Reading Beyond School: Literacies in a Neighbourhood Library

Angela Ward

Linda Wason-Ellam

This ethnographic study describes family and community literacy practices in a neighbourhood public library. As an intercultural research team, we observed patterns of library use and held extended conversations with librarians and neighbourhood parents about literacy activities in the library. The neighbourhood public library was a hub of contiguous communities of practice. It has emerged as a setting with shifting boundaries between formal and informal literacies and between traditional print media and multimodal literacies. The study reveals the dynamic nature of literacy practices in a setting that supported both formal and informal literacies.

Keywords: community literacy, multimodal literacies, neighbourhood libraries

Les auteures présentent une étude ethnographique portant sur les pratiques de littératie familiales et communautaires mises en œuvre dans une bibliothèque publique de quartier. Formant une équipe de recherche interculturelle, les auteures ont observé les habitudes quant à l'utilisation de la bibliothèque et conversé longuement avec les bibliothécaires et les parents du quartier au sujet des activités de la bibliothèque en matière de littératie. La bibliothèque forme un réseau de communautés de pratiques contiguës. Elle apparaît comme un lieu présentant des frontières mobiles entre les littératies formelles et informelles et entre les médias imprimés traditionnels et les littératies multimodales. L'étude révèle la nature dynamique des pratiques en matière de littératie dans un contexte qui favorise les littératies formelles et informelles.

Mots clés: littératie communautaire, littératies multimodales, bibliothèques de quartier

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The ambience of public libraries is familiar: hushed voices, tidily organized bookshelves, complex smell of old books; all may evoke pleasurable reminiscences of childhood reading. In the public libraries of memory, adults browsed gently through dusty volumes, while children sat at low tables, almost hidden behind piles of vividly illustrated picture books. Older men visited the magazine section, smoking while reading newspapers and the latest edition of *Time*. Public libraries reflect the society that sustains them, providing insight into currently acceptable interactions with literacy. For some of us, the public libraries of our youth

were a quiet haven that encouraged private reading.

Retirees still enjoy newspapers and magazines in public libraries, but almost everything else has changed. At Westside Park library,[1] where we (Angela, Linda and other members of our team) have visited frequently over the last three years, children still enjoy *Curious George* and young people seek resources for homework projects. In another part of the library, university student tutors explain math homework to puzzled adolescents. One father persuades his four-year-old son to move away from the collection of Disney videos and examine a display of picture books, but the video is eventually taken home.

The library has emerged as a fascinating context in which to study family and community literacy practices. As we studied how families accessed literacy materials in their community, we became especially interested in the use of public libraries. In this article, we document our observations of formal and informal literacy practices in one neighbourhood library, and include parents' reflections on their own and their families' library use. Using a critical ethnographic approach, we fully utilized our status as outsiders/insiders in the library context. Because most of our previous research has been in schools, our perspective here is that of literacy researchers exploring the library as one site where families in our larger ethnographic study accessed literacy.[2] We bring our backgrounds of school and community literacy to a context that was new for us; we hope to help readers re-experience the ordinary and look with fresh eyes at literacy practices in an ubiquitous public institution.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Researchers who have studied literacy from a sociocultural perspective do not consider it to be a formally learned series of autonomous skills, but regard it as demonstrated in interactions between people (for example, Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000). Schools have most typically espoused the autonomous view of literacy, with teaching organized into hierarchically arranged, decontextualized activities (Street, 1995). Literacy skills, in this view, are neutral and unaffected by their context.

Street (2001, p. 7), however, suggests that particular literacies are learned through participation in social activities. For example, the literacy required for participation in an electronic on-line community differs from the literacy developed between inmates of a prison. We are all members of several different literacy communities, practising different genres of formal, academic writing, jotting reminder notes, writing greeting cards, crafting letters to the editor of a newspaper. People learn situated literacies through

apprenticeship in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice associate informally where members "develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests" (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). These shared ways may include particular discourses and particular ways of using literacy found in communities of work (teaching, carpentry), home (sending greetings, organizing menus and shopping), and leisure (being a car enthusiast or movie fan, or gardener). Communities of practice may be virtual or real; it is possible to be part of a world community of Tolkien movie followers, for example, even though no face-to-face meetings ever occur.

Using ethnographic methods to study literacy practices researchers can "reflect broader social relationships" (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000, p. 12), studying through qualitative methods, literacy in different societal contexts: home, school, or workplace. Data for ethnographic studies of literacy include descriptions of literacy events, which are activities where literacy has a role (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000, p. 8). Literacy practices, comprising patterns of literacy events, define how literacy is habitually used. These patterns give rise to broader understandings of how in a particular community, literacy is regarded and practised. Literacy serves a range of functions for individuals and for groups; changes occur across time in social uses of literacy (Gregory, 2000). Moss (2003) describes informal literacies as "tied to the exigencies of the moment" (p.14), and in the case of children, almost literally ephemeral. In one example of informal literacy, Moss details four young boys' fascination with reading and discussing magazines about WWE wrestling, intensely lived for a season, that had disappeared almost completely from memory when she re-interviewed them several years later.

Gee (2000) has contrasted the informal literacies of home and community with the formal literacies of school and the professions. Formal literacies encompass a range of genres, but are characterized by use of standard language forms and discipline-specific text organization. Formal and informal literacies can exist together in many contexts, including the public library.

RESEARCH FOCUS AND METHOD

The research team included two university researchers (Angela Ward and Linda Wason-Ellam) and four graduate students. Two of our team members brought an Aboriginal perspective to the interpretation of our data, enriching our findings, while another team member lived in an inner-city neighbourhood close to our research site.

Research Site: Exploring the Neighbourhood

The research team chose Westside Park as the site for our study partly for opportunistic reasons (the principal investigators have frequently worked with teachers and students in the community school), and partly because it represents a typical urban prairie mix of immigrants, Aboriginal people from different backgrounds, and descendants of European farm settler families. In 2002, about 7000 people lived in this community; in 1996, 86 per cent claimed English as their first language. Neatly painted small houses are looked after by long-time residents of the community, while nearby apartment blocks are home to many new arrivals in Canada: from the former USSR, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and other Asian countries. Of the Aboriginal families who live in this neighbourhood, some have lived all their lives in an urban environment, while visiting Northerners live in affordable housing here during their attendance at a variety of postsecondary institutions. This area is not the risky downtown, but neither is it suburbia as constructed in more affluent areas of the city.

   The city library system, of which Westside Park is a branch, is highly rated in comparison with public libraries across Canada. Clearly the local population is supportive of its library services. Almost half the population of Westside Park have a library card, but not all families we visited and interviewed were regular library users. The Westside Park library, built as part of the recreation centre, is visually very similar to the shopping mall. Its external blandness, making it barely distinguishable from the centre and mall, signals its role as a municipal service, alongside the swimming pool and gym.

Data Collection and Analysis

The ethnographic data for this study included maps, photographs, participant and non-participant observations, document analysis, and semi-structured and conversational interviews. We spent many hours, not meticulously counted, "hanging out" in local stores, and walking the residential areas to understand the physical spaces of the neighbourhood. We collected a wealth of information in our interview transcripts, field notes, and reflective pieces written and shared among the team members. To study the neighbourhood library, we visited it approximately thirty times. The visits varied in length, deliberately planned to take snapshots of literacy activity at different times of day. Because the after school times were especially busy, we had an excellent opportunity to observe homework activities. Two younger researchers on our team took their children along five or six times to visit the library, affording them ways to engage with

other parents in informal conversations about literacy and childrearing. On several mornings, some team members participated in storytime programs; others were able to sit and observe for several hours in the evenings when adults and families typically used the library.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the city's literacy librarian and the branch librarian; these were audiotaped and transcribed. We also interviewed in-depth thirty parents and conducted two focus groups with parents and teachers together. In the interviews, we asked parents and teachers about their own library use as well as that of their families. The interviews took place in parents' homes and typically lasted between one or two hours. In several instances, because of parents' commitments to work or their children's activities, we interviewed them in two separate sessions. During the interviews, which were designed to be wide-ranging and conversational, parents recalled personal experiences with library-going, which stretched back to their own childhoods. The focus groups with teachers and parents took place in the local community school. Each of the three focus groups had six or seven participants, with the majority being parents. These sessions raised questions we had previously discussed with parents individually, including ideas of how to improve home-school communication about literacy and broader literacy issues such as access to public libraries and other literacy activities and materials.

As a research team, we met weekly over a three-year period to discuss and analyze the data. Sessions often took the form of sharing and discussing fieldnotes, transcribed interview data, and individual thematic analyses The interpretation of our data was enriched by Aboriginal perspectives brought by two of our team members. All five team members observed in the library, writing fieldnotes during and after their visits; we synthesized, categorized, and organized these observations to describe and elucidate literacy practices within the library. The syntheses resulting from our team discussions themselves became data. The team's own experiences with literacy and libraries as children, and later as teachers and parents, provided a further context for our understandings of the role of libraries in supporting a variety of literacies.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

We used two major sources of data for this article. In the first section, based on multiple observations and fieldnotes contributed by all research team members, we have built an ethnographic picture of Westside Park and its public library. In the second section, we have used parent interview data to provide a perspective on families' use of Westside Park Library.

Observations and Interviews in the Library

An interview carried out with the system's head librarian reinforced our observation of the close relationship between libraries and literacy programs. The library system in the city where we live had, at the time of the study, a literacy librarian responsible for creating literacy initiatives in the library system, often in partnership with other provincial organizations. A typical outcome of her work is support of family literacy programs. The city's literacy librarian sees the library as providing access to free public meeting rooms for literacy organizations, resources for literacy tutors, and materials for English as an Additional Language learners. She spends much of her time writing grant applications in collaboration with literacy organizations. Current library-sponsored programs in the city provide outreach services to prisons, to teen parents, city drop-in centres, as well as secondary schools in the city. The on-site librarian can waive fines for participants in these programs, recognizing that bureaucracy can be a barrier for some potential library users: "If you don't have a fixed address and are forced to move every two months, returning library books may not be high on your priority list" (Literacy librarian).

Westside Park Library Programs

Westside Park offers story hours and supports early reading by providing materials for preschoolers and parents. The library provides family story times, preschool story times for children aged three to six, summer reading programs, parenting programs, and computer sessions. Westside Park has well-attended "Toddler Times" for children aged 18 to 36 months and their caregivers. Shelley, the parent of a toddler, expressed her enthusiasm for storytime.

[I value] the story time that the library has in the morning. It was something that I tried to work into my schedule, just make it part of the morning routine. We would take the girls there. Even downtown library's story corner, I remember doing that as a child and enjoying it, and trying to incorporate that, too, into my days off, and make it part of the day that we share together. (Shelley, parent)

The children's librarian shared books, sang songs and used puppets and other items to focus the toddlers' attention. The branch librarian noted that the literacy "label" tended to discourage some people from participating in some library programs.

We'd like to do something for literacy. You advertise it as a literacy program, but who's

going to come? If somebody is really illiterate, they can't read it anyway. . . . Story times are a really important part of our programming, although we don't advertise them as literacy. (Branch librarian)

Because the library took on computers from the Bill Gates Foundation, it has been obligated by the terms of the endowment to offer computer education to library users. The successful programs include "Computers for the Totally Terrified," which enrols mostly seniors, as well as sessions on e-mail and Internet searching. The branch librarian, aware of the diversity in the Westside Park neighbourhood, attempts to match community needs through both library resources and programming. Groups who use the library use its spaces in different ways.

OBSERVED PATTERNS OF LIBRARY USE

On busy days (Sundays, Mondays, and Saturdays) there were 1300 users, 600 on slow days. The busiest hours are between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m. Cynthia, a graduate student researcher, provides the flavour of a typical evening in Westside Park neighbourhood library in her fieldnotes.

There are about 40 people in the library on this visit. The study area in the back is being fully used. Ten people surround the photocopier and others surround the computers. It looks like people are doing their homework. There is a friendly buzz in the room. Nobody is looking at the handouts at the door when they come in or leave. Nobody is looking at the posters on the walls. They seem focused on books, videos, sewing patterns, music, and computers. It looks busier than a busy day at the Education Library! Three staff are working in the evening. One talks with a Grade 12 student doing her homework. Three small children are playing in the storytime area in the back. (research assistant's fieldnotes).

This snapshot encapsultes the range of literacy activities we observed.

Family Orientation of Library Holdings

There were 30,000 children's books (hardcover and paperback); 34,000 adult/young adult books; 2,000 audio cassettes, 3,000 compact disks, 6,600 videos, and several hundred DVDs. The free-standing shelves close to the entrance held career and consumer education materials. There were six shelves of "Books in Languages other than English." These were popular literature (judging by the cover illustrations) in Spanish, Polish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Ukrainian, and Arabic. The library provided books in languages other than English if patrons asked for them, which were ordered from the main branch. According to the branch librarian, books in Chinese and

Vietnamese are most frequently used. There were also some bilingual children's books. The library also provided a special room for the use of volunteer literacy tutors and their adult students where the small "Adult Basic Education and ESL" section is housed. This comprised many workbooks and some easy versions of short fiction ("The Laubach Way to Reading"; "How to prepare for the TOEFL test").

Five of the six Gates Foundation computers have Internet access; the one reserved for children does not. There is one CD-ROM unit with games for children, and two computers for searching library catalogue and databases. The computers came with software (interactive books — *Barney's Circus*, *Barney's Farm*, *Barney's Sea*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *Mercer Mayer*, Microsoft programs, Internet access, Encarta *World Dictionary and Atlas*), some of which the branch librarian considered "too American." Another downside of the project from the library's point of view was that furniture and infrastructure (training) had to be provided (some rural areas throughout the province turned down computers because of this).

Multimodal Literacies at the Library

We observed both virtual and physical interactions with text. Parents and children demonstrated multimodal responses to reading and storytelling. During sessions for preschoolers, the librarian reading the story encouraged children to join in by singing songs, incorporating bodily actions, and entertaining with puppetry. Because the children were toddlers, the librarian encouraged the adults to stay for the sessions. Many adults participated eagerly with the children, clapping in time to song rhythms and calling out in response to questions about story characters. Some parents held children on their laps to reduce fidgeting and squirming.

After storytime, children engaged in craft activities in a room sealed off from the general public. The crafts typically involved cutting and gluing or weaving with brightly colored yarn. The children's corner at the back of the library included toys, board books, tapes, and small-sized chairs. During our visits, we only occasionally observed parents reading to their children. Library users developed distinct patterns when interacting with paper materials. It was here that we noted generational differences in patrons' choices. Magazine readers might sit for 30 minutes in the comfortable seating area set aside for them, piling up six or seven magazines on related topics, such as motorcycles or trucks. Serious readers took time to read through one or two articles per magazine. In other instances, magazine reading was auxiliary to another activity; for example, a young girl was observed flipping through a teen magazine while talking to a friend. In some interactions,

books were almost incidental, as when two boys around 13 years old sat across from one another at a table and talked about skateboarding. After about half an hour, one boy started to read a comic book and the other picked up a thin paperback to read.

Library users also had different approaches in choosing a book. Some stood at one bookshelf and looked through a short section of books; others walked up and down the fiction section to find an author alphabetically shelved; still others looked through new acquisitions prominently displayed at the front of the library. In some cases, users' book choices were constrained by the amount of time available for browsing. A young mother came in one day at about 8:30 p.m. with her baby on her shoulders and a four-year-old at her side. She headed over to the children's section, quickly chose a book, and darted out before the 9:00 p.m. closing.

Some adults doing homework studied in the separate seating section designated for Adult Basic Education materials; we observed adolescents searching for information on the Internet or occasionally in encyclopedias. High-school students sat at large wooden tables with their university tutors, for example discussing algebra problems. High-school students used computers for specific homework tasks that involved searching the Internet for information. They also spent time checking e-mail. We observed one woman figuring out mortgage payments as a class assignment. Young people were heavy users of those computers hooked up to the Internet. When one of our researchers tried to sign up to use a computer, she found that they were all booked two days ahead. The librarian noted that "It is best to call at least a day or two ahead."

Young children with their parents puzzled out computer programs based on television characters. The most popular computer games were Arthur's Brainsteasers, Arthur's Math Carnival, Arthur's Spellathon, Barney's Sea, Green Eggs & Ham, and Magic School Bus. Parents usually chose videos for their children. The children's videos were much more frequently browsed than those for adults. Parents (usually, but not always, mothers) typically checked out four or five videos for their children. Animated movies, such as those produced by the Disney Corporation, were favourites. Families visiting the library responded to multiple forms of text and symbolic representation.

Observed Patterns of Literacy

These patterns can provide insights into how library interactions shape families' literacy practices. Major categories of literacy practices in the library — finding and choosing materials, reading, writing, and checking out books

— have not changed significantly over the last five decades. The striking differences occur in the media currently available to library users, and the proportion of the library's holdings of computers, videos, and book materials.

In Westside Park library, library users exhibited several ways to find and choose materials. Some people knew what they were looking for, perhaps finding more books by a favourite fiction writer, or working from a list made prior to the library visit. Some patrons came in with "top seller" book lists from a newspaper. These people went directly to a shelf, chose one or two books, often within minutes, and checked them out. We also observed some patrons choosing only from a favourite section in the library (for example, languages other than English, children's books, mystery stories, new fiction). Librarians, when asked, would also lead readers to particular areas, usually when they needed specific information (for example on setting up an aquarium, finding information for a homework project on the Middle Ages in Britain). We frequently observed parents reaching over their young children to cull piles of chosen books, making choices for their children. Perhaps predictably, we observed senior patrons browsing more than young people, possibly because they had more available time.

During their book selection, library users read information on the inside flaps and back cover (usually a brief synopsis of the book and information about the author). Some would flip rapidly through the book, determining, in the case of one teenage reader, the print size. Because books were being used as homework resources, students would take several books to a table for further perusal. Because the books for homework were (somewhat ironically) not usually taken home, students spent only a few minutes in making their initial selections.

We observed writing in the library much less frequently than reading; writing was usually associated with formal, schooled tasks. Much writing observed at computer stations was in the form of e-mail (for older library users) and chat room activity (for teens). Occasionally, computer users made notes from Internet sites, but they more frequently downloaded and printed information. Both adults and adolescents wrote at the tables provided; this writing seemed to be mostly note-taking associated with homework activities.

Many routines for checking out books are "fossilized" sets of behaviours, rather than literacy practices. The task of applying for a library card no longer demands the ability to fill out a form because the librarian asked for personal information (name, address, phone number) and entered it into the computer database. Users received cards immediately. Book and video checkout was also computerized, and the limit on borrowing was high (50 books; up to 10 videos, depending on the type and demand), so checking

out materials was relatively painless. We observed patrons paying fines for overdue books. Local people discussed this issue in the interviews we carried out following the library observations, stating that worry about paying fines had led them to purchase secondhand books rather than use the library.

Although barriers such as the fine system discouraged some patrons, many local people used the library to access information for school and study purposes. Patrons used books and computers and also asked librarians and homework tutors to help them with schooled literacy tasks. They used informal literacies in computer communication and in conversations about computer games and magazine articles. The demarcation between formal and informal literacies blurred in a number of activities: young people read fashion magazines and did homework at the same time; a parent helped her child label animals on the computer screen, asking questions in a school-like manner. The users also saw the library as a source of entertainment, through programs for children and its holdings of audio and videotapes.

FAMILIES' EXPERIENCE WITH THE NEIGHBOURHOOD LIBRARY

In the conversational interviews we conducted with Westside Park neighbourhood parents, they revealed that they did not access books solely through the public library. Taking the bus to the library, while carrying groceries and dealing with small children, was a challenge. Some parents relied on the school library for materials; others ordered books from clubs organized through classroom teachers and volunteers. A large discount department store in the mall or even the local supermarket became the source of children's books for many families, and, more surprisingly, a local secondhand bookstore (which has subsequently relocated) took on some traditional library functions. Families bought books there for their children, often on a trade-in basis. Several parents suggested that this gave them cheaper access to books than paying library fines. One parent noted,

I don't use the library. I have a lot of books that I purchase and then I'll take them back to the used bookstore and once my daughter reads them and we've read them, then we take them back and sell them off and get different ones. So we recycle them a lot that way. (Susan, parent)

The storeowner recognized that she was offering a public service by doing this.

Many parents in the school community had positive experiences with the library, making it a significant part of their daily lives. One mother noted

that it was harder to find time to visit the library now her children were older and had become more involved in formal activities.

We started going to the library when our son was very, very young. We go to the library a lot, more so during the summertime than during the regular season, because I find with the demands that are on kids now, and they seem to have all their activities in the evenings, there's less time by the time they have homework to do, have supper, do their activity, it's time to go to bed." (Ellen, parent)

Immigrant families were especially appreciative of the library services available to them. Maria, an immigrant mother from the Philippines, told us: "I go to the library and get books so my children have books to read. It helped me to learn English when I read to them when they were little. I looked at the pictures then I could figure out what the books said." In more detail, Mohammed, newly arrived from Afghanistan, describes what the availability of library books has meant for him and for his children.

When I first came to Canada, I teach my children English. We don't have any kinds of books, and we don't have any samples to teach them. Each thing that I see in my eyes, I tell them that this is a glass, this is a table, this is a chair, this is a lamp, this is a window, this is a door. When I got my library card which is free for me, I bring books home and I explain them. Only I read and I translate for them what's the meaning of this sentence. But I think that they don't know at the first time what is a book for, because a book has a lot of paper and they did not see these kinds of things for children before in my country. I see that a book is better for them as I have pictures to show them in the books. I explain to them in English. 'This is a deer. This is a horn. This is his eyes' and my children learn. It is very good for my children to get books from the library. We go every day. (Mohammed, parent).

In another conversation, Miklos, a 10-year old from Bosnia, interpreted for his mother, who described how she took books about Canada from the library so she could learn about her new country. Reading children's books also helped her to learn English. Lorna, an Aboriginal parent, used the library to help her children develop pride in their culture: "I don't know a whole lot of native stories, because that was something I wasn't taught, so I use the library so my children will know their native heritage and be proud of who they are."

Several parents, including Mary, had memories of being library users as children, but felt that, because they were now financially better off than in their early years, they preferred to purchase books: "I find I can afford to go out and buy the books, and I prefer to do that." Somehow, for Mary, using the library had become associated with memories of poverty. Susan, one of several parents who recognized that her children "were into" series

books, preferred to own and reread them. Jackie strongly preferred to read paperback books rather than the hardcovers she associated with the library: "I don't care for hard covers because I read in bed, and you can't hold them right."

Arguing from another point of view, Denise noted: "If the library has it, why spend six bucks on a book when you can go there [to the store]) every couple of weeks and get new books." Barbara recreated her own childhood experiences for her own children, using the library, but also providing personal stories of books: "There were lots of books in our toy cupboard, so we were reading on our own. . . . Every night my brother and I were in the toy cupboard, going through them. I try to do this for my 'little person.'" Barbara had experiences as a single parent in difficult circumstances and found that at that time even getting to the library was not easy: "Maybe you didn't have enough money to put the plates on, or you were driving an unregistered vehicle." These practical issues also surfaced in Eileen's comments: "Mike is really into the library now, but when he was younger it was not quite so nice to take him to the library. One of us would stay home with him and the other would take the two older boys to the library."

Even though for some users Westside Park library had become a place where they hung out with their friends and used computers, some parents noted that not all children preferred computer media to print. Penny, when asked whether her son was using technology at the library or borrowing books, replied:

He is pretty much into the print media. I give him the choice. What he's selecting now is mysteries. A series that I've never heard of really. Paperbacks. It seems they like paperbacks more than a hard cover. Ghosts and goblins, *Goose Bumps*. Things that are more, again, not reality. Things that really wouldn't happen in real life like if there's ghosts in the school. (Penny, parent)

The parents with whom we spoke were aware of the importance of supporting their children as readers, but did not necessarily agree on the role of the public library in their children's literacy lives.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

The range of formal and informal literacies seen in the library is not unexpected; the balance between the use of books and other media reflects a changing world. Parents reported to us that they and their children used home computers to access information, and even to learn to read. The multimodal realities of literacies in Westside Park library are reflected in

family literacy interactions as well; however, recognition of this dramatic change in informal literacy use is just beginning among teachers, librarians, and parents.

In using the library, some parents were looking for support to develop formal, schooled literacies with their children. Others saw the library as a repository of Canadian or Western cultural knowledge; borrowing books opened the door to understanding their new culture. Some parents believed the library's major purpose was to provide users with information, perhaps recognizing that information today might be accessed via the Internet rather than through books, but in essence the library's role was to safeguard society's important cultural knowledge.

Formal literacy practices, associated with schools and other institutions, were evident in Westside Park library. Programs offered in the library were organized in school-like ways, including homework and preschool programs specifically designed to support school learning. Literacy practices in this library occurred in particular physical contexts; elderly magazine users and Internet browsers, young children clicking through Barney stories, and teenagers doing homework existed in separate clusters in demarcated spaces.

The practices carried out day-to-day in Westside Park neighbourhood library are shaped by institutionalized practices and spaces, the influence of schooled literacy, and multimodal communication. The public library, with its long tradition of providing a commons where all citizens may access knowledge for no cost, is a democratic institution. However, the rules for borrowing and returning books may exclude the poorest members of society, transportation is often an issue for those with young children, and the physical organization of the library can be intimidating to those unfamiliar with its operations. Westside Park library, like all other libraries, organized material through complex categorization schemes (for example, the Dewey system), and also organized space in particular ways. The patrons and their activities varied according to the time of day. Library activities were organized by space and, in the case of the computer games and activities, by the structure of the medium and the limited time available for their use.

Parents in our study understood the potential of libraries to help their children become successful users of dominant, schooled, literacies, as their comments on library use make clear. However, they described the computer and the Internet as simply another source of information rather than as a challenge to mono-modal book literacy. Some Westside Park library users were producing and reproducing the traditional library context, the quiet haven, while others, especially young people, were remaking the library through multimodal literacy practices associated with computers and other

electronic media. The librarians with whom we spoke were aware of these contiguous communities of practice, one reproducing the dominant/academic /hierarchical literacy model and the other engaging in informal literacies more closely allied to popular culture, utilizing a range of semiotic systems (Gee, 2003). The presence of computers and other electronic media in the library carries symbolic weight. Wenger (1998) describes how the tools used for a task can change the nature of the task. "Reification shapes our experience. It can do so in very concrete ways" (p. 59). For the branch librarian, the presence of computers and their frequent use signaled the library's continuing relevance in a changing society, while for us as literacy researchers the heavy use of computers in the library gave evidence that in public life at least, media literacies rate equally with traditional print literacies. Gee (2003) argues that teachers and parents should recognize that powerful learning takes place through interaction with multimedia. The potentially anarchic nature of electronic communication puts librarians in an uneasy spot because it is problematic for anyone in democratic institutions to control access to computer text. One snapshot study of Internet use in the Burnaby public library (Curry, 2000) showed that patrons were using computers to access e-mail, news-oriented websites, and chat rooms in many languages, and to gather information about shopping and entertainment. Although librarians are "Internet savvy" and concerned about children's access to research and critical skills, the patrons tend to use computers to communicate with each other, as well as for school-related projects. Behrman (1996) sees librarians in the 21st century as advocates for information equality, and beyond that as champions of traditional values governing the privacy and confidentiality of technology users in the electronic age. This is an oversimplification of the dilemmas libraries will encounter as access to knowledge and its interpretation is transformed in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

What did we learn as literacy researchers about families' library experiences and practices? Because the library has a role as a public service for all citizens, less overt control of literacy use occurs there than in the school setting. The glimpses of current literacies in this study, more accessible to observation than in schools, illuminate questions of the relationship between formal and informal literacies in education systems and other institutions.

Some community members used the library to access formal literacies through information in printed and electronic form; young patrons engaged in informal conversation and literacy events with peers while working

together on the more formal literacies of homework. The families in our study not only borrowed library materials, but also used books, videos, and computer programs in the library. As researchers, we observed a wide range of formal and informal literacy activities.

Some literacy researchers (for example, Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000) have asserted that schools should support a range of community literacies in their curriculum, but Moss (2003) counters this suggestion by noting that pedagogical intent can change informal literacies. According to Moss, the process of schooling renders informal literacies more formal, as they become subject to curricular organization. If indeed the structure of knowledge is being transformed by multimodal discourse, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) and Gee (2003) believe, then critical study of the ways in which students engage with electronic media should also be part of school curricula.

Observing patterns of library use and talking to school families in Westside Park has given us a preview of literacy issues more encompassing than discussions about reading methodology. Re-experiencing the ordinary through our time in a familiar institution enabled us as researchers to explore the boundaries between formal and informal literacies in school, family, and community. We have come to regard Westside Park neighbourhood library, not in its traditional sense as an organized collection of reading materials, but as a dynamic microcosm of community and family literacies.

NOTES

1 All names used in this article, except those of the authors and researchers, are pseudonyms.

2 We collected the data reported here within a larger, three-year ethnographic project in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood (Wason-Ellam & Ward, 2001), which describes how families in Westside Park, a neighbourhood served by a large elementary school, understood and used literacy as part of their lives out of school.

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