team will be led by PI Dr. Jacqueline Kociubuk (Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Library and Information Studies, University of Rhode Island), an early-career faculty member who brings expertise from her professional and research background in library science, education, and childhood studies. To provide research support, help build the research capacity of future LIS professionals, and provide additional perspectives, a URI graduate research assistant studying library and information science will be recruited and hired by the PI to assist with research activities in Phase 1 and 2. In Phase 1, two to-be-named public libraries with self-care populations (one urban, large and one rural small/medium) will be recruited from the northeast region to serve as ethnographic case studies. In Phase 2, four to-be-named public libraries with large self-care populations will be recruited from other regions of the United States and represent a variety of geographic

locales and library population service size. Recruitment of both regional and national libraries will occur through Dr. Kociubuk's professional networks and previous consulting work regarding unattended child policy development and youth disciplinary practice modification with regional and nationwide libraries. A four-member Advisory Board will provide feedback on initial parts of the model and study findings, as well as assist with dissemination of the publication helping to ensure its broad reach across professional and academic sources. Board members will be a mix of researchers, practitioners, and caregivers in order to bring expertise from relevant research, child and teen development, youth services librarianship, and family engagement areas. An external evaluator with a background in library services to school-aged children and teens will join the project team in Phase 2 to assess the relevance and feasibility of the Project Belong youth co-designed scalable model, including the library staff training tools. Finally, an undergraduate student, with knowledge of inclusive and accessible website design, will be hired in Phase 2 to assist with the creation of an accessible, engaging, and aesthetically appealing website to host the *Project Belong* model and associated library staff trainings.

4. PROJECT RESULTS

Project Belong will provide valuable insights into the needs and priorities of self-care children (ages 11-18) and their families. These insights can inform public library service to all children by centering and incorporating self-care children's voices and perspectives into library practices, policies, programs, and spatial design. Findings and outputs from *Project Belong* can assist with situating public libraries as community places that support holistic childhood learning and developmental outcomes for all children, including self-care children. The insights gained in the project will be shared with the field in several ways, including the following:

Project Belong model and trainings: A key output of *Project Belong* will be a website that features a scalable model for library practice, policies, programs, and spatial design that will be accessible and useful to libraries of varying sizes and geographic locations. The model will be developed from research into self-care children's needs and experiences of public libraries, co-design efforts between self-care children and library staff at the regional case study sites, and testing and refinement work with library staff across the country. As a childhood studies and critical childhood theoretical framing will be used in model development, self-care children's voices and perspectives will be centered in the model. The model will also help libraries foster self-care children's belonging, community embeddedness, and leadership thus encouraging positive youth development. It is anticipated that the accompanying staff training may include the following types of resources: videos on teen development, program and service ideas for supporting self-care children, procedural scripts and policy guidance, and information and guidance on how libraries can address self-care children's needs.

Broader dissemination of research: To support national awareness and adoption of the *Project Belong* model and associated library staff trainings, as well as other evidence-based practices and findings that arise from these research efforts, the project team will focus on delivering practitioner- and research-focused presentations, webinars, and publications throughout the grant cycle. These efforts will help contribute to scholarship in both the library and information science field, education, and social work fields, in addition to positively impacting library practice. This includes presenting at both national (including ALA, ALSC Institute, PLA, AERA, and so on) and state-level conferences, as well as writing articles for journals such as *Children and Libraries*, *Public Library Quarterly*, *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, the *Library Quarterly*, and others. Further, the professional development program will be maintained as a free, publicly available website through the University of Rhode Island to increase accessibility for library staff. Contacts with state youth consultants and participating libraries will provide further opportunities to deliver targeted professional development through organized webinars and other training events. Additionally, the PI will work towards partnering with national library and early childhood organizations for broader dissemination and promotion of the professional development program including the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), Public Libraries Association (PLA), American Educational Research Association (AERA), among others. This work will build upon the project team's demonstrated track record of successful practitioner- and research-focused publishing and dissemination efforts and support the PI's career trajectory.

Sustainability of project: *Project Belong* is designed to ensure that its impact can be sustained beyond the project funding. The *Project Belong* website which includes a scalable model and accompanying staff trainings will be openly and freely available online after the funding of the grant, and will be hosted by the University of Rhode Island for the foreseeable future. The PI will also incorporate it into their teaching of current and future library professionals. Thus, the benefits of this project will be sustained long beyond the funding period, as additional libraries implement the materials with self-care children and their families.

Informing of future work: The applied nature of *Project Belong* sets the foundation for future public library collaborations that will help support Dr. Kociubuk's overarching research aims of understanding how public libraries can better support holistic childhood learning and developmental outcomes for all children. The centering of children's voices and perspectives through research activities and co-design work will also help to increase her expertise on how childhood studies perspectives can be better infused into library and information science, ultimately improving both LIS research and practice.

Schedule of Completion, *Project Belong: supporting self-care children and their families*

Year 1 Activities	Fall 2026	Spring 2027	Summer 2027
Gain IRB approval, finalize and recruit regional case study sites, child co-design participants, and develop protocols for observations, surveys, focus groups, and interviews			
Case study observations of library; interviews with library staff and administrators, focus groups with self-care children; and surveys with parents/caregivers.			
Development and implementation of co-design work with children and library staff at case study sites			
Initial data analysis of case study research activities and start of development of model and associated tools and training			
Testing of aspects of the Project Belong model at case study sites			
Workshop at ALA Annual with library staff to test initial tools and training			

Year 2 Activities	Fall 2027	Spring 2028	Summer 2028
Wrap-up of data collection activities and testing at regional case study sites			
Continued data analysis of regional case study research activities, testing, and co-design work			
National recruitment of libraries for model and staff training testing and site visits			
Development of Project Belong scalable model and training materials following regional case studies			
Testing of model and staff training materials by national cohort of library participants			
Travel to national cohort			

Revision and refinement of PD program and associated materials based on testing feedback			
First part of the project evaluation conducted by external evaluator and refinement			
Sharing research findings with original case study sites (including children and library staff) and learning about developments since last visit			
Visual design work on Project Belong model, website, and associated materials			
Dissemination of findings and analysis through conferences and publications			

Year 3 Activities	Fall 2028
Continued sharing of research findings with original and national case study sites (including children and library staff) and learning about developments since last visit	
Finalization of model and training website design and associated materials	
Final project evaluation completed by external reviewer and refinement	
Official rollout of model and training materials	
Dissemination of findings and analysis through conferences and publications; and promotion of model and training rollout	