

EARLY LITERACY BEGINS WITH...WHOM? AN EXPLORATION OF  
MOTHERING WORK AS A COMPONENT IN STUDENTS'  
EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

JESSICA RIZK

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## **ABSTRACT**

Much research has examined the benefits of family literacy programs, but only few have taken up the embedded gendered and class dynamics found in many early literacy frameworks such as storytime programs. The purpose of this thesis then is to investigate the kinds of gendered and class based assumptions involved in early literacy work. Data collection was comprised of observations from storytime programs held at a local library; in-depth interviews with librarian programmers and mother attendees; and a content analysis of read and recommended literature.

The major findings from this research suggest that: a) There are specific expectations regarding “appropriate” literacy work; b) It is assumed that mothers will carry out such prescribed work; and c) Gender was not an important consideration when selecting stories, as it was expected that authors and publishers take up such issues beforehand. These results have implications for future research on mothering discourses and early literacy work.

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"Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light"—

Albert Schweitzer

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Main Argument</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Goal of Research</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Statement of the Problem</b> .....	<b>2</b>
The Selection Criteria of Children’s Literature .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Conceptual Framework</b> .....	<b>5</b>
The Mothering Discourse .....	<b>5</b>
Culture Capital, Institutional Ethnography, and Early Literacy Work .....	<b>8</b>
Moving Towards Intuitional Ethnography and Ruling Relations .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Significance of This Research</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Outline of Thesis</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Background</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Site Selection</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Shift of Research</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Methods of Data Collection</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Methodology Rationale</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>Selection of Participants</b> .....	<b>28</b>
a. Selection of Librarians .....	<b>28</b>
b. Selection of Mothers.....	<b>29</b>
c. Selection of books.....	<b>30</b>
<b>Participant Characteristics</b> .....	<b>30</b>
a. Librarians .....	<b>30</b>
b. Mothers .....	<b>31</b>
<b>The Interview Schedule and Process</b> .....	<b>33</b>
Insider/Outsider Conflict .....	<b>37</b>
Execution of Research .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Data Analysis Plan: Understanding Librarians and Mothers Experiences</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>I. Family Literacy Programs</b> .....	<b>43</b>
Connections between Family Literacy Programs to “Parents” and the Home .....	<b>44</b>
Whose Literacy is Valued?.....	<b>46</b>
The Relationship between Literacy Acquisition and Cultural Capital .....	<b>46</b>
School Based Literacy .....	<b>47</b>

Class Differences .....	48
Deficit Approach to Learning .....	49
Culture, Community, and Family Literacy Programs .....	52
<b>II. Mothering, Parenting, and Early Literacy Work .....</b>	<b>54</b>
The Gendered Nature of Family Literacy Programs .....	54
Mothering Work .....	56
Moving Towards a Parental Discourse .....	60
Where are the Fathers? .....	61
<b>III. The Importance of Children’s Literature, Gender Portrayals, and Story</b>	
<b>Selection .....</b>	<b>64</b>
Significance of studying children’s literature .....	64
Gendered Portrayals in Children’s Literature .....	67
Book Selection Process .....	75
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>79</b>
 <b>CHAPTER IV: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND TEXTUALLY MEDIATED</b>	
<b>DISCOURSES: WHAT IS (UN)VALUED IN EARLY LITERACY WORK? .....</b>	<b>81</b>
Introduction .....	81
Observations of Storytimes .....	83
Every Child Ready to Read .....	85
Librarian Expectations of “Good” Parenting .....	90
Transitioning School Practices into the Home .....	94
What Kinds Of Literacy Practices Get Valued: Education and the Middle Class	97
“At-Risk” Families .....	100
Why do Mothers Attend Storytimes: The Assumed Benefits .....	103
A Routineness and Preparation for Schooling .....	105
What Goes on at Home? .....	109
Whose Culture is Valued? .....	111
Conclusion .....	113
 <b>CHAPTER V: MOTHERING WORK IN EARLY LITERACY: THE GENDERED</b>	
<b>NATURE OF FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS AND PARENTING</b>	
<b>PRACTICES .....</b>	<b>116</b>
Introduction .....	116
Recap of Mothering Work and The Mothering Discourse .....	118
Observations .....	119
Who Comes to Storytime Programs? .....	122
Does “Parenting work” Equal “Mothering”? .....	125
Returning to Every Child Ready to Read & Family Literacy Calendar .....	128
Where do Fathers Fit into Early Literacy Programs? .....	132
Librarians Experience as “Experts” .....	135
Mothering Work as a Social Process .....	137
Out of the Mouths of Mothers: Who Is doing the Work? .....	142
Judgment of Other Mothers: Who are the “Good” Mothers? .....	149

Learning From the “Experts” .....	153
Summary .....	157
<b>CHAPTER VI: (IN)VISIBILITY OF GENDER IN STORY SELECTION .....</b>	<b>160</b>
Introduction .....	160
How do Librarians Select Stories? .....	162
Librarian’s Criteria for Choosing Books .....	164
What Kinds of Books do Librarians Avoid? .....	168
Exploring the Concept of Gender with Librarians .....	170
Gender and Literacy .....	180
How do Mothers Select Stories? .....	186
Important Criteria for Mothers .....	188
What Kinds of Books do Mothers Avoid? .....	191
Mothers and Gender in Children’s Literature .....	197
Gender in the Literature: What is Being Read and Recommended? .....	201
Conclusion .....	210
<b>CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>212</b>
Review of the Study .....	212
Summary of Results .....	215
Study Limitations and Implications for Future Research .....	223
Concluding Thoughts .....	225
<b>WORKS CITED .....</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTION OF STORYTIME PROGRAMS HELD AT SMALLVILLE LIBRARY .....</b>	<b>242</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT .....</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: LIBRARIAN INTERVIEW GUIDE .....</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: MOTHER INTERVIEW GUIDE .....</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>APPENDIX E: LIBRARIAN INFORMED CONSENT FORM .....</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>APPENDIX F: MOTHER INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....</b>	<b>252</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: <u>Description of Librarians</u> .....	31
Table 2: <u>Description of Mother Participants</u> .....	32
Table 3: <u>Librarian Criteria for Selecting Stories</u> .....	165
Table 4: <u>Topics Avoided by Librarians when Selecting Stories</u> .....	168
Table 5: <u>Important Criteria for Mothers when Selecting Stories</u> .....	189
Table 6: <u>Topics Avoided by Mothers when Selecting Stories</u> .....	192

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

... I wonder why all the participants in this program are women? Where are the fathers? Why do librarians keep saying “parents” when it is largely women in attendance doing the “expected” work they keep referring to? I wonder if librarians are conscious about gender portrayals in the stories they are putting on display on the back table for “parents” to take home. I wonder if mothers are... (Personal Memo from observations at Smallville Library, July 26<sup>th</sup> 2012)

### **Main Argument**

In this thesis I suggest that family literacy programs often have a silenced gendered discourse (Casper, 2003) about who is meant to support children’s early literacy habits and what kind of work is expected (i.e. reading to children every night; coming to the library). Through a case study of a library outside of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), I look at the gendered nature of involvement in storytime sessions, along with the ideological frameworks and philosophies structuring early literacy “work” and the assumptions embedded within them. I also consider the process of selecting literature to read to children as it relates to current discourses on gender and mothering. Essentially, this study seeks to understand the intricate relationship between early literacy work, gender, and cultural expectations.

### **Goal of Research**

The purpose of my research is to examine some of the discourses that frame early literacy work, looking in particular at the role of institutions such as libraries and librarians in perpetuating gendered discourses; the participation of “parents” and

librarians in early literacy, and the role that children's literature and story selection play in further contributing to such discourses. The aim of my study in specific is to examine:

1. The role of cultural capital and textually mediated discourses in valuing a certain kind of literacy work. What kinds of "expectations" do librarians and mothers hold with regard to child literacy?
2. The kind of mothering work that goes into early literacy. Exploring further the gendered nature of family literacy programs and parenting practices. How do literacy programs held at a library reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles? What are some of the taken-for-granted assumptions in place about who is expected to engage in prescribed early literacy work?
3. Story selection of both librarians and mothers. Considering the process by which both librarians and mothers go about selecting stories for their children (i.e. through recommendations, personal favourites etc.) and the considerations they make when selecting stories (i.e. length, representation of main characters, pictures etc.). In addition, considering how parents (particularly mothers) are depicted in recommended and read picture books (i.e. what are they pictured doing? Where are they shown?)

### **Statement of the Problem**

Mothers often do the bulk of what we would call "parenting" work. Regardless of whether a father is present, women continue to be responsible for the majority of their

children's maturation—emotionally, physically and socially. The dominant discourse surrounding mothers as primary caregivers structures gender relations, and posits that mothers should be first and foremost immersed in their nurturing role. This discourse of “good” mothering occurs as society indirectly dictates to women that a “good” mother is one who stays home, cares for her children, and puts her career ambitions as secondary to her primary obligations of childcare (Hays, 1996). This “good” mother is also responsible for providing the time, resources, and space to cultivate her children's growth and development. Little however, is said about how the mothering discourse translates into the early literacy work of mothers and librarians who run literacy programs. In other words, do discourses of mothering structure frameworks of local institutions such as the library, as well as the work of librarians? Do they guide mother's own understandings of the kind of early literacy work they should do? Much research has explored family literacy programs and the importance of parental engagement in early literacy (Auerbach, 1997; Cairney, 2003; DeBruin-Parecki & Krol-Sinclair, 2003; Hannon, 2003; Taylor, 1983), but only few have actually looked at the gendered discourses, including the role of mothers in sustaining such programs, and the concomitant absence of fathers. Thus, while research has examined family literacy programs, little has been done on how discourses such as the mothering discourse frame the kind of work that is expected from both programmers and participant's perspectives.



## **The Selection Criteria of Children's Literature**

Examinations of how mothers and librarians (both of whom are largely in charge of selecting stories for children) choose books, is a notable gap in current literature. In other words, what is missing are studies examining the basis from which mothers and librarians select stories for children, and whether they come across the many stereotypical depictions of parents in the stories they read and share. The questions I ask in this study are what kind of "mothering work" goes into storybook selection? How do mothers select storybooks for their children? Are they advised by teachers or librarians to read certain stories? What factors are associated with librarian's selection process? Are gender portrayals a factor for both librarians and mothers when selecting stories?

The purpose of this research will then be to examine further the expectations and assumptions of librarians and mothers in terms of "parental" involvement in early literacy; investigating the ways in which gender guides library and librarian frameworks and expectations, the involvement of mothers and fathers in storytime programs, and story selections. What sorts of ideals and expectations structure the work of mothers, and the opinions of librarians? What kind of work is seen as valuable? In turn, who is expected to carry out this work and why? How do librarians structure their programs in such a way as to support and emphasize a gendered involvement? Does this translate into the stories selected? Where do librarians and mothers begin selecting stories for their children? What kinds of content are important to them? What influences the kinds of stories chosen for children? Is gender being considered in stories, or does it go unnoticed by librarians and mothers?

## Conceptual Framework

### The Mothering Discourse

In Griffith and Smith's 2005 study on mothers and the relationship with their children's schooling, they found that there was a general guilt and anxiety experienced by mothers regardless of class status. They coined the term "mothering discourse" to explain the work, the care, the worries that many mothers feel compelled to be a part of. This mothering discourse constructs an ideal form that mothers must strive to achieve, while at the same time, experiencing feelings of inadequacy for not being able to do "enough". As Maushart (1996) tells us, "there exists a confused notion of motherhood, as it engenders a tidal wave of guilt, resentment, and anxiety among today's women" (p. xx), for being unable to reach this "ideal" status.

The mothering discourse helps to make visible the invisible set of expectations that women as mothers are *supposed* to take part in. As Griffith and Smith (2005) argue:

The nonspecific and generalized responsibility of mothers as defined by the mothering discourse permitted, and continues to permit, as we discovered, no practical considerations to limit that responsibility. Lack of resources, time, or skills could not be claimed against it. As we had discovered for ourselves, the discourse of mothering did not recognize that mothering is work— taking thought, time, effort, and resources. The responsibilities and standards of a mother's achievement did not vary with the real conditions under which her work

was done. The instructions and guidance provided in the texts of the mothering discourse are invariable across the board. (p. 40)

As Griffith and Smith argue, mothering is work; it often takes precedence over anything else in a woman's life, requiring that she dedicate all her time, energy, and money to raising her child the way society dictates is "correct". Maushart (1996) argues that:

for women who become mothers...the responsibility and the commitment on every level are enormous and unprecedented. They are the non-negotiable terms of a biosocial contract into which one does not so much enter as tumble headlong. There is no opportunity to study the fine print. And it is binding for life. (pp. xii-xiii)

What it means to be a mother then, is more than just having a relationship with your child. Rather, the methods of appropriate child rearing are constructed as "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays, 1996, p. 8). In line with this mothering discourse are also notions that there are commitments on behalf on mothers, particularly middle-class mothers, to engage in educational work with and for their children (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 10). This falls into what Hays (1996) has called the cultural model of socially appropriate mothering, taking the form of "ideology of intensive mothering"—a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children (p. x). Extending this discourse even further, Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) have identified mothers' contribution to their children's education as something they call a "domestic pedagogy" (p. 20). In this sense, not only is parental involvement a highly

gendered, largely mothering phenomena, but it is also expected that mothers will accomplish this “work” in an effortless manner, compromising their own needs if necessary and turning those mundane domestic tasks into the basis of a “domestic pedagogy”.

The idea is that “correct” child rearing requires not only money, but also professional-level skills and copious amounts of physical, moral, mental, and emotional energy on the part of the individual mother (Hays, 1996 p. 4). In terms of literacy, there is an expectation that mothers will go above and beyond what is taught in school—taking trips to libraries or participating in workshops, selecting stories to read with their children, engaging in literacy building activities at home—all of which are add-ons, or complement, the education children receive elsewhere.

This notion of a mothering discourse then—the invisible set of expectations and “work” that women are expected to partake in—is the underpinning of my research. It will help frame the discussion surrounding mothers and literacy. The librarians I spoke with in my research are programmers of a storytime session held at a local library. I use the mothering discourse as a framework to help conceptualize how they structure their programs, and how they describe early literacy work and the expectations surrounding it. The mothers I interviewed were attendees of a storytime group held at a local library. These mother participants are, in a sense, actively taking control over their child’s literacy by taking the first step to attend and bring their children to different storytime programs. It is work. Not only do these mothers research different storytime sessions to attend, but there is also a certain level of filtering to decide what kinds of books to read

with their children. Through my research, I will aim to explore what “good” literacy practices are for these mothers and for librarians as well—are mothers engaging with the mothering discourse about what “well read” children *should* read? Do librarians hold on to particular kinds of expectations? Is the mother-librarian relationship based on a belief that librarians are “experts”? The mothers who are informants for this research are constructing literacy, and are working to provide their children with the necessary resources for literacy. Understanding the activities that these mothers in particular are engaging in (from researching storytimes to different kinds of stories, and actively taking their children to the library and picking books up) allows us to understand how this can be considered a form of “work” that often goes unnoticed.

The mothers who are participating in this kind of work are for the most part middle class women. Thus, new immigrant women (who even despite their class, may not speak English), women who do not have the language to read with their children, or single mothers and mothers who work multiple jobs are not included in this equation, for they may not have the time, communication skills, nor the resources to provide their children with library-supported literacy. Understanding this permits us to see how the mothering discourse has certain class-based assumptions.

## **Culture Capital, Institutional Ethnography, and Early Literacy Work**

### Beginning with Bourdieu and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1973) is useful for explaining some of the embedded assumptions made by the Smallville library staff and the literacy framework that shapes their work (*Every Child Ready to Read*). Bourdieu's theory suggests that cultural capital is a resource that can be used to access the dominant culture in society. Cultural capital is usually transmitted from one generation onto the next through the everyday work of mothers and "cultural experts" (Lareau, 2011) such as teachers, librarians, and educators. Storytime programs at the library increase particular kinds of parental "work" early on as part of parental provision of cultural capital for their children. In this instance, it takes the form of information and skills that will help their children benefit in the local educational system (Bourdieu, 1986; Carson, 2009), as well as an introduction to the literacy discourses that circulate through the society. Bourdieu (1973; 1986), and more recent scholars such as Lareau (1989; 2011) make the argument that there is a difference in the way middle-class parents teach various linguistic and cultural knowledge and competencies to their children. These skills subsequently are recognized socially and can be used in the exchanges processes of capital. School curricula and classroom routines, which are aligned with middle class values, tend to expect that children have these specific competencies and skills when the child enrolls in school.

### Adapting Cultural Capital and The Concept of Class

I refer to cultural capital throughout this study as sets of transmissible cultural codes and practices—cultural dispositions that are transmitted to children through the

process of family socialization, or, as we shall see below, in the work of local “experts” such as librarians. In Bourdieu’s use of the word, *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977; 1989; Tzanakis, 2001, p. 77) or systemic qualities: sets of values, skills, dispositions and propensities—that enables certain groups to employ educational reforms for their own individual and collective benefit (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. vi). Habitus is an important form of cultural learning; it is a concept that shapes how parents and schools can interact (Bourdieu 1989; Lareau, 2003 as cited in Carson, 2009).

According to Lareau (2011), lower-class children who do not have access to the valued actions called cultural capital, or have not acquired the kind of capital valued in schools, tend to lag behind their middle-class peers in school-based achievement. Griffith and Smith (2005) argue that:

... children whose families introduce them to a culture that is in tune with the class-based assumptions of school pedagogy and curriculum are more successful than those whose families do not. Lareau examines parental involvement in the school, and accounts for differences in family involvement in children’s schooling largely in terms of cultural differences between the middle and working classes. She notes that the interactions between families and schools are much more intensive in middle-class families than in working-class families, and argues that the intensive relationship coordinated by middle-class families with schools is one through which cultural capital is organized and invested. (p. 15)

According to Griffith and Smith (2005), scholars such as Lareau have transformed Bourdieu's original mechanistic formulation of cultural capital to argue for a more active conception of cultural capital.

### **Moving Towards Intuitional Ethnography and Ruling Relations**

In contrast, Griffith and Smith (2005) take up the concept of class as *active* in forms of social organizations:

... how class position is replicated is not recognized as a definite product of people's actions and inventions. Children's achievement in school, and hence their differential access to middle-class occupations, is treated as an effect of class mediated by family or culture or both. The approach we put forward below problematizes these effects. We want to discover the actual social organization and relations in which people are active and, most particularly, to bring into view the distinctive gender organization that is inseparable from the making and remaking of inequality through the public school system. (p. 16)

It becomes important then to make the distinction that social class is not just simply economics, but rather, it is *what* is done, *how* it is done, and *who* it is done by. While Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is useful for understanding what kind of learning is valued in early literacy work, it does not help explain the *kind* of work that is going on, and how this type of work affects peoples everyday lives.



Institutional Ethnography (IE) in comparison, allows us to look at such social relations of everyday life, and how they are put together. According to Smith (2005), IE: ... begins by locating a standpoint in an institutional order that provides the guiding perspective from which that order will be explored. It begins with some issues, concerns, or problems that are real for people and that are situated in their relationships to an institutional order. Their concerns are explicated by the researcher in talking with them and thus set the direction of inquiry. (p. 32)

In this case, I am looking at the experience of librarians and in particular, the everyday work of mothers in early literacy and how they interact with institutional and discursive relations—this becomes my starting point. It is for this reason that IE is integral to this study—for the institutional ethnographer:

... begins at the “local level with people who are active, and whose activities frame and organize their experiences. Though the ethnography begins with local actualities as they are experienced, it aims to penetrate into the social relations that organize what is ordinarily conceived as the systemic or macro level of the social, from the standpoint of people whose activities produce, reproduce, and change them and to locate those relations beyond people’s experience as these enter into and organize their lives and work. (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 3)

Expanding on this even further, central to IE is Smith’s observation that there is “a conceptual distinction between the world as we experience it and the world as we come to know it through the conceptual frameworks that science invents” (Smith, 1990, p. 374). Thus, there are ways of “knowing” (i.e. what is a “well read” child; what are

“appropriate” literacy strategies; what is motherhood) that emerged through development of the *ruling relations* of capitalism. Smith (2005) defines ruling relations as—“that extraordinary yet ordinary complex of relations that are textually mediated, that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives—corporations, government bureaucracies, academic and professional discourses, mass media, and the complex of relations that interconnect them” (p. 10). As Griffith and Smith (2005) argue:

Relations of ruling have become increasingly embedded in common technologies of communication and technologies, and are social forms in which consciousness and agency become objectified and independent of particular people. They have become a medium in which people act and experience and include the phenomena that we know from Michel Foucault’s work as discourse—those distinctive genres of speech and writing, consciously developed and systematically taught, that constitute subjects and order the text-based realities of the ruling relations. They are, it must be stressed, media of action and not merely of regulation and control. (p. 18)

Ruling relations is a concept that, “grasps power, organization, discretion, and regulation as more pervasively structured than can be expressed in traditional concepts provided by the discourse of power” (Smith, 1987, p. 3). These ruling relations are forms of consciousness and organization that are objectified in the sense that they are constituted externally to particular people and places (Smith, 2005, p. 13). Specific to my study, Smallville library becomes the institution in which I examine how textually mediated discourses are engaged with. According to Smith (1990), textually mediated discourses

are distinctive features of contemporary society, existing as “socially organized communicative and interpretive practices intersecting with and structuring people’s everyday worlds and contributing thereby to the organization of the social relations of the economy and of the political process” (p. 161). Ways of knowing then emerge from experiences of both “parents”, and through the narrow lens of “experts” who declare what it is that children need before schooling, and what it is that “parents” should be providing.

### **Significance of This Research**

This research provides greater insight into the gendered nature of work in family literacy programs available at a specific library, “parental” involvement, and storybook selection. It uses current research available on family literacy programs alongside interviews with mothers and librarians to further contribute to understandings of how such programs, staff, and participants interact with the mothering discourse. It looks specifically at how the discourse of mothering infiltrates institutional frameworks, along with the work of mothers, which is valuable for research on mothers and early literacy.

In addition, this research also opens an avenue in current research on storybook selection; it provides new insights about the selection process of librarians and mothers, including their engagement with gender in stories. Furthermore, it uses the conceptual framework of the mothering discourse as a tool to examine how these ideals continue to be present in many of the stories that are used by librarians and mothers. Research has traditionally examined the roles of boys and girls in stories, neglecting to examine how

ideas associated with the mothering discourse are often translated into stories (in the ways that mother and father characters are depicted). My research is essentially designed to allow librarians and mothers to address and work through their experiences and conceptualization of their work in relation to children's literacy. This is useful for understanding how librarians and mothers frame their experiences with storytime programs, early literacy work, and story selection. I believe this is critical for the future of early literacy research.

### **Outline of Thesis**

This research was designed to explore how the concept of gender intersects with the structural framework and expectations associated with early literacy work; the participation of mothers and librarians in storytime programs; and storybook selections.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, describes the methodology employed to collect and analyze data for this research. This study used qualitative methods to understand and examine the experiences and involvement of librarians and mothers in storytime programs and story selections. My methodology was comprised of field notes and observations I made by dropping into the library and visiting eight different storytime programs; in-depth interviews with librarians who run the programs, along with the mothers who attend; and a content analysis of some of the books read and recommended. A local library in the GTA was selected to explore some of the main components to early

literacy involvement. This chapter explains in further detail some of the background leading up to my research, and the struggles I faced whilst completing the interviews.

Chapter Three presents an overview on the literature surrounding three major sections of my work. The first section of the literature reviews covers some of the background work on family literacy programs. It looks at their origins, along with the connections of family literacy programs to parental engagement at home. In this review, I examine what kinds of literacy skills are valued, in conjunction with the class-based assumptions, and notions of school-based literacy. This section is followed by a summary of the research on early literacy work and “parental” involvement. In specific, it looks at some of the taken for granted work of mothers in the early years of their children’s lives, while raising the question of paternal engagement. The last section reviews some of the literature on the representations of males and females in children’s literatures. There has been extensive research outlining the often-stereotypical depictions of males and females in stories, and the importance of studying children’s literature. Less research has looked into the role of parental representations. I also consider the limited research that is available on how stories are selected and chosen over others.

In Chapter Four I begin my discussion on the results from my research. This chapter looks specifically at both librarian and mother experiences with library storytime programs, focusing in on what is considered to be “appropriate” literacy habits. In speaking with librarians and mothers, I found there to be some unquestioned assumptions made about what “parents” reportedly should be doing to prepare children for school readiness, and a sort of compliance amongst mothers. I examine in detail some of the

structural frameworks to the work of librarians at Smallville, through their guiding philosophy, *Every Child Ready to Read* (Association for Library Service to Children/Public Library Association, 2011), along with the specific kind of competency that seems to be valued and deemed necessary for future success. Mothers in my study expressed their desire to help children succeed in school as evident from much of the work they do in and outside of the home.

In Chapter Five, I interrogate the role of “parents” in this early literacy work. In my interviews with librarians and mothers, I discovered a very gendered approach to early literacy, as library staff and program often make assumptions that it is generally mothers who are responsible for their children’s educational success. Mothers as well, felt in general that the onus was on them to take on the bulk of this work. I use the mothering discourse (Griffith & Smith, 2005), as a tool for understanding in large the work of mothers. In my observations and interviews with mothers and librarians it became apparent that it is the work of mothers that not only keeps these programs in existence, but also contributes to the literacy children receive. I use this chapter as way to explore also some of the embedded expectations in interviews with librarians and mothers and in the guiding framework of a local library, which still assumes mothers are the ones required to make necessary contributions to their children’s early literacy.

Chapter Six explores the results of the interviews with librarians and mothers on the nature of their story selection. I use my results from the interviews to discuss how stories are selected, including what is avoided, and where initial ideas of what stories to read come from. What became evident through analyzing the data was the invisibility of

gender as a criterion for the majority of librarians and mothers. While librarians and mothers overlapped in terms of what they look for and avoid in stories, it seemed that gender was a constant invisible factor when choosing books and thinking about books to recommend or bring into a program. Rather than seeing gender as a social issue, the topic of gender became oriented into a “gendered” child (i.e. boys don’t like to read). Thus, there is little improvement from publishers and authors to capture the role of boys and girls, but more importantly (and less often noticed), mothers and fathers in stories. This means there is less room for mothers and librarians to conceptually think about the role of gender in stories.

Lastly, Chapter Seven summarizes the results of this study and some of the limitations of this work, along with the relevance of this work to future research looking into the interconnectedness of gender and early literacy. This study suggests that gender is a largely invisible phenomena, both in terms of how mothers conceive their roles, how librarians and library frameworks structure their work and their expectations, and in terms of the stories that are selected.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

“Research is formalized curiosity.  
It is poking and prying with a purpose”- (Zora Neale, 1942)

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the background and nature of the research methodology used to collect data. I provide some background information leading up to the proposed research and the site selection, followed by an explanation of the shift in research that led me to the current research project. Moreover, I deliver a description of the methods used to collect the data, a rationale for employing qualitative techniques, and a review of the justifications for using qualitative methodological approaches. I also offer an explanation of how I recruited participants, along with a description of their characteristics, and an outline of the interview schedule and process. Finally, I discuss some of the issues that I encountered conducting the interviews, and provide an overview of how I executed the research and data analysis, while sketching out some limitations to this research as well.

#### Background

This research set out to examine the gendered nature of involvement in early literacy programs, and the discourses that frame them. The research question guiding this study was: *How do storytime programs at this library operate under gendered and class based assumptions, and how do the roles of mothers and librarians intersect with this?*



As a registered teacher and student within the Faculty of Education, I have continually pondered the intersections of families and schools. The research I am conducting as part of this thesis project stemmed out of a paper I wrote for the York University Graduate Course EDUC 5480: Families and Schools. The paper I composed examined how Griffith and Smith's (2005) notion of a mothering discourse—unwritten, yet widely held assumptions and expectations associated with being a mother/woman—were present both implicitly and explicitly within the texts and pictures of stories for young children. Specifically, I was looking at how assumptions about conventional mothering (or fathering for that matter) are transmitted into children's literature. Initially, I was intrigued by the ways in which mothering or “mothering work” was depicted in literature, and set-off to examine how mothers select stories for their children, and whether they consider gender as a criteria when selecting books. With this question in mind, I began to look for a space in which I could find a group of mothers—mothers who assumingly had a large selection of stories for their children—to interview. After discussing this with my supervisor, I decided to turn to the public libraries to see what I could find.

### **Site Selection**

My Through casual discussions with a senior librarian at a small library outside of the GTA, I discovered that there were “family” storytime sessions held at various libraries in the area. These storytime programs encourage “parents” to come with their

children to hear stories, but to also learn more about early literacy strategies. After visiting multiple libraries in the area, Smallville library<sup>1</sup> was chosen because it is one of the few libraries with an entire floor for the Children's department, and it is the library with the most storytime programs available. This library has been in service since 1991, and is considered to be one of the busiest libraries in Canada. It offers a total of eight storytime sessions, which target different ages and themes (See Appendix A for a full list and description of each of the different storytimes). In short, they hold registered storytimes weekday mornings that are targeted for specific age groups (zero to five years old.) and cost \$15 for an eight-week session. Alternatively, they provide an all ages drop-in storytime program weeknights and Saturday mornings for free. In addition to sharing stories with "families", these storytimes serve the purpose of teaching "parents" early literacy strategies as deemed important by the programmers. When I first approached these storytime programs, I began purely as an observer—interested in acquiring a greater understanding of how these programs work. However, after further investigation into these programs, I believed that they would function as a perfect opportunity to investigate the intersectionality of mothering and literacy, and would offer access to different mothers to interview on the nature of their story selections—and so began my research.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the library in this study is has been changed to ensure anonymity of the families and program staff.

<sup>2</sup> All names of library staff and mother participants in this study are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identities

<sup>3</sup> All of the mothers interviewed had daughters. Perhaps they bring their daughters because they assume

## Shift of Research

My original plan of study was to interview mothers on their story selection. I decided that before I made any contact with potential mother interviewees, it was best to spend some time observing the various storytimes that were held, and to make detailed field notes on what I found to be interesting. It was these initial field notes that I took as an observer that led me to shift and broaden the focus of this research to include librarians. After I had successfully met with the librarians and gained permission to observe their storytimes, I sat in on each of the eight different programs, and discovered some very interesting and different dynamics that were occurring in these programs that evidently shifted the focus of my research.

The results of the observations will be discussed in further detail in Chapters Four and Five, however briefly, what first stood out to me was the fact that the majority of “parents” who were attending the programs were mothers. While I was expecting to see mothers’ predominately as attendees, I was amazed at how few fathers were present. What fascinated me even more was the interaction between mother attendees and librarians. I witnessed the librarians who run these programs offering explicit “parenting” advice to the mother attendees on things such as the nature of books to read, and the kinds of activities they *should* be doing with their children. Thus, “parenting” advice was given to mothers. Mothers on the flip side, came to regard these librarians as somewhat “all-knowing”, as evident through the questions they were directing to librarians (i.e. *what kinds of books should my five year old be reading? Should I put my child in French immersion?*). Thus, there was a two-way interaction happening here: Participants of the

storytimes were attending because they saw the librarians as “experts” in the field of child literacy; actively looking at the stories being read or recommended, making notes of activities to take home; on the other hand, librarians were transmitting messages to mother participants under the guise of “parenting”—*this is what parents should be doing at home to reinforce early literacy skills*. In a sense, I noticed a call for, or a transfer of school-oriented practices into the home. I decided at that point that my research should be not be limited to an examination of gender in story selections, but rather, I should open up my investigation to explore gender as a structuring mechanism that guides both “mothering work” and librarian philosophies. As such, I made the final decision to explore not only how mothers select literature for their children, but rather, their own understanding of early literacy “work”. Additionally, I concluded that librarians should also be part of this study as well, to explore and to understand how they view their role in the transmission of cultural capital expectations about “appropriate” literacy habits to “parents”, while considering how the concepts of gender and class structure their framework for these programs, their understanding of early literacy work, and their story selection.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

My methods for data collection was broken up into four segments:

- 1) Observations/field notes of storytimes
- 2) In-depth interviews with librarian programmers

- 3) In-depth interviews with mother participants
- 4) Content analysis of read/recommended stories

The first step was taking field notes at the eight different storytimes held at Smallville library. When observing, I was specifically looking for things such as: who was coming to the programs, the kinds of interactions occurring between attendees and librarians, and the types of messages both the librarians and “parents” were emitting.

In the in-depth interviews with both librarians and mothers, I was attempting to understand in greater detail, the kinds of inherent expectations and ideological frameworks that structured their early literacy work. I wanted to know more about why they describe these storytimes as beneficial, along with whom they say they benefit, and in which ways. In addition, I used the interviews as an opportunity to discuss story selection processes, looking in particular if the criteria of gender plays a role. Throughout the discussions with both librarians and mothers, I was interested in uncovering what frames their understanding of the underpinnings of these programs, and the “work” that they do. Where do their ideas about early literacy involvement come from? Who do they think is responsible for teaching children to read? Are there any taken-for-granted assumptions made about the nature of this involvement and who is expected to take on the majority of the workload?

The last methodological approach was to look at the actual material that is being read or recommended. Taking into account titles of actual books, I proceeded to look at the construct of gender in these stories. How are boys and girls as protagonists represented? How often are girl characters shown? In what ways? In my analysis I drew

once again upon Griffith and Smith's (2005) descriptions of a mothering discourse to analyze how representations of mothers and fathers in stories may reflect current cultural discourses about what it means to "mother" or by extension, to "father".

### **Methodology Rationale**

This research relied on qualitative methodological strategies. As a teacher, I have experience in observing teaching and learning within a specific setting, which compliments the methodologies I have chosen to engage with. Qualitative methods were chosen because such research "provides detailed descriptions and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience" (Marvasti, 2004, p.7). The advantage to qualitative approaches such as the ones I have employed, are that "they give a voice to research participants in a way that is not possible in quantitative studies" (Neuman & Robson, 2009, p. 358). As Neuman and Robson (2009) argue, in qualitative approaches the personalized voices and in-depth understanding of the experiences of members of the social world (in this instance, mothers and librarians) make this approach a fundamentally important tool for studying the social world.

A crucial part of ethnographic studies are the field notes/observation component. Observations are an important element to qualitative research because through observation, a researcher may capture people's expression of social information, feelings, and attitudes through nonverbal communication; often times becoming significant points of research. In addition, through listening, a researcher can make notes on what and how

something was said, providing him or her again, with a plethora of first hand information (Neuman & Robson, 2009). Compared with other methods, observations provide a greater precision, accuracy, and reliability about events through field notes (Bryman et al., 2009). Marvasti (2004) draws on the work of Geertz (1988) to argue that, “the theoretical significance of field notes is best captured by the concept of “thick descriptions” (p. 55). This means showing:

in close detail the context and meanings of events and scenes that are relevant to those involved in them. This task requires the ethnographer to identify and communicate the connections between actions and events...in this sort of descriptive enterprise, actions are not stripped of locally relevant context and interconnectedness, but are tied together in texture and holistic accounts of social life. (Emerson, 1988, pp. 24-25, as cited in Marvasti, 2004, p. 55)

Thus, taking field notes provides an interpretive framework for connecting notes with other realities. They help to understand both the meaning and context of what takes place in the field (Marvasti, 2004).

Using qualitative in-depth interviewing methods as opposed to traditional social science approaches also allows the researcher to have access to wider variety of people and situations, often being able to understand experiences and events in which they did not participate in, while delving into important personal issues (Bryman et al., 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Arguably, the biggest strength of in-depth interviews is in its ability to find out what someone else thinks or feels (Bouma, Ling, & Wilkinson, 2012), permitting the researcher to see the world from the perspective of the respondents. This

allows for unexpected answers, surprising data, while at the same time, the ability to gain an empathic appreciation of the respondents' world; essentially giving participants a voice and an opportunity to tell their story as they wish, identifying the issues that are important to them (Barbour, 2007; Bouma et al., 2012; Marvasti, 2004; Neuman & Robson, 2009).

Unlike survey research, in which the same questions are asked to each individual and participants are not necessarily allowed the opportunity to elaborate, in qualitative interviews, interviewees share in the work and fun of discovery, often guiding the questioning in channels of their own choosing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Questions are designed in such a way as to go beyond the presumed surface level of respondents' feelings and into instead, "the deeper layers of their consciousness" (Marvasti, 2004, p. 22). Interviewees are free to respond in whatever way they wish, using whatever words they feel best express their accounts of experiences, feelings, or opinions (Neuman & Robson, 2009). This allows the researcher to obtain unique information or interpretation by the interviewees, while having the potential to reveal multiple, and sometimes conflicting attitudes about a given topic (Marvasti, 2004; Stake, 2010).

Content analysis as a methodology also offers many benefits to the researcher. Not only does it provide new insights and increases a researcher's understanding of a particular phenomena (Krippendorff, 2004) but many scholars argue that it is an unobtrusive and objective method of analysis—it directly interprets the content within a text, and the data is not altered by being studied, nor are any behaviours changed (Bryman et al., 2009; Neuendorf, 2002; Neuman & Robson, 2009). In addition, the



results can be checked and rechecked (Neuman & Robson, 2009). Using content analysis as methodological approach to research also provides flexibility for the researcher, as they “are able to make decisions as to the scope and the complexity of the content-analytic study” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 2). Furthermore, studying texts such as children's literature through content analysis provides the researcher with valuable cultural insight into the messages and meaning behind the literature being read (Bryman et al., 2009), and could be used as a way to make inferences about public attitudes (Marvasti, 2004).

## **Selection of Participants**

### **a. Selection of Librarians**

With the shift in my research, I became interested in learning more about the role of librarians in storytime programming, and how they view their contributions to early literacy work. By exploring how librarians negotiate, interpret, and conceptualize their positions, I had hoped to paint a clearer picture of their influences to early literacy expectations, and the indirect transmission of a certain kind of valued capital into the home.

After observing each of the storytime sessions, I approached the librarians to speak to them in greater detail about the nature of my project, and asked informally if they would like to participate in my study. At that point, if they tentatively agreed, I would write down their contact information, and send them a follow up email outlining in greater detail the nature of my work, some sample questions, and potential date options to

conduct the interviews. All of the librarians I approached agreed to participate. In conversation with one of the programmers, I was informed that the senior librarian and manager of the children's department would also be good people to speak with (both of whom are not currently running a storytime). I contacted both of them and received positive responses. Due to the nature of time however, I chose seven out of the nine programmers to interview (based on who was available). As a gratitude for participating in my study, I offered each librarian a \$10 Tim Horton's gift card.

#### **b. Selection of Mothers**

Initially, as outlined previously, I was curious about the mother's story selection. This however, grew into something much more: I wanted to understand mother's participation in these programs, and whether they felt (among many other things) that they and their children would benefit from attending. By learning more about their experiences in these programs and their reasons for attending, in addition to their process for selecting stories, I had hoped to focus on mother's own descriptions of their work.

I first spoke with library staff to see what the best approach to recruiting mother participants would be. They suggested to attend the storytime sessions again, and offered to give me a few minutes at the end of their storytimes to reintroduce myself, my study, and ask if for any volunteers to participate in the study. I selected mothers in registered programs, rather than drop-in sessions, as I decided it would be best to interview mothers who have a long-term commitment to attending programming. I attended three storytime

sessions, and had a total of six mothers sign up for the study. Once the mothers signed up to the study, I sent out a follow up email, much like the one provided to the librarians, about the nature of this research, what they will be asked to do, and some sample questions. I asked them to provide me with a date, time, and location that would be best for them. As an appreciation for participating in my research, I provided each mother with a \$10 Chapters Gift Card.

### **c. Selection of books**

The books chosen to examine for this research were based on read or recommended literature as dictated by librarians or mothers. During observations in the storytimes, I made note of the kinds of stories that were being read a loud, and the stories that were being recommended (either orally or put out on display for parents to take home). In addition, the librarians leave out “top pick” lists for people to take with them that outline the “best” books for selected age groups (as recommended by them). I also used stories that both librarians and mothers listed as some of their favourite books to read.

## **Participant Characteristics**

### **a. Librarians**

All the librarians interviewed in this study were employed at the Smallville library. They each held different positions within the Children’s Department. Table 1 below outlines their different positions.

**Table 1: Description of Librarians**

<b>Name<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Karen	Library Clerk
Ava	Library Assistant
Lacy	Library Technician
Iris	Librarian
Joe	Librarian
Cal	Senior Librarian
Ella	Manger of Children’s Department

All of the librarians had extensive experience within the library system, and have at one point or another, been heavily involved in programing and book selection.

**b. Mothers**

To be participants in the study, mothers were required to have children registered in storytime programs at this particular library. I chose to interview mothers who had made commitments to library programming as opposed to those who “drop-in”, because I was interested in learning more about the experience of being a part of these storytime sessions, and the steps and/or reasons for committing to these early literacy resources,

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<sup>2</sup> All names of library staff and mother participants in this study are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identities

while considering how such programming experience can/does shape mothers understanding of “proper” literacy habits.

There were six mothers involved in this this study. A description of each of the participants is outlined below in Table 2.

**Table 2: Description of Mother Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Nationality Identified with</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of Children<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Age of Children</b>
Amy	Indian	Taking time off work (Laid off software developer)	36	1	2
Lena	Pakistani	Nurse (On maternity leave; returning PT)	34	2	10 months; 4.5
Elyse	Turkish/Syrian	Taking time off work (Worked as an Islamic teacher)	35	3	9; 5; 3.5
Chloe	Taiwanese	Stay-at-home mom (no past work experience; no intention of working)	30	1	3
Tara	Dutch/Italian	Part-Time Small Business Owner	31	1	2
Angie	Canadian	Part-Time Nurse	36	1	2

By looking at this chart, we could argue then that these women are from middle class families, as none of them are currently employed full-time, yet, they have the luxury of

<sup>3</sup> All of the mothers interviewed had daughters. Perhaps they bring their daughters because they assume girls would appreciate/enjoy these programs more than boys?

being able to *choose* whether to work part-time or to stay at home<sup>4</sup>. As stated earlier, these mothers were expected to have a more significant commitment to early literacy “work” because they were not currently employed full-time (and some not employed at all). One could argue then that these mothers have invested a greater time than most to storytimes, as they are committed to attending the library at least once a week, and have presumably come to see this kind of early literacy “work” as important. This is a feature of my data and has shaped the kind of data received.

### **The Interview Schedule and Process**

I had no previous relationship with any of the librarians or the mothers. To gain access to both groups, I simply introduced myself to each library programmer. I started observing library programs during the summer of 2012 and then proceeded to observe them again from September to November 2012. Through these observations, I developed a close relationship with the library staff that smoothed my transition into interviewing. It was through the relationship with the librarians that I was able to access the storytimes and recruit mothers to this study.

Once the librarian staff and mothers contacted me, confirmed their interest in being interviewed, and suggested a day, time, and location that were most suitable for them, the interviews commenced. The setting of the interviews was left up to the

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<sup>4</sup> Other indicators as to their middle class status can also include things such as: The \$15 registration fee they pay, the area of town in which this library was found, the time and interest they have to go to the library etc.

discretion of the participants. As expected, all the librarians suggested meeting at the library either before or after their storytime programs would be best. The interviews with the librarians occurred between the months of November-December 2012. The length of the interview with the librarian staff lasted anywhere from 45 to 120 minutes depending on the nature of the conversation.

Two of the mothers preferred that I meet them at their homes because they had the responsibility of watching their other children during the day; the other four suggested we meet before or after their registered storytime sessions. Of those four women, two of them preferred to be interviewed together. The remaining mothers were interviewed individually. The interviews with the mothers were conducted during the month of January 2013. I had initially proposed to conduct focus group with the mothers rather than individual interviews. However, due to timing difficulties, as it was near impossible to find a day, location, and time that worked for all the mothers (not to mention someone to watch their children), I decided to offer them separate interviews at their convenience. The informed consent mentioned focus groups, so I explained to each mother prior to the interview what the initial plan was, and the reason for the modification.

I asked open-ended questions in this study, while adhering to a semi-structured interview guide that outlined some major areas and topics for discussion surrounding storytime programs, literacy strategies, gender and story selections, and so forth. I altered the questions slightly depending on whether I was interviewing a librarian or a mother.

Before the interviews began, I briefed both the librarians and the mothers on my background and the nature of this thesis research that I am conducting (Appendix B).

The purpose of the interview guide for the librarians was to be able to understand how librarians select books to read with families in their storytime sessions (and their recommended lists), and whether they consider the topic of gender in their book choices. Additionally, the interview guide assisted in extracting information on librarian's own experiences with, and understandings of, the storytime sessions they are in charge of. To examine librarians' experiences, I began the interviews by inquiring about their background and how long they have been part of the system (Appendix C). I wanted them to feel comfortable being interviewed before I began to ask them more detailed questions. I then transitioned into questioning them about the process by which they choose stories, in an effort to understand their choices of literature. Librarians were asked to reflect on the role that gender plays in their experience with selecting stories. Librarians were also asked to speak to the nature of the groups they conduct, in terms of who comes, the interaction with participants, and the overall experience. Lastly, it was imperative to understand what assumed benefits the librarians believe the storytimes offer to participants, and how these programs fit in terms of the greater umbrella literacy and preparation for schooling.

The interviewing guide created for mothers (Appendix D) was used to discover their experiences with storytimes, their reasons for attending, and what they believed their children would leave the programs with. It also helped to frame the discussion surrounding book choices and engagement with the literature. The interview guide was



not used as a prescriptive list of questions, but rather, it provided prompts to ensure that different topics areas were covered in the course of the conversation. When relevant issues arose, or topic areas I had not considered, those areas were probed further. In other words, I was not limited to the questions I had written down, but rather, I used them as an informal guide to direct each conversation. To anchor the discussion with mothers about their experience with libraries, I asked mothers to begin by sharing their reasons and rationales for attending libraries and the gendered nature of their involvement: How long they have been coming for? Who tends to take children to the programs? Who reads at home? I continued to ask mothers to speak to their experiences with the storytimes, and again, their rationale for registering in the program, and the assumed benefits for themselves and their children. I wanted to probe further how participants negotiate understandings of the early literacy work and preparation for schooling they were engaging in, while attempting to demystify who takes primary control over children's literacy habits. Lastly, their process for selecting stories was also considered, as I asked mothers to walk me through their criteria for selecting certain stories over others, where they get ideas about the kinds of stories to read, and whether gender is something they attend to when selecting books.

For each interview I conducted, I made sure to familiarize the participants with my study and myself, in an attempt to create an environment of trust and respect where participants felt comfortable to share their opinions and beliefs. I approached the interview in a very conversational manner, making sure to repeat or reword any questions that participants found unclear. Overall, the reaction of the participants (both the

librarians and the mothers) during the interviews was positive. They seemed to enjoy talking about their experiences, and appreciated the opportunity to self-reflect about storytime programming and the process of selecting and filtering through stories.

### **Insider/Outsider Conflict**

I was also aware of my own role and status during the interview process. I wanted to make sure I presented myself as someone who was generally interested in learning about their experiences as a whole. As such, there was an insider/outside conflict I found myself grappling with. Griffith (1998) summarizes this as:

Where the researcher enters the research site as an insider—someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched—the tacit knowledge informs her research producing a different knowledge than that available to the outside—a researcher who does not have an intimate knowledge of the group being researched proper to their entry into the group. (p. 362)

As a Lebanese-Canadian, I have found myself struggling to overcome certain cultural norms and gender restrictions that are a part of my own background. As a researcher, I went into this project with my own assumptions about gender equality and norms, and what *I* believed. However, through the interviews, most of them conducted with new immigrants, and people with strong cultural values, I found myself at a crossroads: On the one hand I believed to be an *insider* to a certain extent—having grown up in a

traditional culture/family, I could empathize with some of their beliefs—they were not foreign to me. On the other hand, I also felt like an *outsider* at times, as I tried to comprehend how they negotiated the library setting through their traditional cultural expectations. Thus, it was a challenge to analyze the interviews in such a way so that their cultural expectations and gender equality beliefs were not downplayed. In other words, the methodological issue I came across was to make sure my sensibilities did not overlay theirs. Furthermore, despite the fact that I took interest in the experience of mothering, I myself was not a mother, and thus mothers in this study perhaps may not have felt entirely comfortably disclosing certain information to me, as I was an outsider to their group.

### **Execution of Research**

Both sets of interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and a thematic analysis of the data was completed afterwards. The audiotapes and transcriptions of interviews were kept secure at all times. In my analysis, participants' responses were not identified by name, but as mentioned, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant (as well as the library) to assure anonymity.

The York University Research Ethics Committee approved this study. The purpose of this study was described orally to participants before each interview began. The statement of informed consent was then given to each participant (Appendix E & F). Participants were asked if they had any questions before beginning, and were all

reminded that they could ask questions throughout the interview process, and that they could stop or refuse to answer questions at any point. I made sure to also remind participants that the interview was completely voluntary. When they had orally agreed to continue, they were asked to sign two copies of informed consent. One copy was given to participants as a personal reference; the other remained with me.

### **Data Analysis Plan: Understanding Librarians and Mothers Experiences**

All the interviews were recorded with a digital recording device, and simultaneously on an iPhone as a back up. I ensured participants that the recording device was only for my use to later transcribe the conversations, and that everything said during the interview was confidential. Once each interview was completed, I transcribed them and completed a data sheet for each participant indicating their pseudonym, occupation, the date, time, length, location of interview, and age.

The major element of the data analysis included coding both the interviews and the fieldwork notes for various themes that emerged. All the information was kept stored on a private file. After each interview I wrote memos to remind myself of the interviews, and to make notes of anything that initially struck me during the interviews. Glaser (1978) defines memos as the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationship as they strike the researcher while coding. Bryman et al. (2009) argue that analytic memos are written to oneself to help “bridge the gap between the data and the concepts, interpretations, and theories that are developed to make sense of what is being

observe” (p. 152). I began the analysis process by re-reading each interview. To make sense of all the data that I had gathered through interviews, I used a thematic analysis to organize, describe, and interpret the data to form the basis of what would later become codes. Coding encourages higher level thinking about data and moves a researcher toward theoretical generalizations (Neuman & Robson, 2009). This also allows the researcher to quickly retrieve relevant parts of the data and to examine how it varies across cases (Gibbs, 2007; Neuman & Robson, 2009).

When coding both the field notes and the in-depth interviews, I looked for statements that fell under the large categories of: mothering work/discourse, gender, cultural capital, book choices, parenting expectations and ideological frameworks. I was able to gather a conceptual schema that emerged from the participants’ narratives that included their thoughts about the storytime programs, early literacy work and gender and story selection. I used participant’s responses as the basis for creating codes and categories in the analysis. The major findings from the interviews with the mothers and librarians will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

When performing a content analysis on the storybooks, I was coding based on these categories: Who are the main protagonists of the story? How are boy and girl protagonists portrayed? How often are mothers shown? Fathers? What are they pictured doing? Where? How does this reflect societal discourses of motherhood (or fatherhood)? These results will be explored further in Chapter Six.

## Summary

This chapter has provided a glance at the methodology used in this research. I have given a brief introduction to the origins of my research ideas, and explained the shift of research into a new direction. I outlined the methods of my data collection, which included an observation and fieldwork component, in-depth interviews with both librarians and mothers, and a content analysis of read and recommended stories. Building from this, the choice for employing such qualitative data methodologies was also discussed. In addition, I also gave a description of the participants in the study, outlining how I approached them, and the rationale for choosing this particular site to conduct the research in. I then proceeded to explain the development of the questions for the interview guides, the schedule of the interviews and the process, and how each of the interviews was handled and executed. I summarized my experience with the interviews as both an insider and outsider, along with some possible limitations to this work. All my data was coded and thematically analyzed, and the results of my observations and interviews will be discussed further in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER III:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

It could be argued that the single major cause of continuing school “failure” and literacy difficulties lies in the cultural misunderstandings between those offering literacy instruction and those on the receiving end (Street, 1997, p. 208).

#### **Introduction**

This chapter contains an examination of the literature on three broad, yet interrelated, sections. The first section highlights family literacy programs— what they are, what they entail, and what purpose they serve. This proves useful for understanding some of the background and structural frameworks that support these programs, while examining some of the conceptual issues with family literacy programs. The second section will present an overview of the relationship of mothering to educational responsibilities. It will look at the gendered nature of family literacy programs in terms of mother and father participation. It will also cover some of the implicit, underlying expectations that are associated with being a mother, and some of the contradictions within. The final section discusses the relation between gender portrayals, children’s stories, and book selections. This will explore in greater detail the importance of studying children’s literature, the kinds of representations of both boy and girl protagonists, and mothers and fathers in stories, and some of the current literature on the process of how mothers and librarians select stories.

## **I. Family Literacy Programs**

Over the past decade, the concepts of “family literacy”, and family literacy programs, have become very well established as a construct and a medium for providing instruction to both parents and children (DeBruin-Parecki & Krol-Sinclair, 2003). The term “family literacy” notably has its roots in Taylor (1983) who, much like current research today, initially showed that young children’s initiation into literacy practices were shaped by parent’s and other family members’ interests, attitudes, abilities, and uses for written languages. In other words, there was and still is a strong concentration to the family ecology (Edwards, 2004; Nutbrown, Hannon, & Morgan, 2005; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). Cairney (2003) also suggests that “family literacy” can be understood as a set of social and cultural practices that are associated with written text.

Many scholars define family literacy programs in terms of their ability to teach literacy that acknowledge and make use of family relationships (Hannon, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2005). They can be seen as a merging of literacy for both early childhood education and adult education; providing a range of interventions that may address needs of children, their parents, or both (Hannon, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2005; Wasik & Herrmann, 2004). According to Purcell-Gates (2001), family literacy programs seek ways to “help parents incorporate activities into their homes that will help parents to prepare their children for learning to read and write, and experience written language in home environment” (p. 19), which may be critical for emergent literacy knowledge.

The aim of such programs, much like the one I will explore in later chapters, is to enlarge, “parents” awareness of early literacy development, and to provide them with



additional options for promoting their children's development without necessarily 'devaluing' them" (Hannon et al., 2006, p.42). They offer families' long-term commitment towards enhancing understandings of the "parents" role in early literacy learning (Rodriguez-Brown, 2003). Scholars such as Paratore (2003) have pointed out that some programs offer direct instructions to parents, with the intention of affecting children's literacy through parental actions at home. As I will shortly take up, there seems to be a link between family literacy programs to the expectations associated with a certain kind of "parenting". This raises the question of whether library programs operate on the basis of a general assumption that parents who lack "literacy" proficiency also lack an understanding of effective parenting practices (Paratore, 2003).

### **Connections between Family Literacy Programs to "Parents" and the Home**

Scholars are unanimous in arguing the importance of parental participation at home, and the overall home environment for enhancing learning in the early year's of children's lives (Burger & Landerholm, 1991; Cairney, 2003; Edwards, 2004; Hannon, 2003; Leseman, & Jong; Lynch, 2008; Makin, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2005; Paratore, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1998; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998; Wasik & Hermann, 2004; Weigel et al., 2006). The home environment and parental participation are said to play a factor in literacy achievement throughout all years of schooling, in children's development of early literacy skills and disposition towards reading and writing, including an increase in student achievement (Edwards, 2004; Leseman & Jong,

1998; Nutbrown et al., 2005; Wasik & Hermann, 2004). A key factor also appears to be the degree of congruence between the literacies of home and school (Makin, 2003).

The role of “parents” in early literacy work is a crucial component of my research, and something that will be explored in later chapters. At this point, it is important to understand that it was not generally until the last quarter of the twentieth century that early literacy educators began to see “parents” as a critical part in the development of “healthy” literacy skills (Hannon, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2005).

According to Hannon (2003), the change reflected:

an interest in parental involvement as a tool for reducing persistent educational inequalities, increased adult literacy in society, rethinking of professional knowledge concerning literacy development, more print in the environment (children’s books), and a recognition of families as active users, rather than passive beneficiaries, of educational services. (p. 103)

Cairney (2003) draws on the work of Taylor (1983) to argue as well that there were “shifts in parents’ approaches to the transmission of literacy and valued which coincided with children beginning to learn to read and write” (p. 279). While it is important to consider the shift towards an inclusion of “parents” in educational discourses, as I will shortly explore, the continual use of the word “parents” in reference to such early literacy work continues to mask the actual participation of mothers, who generally tend to be the ones engaging in “parenting work”.

### **Whose Literacy is Valued?**

The terms “family” and “literacy” can, and do, have many different meanings (Hannon, 2003, p. 100). The biggest critic of family literacy programs is the question of *whose* literacy is valued, and whose literacy do they aim to change? (Hannon, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2005). What kinds of literacy strategies are being transmitted to parents? Family literacy programs are often times based on narrow concepts of family—the question then becomes *who* is learning from *whom* (Hannon, 2003, p. 100)? As Cairney (2003) points out, “literacy is not culturally and ideologically neutral. We need to examine what this means for literacy acquisition and the relationship of family literacy to life and, in particular, public intuitions” (p. 94). Families who attend family literacy programs may be heavily engaged in literacy practices, and may even have many literacy skills, but they may not necessarily be those practices and skills that are deemed valuable by schools (Hannon, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2005, p. 26). This is important, for research shows that schools have traditionally privileged an elite group by emphasizing language, content, and international behaviour familiar to a particular kind of group of people (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Janes & Kermani, 2001). If the goal of family literacy programs is then to prepare young children for schooling, we can see how the kind of learning taking place in these programs may operate under a very narrow understanding of “literacy”.

### **The Relationship between Literacy Acquisition and Cultural Capital**

Literacy development has also been shown to be heavily dependent on access to available social and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Millard, 2003, p. 24). Accesses to resources, such as family literacy programs are dependent upon socioeconomic, linguistic, and geographic factors. According to Makin (2003), these often intersect with one another to produce formidable barriers for children, and arguably, their parents (p. 331). The kind of literacy opportunities then that children and their parents are exposed to depends on the “cultural capital” to which a family has access to (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; McNaughton, 2001). This can mean anything from knowledge of the English language, to an awareness that such programs exist, to even resources such as time, access to, and availability of a parent to attend (as most family literacy sessions are scheduled throughout the day). Access to programs available at libraries that aim to enhance literacy are providing children with ways of knowing and acting that enable them to enter mainstream classrooms with resources that are of value to schools, but not necessarily of value to participants, cultures, or communities (McNaughton, 2001). If this is the case, the question to ask is then, is what happens to children and families who do not engage in this outside informal preparatory work for school?

### **School Based Literacy**

Schools can be seen as institutions that reproduce larger political and social structure, and hence, are relatively fixed and passive, with little agency to change

(McNaughton, 2001). This means that becoming “school literate” so to speak, and becoming fluent in school discourses are riddled with complexity (Knobel & Lankshear, 2003). Parents’ own aspirations for their children’s literacy may not necessarily accord with the assumptions of program designers, or national policy-makers, nor do they necessarily act consistently with professional educators’ ideas about literacy activities (McNaughton, 2001; Nutbrown et al., 2005). As some scholars argue, program directors have come to see the family as a way to achieve educational goals that schools were traditionally unable to accomplish—at its most extreme, this involved using family literacy schemes to infiltrate school and middle class values and forms of literacy into diverse homes (Street, 1997).

### **Class Differences**

Home literacy practices do vary immensely from family to family. Some scholars have suggested there is a “middle-class” bias, as middle class families are more adept to preparing their children for schooling (in ways such as attending family literacy programs) that produce more linguistically complex language and skills at earlier ages (Cairney, 2003; Lareau, 2011). Middle class parents also model literacy in different ways as children of middle class parents have more opportunities to talk with their parents and more engagement with different materials, which widen the achievement gap (Lareau, 2011; Leseman & Jong, 1998; Lynch, 2008). Children who enter school with a larger familiarity of school-based literacy have a definite advantage over others (Lynch, 2008).

Research has shown that children from lower socio economic statuses start school with less written registered knowledge, are thus less prepared for school, and begin to learn the written language from school rather than the home (Clay, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 2001; Wasik & Hermann, 2004). According to Janes and Kermani (2001), this deep investment in children can be recognized in terms of its “social capital” (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977).

### **Deficit Approach to Learning**

There is some evidence to suggest that family literacy programs can be conceived as a kind of educational intervention program that target “disadvantaged” communities to reach children who tend to have difficulties with school literacy (Hannon et al., 2006). Many academics make the argument that family literacy programs often take a “deficit approach” to teaching participants in their programs (Casper, 2003; Hannon, 2003; Street, 1997; Wasik, 2004). Programs are often based on the underlying premise that low-income families are “too deficient in literacy practices, parenting skills and knowledge to support child learning, and hence require regulations and education to ensure that literacy is promoted” (Casper, 2003, p. 2) As such, there becomes some what of a top-down approach to teaching in terms of the manner in which particular literacy practices are delivered and imparted to the “illiterate”, and some large assumptions made about participants, including “stereotypes about sad, empty, ‘illiterate’ living in darkness and awaiting the light of middle-class school literacy” (Street, 1997, p. 208). The crisis of

illiteracy according to Street (1997), remains rooted in an assumption of a single homogenous society and a single homogenous literacy require of its members (p. 208).

When people talk of “at-risk” children or families, they are usually referring to those from low-income, low-literacy, and/or bilingual homes (Makin, 2003). According to Nutbrown et al., (2005), a reoccurring idea in the family literacy discourse is that there are families “in which parents have literacy difficulties, and in which it is supposed that the children are consequently destined to have low literacy achievements at least by school measures” (p. 27). In other words, “at-risk” families may not be those who necessarily are poor. Rather, “at-risk” could be used as a way to describe families who deviate from the standard discourse of literacy that schools and family literacy programs operate under.

Family literacy programs focus on transmitting mainstream *school* literacy practices into the home (such as teaching parents how and why to read to children) (Auerbach, 1997, p. 71). The solution then for “at-risk” families, was to take the school to home so to speak, and to “teach parents how to properly be teachers of their children, to read to them in approved ways, and to inculcate the ways of learning, speaking, reading, and writing valued in mainstream education” (Street, 1997, p. 208). As Nutbrown et al., (2005) argues, it is quite probable that some family literacy programs even “proceed on ignorant, and even offensive, assumptions concerning what certain families do not do or what they are supposed to be incapable of doing” (p. 26). Such families are seen as “lacking the qualities of educational support and cognitive skills required of formal schooling” (Street 1997, p. 208). Smythe and Isserlis (2001) nicely summarize this as:

The concept of family literacy as an intervention targeted at "at-risk" families, with the goal of "preventing" low literacy, learning difficulties, failure rates in schools, crime and unemployment, is associated with what [Auerbach] (1995) calls the intervention-prevention approach to family literacy. Integral to this approach is the belief that the persistent gap in academic achievement between children from low income or ethnic minority families, and their middle class, English speaking counterparts can be resolved by educating parents to provide appropriate literacy support in children's formative years, and to support their children's schooling in specific ways. (p. 4)

According to Janes and Kermani (2001), non-mainstream, or newcomer groups are often at a great disadvantage in helping their children acquire literacy that is most valued in the dominant society. They remind us that while "intervention" programs (much like family storytime programs), are attempts to diminish this advantage, "these attempts to 'give literacy away' are sometimes disingenuous, sometimes calculated to maintain class boundaries rather than transcend them. Such attempts can be patronizing, demeaning, or unintentionally alienating" (pp. 458-9). Such programs often transmit and reinforce cultural norms, values, and parenting practices in informal learning spaces. This form of regulation is shaped by dominant discourses surrounding parenting roles, and is located in the socio-cultural context of community life (Smyth & Isserlis, 2002). In other words, literacy practices are deeply social— embedded in and constituting an array of familiar community and school relationships (Knobel & Lankshear, 2003).



A heavy responsibility is placed on families who do not engage in mandated instructions such as reading regularly in the home, or having an abundance of materials and resources available at all times for their children to engage with. According to Goodman (1997), families begin to “accept the notion that since they do not read books aloud to their children, they are irresponsible and are the cause for their children’s lack of literacy...it is dangerous to expect all families to follow the same prescriptions for literacy learning” (p. 56). As I discovered through my own research, there tended to be an assumption made that children with “literacy problems” are coming from homes with deficient or inadequate literacy practices. As a result, much of the frameworks structuring library programs like Smallville, stem from the belief that parents need to be taught to value and support their children’s literacy.

### **Culture, Community, and Family Literacy Programs**

Research consistently shows that children’s early understanding of literacy is learnt socially and culturally—within their family and community. The types of literacy experience that children will encounter then will differ according to families’ social and cultural practices (Hannon et al., 2006, p. 20). It is important to note that people from nonmainstream backgrounds do have deep and powerful attachments to their local knowledge and its transmission, which is why they may have difficulty “seeing” elements of culture that mainstream educators take for granted (Janes & Kermani, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 2001). Many scholars argue that schools and literacy programs such as the ones

available at the library, fail to recognize and build on the literacy practices children bring with them from home (Cairney, 2003; Hannon, 2003; Rodriguez-Brown, 2003). The problem stems largely from the inability for institutions (i.e. schools; libraries) and staff (teachers; librarians) to view the community as a resource. Many programs, as Olmedo (2004) has pointed out, generally exclude other kinds of literacy, such as inclusions of community members, or oral story telling traditional popular amongst different communities and cultures. According to Barton (1997), notions of family literacy need to move beyond the book and take account of children's participation in a wide variety of home activities. In addition, they need to move beyond the school as a site of activity, and homes as needing to replicate what schools do, and instead, look to supporting the things people do in their lives already (p. 108). According to Rodriguez-Brown (2003), "unless students fit mainstream models of learning, schools do not recognize the knowledge that culturally and linguistically different children acquire at home" (p. 127). The lack of inclusive culturally relevant pedagogy is a clear shortcoming to many family literacy programs.

## II. Mothering, Parenting, and Early Literacy Work

### The Gendered Nature of Family Literacy Programs

Family literacy programs have the ability to either reinforce or challenge gender-related barriers to literacy (Cuban & Hayes, 1996). Unfortunately, there is much research to suggest that family literacy programs are highly gendered as they unwittingly perpetuate stereotypical depictions of literacy as a woman's domain (Gadsden, 2003, p. 118). In fact, many scholars go as far as to argue that while programs in general refer to "parents", through both oral and written advice, it would be much more accurate to talk of "mothers" (Caspé, 2003; Hannon, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2005; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). As Caspé (2003) suggests, the guiding principles that structure family literacy programs, often confine the participants (who tend to be majority women) to the domestic sphere. Expectations about being a mother and women are implicit within family literacy discourses, which is something that I will explore in greater detail through a specific storytime program in Chapter Five. It is imperative then, as Smythe and Isserlis (2002) suggest, "to look at how literacy programs are influenced by longstanding 'mothering discourses' that represent culturally-bound beliefs and values surrounding *who* and *what* constitutes a good mother, a normal family, and by extension, appropriate literacy and pedagogical practices in the home" (p. 2). It is important to pay attention to the gendered nature of family literacy programs, for it also urges us to look specifically at the work that women do, their needs, and their interests as women (Cuban & Hayes, 1996).

Much research argues that in most white, middle-class, Western-nation homes, it is the mothers who are considered to be children's first teachers—transmitters of beliefs, practices, and knowledges. It is mothers who most frequently engage children in the daily practices of text sharing and message making, and it is their roles as mothers that often defines women's learning *only* in relation to children (Cuban & Hayes, 1996; Gadsden, 2003; Millard, 2003). Mothers continue to be represented and thought of as “natural” nurturers, who are therefore “natural” teachers of their children, and are thus responsible for their academic, social, and emotional competency (Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). Mothers begin to then develop a self-efficacy in their roles as teachers for children, as they are trained to pass on certain reading skills and other learning behaviours to their children (Cuban & Hayes, 1996; Rodriguez-Brown, 2003). Although mothers are placed as children's “most important educator”, they are given no authority or power in their teaching role, but instead, are expected to transmit knowledge and skills in prescribed ways (Cuban & Hayes, 1996; O'Reilly, 2004).

Notions of “good” mothering then become associated with an “ideal” family (middle-class, heterosexual, two parent, etc.), which consequently, is then linked with “ideal” literacy practices—practices which serve larger pedagogical goals as deemed important by schools, and which are thought of as having the extra benefit of building strong families (Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). Women's presence in literacy programs becomes esteemed insofar as women convey dominant cultural knowledge to their children—knowledge that supports rather than challenges the status quo (Cuban & Hayes, 1996). As Griffith and Smith (1991) argue, “women work for schools” so to

speak, both in terms of parental involvement tasks linked to schooling, and in the increasing pressure for women to provide literacy related experiences such as storybook reading in the home.

It is assumed that women or mothers, who do not communicate the “correct” educational message, fail to conform to the societal norms for “good” mothering. When such assumptions underlie family literacy programs, they may lead women to believe in their own deficiencies as mothers (Cuban & Hayes, 1996). As Dudley-Marling (2001) argues, “to the extent that this is true, the cultural imposition of an ‘ideal mother’ against whom mothers can compare their own actions is a set-up that will always make mothers feel less than adequate, even under the best of circumstances” (p. 195). Smythe and Isserlis (2002) remind us to pay close attention to “mothering discourses” and how they produce institutional truths about women’s literacy “needs”, “ideal families”, and “good mothers”. It is particularly important to consider if and how mothering discourses limit opportunities for women’s educational beyond their roles as parents, as family literacy programs could perhaps be interpreted above all, as a continuation of the mothering discourse that frames family relationships (Smythe & Isserlis, 2002).

### **Mothering Work**

As discussed in the previous chapter, motherhood is a social construction (Gatrell, 2005; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Women are not born with naturalistic tendencies to “mother” any more than men are, yet the expectation of

“mothering” is for the most part, left within the hands of women. Griffith and Smith’s (2005) notion of a mothering discourse allows to understand these culturally bound beliefs and values surrounding who and what constitutes as a good mother, a normal family, and by extension, appropriate literacy and pedagogical practices in the home (see also Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). The mothering discourse positions parents and most often, mothers, as their children’s first and most important educator. According to Smythe and Isserlis (2002), the term conflates nurturing with pedagogy, leaning on images of the “sensitive mother”. As discussed earlier, there is a large body of research to suggest that there is a positive relationship level parental involvement and school achievement (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Lareau, 1989; 2011). However, parental involvement refers more to the work of women as mothers than it does to men as fathers (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Griffith & Smith, 1990). Dudley-Marling (2001) reminds us that among mothers, there are profound differences in how parental involvement is experience—“All mothers do not have access to the same social, economic and cultural resources to support their children’s schooling” (p. 185). Mothering then may vary depending on education and background (Gilbert, 2008). The presumption that is most often made however (especially through family literacy programs—again, to be explored later) is that parents (read: mothers) have the same access to time, knowledge, and various cultural and material resource necessary for their children’s success.

As O’Reilly (2004) notes, today the ideology of good motherhood “demands more than mere physical proximity of mother-child—contemporary mothers are expected not only to spend “quality time’ with their children, but todays children dance, swim, and cut

and paste with their mothers” (p. 8). This requires a lot of time, energy, and money to raise children, as the emphasis now becomes placed on enrichment of children—through toys, books, games, activities, programs and so on (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 9). As Griffith and Smith (2005) point out, the mothering discourse supports a nuclear family organization. “The responsibilities and standards of a mother’s achievement do not vary with the real conditions under which her work is done” (p. 40). Families who deviate face scrutiny when they cannot engage in what they call, *complementary educational work*, “the work done by parents that contributes directly to a child’s work as a learner in school” (p. 69). Having access to resources for your child to indulge in, but also the time or resources to buy the time to engage with them, is not viable for working class parents. Lareau’s (2011) notion of *concerted cultivation*, shows how middle class children have access to leisure activities orchestrated by adults (p. 31). There are some assumptions about the kind of parental involvement that parents *should* do. According to Standing (1999):

Parental involvement means helping with homework, helping in the classroom, reading with your child, taking part in the activities and outings, and doing ‘extra-curricular activities’. It entails providing time, space and equipment (books, computers, etc.) for children to work at home... (p. 58)

“Parental” involvement is largely a mothering phenomenon, and this becomes problematic when we consider that the mothering discourse influences mothers own perceptions of their roles as their children’s first and most important educators, and as the responsibility for children’s literacy skills both in and out of school continue to be classified as women’s work (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Gilbert, 2008; Griffith & Smith,

2005). Griffith and Smith (2005) argue that, “in all its varieties, the mothering discourse has this in common—it requires the subordination of women’s unpaid labour and the conditions of her life to the ill-defined needs of her children’s development and of their schooling” (p. 39).

What is more striking is that mothering and cultural expectations associated with it do not exist in isolation, and are not made in a vacuum (Gilbert, 2008). Mothering is learned both through the mother’s life experiences, and from “experts”—learning about what they should and should not do, and in response to the social pressures of norms and values in a given cultural context (Gilbert, 2008; Lareau, 2011). Advice about how to be a “proper” mother comes from various sources: politicians, doctors, teachers, and even librarians as we will soon discover. Horwitz and Long (2005) provide some insight into this issue by arguing that, the “voices of the mothering discourse are those of experts—politicians, academics, physicians’, media personalities and those in positions of power” (p. 100). Discourses surrounding “good” mothering as O’Reilly (2004) reminds us, also suggest that the characterization of today’s mother is that they turn to so-called “experts” for instruction. This seems to be true of middle class women, who according to Gatrell (2005) are highly susceptible to the influence of “expert” parental advice. Expert advice is offered under the umbrella of “parents”, but the directives that are given tend to be addressed and geared specifically towards women, and contain prescriptive messages about how “good” mothers should behave. More often than not, in order for mothers to fulfill the criteria of “good-child rearing” in the eyes of the “experts”, mothers must devote most, if not all, of their time to bringing up their children (Gatrell, 2005).



## **Moving Towards a Parental Discourse**

It should come as no surprise then that there continues to be an emphasis placed on women as mothers—one that almost seems to be non-existent for fathers. As Anderson and Hamilton (2005) point out, mothers still continue to perform more housework than fathers, including the majority of cooking and childcare responsibilities. Extending this even past household obligations, implicit with becoming a mother as previously discussed, are also expectations surrounding primary caregiving. The majority of women who mother young children, regardless of their marital status, function primarily as sole parents, assuming full responsibility of the demanding, continuous physical tasks associated with children and domestic duties (Maushart, 1999, p. 119), as the rearing of children remains a major responsibility in conjunction with their “mothering” activities within the family (Chowdorow, 1999, p. 5). Mothers are expected to see the socialization of their children as the most meaningful job, regardless of their approaches to childrearing (Gilbert, 2008). As discussed beforehand, the discourse of mothering surrounding women continues to inform the way we think about parental roles—specifically mothers relationship with schools and indeed their own perceptions of their roles as their children’s first and most important educators (Smythe, 2006, p. 8). Organized childcare and schooling outside the home *presuppose* and *supplement* mothering, they do not *supplant* mothering (Chowdorow, 1999, p. 5). Research has emphasized the significance of parental involvement for giving an educational advantage to children, as well as the work done by “parents” that contributes to a child’s work as a learner in school (Griffith & Smith, 2005). There is an underlying expectation that

mothers will cultivate their child's education by continuing to reinforce activities in the home, or in the world outside of school, such as helping a child read, spell, or like the mothers I interviewed, taking trips to libraries. In other words, there is a contribution made outside of school to assist in the "specific skills that bear directly on the tasks a child is expected to do in school" (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 69). But where are fathers place in all of this— in discourses surrounding the role of fathers in children's early years?

### **Where are the Fathers?**

Research supports the claim that the number of fathers involved in family literacy programs needs to be maximized as they are an important figure for children's development (Barton, 1997; Cuban & Hayes, 1996; Gadsden, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2005). According to Barton (1997), family literacy programs need to move beyond the "young mum", to include obviously fathers, and a range of other relatives and friends that people site as important in their literacy life, as focusing exclusively on mother-child relations, "exclude important social relations and community resources" (p. 108). More father participants and male programmers would support women first off, and would ensure children see men involved in an activity that might otherwise be considered as "women's work". This would also educate responsibility for all members of families, and not certain individuals (Cuban & Hayes, 1996, p. 12). As Gadsden (2003) reminds us, programs that aim to influence fathers must consider how to engage them as literacy

learners and teachers for their children, and should “provide a context for the knowledge/experiences, literacy beliefs, and needs of fathers” (p. 109). If the majority of “registered” storytimes such as those held at Smallville library are held weekday mornings, is it no wonder that fathers are notably absent? Thus, we could argue that the workday of many or perhaps, most fathers, precludes their participation at programs, which are set up essentially for mothers working at home.

Just as there is a constructed notion of what “motherhood” entails, so too exists a discourse on “fatherhood”, which is also a socially constructed gender role that is mediated by culture (Quinn, 2009). Fatherhood continues to be constructed in terms of men being incompetent, as unable to handle the simplest required child-rearing tasks (Hays, 1996). Although most mothers would want their male partners to do more of the child rearing, mothers traditionally worried “that men don’t know how to do it right, simply can’t do it right, or are unwilling to do it right” (Hays, 1996, p. 104). In light of this fact however, studies have shown that there are no significant differences between males and females in their capacity to nurture (Silverstein, 1996), and that males are just in need of the practice (Hays, 1996).

Implicit within this “mothering discourse” is the idea that mothers who want to advance in their careers must sacrifice time for their family, in which case, makes them “bad” mothers. Silverstein (1996) puts this as often times mother’s employment has been considered as “maternal absence” while the effects of paternal employment are almost ignored. Embedded within discourses about fatherhood are the notions that they cannot enjoy the luxury claimed by females to “opt” to work for pay, “either they participate in

paid work, or they are regarded as deviant” (Maushart, 1999). In fact, the emphasis continues to place the stereotypical idea of the father as an economic provider (Gatrell, 2005). This discourse of “fatherhood” must be redefined according to Silverstein (1996) to emphasize the intimacy, care and connection that previously characterized what we thought of as “mothering” (p. 30). Silverstein (1996) goes on to argue that the “traditional concepts of ‘mothering’ and ‘fathering’ must be discarded, and the idea of ‘family’ must be dramatically restricted, and they both must include nurturing and providing economic resources” (p. 31). Traditionally there has been a gendered nature of “parental involvement” in the sense that it is women as mothers who tend to be involved in children’s schooling; not fathers. Using the term “parental” often times gives equal emphasis to the role of fathers as parents, even when fathers may not be present or even involved (Standing, 1999, p. 58). As we will shortly discover, these discourses continue to be reflected in much of children’s literature. It becomes important then that we work towards a discourse that incorporates and encourages fathers to play a more direct role in their children’s schooling process, and to show images of involved fathers in children’s literature to broaden the understanding of gender roles for young readers<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that gay and lesbian families do not necessarily conform to these assumptions concerning gender as a determinant of behaviour. This becomes something to take up in future research.

### **III. The Importance of Children's Literature, Gender Portrayals, and Story**

#### **Selection**

##### **Significance of studying children's literature**

A growing number of scholars have been interested in children's literature and the messages that they reflect, as this is yet another mechanism in which society exerts its influence over young minds (Louie, 2001). Scholars are unanimous in arguing that studying children's literature is of great importance, for not only is it another site where gender stereotypes are encountered and learned, but what society provides for its children is a reflection of those values it interprets as central to its continuity (Adams, Walker, & O'Connell, 2011). These books can be considered as a kind of social artifact, one that does not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a relationship to other artifacts and social relations (Taylor, 2003, p. 306). Children's stories are a site where discourses of gender are continually learned. Discourses do not exist in isolation. As early on as 1972, the classic Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross study clearly outlined the importance of studying children's literature:

Picture books play an important role in early sex-role socialization because they are a vehicle for the presentation of societal values to the young child. Through books, children learn about the world outside of their immediate environment: they learn about what other boys and girls do, say, and feel; they learn about what is right and wrong; and they learn what is expected for children their own age. In

addition, books provide children with role models—images of what they can and should be like when they grow old. (p. 1126)

The stereotypical portrayals of men and women affect how young readers perceive themselves within this framework. Stereotypes have a direct effect on attitudes, expectations, personality characteristics (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005), and even behaviours, as children who are exposed to books with gender-stereotypic behaviours are more likely to demonstrate stereotypic behaviours themselves (Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009). The continual exposure to such traditional gender stereotypes negatively affect boys and girls development, not only narrowing the range of acceptable behaviours, but also naturalizing inequalities (Adams et al., 2011; Hamilton et al., 2006), and changing children's ideas about the world (Diekman & Murnen, 2004). Such stereotypes also affect children's affective and cognitive development and impair the development of positive self-concepts, and induce negative attitudes towards the child's own developmental potential (Agee, 1993). Through hearing traditional narratives, children "learn to recognize themselves and others as located within their own lived gendered narratives" (Davies, 2003, p. 46). This means that the stories children read shape how they think of their place in the social structure (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011) while also providing characters to which their own positions in the social world can be interpreted (Davies, 2003). In addition, children's books contribute to how children understand what is expected of women and men; mothers and fathers (McCabe et al., 2011).

In children's literature, boys tend to be featured more often than girls, and portrayed in more independent, brave, and courageous roles. This is also true of women and men as mothers and fathers, and considering that children tend to identify with their respective gender in stories (Weitzman et al., 1972), we can see how this is a process of learning gender that occurs through literacy. These gender roles according to Agee (1993) often grow out of unexamined, long-accepted cultural assumptions about who women are, and what they are supposed to do with their lives. Thus, the continual reproduction of stereotypical books indirectly supports discourses that posit that women and men are responsible for the private and public sphere respectfully. This stereotypical portrayal of sexes, including an underrepresentation of female characters, not only present children with future images of themselves, but also limit children's (particularly girl's) career aspirations and goals, and frame their attitudes about their future roles as parents (Hamilton et al., 2006; Weitzman et al., 1972). As a result it gives boys a sense of entitlement, while at the same time, lowering girls self-esteem and occupational aspirations (Hamilton et al., 2006). In other words, sex stereotyping frequently produces rigid, black and white conceptualizations of the appropriate abilities and behaviors for men and women (McDonalds, 1989, p. 389).

Building on this notion, a study by Karniol and Gal-Disegni (2009) found that when comparing gender-fair versus stereotypical readers, the fair reader actually decreased the number of activities judged as only appropriate for males, and increased judgments of the greater appropriateness of activities for both genders. Tsao (2008) argues as well that children who read non-sexist stories over a sustained period of time

reduced their notions of gender-role stereotypes (p. 111). It is clear that what children read and are exposed to, contributes to the formation of their self-images that help construct their self-identity. What's more, studying children's literature is crucial because stories are being viewed at times when children are in the process of developing their individual identities, and thus are particularly influenced by what they see in stories in terms of their gender identities (Tsao, 2008).

### **Gendered Portrayals in Children's Literature**

Within popular culture, the market is divided so that different products are produced for girls and for boys, and children's literature is only one of many other outlets that often times transmits sexist messages to young girls and boys (Anggard, 2005).

Within this social outlet, studies show that female characters not only are underrepresented, but when they are shown, they are portrayed in more submissive, passive and nurturing ways; rarely ever in the main role/heroine lead (Turner-Bower, 1996; Weitzman et al., 1972). In contrast, males tend to be more overrepresented, independent, aggressive, and often taking more of a leadership role (Adams et al., 2011; Brugeilles, Cromer, & Cromer, 2002; DeLoache, Cassidy, & Carpenter, 1987; Tsao, 2008).

While research has analyzed female and male protagonists in terms of their sexist portrayal within popular stories for children (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Hamilton et al., 2006; McDonald 1989; Taylor, 2003; Tsao, 2008), less attention



has been paid to parental images in stories for young children—how are mothers and fathers portrayed in popular children’s stories? Where are they pictured? What are they doing? How do our dominant discourses about “mothers” and “fathers” filter through to children’s literature? Picture books offer not only a particular image of *who* a mother is or should be, but in doing so, it is also providing guidelines about how to be a “good” mother, and by comparison, a “proper” father (Papazian, 2010). Many stories continue to present mothers and fathers in stereotypical roles—mothers are more likely to be represented as a housewife, or pictured cooking or cleaning, while a father is less likely to be shown in the home engaging in any “traditionally female” work. A recent shift in children’s literature has begun to depict fathers in more “playful” nurturing ways—teaching their children sports or taking them fishing for example (Adams et al., 2011; Diekman & Murnen; 2004). This contributes to a discourse of “fathering” that posits males as more fun and active in their “parenting” role. While these images may not be central to the storyline, they are often times implicit within the text and background pictures. A notable gap in the literature is the then the examination of the images of parents in stories, which further contributes to gendered messages children receive about the roles of mothers and fathers.

Men and women are much more likely to have traditional than non-traditional jobs (Hamilton et al., 2006), and women tend to dominate activities inside the home, while the opposite is true for men (Weitzman et al., 1972). As Brugeilles et al. (2002) argue, young girls “cannot escape from the maternal and housekeeping roles that dominate the books” (p. 260). Like their younger female counterparts, mothers as main

characters appear to be rare as well (Brugeilles et al., 2002), but fathers appear even less in stories than mothers (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Brugeilles et al., 2002; Quinn, 2009). Mothers in stories are frequently depicted undertaking various domestic chores in the home (Adams et al., 2011), appearing as nurturers more than fathers (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2006; Turner-Bowker, 1996). Picture books thus construct images of and ideas about mothers and motherhood that shape not only children's, but also women's (and men's) understanding of what it means to be a mother (Papazian, 2010, p. 124). This trend seems to extend even past children's literature, as Wardrop (2012) found that even within popular media shows for young children, the trend is still in the direction of "good" moms being pictured as non-working, stay at home mothers who are devoted solely to the needs of their child.

Women as mothers are more likely to be pictured at home than working, as the family/job combination seems to be particularly inaccessible to women in stories (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Papazian, 2010). The classic study by Weitzman et al. (1972) found in a sample of best-selling Caldecott books that no woman had a job or profession, and that motherhood is presented in picture books as a full-time, lifetime job. Even more so, motherhood is presented as something that is unrealistic, as the woman is almost always confined to the house, "although she is usually too well dressed for housework" (p. 1141). While some may argue that the Weitzman study is a bit outdated, as in 1972 most women (at least middle class ones) were restricted to the home and domestic duties, studies well into the 2000s such as Adams et al. (2011) have found that these representations continue to be held true. Adams et al. (2011) argue that there is a danger

that the “dirty work” of mundane domestic chores remains to this day, marginalized as “women’s work” in the rush to romanticize involved fatherhood in representational terms (E.g. Men as fathers are never portrayed cleaning the toilet). Adult women have little access to the main role and are excluded from many occupations as they continue to be confined to the maternal role (Brugeilles et al., 2002). Scholars argue that when mothers are pictured as working (whether in human or animal form), they tended to be confined to occupations such as teaching, childcare, or shop keeping, as female work is often devalued in stories (Brugeilles et al., 2002; McDonald, 1989). It is this image of parenting as the *only* female occupation available to women—mothers are pictured as self-sacrificial as eternally fulfilled in their roles (Papazian, 2010).

Studies such as Fraustino (2007) and Vandenberg-Daves (2003) have even shown that in popular children’s books such as *The Berenstain Bears* series, traditional sexist gender roles continue to exist through the main characters. Mama Bear for example, is confined to the house in all the books in the series (except one—where she works to make “extra money” and then is subsequently never shown again the series as a working mother—and this is true even of books published in 2010). The gender-stereotypical behaviour of Mama and Papa Bear according to Fraustino (2007), “can’t help but contribute something to the reproduction of traditional mothering ideology in Berenstain audiences” (p. 254), just as it does in audiences of other popular stories for children. The fact that males are almost always the lead characters or heroes in stories, leads one to wonder whether girls and women are confined to the home because they are not considered interesting enough (unless they are the ones needing saving).

Quinn (2009) found that when fathers do appear in stories, they are often times shown with a moon in the background or at night, which may serve as a reminder that fathers are often accessible to their children at night because they work during the day. Extending this even further, studies show that fathers are involved less in the “nurturing” and “functional” touching that mothers are involved in (Adams et al., 2011). Instead of emotional relationships that characterize the mother-child relationship, they are more likely to be seen playing activities with their children (Brugeilles et al., 2002), and appear to be much more and angry and disciplinary with them (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). Wharton (2005) also found in her study that males are often portrayed in more humorous ways, a depiction that ties in with the number of other social discourses on fatherhood such as the “fun daddy” role. Picture books thus, do not provide a realistic image of fathers and husbands, as they are rarely ever shown to help in the mundane duties of childcare or household tasks (McDonald, 1989; Weitzman et al., 1971). In comparison to female work, the professions of males are much more diverse and socially rewarding, as the range of masculine occupations is much wider—for the paternal function is indicated by having a job (Brugeilles et al., 2002; McDonald, 1989).

Interestingly, when books do consider themselves to be nonsexist, they succeed in “portraying female characters as adopting the characteristics and roles identified with the masculine gender role, but they did not portray male characters as adopting aspects of the feminine gender role or female characters as shedding the feminine gender role” (Diekman & Murnen, 2004, p. 381). Thus, while some books have succeeded in showing girls they can be “assertive, independent, pursue medical careers or take care of the car,

very few books have shown boys that they can be nurturing and caring, cook meals, or take care of children” (Diekman & Murnen, 2004, p. 382). Although many fathers do take an active role in their child’s life, and women all over the world are breaking traditional stereotypes, this is clearly not reflected in children’s literature (Turner-Bowker, 1996, p. 477). Could the underlying fear be that if young male readers are exposed to more nurturing, caring, male role models in stories, they will grow up to become effeminate? While gender stereotypes in stories may provide opportunities for adults to take up issues of gender, race, and class stereotypes, the problem as Papazian (2010) argues, is that most adults do not pay much attention to portrayals in children’s literature—In fact, they “see children’s literature as a thing of, about, and for children. The effects of children’s literature then on adult readers become not only insidious, but remain unchecked” (p. 124).

In Chapter Six, I will delve further into my own research, which looks at depictions in popular storybooks that are read and recommended at Smallville. Briefly my analysis of stories (in this research, and the work I have done prior to) mimicked much of the same findings from previous scholars. Among some of the most notable outcomes was the fact that very subtle gendered and stereotypical behaviours of main characters in illustrations of popular stories continue to exist. Stories such as *The Berenstain Bears*, a classic for many families, repeatedly reinforce stereotypical messages such as passive mothers and aggressive/disciplinary fathers.

Other themes that emerged through my examination were as previous scholars documented—a “progression” towards showing more female mothers in working roles

on the one hand, with an absence of stay-at-home fathers on the other hand. Stories were much more likely to show working moms than they were homemaker dads. Authors continually portrayed mothers as the primary caregiver to children, and depicting their lives as revolving around their children. An example can be found in the popular story, *Llama Llama Mad at Mama* (2007), where Mama Llama must spend her Saturday grocery shopping with Llama Llama (who throws a fit), even though she thinks “shopping is boring too”—but someone must sacrifice their Saturday, and it clearly is not Papa Llama.

The literature I examined was also filled with examples showing how the mothering discourse operates under a middle class assumption about the social standing of mothers. Examples such as the story, *31 Uses for a Mom* (2003), in which the description reads as “humorous drawings show some different ways in which moms *serve* [emphasis added] their children” implies that it is the mothers who do the majority of “parenting”. The “uses” for a mother as described in the story are as follows:

Clock, chauffer, hairstylist, tailor, navigator, doctor, pitcher, catcher, retriever, encyclopedia, accompanist, beach chair, bottle opener, taster; fixer-upper, photographer, tooth puller, party planner, ruler, opponent, personal shopper, answering service, costume designer, thermometer, pet sitter, mixer, bank, tweezer, hand holder, page turner, friend.

All these “uses” of a mother contribute to our understanding of the mothering discourse as being largely class based—do working class mothers have the time to create costumes for their children, or the education to be their children’s “encyclopedia” so to speak?

These working class mothers who cannot provide the time or resources for their children get classified as “bad” mothers in comparison to their middle class counterparts.

Interestingly, my exploration also pointed towards a discourse of mothering that suggests not only how mothers should act, but also how mothers should look like. Goodwin and Huppertz (2010) for instance point to the significance of figures such as the “yummy mummy” and the “slummy mummy” in the making of contemporary maternal selves. These “figures” they argue, “are understood as highly distorted archetypes of real women that women are exposed to and draw upon. The idea of figures and the processes of figuration are useful in understanding how good mother discourses continue to exert pressure on women” (p. 12). West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that whereas boys are taught to learn to value physical strength, little girls are taught to value appearance—that is, managing themselves as ornamental objects (p. 17). Looking at images of mothers in popular stories for children supports this notion— well dressed, well groomed, appropriate body weight, feminine and appealing. One quick search of mothers such as Mama Bear, Llama Mama, or even mothers featured in Robert Munsch series or *Jillian Jiggs* (1985) will support discourses of what “good” mothers should look like. It is important to note that discourses around yummy mummy or slummy mummy are practices of mothering that re-inscribe classed discourses. Thus, the appearance of a good mother not only “produces new forms of the good mother, but also enacts and re-enacts the working-class-middle-class divide” (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010, p. 13).

Lastly, fathers in my research were also largely invisible. Fathers were by and large absent from many of the stories I examined. The assumption that tends to be made in

picture books is that it is the mother who is home during the day (and night) with their children. Stories such as *Llama Llama Red Pajama* (2005), where Mama Llama is pictured doing the dishes when her child calls out for her to put him into bed (with no sign of a Papa Llama), or stories like *No, David* (1998), where David's mother is pictured disciplining her son through the novel, point to the remarkable absences of fathers. In the stories I observed, if fathers were pictured, again they were less likely shown to be engaging in any kinds of housework or nurturing behaviour, and were more likely to be shown engaging with their child in playful activities outside of the home.

### **Book Selection Process**

When children are left to read or to create their own literature, they tend to select themes for their stories that are not only similar to those of other children of the same gender, but themes or stories that can be seen as "boys" or "girls" books (Anggard, 2005). Parents however, are usually the ones in charge of selecting stories for children, especially younger ones. Saracho and Spodek (2010) found in their study of families, that their entire sample of participants read to their children, however, it was mothers who did the majority of the reading. Even more interesting, was their finding that parents read to their children books that were of interest to them and related to their situation: "They selected books that the teachers introduced to them and also asked teachers for help in selecting different but appropriate books for a specific interest or situation such as a birthday, holiday, hobby, or activity" (p. 405). Book selection was based on two major



criteria in this sample: the selection of memorable or repeated language or refrains, and the occurrence of objects essential to the plot (p. 405). In a study by Anderson et al., (2001), they found various trends for story selection amongst middle class participants. First, was that parents were influenced by the child's gender in terms of what kind of books were most "suitable" for their "gendered" interests. They also found that the most popular reasons for selecting certain stories over others was subject matter-content, children's interests, aesthetics, familiarity, educational value, difficulty, parents' own interests, and overall value of the book. There is still relatively little known however about storybook interactions and reasons for selecting certain books over others to read with children (Anderson et al., 2001).

According to Schwindt and Tegeler (2010), when librarians are selecting stories they tend to base it on the following criteria: repetition, predictability of story, rhythmic language, appealing illustrations, folk tales/traditional stories, and experiences relevant to the children. Little research however has been completed on the relationship between librarians and story selections, and how librarians filter through literature. As Adams et al. (2011) reminds us, it is essential for research to look at surveying what parents (and librarians for that matter) read with their children, as to base one's sample on the results would be a commendable attempt to pinpoint books that are actually being read. It is clear that more research is needed on selection processes, particularly on the work that mothers engage in to select stories and how they interact with gender roles in picture books.

Most research has been clustered around areas of adults and literacy, as some research has shown that an enriched home literacy environment that includes opportunity for parent-child joint book reading for example, is an important contribution to children's development of early literacy skills (Bingham, 2007; Weigel et al., 2006). Studies have also shown that there is a relationship between parental literacy beliefs and attitudes, the quality of joint book reading interactions, and the kinds of books and frequency in which books are read (Bingham, 2007; Weigel et al., 2006). Thus, correlations have been found between children's gender stereotypes and mother's (as they tend to read with their children most often) gender attitudes (Friedman, Leaper, & Bigler, 2007). A more traditionally oriented mother is associated with a more traditional orientated daughter or son (Ex & Janssens, 1998, p. 179). Generally speaking however, Friedman et al. (2007) have found that mothers do not generally challenge many of the gender stereotypes that exist within the contexts of media such as children's literature. This is a central consideration for research, for as Wharton (2005) argues, "adults have the role of guiding children's reflections of the text itself. Much depends, then, on whether or not adults contest the text" (p. 239).

Other studies such as DeLoache et al. (1987) have found that when mothers do read to their child, there tends to be a maternal bias towards masculine labels when gender-neutral characters are pictured. This study also showed that much of the information that parents transmit to their young children is conveyed not only indirectly, but often times unintentionally as well. Children tend to imitate persons who are available for observation, and who are warm and nurturing towards them (McDonald, 1989), and

thus are more likely to follow in their parent's footsteps in terms of attitudes.

Understanding the relation between parents' beliefs and behaviours and what they choose for their children are significant because they have consequences for children's development (Bingham, 2007).

Even though books may still represent men and women in stereotypical ways, it does not necessarily mean we should stop reading them to children altogether, for "narration can serve as a means of exploring different positions in discourses of femininity and masculinity" (Anggard, 2005, p. 551). It thus becomes vital to study how and if children are educated on these constructs—teaching them that they do exist, and teaching them to work against them, which is more effective than ignoring reality. Wharton (2005) reminds us that, "the way that gender is portrayed in school books may be less-important than the ways in which parents use these books with children...an author may write for a feminist-intentioned text, but there is no guarantee that the young readers will possess the schemata to read it as intended" (p. 24). Accordingly, parents can then supplement the reading of more gender-traditional books with discussions about why male and female characters are portrayed in certain ways (Diekman & Murnen, 2004, p. 382).

If as Saracho and Spodek (2010) argue, parents do take control in choosing books and selecting resources for their children, then it becomes extremely critical to research mothers and their selection process, and deconstruct what and why certain stories are chosen for their children over others, and the influence of gender. This is true for librarians as well, as they are in charge of the kinds of stories made available and

accessible to young children via librarians and family literacy programs. A valuable resource for influencing children's gender attitudes is careful selection of reading material and the use of books and related activities that promotes gender-neutral attitudes (Tsao, 2008, p. 112), and research examining this will help shed light to how parents (mothers in particular), and librarians, engage with this information.

### Summary

A review of the literature has been provided covering areas of family literacy programs, the gendered involvement of mothers (and the question of the invisibility of fathers) and the relationship of gender to stories and storybook selections. The overview of family literacy programs revealed their purposes, but also some of their limitations in terms of the kind of literacy skills valued, the implicit assumptions about who actually has access to these programs, and their relationship to school discourses. If family literacy programs are supposed to prepare children for schooling, how do we understand children who are not exposed to this "cultural capital" before hand?

An outline of how mothering work is associated with family literacy programs was also provided. I examined how family literacy programs have a strong gendered aspect to them, as it is mothers who tend to be involved, yet, become hidden under the guise of "parenting". Exploring some of the links between family literacy programs to mothering discourses provided useful for understanding how these two subjects are related. In addition, unpacking mothering work and cultural expectations of motherhood

allowed for a greater understanding of the mother's role in early literacy. Furthermore, the question of fatherhood was also interrogated, as there seems to be a gap in our understanding of the relationship of "fatherhood" to early education, and where fathers fit in to this mix.

Lastly, the final section highlighted some important issues in the area of stories, gender, and book selection. As I demonstrated, the cultural expectations associated with "mothering" and "fathering" (as discussed in the second section) continue to be represented in much of the current literature for children. What are the implications for children who continue to be exposed to literature that contradicts much of the change we are seeing in society? This section highlighted the importance for further research into not only parental book selection, but librarian's choices as well, as often times, they may be exposing young children to stereotypical stories through family storytime programs and through the selection of books available at libraries.

## CHAPTER IV:

### CULTURAL CAPITAL AND TEXTUALLY MEDIATED DISCOURSES: WHAT IS (UN)VALUED IN EARLY LITERACY WORK?

“You know if you just had a child and just breastfed, and okay put them in school when the time comes and did nothing else with the child, and left the rest of society to deal with them, so now I have a miscreant, a socio-path, a person who does not know words enough to use them...”

(Lacy, Library Technician)

“Well I think sometimes they [other parents] underestimate the value of reading to their children. I think that is what it is. They don’t understand the value...”

(Lena, Mother)

#### Introduction

This chapter explores some of the findings from observations and in-depth interviews with librarians and mothers with regard to their experiences and involvement with early literacy programs at Smallville library. I will investigate some of the unidirectional transmission of instruction from librarians to mothers (exploring “proper” literacy habits), while considering mothers’ understandings and experience of this. I also interrogate librarians and mothers expectations about what kinds of literacy skills are expected, or valued, and why.

In addition, this chapter considers some of the structural frameworks of storytime through an examination of Smallville’s library framework, *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) and associated expectations regarding appropriate literacy habits. Using Bourdieu’s (1973) notion of “cultural capital” as a framework, along with Smith’s (2005) work on IE and Ruling Relations (1999), I examine how “parenting” practices are

coordinated and constrained by discourses, and “expert” knowledge embedded within library policies such as *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) and other guiding documents.

Moreover, I use this chapter to examine how storytime programs at this library work to prepare participants for schooling practices, which are aligned with middle-class values. These storytimes offer certain linguistic and cultural knowledge’s and competencies that librarians feel are required for educational success. As evident through many interviews with librarians, there is an implicit assumption that “at-risk” or lower class children, who do not engage in these kinds of activities, or do not have access to these skills, do not gain access to the necessary social and educational capital to succeed in school. Likewise, I take into consideration how this transformation of early literacy skills shapes mothers own expectations—how does this mold their beliefs, and the assumed benefits to attending the programs? To what extent are their actions rooted in discourses surrounding early literacy habits?

In short, this chapter will illuminate how librarians have specific expectations about the kinds of unpaid work “parents” should engage in to support the institutional goal of school readiness through the transmission of school practices to home. The focus is on how library storytime programs, such as the ones available in Smallville library approach early literacy—attempting to teach parents cultural competencies to prepare their children (and themselves) for schools. I will also begin to tease out the opinions and “work” of mothers around literacy.

## Observations of Storytimes

My observations at the various storytime sessions held at Smallville library lead to some interesting findings, specifically in terms of the ways in which librarians would attempt to “teach” parents. The initial set-up of the storytime room was akin to a kindergarten classroom: brightly coloured walls, happy inviting music playing as children enter the room, stuffed animals of popular television shows (i.e. *Arthur*, *Babar*, *Kermit the Frog*) placed all around the room, a colourful mat placed in the centre of the room, and a table set up on the corner of the room with an array of storybooks, videos, and cassettes that support the daily theme. There were “special” librarian chairs (i.e. stools, bean bags) usually set up at the front of the room, and often times, with props near by (i.e. felt boards, chart paper, bubble machines, basket of toys).

During storytime programming, the librarian in charge of running the particular session would control the room environment as if it were a classroom. For instance, they would provide school-like instruction to children—“sit down”, “please raise your hand”, “please be quiet and listen when someone is talking”—are phrases used to discipline the children in a classroom-like setting. The purpose of such behaviour, as one librarian told me afterwards, was to attempt to “reinforce the kind of behaviour that is taught or learnt at school”. The goal as she made clear, was to teach children to begin to hear the kinds of instructions that they would expect to encounter upon entering school.

Extending this even further, inference-type questions were asked before, during, and after reading stories—questions such as “what do you think this story will be about”; “have you ever seen a purple cat”; “so what were the animals we saw in the story today,



does anyone remember” were commonly said. Again, as one librarian divulged to me, this was “meant to compliment the work they do in school”. It was instances such as these that allowed me to begin to develop a greater understanding of the intricate relationship between what is taught in library programs and in schools. Storytimes sessions were not limited to just reading stories though, but librarians also engaged in songs, dances, rhymes, play, and variety of other literacy building activities. This kind of “supplementary educational” work is used in storytimes as a way to transmit such practices into the home. As described by Griffith and Smith (2005) in *Mothering for Schooling*, and as the next chapter will reveal, it is largely middle class mothers who can afford to engage in this kind of work through their supplementary educational work— “women, who as mothers have time to dedicate to their children’s education, contribute to the functioning of the school in ways that are seldom recognized as work” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 24). What struck me the most, however, was not the messages directed towards children, but rather, the ones directed towards “parents”. In each of the storytime sessions I attended, there were constant reminders for parents to try and reinforce certain early literacy skills. For example, there were messages posted around the walls of the room with messages such as “sing, play, talk, and read with your child”. Most librarians would also use the first few minutes of programming to make reference to their structural framework, *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011). Through this, they would suggest “appropriate behaviour”; such as we “we recommend reading *at least* ten minutes every night”. It was quite common for the librarian to leave books or activity sheets out at the end of class for “parents” to take home and complete with their children, to which

most parents in the room eagerly picked up with them as they left the room. These take-home activities would reinforce the lesson for the day (i.e. letter, theme). Librarians would often hand out *Every Child to Read* (2011) pamphlets in hopes that they would, as one librarian mentioned, “encourage parents to read and more and show them what they should be doing”. The rationale was that parents “are their children’s first teachers”, and because of this, should teach children “to sit down, to listen, to hear, to know what a book is”. As one librarian revealed to me, “kids who learn more rhymes, do better in schools...they are a lot more ready through this, and teachers can tell which kids have already been exposed to these kind of things”.

Many parents would stay back a few minutes after the storytime program to ask librarians questions regarding the kinds of books they should be reading, or to elaborate on songs or activities that were part of the daily lesson. This notion of “parents” as children’s first teachers is not something new. This same mantra is repeated through many documents produced by the ministry for instance, and other library texts. This speech act, as we shall explore in the next chapter, affirms the *mothering* work (note the blurring of parent/mother/father), in addition to extending teaching into the home to support notions of supplementary educational work done by none other than mothers.

### **Every Child Ready to Read**

Bourdieu’s theoretical concept of cultural capital is helpful for understanding librarians approach to early literacy. *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011), is used as a

resource by librarians to drive home the message to “parents” that it is *you*—the parent—who needs to teach your children how to read before school. However, learning to read before school is only one aspect of the mothering work that develops the child’s “cultural capital”, which also includes the experiences that only economic and social privilege can access. During my interviews with librarians, an important conceptual part of their work continued to be referenced over and over again: *Every Child Read to Read* (2011). This is a project of the Association for Library Service to Children, and the Public Library Association, both divisions of the American Library Association. It was prepared to “help your child get ready to read with simple activities every day” (ALSC/PLA, 2011). This pamphlet exists not only as a tool for librarians to conceptually think about the work they are doing, and the reasoning behind it; but is a resource for parents as well. It is designed to give information to parents about what kinds of early literacy activities they *should* be doing, and why they are important. From the perspective of Bourdieu, we could argue that these specific activities are valued by the dominant culture, are the ones that get transmitted, and thus, become the standard to which everyone must aim to achieve. To take this a step further however, the argument could be made that this is due to the fact that it is focused on specific “valued” activities—the “valuing” coming from institutional relations of literacy (schools, libraries, literacy initiatives, parent, mothering work).

According to the pamphlet, simple activities that fall under the broad categories of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing, will help “your children to get ready to read by providing early literacy opportunities around your home...throughout the day” (ALSC/PLA, 2011), The problem with such pedagogy, as Smythe and Isserlis (2002)

have pointed out in a study of family literacy programs in the United States, is that often times resources such as *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011), “assume that a parent stays at home with a young child during the day, that none of the activities take any extra time or required resources, and that there are no other children in the home in need of care” (p. 8). How can activities be completed during the day if both parents work for example? Through this we can begin to peel off layers of social class in terms of the kinds of activities suggested by the pamphlet, and who it is assumed will carry them out. Below are highlights from two of the interviewees on *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011):

The whole point of it [*Every Child Ready to Read*] is so parents learn to participate...parents are the first contact for literacy, and I guess I have learned, this is really important because a lot of parents think learning to read or literacy is this special almost like holy grail, like how do I do this? It's like everything you do, from the time you are just talking to your baby...so I have learnt that you have to do that... explain to parents what their role is, and *Every Child Ready to Read* helps. (Joe, Librarian)

According to Ella, manager of the children's department:

With the *Every Child Ready to Read*, I think what we are thinking about is communicating the importance of early literacy, and suggesting to the parents that they are their children's first teacher. Education starts at day one, and you are in the best position to know your child, and to help them develop and nurture those skills.

The goal is clear: to have parents, typically mothers, involved and to teach them “proper literacy skills” as this is an essential part to school success. Smith (2005) contends that in our textually mediated world, texts are part of the social relations of the institutions that shape and constrain the “local” contexts of our lives. Such texts reflect the ruling interests of institutions, as they establish procedures, rules, policies and official versions of reality that are “activated” by readers in various sites across society. *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) is an example of a textual mediated discourse; a tool that reflects dominant notions of “proper” literacy habits and simultaneously, maintaining the status-quo. Such texts, “do something special as coordinators of peoples activities” (Smith, 2005, p. 65), which in this case, organize librarian teaching practices, and as we will later see, mothers’ engagement with early literacy work.

The regulatory message in such family literacy advice is “that if parents follow the instructions and activities carefully, their children should become readers, and their academic and social success will be assured” (Smyth & Isserlis, 2002, p. 8). Family literacy policies such as *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) do not just stop in attempts to teach parents how to do supplementary educational work, but, as we will see in the next chapter as well, family literacy policies continue to proceed on gendered assumptions about who has primary responsibility for the literacy development in their children. As Smyth and Isserlis (2002) point out, family literacy policies “could also be interpreted as a continuity of the mothering discourses that frame family relationships” (p. 36).

Along with the rise of library policies such as *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011), came a conceptual shift of the roles of parents. Through the interviews with librarians, it

became apparent that this idea of “an involved parent” within storytime practices was a relatively new framework. Traditionally storytime programs were meant for children only, however, they evolved to include a stronger emphasis on educating parents first in hopes that they would subsequently educate their children. Part of this reason, is as Ella, the manger of children’s department argues, “because of research and what we were reading in the literature that showed it is obviously much more positive if parents are involved”. The quotations below further illustrate this shift:

Thankfully, about twenty years ago people started saying this isn’t making sense, because really the parents should be in the program, with the children enjoying the stories so that after the storytimes, they can engage in conversation about what they heard about, what they read about, who was their favourite animal or little person or repeat the songs and repeat the rhymes. (Ella, Children’s Department Manager)

Lacy, a library technician, adds:

A mum or dad would drop the child off, the child would go into the program room, and the moms and dads would stay on the outside. Then in later years, when the whole concept started changing we said...if a child goes to the parent and starts singing “the insy winsy spider”, *mummy’s* going to say “oh shush up I don’t want to hear that” or “what are you talking about I don’t know what that is?” So then we started inviting the parents into the room, so they are they are not paying for it, only for their child, but they get to come in. So when their child sings “the insy winsy spider”, *mummy* says, “went up the water spout”, and they

can do the actions and everything. Now it is an experience for both of them, like “only *mummy* and I know that song...*daddy* [emphasis added] doesn’t know it and maybe we will teach it to him”.

As elucidated in these quotations, the role of “parents”, and understandings of “parenthood” have become constructed within discourses of “involved parenting”. Thus, “good” parents are involved parents; are those who take interest in their children’s literacy development.

### **Librarian Expectations of “Good” Parenting**

The goal of my research with librarians and mothers was to uncover the social processes that value certain skills and expectations over others. The purpose of this research using IE as a framework, is as Smith (2006) argues, “not to generalize about the group of people interviewed, but to find and describe social processes that have generalizing effects” (p. 18). This research then looks past the experiences of these particular librarians and mothers, and moves towards the discourses that produce librarian and mother experiences in particular ways. It was clear through the interviews I conducted, that librarians held certain expectations about what “parents” should be doing to support and reinforce early literacy strategies at home. In a sense, their responses seemed to set up an either-or-dichotomy; either parents follow prescribed literacy habits to be considered “good” parents, or else they may be considered deviant, or “at-risk”.

Some librarians even develop a sense of “pity” for families who did not engage in such early literacy skills:

It is so sad, like I think when people come and they have a kid who is six and they don't know anything...like how to read with them, and how to teach them good literacy habits, and they missed all those years of programs. It is just sad. I wish there was a way of everyone knowing. (Iris, Librarian)

Similarly, Joe, another librarian at Smallville library said he believes that all parents should be learning “good stories, rhymes, and fun things to do with their children at home; but it is unfortunate that many people don't bother with this”. Librarians set up their storytimes in such a way as to convey messages to parents about what they should be doing at home. Again, making sure they learn a kind of capital required to raise “successful” children. The purpose of the storytime programs, as Karen, a librarian clerk told me, “are mainly to get the parents interested to get the kids to read”, for as Lacy, a librarian technician, pointed out, “children who are read to and who read are much more successful”. Ella, the children's department manager, elaborates on this:

What they realized was that what parents needed to be aware of for their children to be ready for school, were these skills—early literacy skills—that a child needed before they could read. And, um, so they...the library tried to figure out how to be a player...how they could be involved in communicating this information.

For librarians, developing early literacy skills meant following in the footsteps of *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011): activities that fell under the categories of talking; singing; reading; writing; and playing. We can see then how such texts are of central importance



to framing librarian discussions because “they create this essential connection between the local of our (and others) bodily beings and the translocal organization of the ruling relations” (Smith, 2005, p. 119). Such expectations organize how librarians view the responsibilities, and as the next section highlights, how mothers view themselves.

Through these interviews, we can also witness how textually mediated discourses become relevant to the expectations librarians hold. Discourses, as Griffith and Smith (2005) argue, are “people participating actively and embodied in conversation mediated by written and printed materials” (p. 34). These expectations of librarians (and mothers) do not exist in isolation, but rather are continually formed and reformed through discourses produced institutionally.

Unanimously, all librarians claimed it is parents’ responsibility to ensure that their child is taking the necessary steps to succeed before school:

The way I would see it is, a parent’s involvement in their child’s early learning or literacy is imperative. It is something that I think they have to do. It is essential.

For me, it is like the same as making sure they are fed properly and cared for and clothed. The really important thing that I would like to drive home to parents is that they are their child’s first contact. It is not going to be an outside source like a teacher, or by the time they get to JK, it is like you the parent from the time they are born. Having said that, we are an essential partner in that, so you know, we can guide you and advise you and pick out the books, and do formalized storytimes. But definitely I think a parent first above all else. For some parents they think it is daunting, but you know what, it’s like things you are doing are the

foundations. Again the narrative skill can be a parent just going through the supermarket with their baby who isn't speaking and just talking about things on the shelves. It is really...not as complicated as people think it is. (Joe, Librarian)

A theme that was constructed in many of the interviews was that librarian's roles are meant to *reinforce and support the work that should be happening at home*. Ava, a library assistant also spoke in her interview that, "...taking your kids to the library is not enough. You have to do it at home. When you come, you have the world open to you, and all the resources, including people as well as books, but definitely encouraging literacy at home...early literacy begins at home!" Librarians had already formed opinions and expectations of practices that should be acted on in the home. For example:

...you don't even have to necessarily explain why... but this is just what you should be doing at home—you should be singing, talking, reading, writing, and playing. That's how you should be spending your time. So, it is great, and I think that some parents have really appreciated it. (Ella, Children's Department Manager)

Cal, a senior librarian, concurs that:

It is something that is going to happen if the child is engaged with, and not plunked in front of the TV and ignored. You are going to talk to your child, and you are going to scribble on a piece of paper, and make them interested in letters, and you just have to encourage them and trust and empower yourself to do it.

Much of the interviews with librarians focused on the kinds of instructions they provide for families through storytime programming, and the kinds of literacy skills and habits

they encourage to be done at home. As the next section exemplifies, the overall goal is to transmit school practices to the home.

### **Transitioning School Practices into the Home**

Interviews with librarians showed that the programs work to align themselves with school discourses about “appropriate” literacy habits. Theoretically, using Bourdieu’s (1973) concept of cultural capital, we can see how educators (in this case librarians) work to assist families to gain a degree of “cultural capital” by transmitting school practices into the home. Bourdieu (1977) made the argument that class inequalities are facilitated through schools. Teachers,

...pedagogic actions promote the cultural capital of the dominant class by rewarding students who possess such capital and by penalizing others who do not...In other words, schools become a central agent of social exclusion and reproduction, as knowledge and possession of a particular culture is argued by Bourdieu to be unequally distributed according to social class, and to be institutionalized as legitimate and to confer distinction and privilege to those who possess and employ it...such cultural capital actively reproduces social inequalities. (Tzanakis, 2011, pp. 76-77)

To take this a step further, using Smith’s (2005) concept of IE, we can also understand how the ruling relations are mediated through dominate ideologies that reflect the interests of those in power. Thus, the standards in most educational institutions are that of

the dominant culture—usually implying a middle class heteronormative background, to which all other forms of expression and “culture” tend to be judged in comparison (Yosso, 2005). According to Griffith and Smith (2005), “schools have traditionally been organized to create, for at least a segment of the population, a generalized level of skills and cultural background orientated to the merging relations of ruling” (p. 19). Some specific forms of knowledge’s, skills, and abilities are not necessarily better than others, but are *valued* [emphasis added] more by privileged groups in society (Yosso, 2005). Essentially, this means that students and parents from cultures that deviate from the dominate one, while not sharing assumptions and rules of this culture, are still held accountable to the expectations of the dominant group (Greenwood, 1998).

The interviews conducted with librarians reveal that they are working towards the goal of trying to educate “those” families on appropriate school literacy by transitioning what schools value into the home. Ava, a library assistant, spoke in reference to her program that, “it is definitely more for schooling, but it is all generally a preparation for language and interaction and being in the world, and learning for school is a big component of our programs”. Karen, a librarian clerk also revealed that they started a “kinderfun” program, “because we were thinking that kids are going to go to school, so if four year olds go to school in the morning, we thought they could come in the afternoon and they could still go to programs, and learn outside of school”. For librarians, the assumed benefits to attending these storytime sessions was the reinforcement of “good” behaviour in children—such as discipline, manners, and an understanding of culturally appropriate behaviour:

This is the kind of stuff they are going to encounter in school, so the kids, when they come here, they sit down and they know...like kindergarten kids...their days are broken up into segments—time when you go to washroom, time for snack, time for whatever. So, when they come here, you are still doing your segments—you are doing a story, a song, a rhyme, or however you want to do it. They learn how to behave for school. You are teaching them being with other people, talking to other people, asking for what you want and what you need, um...interacting with other children and certain kinds of things... A routine-ness is what you are teaching them. Then, when those kids go to school now, they are better equipped. So if the parent had two children at home, and one was just plunked into Grade One, and with no skill-test or anything, and the second child now has been through this program, and they found that that made a big difference. (Lacy, Librarian Technician)

Extending on this even further, library assistant Ava adds:

For some of them, it may be their first time that they are in a group setting, and they are sitting listening to an adult who is giving something to the group, and they are supposed to learn to share, and take-turns, and pay attention and sit. It is that kind of school-like setting, and for some of them it may be the first time they are in that setting.

As shown through these quotations, the ruling relations surrounding “proper” literacy techniques have manifested themselves in discourses that coordinate librarian talk and parenting practices. There is a distinct relation between the library as an institution, and

textually mediated discourses on early literacy habits. As Smith (2006) argues, the aim of the institutional ethnographer “is to explore particular corners or strands within a specific institutional complex, in ways that make visible their points of connection with other sites and courses of action” (p. 17). She argues that:

Texts...those that are circulated within the ruling relations, are not directly consumed by people in their everyday lives. Nonetheless, these powerful texts penetrate the local through the work practices of parent educators, child development experts, educational leaders, economic and political leaders whose interests align with the overarching institutional goal of producing ‘school ready’ children. (Smith, 2005, p. 41)

Texts such as *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011), and the overall structuring framework of Smallville library represent and reinforce dominant themes of child development, and as I will unpack in the next chapter, mothering discourses. Returning once more to Bourdieu (1977; 1986), we can begin to understand also how a dominant *habitus* is a set of actual activities that are coordinated textually and institutionally with the dominant class organization (Sullivan, 2002, p. 149).

### **What Kinds Of Literacy Practices Get Valued: Education and the Middle Class**

Children who have more traditionally “involved” parents who tend to reinforce school literacy practices at home are more likely to succeed in school. A striking theme emerging from the interviews with librarians was the specific *kind* of involvement that

was deemed necessary. By exploring “the local sites of people’s experience”, IE as a research methodology allows us to conceptualize the inequality that occurs in schools in terms of the kind of knowledge valued over others (Smith, 2006), or in this case, the kind of pre-school learning that is valued and taught. For instance, Iris, a librarian at Smallville, elaborated in her interview on the nature and kinds of activities parents could engage in at home:

I think, for parents just to connect everything together. They are blown away when you tell them that singing and playing and hands on activities with your child, like take Play-Dough and make the letter “P”. And guess what? At home you could make a P out of macaroni while you make dinner. You can make a P out of spaghetti, or your shoelace. You can make it out of a piece of hair that falls off your head. Just be aware that all around you are opportunities to teach your child, and eventually. It is going to click and they are going to be reading.

Iris’s description of possible at home literacy habits, such as using Macaroni while making dinner to draw letters, includes a taken-for-granted assumption about resources available to families. In other words, expectations tend to align themselves with middle class values (even something such as availability of time to “teach” during dinner is a luxury not all parents can afford). In one instance during a library visit, there were Family Literacy Calendars (2013) being handed out to participants. The calendar suggested various activities for each month of the year to help children get ready for school. A quick glance at the calendar reveals some recommendations that include taking walks during the days, or having an abundant source of materials (i.e. paint, markers, crayons,

chalk, etc.) available at all times for children to engage in. Examples such as these again exemplify some of the large taken for granted assumptions that are being made about the economic and social resources of the families involved. Many of the suggestions offered by librarians and resources such as at The Family Literacy Calendar make assumptions about family life: that these are two parent, heterosexual families; that one parent will be home during the day to engage in such activities; and that families have the time, resources, and even the desires to take part in this kind of work. The interesting point here is that these emerging ruling relations about at home literacy practices require “standardization and interchangeability of knowledge and skills...” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 19). Thus, regardless of the kinds of families children come from, the expectations stay constant.

These kinds of expectations are not just found in school or in literacy-based programs, but in research on early literacy development. Scholars such as Nutbrown et al. (2005) have for instance recommended steps for parents to take in their children’s early literacy development. According to Nutbrown et al. (2005), there are four key roles parents should take:

1. Opportunities (i.e. encouraging socio-dramatic play; having storybooks available at all time; making visits, trips and holidays to provide further opportunity to talk, read, write)
2. Recognition (i.e. parents should praise children when reading; put drawings on display; tell others what their children have achieved)



3. Interaction (i.e. sharing of real life literacy tasks where children can make a meaningfully contribution—shopping lists, signing their name on cards)
4. Models—(parents should act as models and users of literacy; parents should be reading newspapers, crosswords, writing shopping lists, following cooking recipes, writing cheques to model this behaviour for their children)

Examples such as these exemplify the extent to which such discourses are ingrained within contemporary research. If these are set as the standard to which families must aim to achieve, what do we make of families who deviate from this? If public school systems provide, as Griffith and Smith (2005) argue, a “standardized education program”, then who is responsible for providing families resources to succeed? As hinted throughout this chapter, and as Griffith and Smith (2005) make clear, this is made possible through the “engine of inequality through the addition of middle-class women’s supplementary educational work to the educational work of the school” (p. 24). Thus, it is not merely about the kind of capital that is being transmitted at home or in libraries that allows students to succeed, but the kind of unpaid labour of mothers that allows schools to continue, and students to succeed.

### **“At-Risk” Families**

It would be unreasonable to think that all families engage in such prescriptive literacy habits at home. However, the general impression left after speaking with librarians was that there was a common idea that families who do not engage in such literacy practices

at home are “at-risk”, and in danger of not providing their children with the proper preparation for schooling. Often times, “at-risk” would be used in conjunction with the words “immigrants”, or “newcomers”. The librarians interviewed continued to make reference to “at-risk” communities in danger of not preparing their children for schooling.

The following is an example of this through librarian technician, Lacy:

You also have a large population of children who don’t leave the home until they start grade one. So that meant that you had a kid coming into school that was speaking any one of the myriad languages, so when they came into that classroom they didn’t know how to talk to the teacher, how to say things like “I need to go the bathroom”. That interaction wasn’t there. So they identified six communities and said that these are the communities where people are “at-risk” more. What are we going to do for them?

The emphasis is placed on families in need of learning mainstream culture, rather than seeing the diverse backgrounds and cultures as assets to the community, that librarians (and schools) can benefit from:

....in general I find people are very receptive and want to be part of our culture, and our traditions and beliefs, and songs and things. However, I always tell my colleagues, put the words of songs up on those sheets. Even if it is songs you think everybody here should know, “Mary had a Little Lamb”, whatever it is, “Twinkle Twinkle”, they might not know the words. Just because we grew up with them, and we have known them forever, don’t assume that people in diverse environments do... some of them don’t even know who Santa Claus is. I don’t

change that because I want them to know that here in Canada, this is our tradition, and this is what we celebrate. (Iris, Librarian)

Ella raises a similar point:

I find that a lot of our moms, for sure, English is their second language. I find some of them so keen, and so enthusiastic, they want to learn those rhymes, and know the songs. I think a lot of them go the Early Years centre too, which are very popular, so they get familiar and know some rhymes and songs. I am always very happy to hear a lot of them do know the rhymes and the basic ones. They may not speak English very well, but they know those songs. We have lots of newcomers, so they don't know...they may not be familiar with our sort of North American tradition, or lets say, Western tradition, of nursery rhymes and stories. For them to hear the stories here, and to have the opportunity to have the experience together, to have fun together, enjoying literacy together, and then they could follow up at home.

As some of my data indicates, Smallville library seems to differentiate between those families that they assume are "cultured", and those who are not. In a sense, one could argue that family literacy programs, such as the one in this study, are aimed to transmit a degree of cultural capital, or "valued" knowledge to participants in the program, with hopes they will be better prepared for school. The problem lies not within their hopes to prepare families for schools, but rather, in the assumptions made about the necessary steps or actions for this to happen. Returning once more to Smith's concept of ruling relations, she makes the argument that relations of ruling involves construction of the

world as texts.... “creating forms of consciousness that are properties of organization or discourse rather than of individual subjects” (1987, p. 3). How do we define what constitutes as “at-risk”? What is considered deviant? Who is in need of “helping”? The question therein becomes how do participants of these programs negotiate through such discourses? To this I turn the chapter over to the mothers, to hear their voices and opinions on library storytime programming.

### **Why do Mothers Attend Storytimes: The Assumed Benefits**

As I have made apparent through this chapter, IE as a methodology is relevant to this study because it begins in peoples’ experience in an institutional setting. IE explores with people their experience of “what is happening to them and their doings and how these are hooked up with what is beyond their experience” (Smith, 2005, p. 41). It takes for its entry point the experiences of *specific* individuals “whose everyday activities are in some way hooked into, shaped by, and constituent of the institutional relations under explorations” (Smith, 2006, p. 18). In this study I take up the experiences of mothers and of mothering work in relation to their children’s literacy. As I will demonstrate in this section, the work of mothers is indeed shaped by dominant discourses of “good” parenting habits. Through interviews with the six mothers who attended weekly storytimes, I was able to tease out some of their reasoning and rationale for not only coming to libraries, but for taking the time to commit and register their children in these weekly programs. For some, it was a combination of learning, “they are reading and

being introduced to the world of books, and being lost in a book”, Lena, a registered nurse on maternity leave tells me. Elyse, a mother with three registered children in the program argues that it is more for the educational element: “The songs are educating, and at the same time it is fun and the books are related to the subject. Each week they will learn something. I like it because it is short, they learn something, then we go home and focus on it and we learn something”. For some other mothers, such as a Chloe, a recent new immigrant from Taiwan, they want to know what others are doing at this stage, “we read and do stuff at home, but I also want to know what others are doing, what books the teachers give the kids. So I registered her for the program to see what they are doing in the library”. Interestingly, every mother I spoke with said that one of the biggest reasons for attending was so that their children have an opportunity to socialize with other children (and as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, an opportunity for mothers to socialize with other mothers). Amy, a laid off software developer elaborates:

It is a social interaction. That is something that I cannot give at home, her playing with other kids. Because she is reaching an age where she wants to interact with other kids. Secondly, I would say, language development, her learning skills basically, her ability to learn rhymes and things like that to help in the language development right? Those are the most important things, but I think the social interaction part is huge for me.

Amy, much like the other mothers, is driven to participate in such programs to help her daughter get ready for school—both in the socialization and educational experience. This was a common response from many of the mothers for many of them were driven by

what “experts” (i.e. librarians, pediatrician) suggested were appropriate steps for early literacy work (to be explored in the next chapter). This again becomes relevant to the methodology I take up, for IE recognizes texts not as discrete topics, but rather as they enter into and coordinate peoples’ doings. “Indeed as activated in the text-reader conversation, they are peoples doing” (Smith, 2005, p. 170). Thus, through conversations with mothers, we can begin to see how discourses structure the work of particularly mother’s engagement in early literacy strategies. It may be that mothers attend these storytime programs, and engage in supplementary work not because they have more “capital” than others, but because they can *afford* to do so, and are in a sense, actively participating in dominant discourses.

### **A Routineness and Preparation for Schooling**

As we saw in the previous section on librarian frameworks, the storytime programs prepare families and their children for what they will encounter in schools, and what schools in turn will expect from them. As it turns out, for the mothers interviewed in this study, this preparation for schooling, or “routineness” as some mothers pointed out, factors into their decisions for attending. This belief in acquiring a certain level of school-routineness/readiness stems out of the dominant discourses dictating to parents what they should and should not be doing, and what is beneficial for their children. Angie, a mother of a two-year-old daughter, said of the storytimes:

I find the classes themselves are quite nice, because they are quite routine as well. I find it is nice the classes are that way in terms of they have the tickle rhymes, or I guess the stories, or sing songs, they get introduced...like it is very similar each week so she knows what to expect. I think when she goes to the classes, I take away the tickle rhymes she learns.

Tara, another mom in the program who participated in the interview with Angie, elaborated on this by saying:

You can see a vast difference from when they started the program and when they ended it. She knows certain actions to songs, and there are certain rhymes that when you start them, she knows what to expect and she gets ready for the tickle rhymes.

This routineness also translates (in what we will shortly see) to activities done in the home. Amy commented:

After two or three programs, I know the songs that they repeat every time, and the songs that are new every time. The ones that they repeat I can do them at home. Then when she comes back next time she has heard the song many times. This program is new for her, so I can see the first few classes she is observing more, then participating and getting an idea.

Much like the librarians stance that early literacy begins in the home, all mothers in this study concurred that this kind of work needs to start at home for children to succeed in school—"oh you have too! I think you have to start at an early age at home so it becomes

a habit” (Elyse). Other mothers, such as Angie, made the bold statement that they do not believe that schools should be the primary source of education for children:

I think it is absolutely necessary for parents to do this stuff at home. I am not a big supporter of the public school system. I think there are a lot of flaws in it. I don't think you should rely on the public school system to educate your child.

As we can see from the discussion, there are strong discourses in place structuring these mothers' desires to prepare their children for schooling. Such “texts” institute, regulate and establish agency, while controlling and mobilizing the work of others. According to Smith (2005), “textually sanctioned agency produces a power that is generated by the concerting and mobilization of peoples work” (Smith, 2005, p. 183). In the case, it is the mobilization of women's work as mothers that allow their children to have access to pre-school learning.

The kind of work that goes at home will be explored shortly, for now however, it is important to understand that the mothers involved in this study believed in the partnership between school and home, as well as being concerned about their children's future success in schools. Lena believes that the partnership between schools and home is essential:

If you want your children to do well, and love it, the schools need to introduce it and give them the building blocks, but it is up to us to build that mountain so that they keep it going high and continue to practice. It is up to us to practice and reinforce the skills that are going on in school.



The question of just who “us” is will be explored and taken up in the next chapter. For other mothers, such as Chloe, her hope is rooted in a belief that a routine-ness will translate into acquired school expectancies. What is interesting in the case of Chloe, is the connection she makes with this and her traditional and cultural upbringing:

...when she gets older and goes to school, she knows how exactly school looks like, just teacher and kids, and we have to sit there and listen to teacher. How to listen, and sit and not stand up and cry...I think it builds confidence. Like if she learned how to write before school and when teachers teaching it, she already know how to do it. It is kind of a cultural thing in our country. We always learn ahead...the first step is preschool right? So we already do the preschool stuff when she was really small. Like my mother did to me, like I was two and I started writing right away. She was worried I won't pick it up in school, or lose in a race or something. So we worry.

As the interviews with mothers suggests, there is a strong connection between school discourses and those of storytime programs. Again, because this inquiry looks at women's standpoint, and IE begins in the local actualities of people's lives, it helps us to make women's actions observable, “insofar as they are produced in language as talk and/or text. Discourse itself is among peoples doing; it is of the actualities of peoples lives; it organizes relations among people...” (Smith, 2005, p. 25). For mothers in this study, there seemed to be a sense of burden placed on them to reinforce school practices in the home. As we will see in the next chapter, this is an all too common experience of mothers in relation to their children's schooling.

### What Goes on at Home?

After examining this library's guiding framework surrounding "proper" literacy habits, it became evident that there was an expectation that there were specific literacy habits that needed to be translated into the home. As mentioned, IE works from peoples' experiences in and out of institutional forms of coordinating peoples doing... "to discover how the ruling relations both rely on, and determine their everyday activities" (Smith, 2005, p. 44). The kinds of literacy habits as expected by librarians were found to be rooted in a particular form of mothering more present in middle class families—making assumptions about the assumed resources available to parents. These mothers follow such prescribed work. All of the mothers, in one-way or another, engaged in numerous "literacy building" activities outside of the library. For instance, many of the mothers who participated also mentioned their involvement in Early Years Centres, in enrolling their children in French lessons, engaging in arts and crafts, music lessons, phonic building, and the list goes on. Chloe for instance says, "I sometimes watch YouTube and see what other songs kids are doing. I print them out and put them on our bed so we do them after storytime at home". She continues to say that:

everyday we do crafts. We are so busy. We draw something, we sing. We keep busy. After lunch I add homework in, like addition and subtraction, I just make her do math problems and learn how to draw and do this kind of stuff.

For Amy, the kind of outside work she involved in includes, "all sorts of playing like physical stuff...she has an easel so she paints. I bought her finger painting and all sorts of

activities”. It is this supplementary educational work that occurs at home delivered by women in particular that Griffith and Smith (2005) argue:

...enables the school as a whole to function at a higher level than it can where those contributions are curtailed or absent...It is this work of mothering that is rarely acknowledge, fundamental to the production of a middle-class education in a middle-class school...this is the work that constructs and reconstructs a middle class experience of schooling. (pp. 24, 27)

The work that some of these mothers engage in seems to echo Lareau’s (2011) notion of concerted cultivation. Lareau argues, “middle-class parents who comply with current professional standards and engage in a pattern of concerted cultivation deliberately try to stimulate their children’s development and foster their cognitive and social skills” (p. 5). The work that these mothers engage in does not end with the storytime sessions, but as I demonstrate, extends to different avenues. This “concerted cultivation” as Lareau (2011) argues, also shapes the use of language, which is an important aspect to middle-class parenting, which lies in efforts to foster specific skills for their children. As Lareau puts it, “parent-child dialogues can boost children’s vocabulary, preview or deepen knowledge” (p. 110). An example of this comes from mother Elyse:

We took her to NYC national museum when she was three. When she was little I said okay it is time to go to the zoo. She didn’t understand what this huge gray animal was. I said, “this is an elephant”, “look, it has a big trunk”, and she was like okay mom. So when she was like three, I was like now this is her time. We

need to go the zoo again. And then we keep on doing this and that and my husband was like we are just doing too much. My parents just laugh at us...they say why do you keep teaching that much to your kids? Another time we were in Turkey, and when I see a moon I will tell them look at the crescent moon, if it is the full moon, I will tell them look at the full moon, and look at the bird or the tree, and then my friend, I think she noticed, she goes and tells her son, look at the clouds, and he just goes, “okay”? That was it. She was like, so your kids look, and what do they see? And I am like yeah, they see what I see. It is beautiful right, nature. They take it in. My friend was like oh “tsk tsk, it didn’t happen with my kid”.

Overall, this section has hinted towards some of the gendered nature of involvement in early literacy practices, which tend to be taken up mostly by mothers. As we will see next chapter, there seems to be a theme of femininity as discourse—involving “the talk women do in relation to such texts, the work of producing oneself to realize the textual images...” (Smith, 1990, p. 163). It is the connection of women to these textually mediated discourses that really calls for an examination of early literacy work.

### **Whose Culture is Valued?**

When talking with librarians at this program, there seemed to be a trend towards “helping” or “teaching” new immigrants, or “at-risk” families as they say, the kinds of literacy habits valued by mainstream, dominate culture. Interestingly enough, it would

seem as though mother participants at this particular library also seemed to want to fit themselves in this narrow definition of literacy, and be part of the status quo. I found this to be truer for more recent immigrants such as Chloe, who says that she likes “to learn English rhymes and how they do crafts here because they are so different from Taiwan”. During my interview with her I acquired a strong sense of passion and determination to help her daughter “succeed” in this society, by making sure she is equipped with all the “relevant” skills schools value. Most mothers felt proud about taking away something they had little familiarity with:

Elyse: quite a lot of them [songs, books] are new, so I am learning too so it is great.

Amy: A lot of times when they do the songs, they are new for me because I am not brought up here, so some of them are new to me, so I go back and I just look for them or record them or download them and get them from iTunes and I can play with her the same song at home.

Angie: ...and the songs too that now they are singing, I find we are learning them too. We do them as well at home.

All the mothers that I interviewed seemed to take pride in their knowledge of mainstream rhymes, stories, or activities. Very few made reference to their own cultural/ethnic literacy habits as factors to develop healthy and successful children. Through Smith’s notion of ruling relations—social forms in which consciousness and agency become objectified and independent of particular people—we can understand how these mothers may too place emphasis and value on a particular kind of culture. It is no coincidence that

mother participants in these storytimes hold on to similar values as the librarians who run these sessions. For as Griffith and Smith (2005) remind us, “the translocal character of the ruling relations relied, and continues to rely on, formalized credentials guaranteeing competencies of a specific kind—competencies that can be seen as generated independently of any particularized relationships” (p. 18).

### **Conclusion**

The overall goals of this chapter were to illuminate and highlight main findings of interviews with librarian programmers, and mother attendees on their experience with storytime programming. I used the example of Smallville’s library storytime programs, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, followed Smith’s work on IE and ruling relations to make sense of the ways in which librarians and mothers experience early literacy work. Cultural capital as a conceptual framework was employed in this work to understand how storytime programs at Smallville operate under the basis that “parents” are required to learn and transmit a specific kind of cultural capital for their children’s educational success. Recognizing some of the limitations to cultural capital, I incorporated Smith’s framework of IE and ruling relations, which is crucial to this work, as its “commitment is to remain in the world of everyday experience and knowledge to explore ethnographically the problematic that is implicit in it, extending the capacities of ethnography beyond the descriptions” (Smith, 2005, p. 43).

I began this data chapter with a description of some of the observations I made of the storytime sessions, noting in particular the interactions and dynamics between librarians and participants. One of the most interesting observations was their structural framework, *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011), to which I then dissected using some of the interviews with librarians on how this text, with its associated literacy philosophy, structures their work. It was also through librarian interviews that I was able to tease out some of their expectations regarding “proper” literacy habits, and what they assumed “good” parenting consisted of. This also called for an examination of how these practices have transformed school literacy habits into the home. What’s more, this chapter has highlighted some of the take-for-granted assumptions made by library programs and staff regarding the resources available to parents of programs. As a result of not being able to conform to such middle-class standards, families become considered “at-risk”, or in need of greater “cultural capital”.

This chapter also probed the involvement of mother attendees in storytime programs at the library, looking in particular at some of their reasoning for attending programs, and the assumed benefits for their children and themselves. Among the reasons was a sense of preparation for schooling that mother attendees felt would help their children advance later on. The interviews also shed light into the kinds of work that these mothers participate in outside of schooling (such as storytime programs, arts and crafts etc.). Lastly, the interviews with mother participants also made visible the particular kind of culture that is valued, as mother attendees were encouraged and praised for learning the dominant culture’s set of stories, rhymes and so forth, instead of integrating their own

cultural literacy skills. Overall this chapter alluded to a major finding to now be explored in Chapter Five: That there is a largely gendered subtext to this work that is intertwined with dominant discourses of mothering and early literacy.



## CHAPTER V:

### MOTHERING WORK IN EARLY LITERACY: THE GENDERED NATURE OF FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS AND PARENTING PRACTICES

“Saturday morning is great for dads. I have a feeling that a lot of moms will say ‘ugh, just get the kids out of my hair for Saturday, I need a little bit of break from the week’...” (Ella, Children’s Department Manager)

“I found it was more for the parents...for me, it was more for the mother support, and the kids just happen to be there singing and dancing...” (Angie, Mother)

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how library approaches to early literacy, and mother’s participation in story programming, demonstrate the gendered nature of *parental* involvement. It considers how both approaches to, and involvements in early literacy programs are in line with Griffith and Smiths (2005) description of a “mothering discourse”. I argue that storytime programming makes assumptions that are embedded in the discourse of mothering, which positions mothers as the responsible agents for their children’s educational success. I take up Smiths work on IE and ruling relations again to explore some of the connections of gender to textually mediated discourses.

In this chapter, a quick review of the mothering discourse is provided—what kinds of implicit expectations and assumptions are made about the race/class/marital status of women in relation to their children’s schooling. In other words, who is included in this discourse, and who is not? This chapter makes explicit how this notion of a mothering discourse identifies mothers, and mothers alone, as responsible for their children’s

educational success. Similarly, I will explore some of the embedded assumptions made about the resources available to accomplish such tasks.

Extending this even further, this section unpacks the work of mothers, by looking at *who* attends storytime programs, and who librarians and librarian frameworks (i.e. *Every Child Ready to Read*) assume take on the major responsibility for children's literacy development. It begins with my own observations again in regards to the interaction of gender and family literacy programs, noting in particular the exchanges of mother, fathers, and librarians in these programs. I return once again turn to *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) and other resources provided by the library to explore how the work of mothers becomes unaccredited, or invisible under the guise of "parents". Through interviews with librarians, I will also attempt to demonstrate how librarians assume the work of mothers is "natural" or "inevitable". This becomes evident through the ways in which librarians use terms such as "mothers" and "parents" interchangeably, but still acknowledge that early literacy work is largely a mothering phenomenon.

Through interviews with mother attendees, I attempt to explore how mothers negotiate and understand their roles and responsibilities when it comes to early literacy work—how does the mothering discourse frame/structure participant's own understanding of the roles and responsibilities as parents? I investigate the relationship between mothers and librarians, and mothers own understanding of librarians as so-called "experts" in the field of early literacy; once again, becoming relevant to the discourse of mothering and institutional relations, as it is these "experts" who drive this framework, and who present women as the primary manager of children's educational activities. In

addition, I consider how mothering work exists in a social bubble, as mothers learn from one another about what is to be classified as appropriate “mothering”.

In sum, I will make the argument that storytime programs found in this library promote discourses of mothering that assumes the participants (mothers) have resources available to them to provide learning experiences at home, and that this work is largely done by mothers. Extending this even further, I consider how storytimes (and library, early literacy ideologies etc.) endorse mothers as responsible for their children’s educational success through the constant language of “parents” as partners in their children’s education. I also take up the opinions of the mothers in these programs to interrogate their views on the work they do in relation to their children’s literacy skills.

### **Recap of Mothering Work and The Mothering Discourse**

As I previously covered in the literature review chapter, parental involvement is a highly gendered phenomenon. In fact, it was Griffith and Smith (2005) who initially noted this gendered involvement of parents and coined the term the “mothering discourse”. This was created as way to “mobilize the work, care, and worries of mothers in relation to their children’s schooling (p. 33). They defined discourse as “systematically developed knowledge, morality, and set of values that are expressed in definite ways of writing and speaking” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 33). They made the argument that this discourse largely structures the work that mothers do. This discourse of mothering refers to the work that a mother is *expected* to contribute to her child’s education without regard

to the mother's *actual* [emphasis added] circumstances (Carson, 2009). Discourses surrounding motherhood shape the way mothering is experienced, along with the expectations that come along with it. In a sense, the discourse of mothering dichotomizes motherhood into separate and distinct categories; "good" or "bad" mothering. According to Chase and Rogers (2001), the "good" mother is characterized as "above all selfless. Her children come before herself and any other need or person or commitment no matter what...she loves her children...she follows the advice of doctors and other experts and she educates herself about child development" (p. 31). They argue that in contrast, American culture has targeted three types of "bad" mothers: "those not in nuclear families; those who can't (or who are perceived as refusing to protect their children); and those whose children seem to go wrong" (p. 31). While the "good" mother ideal is depicted in terms of what she does (i.e. puts children first; follows advice of experts etc.), it embodies certain unspoken assumptions about who she is. "It is rarely said out loud that the good mother is white, able-bodied, middle, upper-middle or upper class, married heterosexual" (p. 31). This notion of a mothering discourse then identifies mothers, and mothers alone, as solely responsible for their children's success.

### **Observations**

After viewing all the different storytime programs at Smallville library over the course of a few months, one of the first trends that I witnessed (and which will be explored further later on) was the use of "mothers" and "parents" interchangeably. Often

throughout the storytime programs, I would witness librarians saying phrases such as “*parents*, you should do... *mothers* this will be great for you”. There was a constant back and forth exchange between mothers and parents. As the interviews would later reveal, librarians were not oblivious to the mothering work that occurs, but have instead come to see this work as part of a women’s “natural” duties.

Another noticeable observation upon entering the story rooms was the abundance of women that were in attendance—mothers, grandmothers, sisters and so forth. I found this to be true regardless of the time of day—morning or evening—and whether it was a weekday or weekend. Granted Saturday or Sundays tended to draw in a greater number of males, but interestingly, it was usually always in the company of their partners; rarely did they attend alone with their child. In fact, it was much more likely to see a grandfather with children than it was to see a father on their own. Overall, there were only a handful amount of fathers I saw in the duration of my time spent at the library.

The interaction between the genders was fascinating. Mothers were much more likely to actively sit on the floor with their children, and encourage them to answer questions and participate—“go stand up”; “listen to the story”; “yes, that it is a black bat”. Some of them would sit with their children on their laps, while others would encourage them from far away, pushing their children to be more involved. Children would often look back to their mothers for reinforcement, to hear things such as “good job”, or “you did it right”. Mother participants were quick to “correct” any “bad” behaviour in their children such as lying down instead of sitting properly, or shouting out loud. If the behaviour persisted, they had no problem taking the child out of the room

(which was true as well if their child began to cry or run around). They were also quick to interact with each other's children, correcting their behaviour as well, by saying things such a "be gentle please" or "please don't hit".

In certain storytime groups, such as "Shake, Rattle, Read", a program dedicated to babies as young as four months and up, mothers were much more likely to talk to one another about developmental issues with their children. For instance, mothers who had not met before would develop fast relationships with other mothers of similar aged babies, and begin to ask questions such as, "is your baby eating solid foods yet"; "has she taken steps yet"; "oh she is starting to wave now, that is her new thing". Mothers seemed invested in talking to other mothers and sharing experiences with one another. This, as I will explore shortly, takes us back to Griffith and Smith's (2005) notion of a mothering discourse, allowing us to see first hand, how mothering is a social process as mothers learn from other mothers how to "mother".

Fathers in comparison tended to be few in numbers. During weekdays, generally there were no fathers in attendance, however there was the odd father who would join in week to week (albeit, inconsistently). On Saturday mornings, it was much more common to see anywhere from one to five fathers, most often with their partners. Again, there would be the rare father or two who would come to these programs alone (although they would not usually stay the entire duration). If fathers attended the programs with their partners, they would usually sit down on the mat with their children and be more actively engaged. However, if fathers came in on their own with their child, they were more likely to be less engaged. Fathers coming into the programs alone were more likely to drop their

children off on the carpet, and either stand in the far back away from the crowds of parents sitting down, or seat themselves on a chair somewhere in the room. Even if they noticed their child struggling with an activity (as I noticed one child did who came in with her father) fathers were still likely to stand in the back of the room and watch rather than participate or guide their children. The observations proved to be a necessary component to understanding the gendered involvement of storytimes, as I was able to witness what happens on the one hand, and on the other, compare my observations with the discussions from both librarians and mothers.

### **Who Comes to Storytime Programs?**

There was a huge discrepancy between the number of females and males who attend the programs. When interviewing librarians, I was curious to know whether or not they are aware of this disparity. As it turns out, all the librarians at Smallville library were in agreement that it is predominately mothers who attend storytime programs:

Ella: Mostly I would say here, it is moms, and or grandparents, with little ones that come in for the registered programs.

Cal: It is most often moms, but there are always a few dads who come as well.

Iris: Here, it is predominately the mothers who come. Sometimes the grandparents, or caregiver. No, not very many fathers...maybe the odd father, or odd grandfather. There is one dad I know who comes, yeah.

As Iris and Ella began to point out, grandparents outnumbered the amount of fathers who attended. According to Joe, librarian:

I would say that the biggest group bringing their kinds in would be moms, and then after that, it might even be grandparents or kids with other siblings in the department rather than dads on their own. Sometimes couples will come in too...there have been a few dads who do come. It is definitely less than fifty percent but there are some who do. Yeah, I think grandparents more than dads for sure.

Ava, a library assistant agrees as well, making the statement that in the evenings “you get the kids who are in school during the day...so more members of the family including dads and grandparents, more of a mix. Mornings tend to be more moms and young pre-school kids, or grandmas and caregivers.” Not only do mothers tend to dominate these programs, but there does not seem to be anything anomalous about the fact that there are relatively few fathers who participate in such early literacy activities. Upon inquiring why that may be, Ava, believed that it may have to do simply with “conventional” views of parenthood:

It probably has to do with maternity leave I think, and just like traditional thinking.... like it is more traditional for the mothers to be with the young ones especially with the earlier ones. Certainly paternity leave is something that is happening now, but it hasn't caught on very much.



Storytime programs held at Smallville library are held either during the morning or in the evenings. Registered programs are held weekday mornings, while drop-ins are held evenings and Saturday morning. A common idea amongst librarians was that evening program and Saturday mornings were ideal for “working” fathers:

We have drop-in and registered. We have evening sessions, and that is just to give people, like fathers, who work a chance to come. (Iris, Librarian)

Joe, a librarian, says of this:

So for the registered storytimes, they are weekday mornings, at ten. Usually that is often times a mom or a caregiver. Weekends, and evenings you definitely see lot more fathers.

Cal, a senior librarian. adds:

More moms, like stay-at-home-moms will attend the day ones for sure.

In conversation with Ella, the manager of the children’s department, she brings up the argument that it is important to give a chance for dads to come:

Okay...I think we did evenings because definitely to have something for the people who are working in the day, and the same with the weekend. To give dads an opportunity...not to say that...I mean...well...still usually, in the daytime is usually moms who come. I think it is important to give the chance to the dads.

Some librarians, such as Iris, reflected on the gendered nature of these programs by arguing that this dominance of women in the programs has to do with the demographics of this particular area:

And that would most likely switch if you were in a different part of the city. I think because this area is a lot of newcomers, they have come for the father's job. They have come here. So he is the ...I mean it is old school a lot of the cultures. The man is the worker, and the wife stays home with the children. And they have a lot of children too. (Iris, Librarian)

There may be connections then between locations, cultures, ideologies and demographics.

Using IE is a useful approach to understanding why there is a disparity between males and females in terms of participating in early literacy programs. The aim of IE as we already know, is to "explore the particular corners or strand within a specific institutional complex, in ways that make visible their points of connections with other sites and courses of action" (Smith, 2006, p. 17). Here we can begin to form connections again between mothering discourses, suggesting that this is seen as a "women's" responsibility, and institutions such as the library working to continually enforce such a message. It is still very much ingrained in discourses of motherhood that the fathers' primary concern is not to invest in their children's development, but to be responsible for monetary contributions to the family.

### **Does "Parenting work" Equal "Mothering"?**

The words "parents" and "mothers" were used interchangeably. Through interviews with the mothers I noticed a common sense evocation of mothering roles.

Even without asking librarians questions regarding gender or parenting work, there were swaps made between the concepts of “parents” and “mothers”. Terms such as “parental work” are not gender neutral, but rather, phrasing it as such actually makes invisible the work of mothers, and diminishes their contributions. The following quotations highlight this dynamic, providing a glimpse into some of their expectations of “parents”:

Ella: For the pamphlet, it is just making *parents* [emphasis added] aware that literacy is not just about reading.

Joe: I hope *parents* [emphasis added] do leave with a better idea of good stories, rhymes, and fun things to do with their children at home.

Cal: It is not a guilt trip. We just want *parents* [emphasis added] to do this kind of stuff with your children for their benefit.

These quotations point to some of the embedded expectations that librarians hold in regards to “parents”. Yet, they had already made it very clear that it is mothers who are largely in attendance. It becomes significant when librarians begin to talk about “parental” responsibilities and blend “parents” and “mothers” together. Below are some examples of this:

What I try to do is pick one so that *mothers* can do with the babies even if they aren’t listening to the stories they are getting some rhymes and songs out of the program. That is what I hope for *parents* [emphasis added]... (Karen, Library Clerk)

Librarian Iris also interchanges terms such as “moms” and “parents”:

...Or, if you are looking at a shopping list in the kitchen, and your child is watching you and you can say what you are doing out loud. Then they know that what *mom* is doing on that paper, it makes sense. It is not just a scribble on a paper.... Just making *parents* [emphasis added] aware I think.

Embedded in such statements are the expectations that mothers are the primary doers of “parenthood”. It was not just assumptions that mothers are in charge of children’s literacy skills, but it was this common idea (which will we see shortly again) that this is, and should be mothers sole priority; that “proper” mothers are those that are invested in their children’s wellbeing. There was a naïve, taken-for-granted conviction that the default for mothers is to be home with their children. This is illustrated in the quote below:

Some of these newcomers may not know the song. We always say, don’t put your own and culture aside, so number one if you are the *mummy* and you speak Tamil, and you married an English man, you say you want them to be bilingual. *So mummy knows Tamil, and mummy is at home with the child all day long*, and is going to interact with the child in Tamil. *When daddy comes home in the evening, daddy* [emphasis added] is going to do the English. (Lacy, Library Technician)

Statements such as these continue to perpetuate the stereotype and belief that women as mothers are “naturally” meant to stay at home during the day, and those who work deviate from this normative expectation.

## **Returning to Every Child Ready to Read & Family Literacy Calendar**

It is not just librarians who continue to participate in the mothering discourse, but as touched upon in the previous chapter, the guiding structural framework for Smallville library, *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011), continues to embed messages about mothering discourses, domestic pedagogy, and parental involvement in their pamphlets and messages. A quick glance at the pamphlet will show phrases dispersed such as “early literacy begins with *you*”; “help your child”; “Parents are important in helping children get ready to read” (ALSC/PLA, 2011). This guide focuses and places a large emphasis on the role of the *parents*—it is the work of “parents” that will guide children to a successful path in schools. The pamphlet talks about “parents”. What it does not talk about are fathers or mothers (although the pictures of mothers with children in the pamphlet continue to outnumber the amount of fathers shown). Thus, *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) lumps mothering and fathering under the umbrella term of “parenting”. As a result, gender distinctions as Griffith and Smith (2005) have pointed out, become blurred through the use of terms such as parental involvement. On this matter, Smythe and Isserlis (2002) have made the argument that such pamphlets:

....are presented as politically and gender neutral, assuming that families do or should have the time, resources and desires for school involvement and ignoring the fact that the burden of school involvement activities will fall on women, who are likely already juggling multiple roles and family work conflicts . (p. 3)

Eradicating the work of mothers however, means they are essentially ignoring the fact that women are the ones who are significantly more involved in family literacy programs

than their male counterparts, and that it is mothers who tend to have these burdens placed on them.

When the pamphlet mentions phrases such as “you are your child’s first teacher, and your home is where your child begins to learn” (ALSC/PLA, 2011), who are they really referring to? What kinds of assumptions are they making? The brochure offers suggestions on how to “help children get ready to read by providing early literacy opportunities around your home” (ALSC/PLA, 2011). Below are some highlights:

- Have books within easy reach. Make a special spot for books in your house.  
Come to the library often and find new books to make reading fun. Show your children how important reading is by reading yourself
- **Talk and listen to your child as you prepare meals, do household chores, get ready for bed—anytime is a good time for conversation [emphasis added]**
- Have a prop box with inexpensive items that children can use for imaginative play...

These suggestions bring back into full circle the ideals of the mothering discourse. For one, it assumes that these “parents” are middle class, for who else has the ability to tap in and out of resources such as the accessibility of books and materials; implying that whoever is spending the time with the child has the availability to take constant trips to the libraries along with the financial means to do so. It is this kind of discursive framing that led Griffith and Smith (2005) to argue that it “constructs and reconstructs a middle-class experience of schooling” (p. 27). Such statements also assume that the “parents” are

literate themselves, and again, must be this “ideal” archetype, modeling “good” behaviour.

It is no surprise that women continue to engage in more domestic chores (i.e. cooking, cleaning) than men. When statements such as the bolded one above—“prepare meals...do household chores...” are made, the message is clear: this is directed towards mothers. A similar theme can be found the Family Literacy Calendar (2013) I mentioned in the previous chapter. The calendar shows pictures of both mothers and fathers, yet the examples used are part of what is considered to be women’s work in the home. Some of their ideas or recommendations for parents include:

- ...asking your child to help you set the table
- ...fold laundry together and talk about the different sizes
- ...bake cookies with your child and talk about measurements and what goes in next...

The *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) framework and Family Literacy Calendar (2013) have in common an expectation of mothers—that there will be an extension of this pedagogy into their daily domestic work. These suggestions bring back into full circle the ideals of the mothering discourse. For one, it assumes that these “parents” are middle class, for who else has the ability to tap in and out of resources such as the accessibility of books and materials; implying that whoever is spending the time with the child has the availability to take constant trips to the libraries along with the financial means to do so. This continues to make mothering work invisible (Carson, 2009). Mothering then

becomes a type of pedagogy—an extension of literacy teaching into the domestic work of the home. The “good” mother contributes to her child’s education through the transformation of her everyday domestic work at home into a type of pedagogy. According to Smythe and Isserlis (2002), resources, such as the ones that came into view in my study “assume that a parent stays at home with a young child during the day, that none of these activities take any extra time, or require resources, and that there are no other children in the home in need of care” (p. 8). There is an assumption about, “who is meant to take the school training, monitor children at home, and improve their children’s achievements. However the gendered nature of home-school relationships suggests that these formidable and time-consuming responsibilities will be left to mothers” (Smythe & Isserlis, 2002, p. 12). Smith’s notion of textually mediated discourses and ruling relations are important points to consider here. Smith (1990) makes the argument that there are “active ways in which texts organize relations within textual discourses, both with respect to how local happenings are entered into its interpretive practices, and to how its social relations are organized” (p. 123). Examples such as *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) and *Family Literacy Calendars* (2013) further demonstrate how texts mediate discourses about who is meant to be doing the work, and the kinds of work considered to be “appropriate”. Such texts are part of discourses, which to use the language of Griffith and Smith (2005), essentially are “mediated by texts of various technologies” (p. 34). Such texts also are forms of significations linking language and consciousness to social relations and power in society (Smith, 1990), as these examples are linked to larger mothering discourses.



### **Where do Fathers Fit into Early Literacy Programs?**

As I was speaking with librarians and their experiences of storytimes, I was cognizant to how they talked about mothers in relation to the programing, but even more so when then would mention “fathers”. As I have previously established, librarians would commonly use “mothering” and “parents” synonymous together. It was unusual when anything surrounding “fathering” came up. In my exchange with Karen, I asked her about her experiences with fathers coming to storytime programs. She spoke about fathers in this context: “I think that just depends on the dynamics...like if the two parents are separated, and its dads weekend, then they will bring them, and if its not dads weekend then mom brings them so its that kind of dynamic”. It would seem that the participation of fathers was relevant insofar as there was some sort of disruption in the natural order of familial relationships (i.e. divorce/separation etc.) Thus, it was not assumed or implied that fathers take their children to libraries for a variety of other reasons. Instead, the point was that fathers would take children to library programs under certain conditions or circumstances.

Other librarians were also quick to notice a difference in the kinds of interactions between mothers and fathers and their children. One observation came from Ava, a library assistant, who said:

...maybe there is a little more tendency with the mothers to sit and actively be engaged on the floor with the little kids...there may be a little more tendency for the fathers to sit at the back, but I don't want to generalize. I guess generally speaking, yes the mothers seem to be more involved.

Ella and Lacy both described interactions of mothers and fathers that were in harmony with Ava's observation:

Ella: ...I think at first the dads may be a little bit reluctant, but...well...I have seen some dads stand back, they just can't really make that step of getting down on the floor and reading with their children. On the other hand, there are some amazing dads who are like kids themselves, and they are just giggling, and goofing off, and laughing.

Lacy: Yes, a lot of times it is a different dynamic. Um, because the father will just say, "this is this, this, this". We are done and we are gone... The mums beg and plead and you know... "well I just want to talk to Auntie for a few more minutes" or "okay we are going to go now, we have to go pick up sister or brother", we have to go do this, or do that. And...I guess it all comes down to, ah...um...I kinda wanna say parenting, but who is the boss? I mean, if your kid knows you're the boss, then sure they will push your buttons but they know in the end you are going to win, so they will capitulate. When they know that they can stretch it and push it, then they do that.

Lacy's experience with mothers and fathers lead her to conclude that fathers' made themselves much more visible and present, especially in terms of discipline and order. In contrast, she describes mothers in a much more passive voice, implying that they have less control over their children.

If the mothering discourse has outlined specific guidelines for mothering, where does that leave fathers? Just as mothers participate in a mothering discourse, encouraging them be heavily involved in their children's lives, one could argue that so too do fathers participate in such a discourse—a *fathering* discourse. Sara Ruddick (1997) has identified three functions that define the “idea(l)” of what fatherhood are, that relate to constructions of hegemonic masculinity: provision, protection and authority/discipline. Such discourses also construct men's roles—both the ways in which they see themselves as “father” and the ways in which others see them as well.

At one point in time the librarians began to notice that there were no fathers in attendance, and attempted to change this. As a result, they decided to pilot a “Just for Dads” storytime program, which was meant for fathers only and their children. It was supposed to draw in a greater number of men.

We actually used to have a program called, “Just for Dads”, but then some moms said wait what... can't we come? Then we said of course come on in, and then it sort of didn't work because it ended up being moms coming still. It would have been fun, and I know some libraries have been successful with that, just dads...maybe because it was a drop-in, if we had made it a registered program where the dad actually signs up, we should try that and see. (Ella, Children's Department Manager)

Cal, a senior librarian, adds to Ella's statement:

It turned out in the evaluation of it, that I don't know...but it was basically becoming a drop-in storytime. There was no sort of emphasis on fathers as such

coming. It was the same as normal. No point to label it as “daddy and me”, when mothers would show up.

Of particular significance here is that mothers do not require a special literacy program in the same way that fathers do. Why is there such strong resistance from fathers to participate in family literacy programs? According to Smythe (2006), it is fathers who are also oppressed by social norms that tend to exclude them from involvement in their children’s literacy. Could this explain the very few fathers in attendance? In a sense, mothers may indeed benefit from a sense of control, status, and community in “feminized” literacy settings, which may often times exclude males (Smythe, 2006).

### **Librarians Experience as “Experts”**

Many of the librarians at Smallville library described the relationship between themselves and participants of the storytime sessions in a top-down manner. Oftentimes throughout the interviews, librarians made reference to participants asking for guidance or help in terms of the direction to take their children’s literacy skills. Some examples of this include “parents” asking librarians about the kinds of books they should be reading, inquiring about *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011), or about external programs. Below are some highlights:

They ask for book recommendations more, or they would say... “do you think I should read this book”? Or “do you think I should put my child in French

immersion” or like those kinds of questions. They treat us like we know everything about their education. (Iris, Librarian)

In much of the same fashion, Ella, manager of the children’s department, adds:

...so they often wonder what is appropriate for one year olds, and what is appropriate for five year olds or whatever. So what we have done is put little stickers on the books to make it easier for parents. That is great, so parents can navigate through the collection that we have put out for them.

Karen, a librarian clerk, elaborates:

...A lot of times that’s what they will ask, “what do you mean by *Every Child Ready To Read*”, and “why is that program important”, and “how can I use it at home?” “What can I do at home to get my child to read better...what should I do if my child doesn’t want to sit still?...What kind of books should the children read...ah...how do you choose a book?”

This position of librarians as “experts” in the field of child literacy will also be explored in the next section. For now, it is important to recognize the direction and flow of ideas and resources is unidirectional: transmitted to participants (mothers) in a linear fashion. The mothering discourse as Griffith and Smith (2005) have noted, essentially sets up professionals (such as librarians in this case) as “authorities”. The mothering discourse is driven by so-called “experts” that present women as mothers as primary managers of the home, their children’s education, and any extra curricular activities. With librarians positioned as “experts”, and messages communicated by librarians such as “parents are child’s first teachers”, one can develop an idea of how this discourse according to Carson

(2009), becomes a way of thinking and practice that defines social boundaries of what is acceptable or preferable in a specific domain of life. In this case, such discourses shape interactions between policy, programs, staff, and parents.

### **Mothering Work as a Social Process**

Discourses are learnt in a variety ways, from a variety of sources. A part of learning about the mothering discourse comes from mothers themselves and their experiences. Unpacking notions of the mothering discourse led to the understanding that mothering exists in a social bubble, not in isolation. This means that mothers learn in part about what it means to “mother” from other mothers. Mothers participate in and reproduce the mothering discourse, but this does not happen all on their own. In my study, I found that librarians also contributed to this. For instance, when I asked Ella, children’s department manager, whether the shift to include “parents” into the programs came from them, her response was:

I mean...it might have been that *parents* were wondering why they weren’t involved in the program, but, to be very, very, honest...most *parents*...and it is a fact...[laughs] loved that little forty-five minute break. You know they enjoyed having a little bit of time off...like most libraries you would encourage *parents* not to leave the building, like they stayed in the same area incase their child had some sort of reaction to the story or fell or something...*but they liked having sort of a little break and sitting outside with other mummies and talking, often about*

*child development or child rearing issues*, but, um, it was a good break from them and no it didn't come from the *parents* [emphasis added].

Her statement is interesting for a number of reasons. As discussed beforehand, we see the substitution and use of the words “parents” and “mommies” interchangeably, again demonstrating how “mothering work” becomes buried under the umbrella of “parents”. Even more noteworthy, Ella’s description of programming captures the social element of mothering that many of these women participated in. As she described it, mothers would often “talk about child development or child rearing issues”, making reference to the collective participation of these women in “motherhood”. Ella continued to explore this idea of mother-to-mother socialization, by talking through her experiences with the “Baby and Me” program (created for new “parents” with babies under two):

.... these *mom*s were amazing. We had so much fun, and they loved to talk, and...that program, the first one for new babies, is much more for the *mom*s than it is for the babies, it is really....our objective is to find the best books for babies, and the rhymes and the songs, and to get the *mom*s thinking about the library as a destination. They just love talking about sleeping through the night, and how are you nursing, all those things that *mom*s need to talk about together, and, we were getting to a point where we were planning those movie matinees for *mom*s [emphasis added].

For Ella, her understanding of programming, especially in the ones meant for a younger group, was that it was directly linked to the experience of mothering. It is programs such

as the one she described which continue to reinscribe values about the roles of mothers in early work and institutional sites. As Smythe and Isserlis (2002) have argued,

...cultural norms, values and parenting practices are often transmitted and reinforced through these sites of informal learning...while this form of regulation is shaped by dominant discourses surrounding parenting roles, such discourses are located in the socio-cultural context of community life. (p. 4)

Ella was not alone in her observations, but Lacy, a library technician, also spoke in similar terms:

...sometimes the parents come in and they speak the same language, so they have the chance to talk to each other, while the kid is doing something else. So, oh “how old is your baby”? “oh geez when my baby was this old they weren’t doing this”. There is a whole kind of interaction at that level too. It helps them because they may say, “oh my baby is not breastfeeding, or my baby is a year old and he is not eating solid food”

In her statement, there is no direct mention of “mothers” per say, however, suggesting that “parents” talk about subjects such as breastfeeding, largely implies that this is in reference to female participants. What these librarians are witnessing is the active participation of mothers in the discourse of mothering. Griffith and Smith (2005) have taken up discourse to refer to the “the active ways in which people attend to name, and interpret their own and others doings in relationship to them” (p. 35). As mothers begin to “measure what they do in terms of its standards”, and as they “interpret and orient to



what other mothers do in these terms”, they are in Griffith and Smith’s (2005) opinion, “participating in this discursive process” (p. 35).

Previous chapters shed light to the reason many mothers attended storytime programs: they wanted to better prepare their children for subsequent schooling and to familiarize their children with this process. That being said however, it seems that mothers at Smallville library attend storytimes because of personal desires to “get out of the house” as one mother told me, and to meet other mothers. This reoccurring answer propped up numerous times throughout each interview with the mothers; this notion of “socializing” outside of the confines of the home with other moms. The quotations below further emphasize this discovery:

Amy: Getting out of the house, socializing and seeing other moms and kids. I think its good for me because I am getting out of the house [laughs]. I get out of the house right, so I like it.

Angie: It was more for us really to get out of the house with her and do something. I would come about weekly to bi-weekly...staying at home is really hard—I guess my thing is I really wanted her to get to know other kids. I really wanted her to be socialize with other children, and be introduced with other children.

Chloe: I have nothing much to do during the day. Just play with her, I socialize a little. I like to do that.

Not only did mothers attend partly because it was a chance for them to escape the confinements of the house, but it was suggested that these programs offer the opportunity

for mothers to learn from the other mothers in attendance. This is nicely illustrated through my conversations with Angie and Tara, who spoke to me about their experiences as mothers attending these programs, and the benefits they found as mothers:

Angie: I wanted to see what other moms were doing to get ideas from them. I was having problems introducing my daughter to solids or stuff like that, I find that being in a group full of moms, we can talk about what is going on with them, and then sometimes when I was a bit weary to progress, you hear all these other moms progressing to the other level, and you are like okay wait a minute I can do this too. It's like yeah Juliana can do it. It is like a support group. Especially when I found that zero to one group. I found it was more for the parents...for me, it was more for the mother support, and the kids just happen to be there singing and dancing.

Tara: ... you are right. Through the program it was more of like a...support like you said...like a found a pediatrician for my daughter. We were having issues, I didn't have support from the doctor I needed, and I didn't know where to go to find a doctor. Someone told me to check out this person, and it totally worked out. I got a referral from one of the other mothers.

This experience was not unique to only Tara and Angie, but other mothers such as Amy also shared similar experiences of learning through other mothers. "I was talking to one of the other moms and she was saying the same thing. At home she reads all the books, but when the librarian is reading she would she get up or something like that". In a sense, family literacy programs such as storytimes at Smallville library have become a way for

mothers to learn from other mothers about the experiences of mothering, and indirectly, standards of mothering to aspire towards. In this regard, such mothers indirectly participate in mothering discourses, sharing in the experience, and constantly defining the boundaries of motherhood.

### **Out of the Mouths of Mothers: Who Is doing the Work?**

Both my observations and my discussions with librarians revealed that mothers were the prominent participants in the library storytime programs. When I sat down with mothers, they too reiterated the fact that they bring their children to storytimes more than any other member of the family. It was very common to hear responses such as the one provided by Chloe—“Well it is just me and my husband here...so it is me doing ninety-nine percent of the work”. While it was apparent that mothers did the physical work of bringing children into the library, I wondered, how far did the work of mothers extend beyond library programs and into the homes? Using IE as a framework is helpful for bringing some clarity as to the work of mothers. IE, or a “sociology for people”, bringing into view the “relations of ruling that enter and shape women’s daily worlds, and the ways their daily experiences participate in and construct those translocal social relations” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 2). The work that regulates mothers through a mothering discourse, and by the same token, excludes fathers comes into view as I explore “outward from the experiential world into those social relations that constitute our experience—

social relations in which people actively participate, and yet are larger than the experiential scope of any individual” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 3).

Griffith and Smith (2005) explored the social relations organizing the work that women do in relation to their children’s school and the work of school. The mothers in my study all spoke to me about the extension of literacy work at home. All of the mothers I spoke with spent most of their time during the day “teaching” their children. As such they are participating in the mothering discourse, for such a discourse “mobilized women, particular middle-class women, as mothers to support the educational work of the school with their own work; to be performed under a variety of unspecified conditions” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 40). Mothers in my study were quick to answer, “yes definitely” to questions of whether they found themselves to be the ones doing the majority of “work” at home:

Elyse: I do the work mostly.

Amy: I do the most work first, then my husband. I definitely would say it is me most of the time doing these activities.

Chloe: It is just me and her all day. I do the majority of work. I am really busy.

As Griffith and Smith (2005) have argued, women who as mothers have the time to dedicate to their children’s education, contribute to the functioning of the school in ways that are seldom recognized as work. The mothering discourse mobilizes the work of these mothers, allowing them to feel responsible for taking charge of their children’s literacy development.

If mothers all agree they are doing the most work, where does that leave the fathers? Many mothers spoke in relation to their partner in reference to evenings and weekends: “My husband would do it with her [reading] over the weekend more. In the evenings, whenever he gets time that is when he will do it. Otherwise it is me, because I am with her all day right?” (Amy). Often times it was in relation to them working, as Angie stated:

I take care of her the most. My husband is working, so just because of the times, it is me usually taking her to the library. Sometimes on the weekend he will take her if I am working. But most of it is me.

Not surprisingly, many of the mothers in this study, when speaking about their partners, referred to them as “helping” or “supporting” the work that they do:

Lena: I know it is too much work to do after work. That is why I do it now, and my husband will help out with the bedtime. So we try and take turns then.

Elyse: He is helping with the Arabic part: He does grammar...then he reads books, which he tried to do once a week when he is home over the weekend. He reads books and recently he decided that he should read more to them, so...every time we visit back home with get lots of books with us. I am not so fluent in Arabic. When I read I cannot change my voice according to the book, so I don't make it exciting...so we need his help, He said he will do it, so now he is more involved with the Arabic part.

This idea of fathers “helping” out in the “parenting” role is nothing new. Rather, to use Griffith and Smith’s (2005) mothering discourse, “the mothering discourse certainly assigns to women the major role in the work of sustaining their children in school” (p. 98). For the mothers at Smallville library, the role of the father seemed to support the work they already do, rather than taking on a shared part in this work. Similar to Griffith and Smith’s (2005) findings that “fathers on the whole contribute little to overall educational work done at home that directly complements the work of the school. The major responsibility belongs to the mothers” (p. 103), the mothers in my study held all the responsibility towards their children’s literacy development. Tara’s answer to the question of who does the most work is particularly interesting. Her response was:

With us, it is equal. I mean equal in terms of who is spending time with her. I spend a lot of time with her during the day and week, so it is me I guess. But my in-laws have her one or two days a week, so they are also reading with her. My husband reads, when he comes home when she wants her bedtime story. He reads at night sometimes. Um...so I guess it was mostly me. Although my in-laws, because I was working before, they would take her to the storytimes when it was on a day when I couldn’t. Now, it is me during the week, and my husband will usually take her on Saturdays to a different library.

For Tara, she initially considered the work “equal”, relative to the time her and her husband spend with their daughter. However as she works through this response, she comes to admit that “it is me I guess” who is doing the work. Again there does not seem to be an emphasis placed on the role of the father. In this statement she also mentions

another key figure: grandparents. From the conversation with Tara, along with other mothers, it became clear that (much like librarians had suggested) grandparents, not fathers, were the next in line to “teach” children:

Tara: For me, I am not the only person to take care of her. My husband’s parents take care of her sometimes, they are both retired educators. My mother-in-law used to teach ESL and kindergarten. So they are educators, so naturally, they automatically start doing stuff with her too.

Amy: ...my mom is there now every time when I read, since she has come here. It used to be only me, and sometimes, maybe once or...every two-three weeks that my husband would be here. My mom is reading to her now. And it is good, my mom is coming for this session now. She is recording some of the songs and when I go back home I can play it for her.

Lena: I would say it would be me or my dad who go to library and do stuff at home. My husband really doesn’t take the girls...he has taken them a handful of times, but he doesn’t really take the girls to the library as much as me because I have been home. When I was at work and my dad was watching Sarah, and he was taking her to the library.

As these quotes illuminate, the roles of fathers are slim relative to the work that mothers and grandparents participate in.

Interestingly enough, while all these mothers agreed that they do the most work with their children both inside and outside of the home, mothers were divided in their

opinions to the question of who has the primary responsibility to teach children how to read. Some mothers believed that this is a mother's responsibility:

Interviewer: Who do you think has the most responsibility to teach children how to read then?

Chloe: Mother... do you mean in family?

Interviewer: Anyone really.

Chloe: Before schools, it is from family. After school...we will still help her, but she has to learn how to read on her own, and remember what teacher gave her...and I will still help her when she is little.

Interviewer: So you think it starts in the family first?

Chloe: Yes, the mother [laughs].

Interviewer: Do you ever try to get your husband more involved?

Chloe: He doesn't want to. He is so busy. But since I am not doing anything anyways...I have time to do it.

Interviewer: Okay. So given all the information that you know and read about, who do you think has the primary responsibility to teach kids to read?

Elyse: Mother or teacher [laughs].

Interviewer: Not the father?

Elyse: Not the father yeah, no.



Other mothers believed it was “parents” responsibility, despite the fact that they have on occasion admitted that in their own lives, it is the them—mothers—who take on this burden and responsibility:

Angie: Definitely the parents have the responsibility. The school system is not set-up...to be a good reader, you can't expect them to get to kindergarten at the age of four to five without reading anything. Developmentally, zero to six is the most important years of their lives, and if you are just starting at four, then you have already missed four years. Teachers just aren't equipped with like English as a second language classrooms, and they are teaching English, and teaching everything else, and teaching twenty-two individual kids that will learn how to read in individual ways and how to do something. I mean, I don't care how good the teacher is, you can't expect them to be the soul...like as much as a parent. I think it is the parent's responsibility. Definitely. Both parents I think have to read.

Tara: I think it should be everyone, and not just one individual. For us, it is the parents, grandparents, and the caretakers. It is everyone. Because so much of what we do is focused around books...

Amy: Everybody who is there in the household. They all need to interact with the kid via books too, like it has to be one of the mediums. It has to start at the house.... Whoever is in the house more and is spending time more. Whoever is spending time with the baby more.

Thus, while mothers spoke of themselves as the primary workers in their children's educational lives, some still reverted back to this idea of "parental responsibility". I am not sure what I find to be the most unsettling: The fact that some of these mothers still consider mothers the primary agents for child development; or the fact that others still believe "parents" are, despite having an unequal division of labour in their own home.

### **Judgment of Other Mothers: Who are the "Good" Mothers?**

By the same token, just as mothers *learn* and share in each other's experiences about mothering, they are also quick to make comparisons between themselves and other mothers about what they assume is "appropriate" mothering.

The mothers in my research have this in common: none of them are currently employed in any full-time work. In light of this, I found it interesting how these mothers conceptualized or categorized "working" mothers in relation to themselves. None of the mothers in this study considered themselves "working" moms, despite the fact that some of them were employed in paid labour. They considered their "priorities" as first and foremost to be with their children. Consider this statement from Angie:

Tara and I are both kind of stay-at-home moms, so I hate to say that because we are both working part-time, but we ... we do a lot of the stuff at home. I guess my focus is with Juliana, and work is second, which I know is not the case for a lot of people.

Many of the mothers made the distinction between themselves (those taking the initiative to prepare children for schooling) versus the “working” moms (those who expect schools and other professionals to do it for them):

So they [working moms] are expecting the daycare and the school to educate their child completely. I mean, they just don't have the time. (Tara)

According to Angie:

Yeah, they really expect a lot of daycare staff to do it...and their view of daycare and school is a lot different. To me, I look at the school as supplementary.

Whereas for them, it is like why are you teaching them how to read? They are going to learn at school.

Similarly, Lena adds:

I know a lot of parents that think it is the teachers job to teach my child how to read, or to write, but they have got thirty kids that they are trying to teach these skills too, and no one knows your child like you do. I think if I were I working mom, I would probably say schools have a very strong role in it, but it is so funny you are asking me this six months into doing this with Clara, and I want to say not how easy it was, but how it was just a matter of doing it...like doing it everyday or every other day and it was fun for her, it wasn't like it was a chore.

The mothers who were part of my study in a sense, contributed to expectations associated with the discourse of mothering through the ways in which they viewed their own roles, and others, in terms of mobilizing their time and resources to support their children's education rather than leaving this for schools to take care of.

In a similar fashion, these mothers also spent some time thinking about the challenges that some “working” mothers may face—in their opinions, a constant search for “balance”:

Tara: I would be more rushed I think.

Angie: I would be more rushed too I think. I don't know if I am giving you a necessarily good example. Because I do know working moms and I think it would be very difficult to do what they do.

Tara: I just don't know how you balance everything. You can't be everything to everyone.

Angie: Yeah, I don't know how they do it.

Tara: I think woman are always searching for that balance.

Angie: And if you find that balance...it is nice. I wanted to see more programs available. I think I would like to see...maybe not necessarily the storytimes ones, but maybe like sort of other activities. I find that it is a particular set of parents that will take their children to these events.

Tara: Who is going to be able to come to these events? It is the stay at home moms.

Angie: When we look at our society, I am lucky I am a registered nurse so I can work part-time, but my sister-in-law works a corporate job and she can't work part-time for her job. It is either full time or nothing. So what are you going to do?

While some of these mothers have inserted a gap between themselves and “working” mothers with regard to their opinions on the role of schools, the judgment of other mothers extended past this working-non-working-mom dichotomy. Mothers were also quick to make observations and conclusions about *other* kinds of mothers and their behaviours. This was evident through some of their anecdotes mothers chose to share with me during our meetings:

Like my daughter helps me with the dinner prep. She is either stirring or measuring. She has her own drawer where all the measuring spoons are in, she will pretend to make something while I am cooking. I went to a friend’s house, and their children were like ten and eleven, and they didn’t know how to set the table, or how to wash the dishes. They had no responsibility in the home, and I was like...that is not going to work for me...no.... like even for books recommendations...like other parents who I find are not on the same wave length as I am with books...there are a lot of parents who don’t really care about books that much. So I might not be that interested in what they have to say because they are just letting their kids watch TV, they are that, they are everything else.

(Angie)

Elyse makes a distinction between herself and a friend:

See my friend over there reads to my kids [points across library], but her daughter doesn’t read. My kids are making her read them books. I can distinguish the reading parents and reading kids. My friend doesn’t read with her kids, she is very busy. She doesn’t read as much as I do. So that tells you something...and they

have TV so...I find it very important not to have the TV. But she is very busy and her husband is very busy.

All these shared experiences of mothers further exemplify how mothering does not exist in a social bubble; rather mothering and the work of other mothers shape expectations of motherhood. Griffith and Smith (2005) have contended that the “ideal” mother is constructed in various ways, through various discourses. Part of this, includes “the invidious comparisons among mothers” (p. 35). By measuring themselves relative to others, mothers are able to feel secure in the work that they do. For these mothers, their experience of mothering, and learning what is considered to be “good” mothering transcends the library and into their everyday world. Understanding how mothering discourses frame mothers experiences for themselves and others in daily life helps us to see the extent to which the discourse of mothering structures women’s lives.

### **Learning From the “Experts”**

In my conversations with mothers, I was curious about their opinions of librarians and the level of expertise that they believed librarians held. In their opinions, do librarians hold something that these mothers believed they lacked? Mothers in my study for the most part, seemed to turn to, or to trust in, librarians for recommendations on topics such as the kinds of books to be reading, activities they should be engaging in at home, and even advice on how to deal with child development “bumps”. In my conversation with Angie, I asked her what were some of the reasons for even attending

librarians and storytime programs in the first place. Her response paints a picture as to the relationship between librarians and participants:

.... And I come to learn from the librarians who know a lot more than I do. Not all of them, but some like really tell you why rhymes are important or why this is important, or why is that important, why you want to read these certain books. I found it just gave me the back up when I was doing it.

Angie goes on to further talk about the resources librarians leave out after program sessions, “Yeah, and it is a nice way to put out information to parents without being too aggressive about, like hey you are screwing up all the time; just subtle messages”. For Angie at least, her attendance was guided by her belief that she would leave the storytime better equipped: leaving with some message, some new idea, books to read as recommended by “experts” in her opinion. Angie was not alone in her depiction of librarians as authorities or professionals in the field of child literacy—in fact, this was a common expression in a lot of the interviews with other mothers:

Amy: I know like...good habits they form early on. That is what I am told by like librarians and books that I read. So especially reading. If somebody is reading with you...it may not even be coming to the library, even if it is at home and somebody is reading with you at an early age it makes a lot of difference, especially for pleasure. That is what I am told.

Chloe: I think it is kind of important because we...read and do stuff at home, but I also want to know what others are doing, what books the teachers give the

kids. So I registered her for the program to see what they are doing in the library.

Angie: And certain things too she has learnt like numbers and different things from rhymes. I never thought of rhymes, then the librarian told me, like yeah this is why they are important, it gives them familiarity, it gives them routine, it gives them a pattern...to how to do thing so yeah, the librarians have really explained why the work we do is important.

This high regard for “experts” is nothing new. According to Griffith and Smith (2005), the mothering discourse sets up the professionals as authorities. This takes us back to Smith and ruling relations, for “mothers are governed implicitly, through the ruling relations of experts and the discursive rules and actions of institutions. Power has become more diffuse through the development of capitalism; it extends beyond the boundaries of the local, embodied experience” (Smith 1990; 2005).

In my discussions with mothers, I also ascertained that mothers in my study did not just see librarians as “experts”; rather, they turned to a variety of other sources and “professionals” for advice not only in terms of literacy development, but in terms of what they *should* be doing with their children at “critical” points in their children’s lives. Some mothers, such as Chloe, a stay-at-home mother, turned to the Internet as a source of guidance:

I learnt from the internet, just seeing how...when she was little and I just googled what to do with a one year old. As she gets older, same thing. Now I just sign up for some websites that would send you information...what should you with a two-



year old at home. Stuff like that...so I just browse on the web. So I just said oh this is good, and just signed up for emails. There is like Huggie's...they tell you when and how to potty train. Websites like that that tell you what you should be doing and how.

For other mothers, such as Elyse, she found solitude in seeking the advice of professionals such as pediatricians—whom she places in high regard. She cited her pediatrician as one of the main reasons she decided to join library storytime programs in the first place:

Our pediatrician was such a nice woman. As soon as I had the baby, she started from six months saying you need to get books and read it to her even though she's not going to understand, but just keep on doing it. So I am like, yeah okay I love books, that is a good idea. I didn't know kids could understand at that age, but we just started. That was just an idea, and that is how I ended up doing storytimes.

Elyse's case is quite interesting, for many times throughout my interview with her, she would continue to make reference to her pediatrician as the guiding source for much of the work she does:

We don't have TV.... so we block that out. That was what our pediatrician said to do. Libraries have DVD so I choose educational ones, so they are up to date. They can watch DVD for one hour maximum and that is it...with my kids as I told you, I started really early reading books and no TV. That is one big thing. Our pediatrician said no TV until two years of age, after that, one-hour maybe. I was

thinking maybe I could let them watch something educational, but she said no. It causes the ADD. Don't do it. So I am like okay. I listened to her.

The role of pediatricians and other “experts” such as librarians are crucial to the continuation of the mothering discourse. The discourse of mothering sets-up “experts” in such a way as though “if a woman wanted to know what would help children to succeed in school, she would have to look for professional sources of guidance” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 40), much like Elyse and her reliance on her pediatrician for guiding her children's development. Smith (1987) has made the claim that forms of thoughts and images do not arise directly or spontaneously out of people's everyday lives, “rather they are the product of the work of specialists occupying influential positions in the ideological apparatus (i.e. educational system etc.). Our culture does not arise spontaneously; it is manufactured (p.19). It is these “experts” who continue to contribute to mothers understanding of “motherhood”, and all that it entails.

### **Summary**

This chapter has focused on the gendered nature of work that mothers engage in, both in library storytime programs and early literacy work. It has used Griffith and Smith's (2005) notion of a mothering discourse, along with Smith's work on IE and textually mediated discourses to examine how such work are embedded in large ideals of mothering, and how libraries as institutions promote these discourses.

I began the chapter by providing a quick recap of Griffith and Smith's (2005) concept of a mothering discourse, outlining how this ideology is critical to the development of women's roles in the storytime programs. Through my initial observations of the storytime programs, I was able to focus in on the gendered dynamic of such family literacy programs as witnessed through firsthand accounts of the storytime programs.

My interactions with librarians also led to disclosures about who comes to the libraries and storytimes, while at the same time, gaining an understanding for the expectations that librarians hold in terms of the roles of mothers and fathers. This idea of "parental involvement" was unpacked, as my discussions with libraries further supported this idea of the indivisibility of the work of mothers, as "parenting" has become synonymous with "mothering. Similarly, a further examination of their early literacy framework, *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011), led to some examples of how such discourse positions "parents" as their children's first teacher, which in actuality, implies mothers. I made explicit the ways in which such guidelines expect an extension of literacy work into home—setting up a domestic pedagogy further linking literacy responsibilities into the home life. My conversations with librarians led to me understand their positions on the mothering experience of storytimes, and how such storytimes in their opinions provide a "space" for mothering work to occur, while also understanding how their roles become positioned as "experts".

In addition, this chapter explored the work of mothers, in an attempt to understand how the mothering discourse frames their work as parents. I attempted to make

connections between the work that they do and the mothering discourse, understanding how they see their roles as mothers in comparison to their husbands. Furthermore, I described the social processes within which these mothers experience on a daily basis by coming to the library and interacting with other mothers. Such interactions continue to shape and mold what they consider to be “good” mothering practices. The “good/bad” mother contrast became apparent through these discussions as mothers often passed judgments towards mothers who deviated from “proper” mothering. As I also uncovered through this section, it is the work of “experts” and “professionals” such as librarians, pediatricians, educators, etc. who continue to guide the work of these mothers. Such professionals continue to contribute to the discourse of mothering. This chapter focused on the gendered nature of work in children’s early literacy, and the next chapter will look at how such discourses of mothering become transmitted into the stories that librarians and mothers select for their children.

## CHAPTER VI:

### (IN)VISIBILITY OF GENDER IN STORY SELECTION

Well, we like to make sure that the boys and girls will enjoy the program...but I don't think it is a huge conscious decision, where we are saying "ooohh... does this book seem a little bit sexist"? (Ella, Children's Department Manager)

Do you know what, to tell you the truth, I have not thought a lot about the gender stuff. I try to look more at the message and not refer to gender... actually I find children's books have a lot of animals, like it is not always boy and girl right? (Lena, Mother)

#### Introduction

This final results chapter will look at the (in)visibility of gender as a criteria when selecting stories both to read with children in the library program, and at home. I use this chapter to unpack, through interviews with librarians and mothers, how stories are selected, where stories are selected from, and whether mothers and librarians attend to the issue of gender in literature. In other words, what is the process by which mother and librarians go through to filter among various kinds of stories, to evidently find the one they will read with children?

I first consider the way in which both librarians and mothers choose stories—what do they look for when selecting stories? What do they avoid? What are the important elements to a story? Stated differently, what are their criteria for navigating through different literature/themes/topics? Data for this will be pulled out of the interviews, and provides a niche in current literature about how stories are selected and the process leading up to it.

This chapter also serves to understand *where* stories are chosen from? Are librarians choosing books based on best-seller lists, personal favourites, or third party recommendations? Do mothers choose books based on what the librarians (or “experts”) advise? (Again relating it back to the discourse of mothering, and what “good” mothers should be reading to their children). Where do they get ideas about “appropriate” stories to read? This serves the purpose of understanding how much critical thought goes into story selection, and how much is left to assumed “experts” to be the judge.

Lastly, I explore the role that gender plays in selecting stories. When asked about gender portrayals in stories, how do mothers and librarians respond? I will use this chapter as an opportunity to explore librarians and mothers’ conceptualizations of gender in children’s literature—are they attending to portrayals of boy and girl protagonists? To the kinds of messages that appear in the stories they read? Extending this even further, do librarians in charge of selecting stories, and mother participants, acknowledge the representations of mothers and fathers in stories, and how these representations may further contribute to the discourse of mothering, and assumed gender roles and responsibilities? I use examples of stories mentioned by librarians and mothers to explore the relationship of gender roles and the mothering discourse to their book choices. A further analysis of these stories will shed light to the images/messages/themes that are found in the books used and read to young children.

## How do Librarians Select Stories?

Much of the interviews with librarians focused on their experiences with storytime programming and expectations of “parental” work. I made sure however, to allocate some time during the interview process to transition the conversation into their book selections. I was particularly interested in *how* libraries and librarians select stories. Where do librarians begin looking for books to both bring into the library and to share and recommend to participants coming to storytimes, who therein take these stories to read with their children?

The beginning of story selection process, at least for programming purposes at Smallville, begins with staff meetings, where librarians meet to decide and exchange opinions on general themes or subjects that then translate into loose guidelines for choosing stories:

Karen: So what we do is, we decide, we the programmers, decide at the staff meetings what things we are going to do. So if we decide to do colours, numbers, shapes...ah valentines day...we do those themes for each week, but we don't have to do them, it's not like oh you have to do them.

Lacy: So what we did was we planned out eight weeks of themes, so with those eight weeks of the themes we might say valentines in there that should be one, Family Day is in there, that should be something. It is a group effort.

Joe: Well we as a team sit down and choose the themes. We go in eight-week cycles so we would choose eight themes that a lot of the literature will

relate to. So bears, farms, colours, counting, winters, seasons, things like that. We will touch upon holidays in sort of a secular way.

Librarians also spoke about “theme kits” that were created to help librarians choose stories. These kits are prepackaged by other librarians, and contain stories based on a theme (i.e. colours; shapes; animals etc.). They are made to be easily accessible to librarians in a hurry to choose stories for programming. It was also very common for librarians to also bring in and recommend books in storytimes that they like themselves:

Like I have favourites, and certain authors or illustrators, and I tend to if I like one, I will make sure we order all of them. If there are certain writers or if they have a certain rhyming or rhythm in the books I like, and I know I am going to like it when it comes in and new, that is easy picks. (Iris, Librarian)

Karen, a library clerk prefers to bring in her own material:

Yeah. Like I have a lot of my own stuff that I use....

Librarians also tended to refer to “what’s hot” lists as references on what kinds of books they should be ordering into the library, and bringing into programming to share with the participants:

The books we order are based on all sorts of different lists and like “what’s hot” lists. There are different companies like called Jobbers, they automatically order the hottest books for us off certain lists. So they may be like New York public library lists, or might be, “White Hots”—that is a publishing arm of a publishing company, and they would send us all their newest, hottest, latest titles, and if we



like them, we order them. We go on to the website, and we have a certain budget, we just fire through. (Iris, Librarian)

Similarly, senior librarian Cal adds:

One of the ways in which we get them is our supplier, "White Hots". They will do a book fair, and we will go and see what is coming. So we get a lot of word of mouths, a lot of our top programmers have connections in other systems with other programmers.

Selecting stories to order for the library, and to bring into storytime programs seem to hail largely from staff meetings, external sources such as the bestsellers and word of mouth, and from librarians own personal preferences.

### **Librarian's Criteria for Choosing Books**

I gathered quite an understanding as to where librarians being their search for stories, but I wondered still, with those loose guidelines, how do they select their stories? In other words, what were their conditions for choosing one book over another? During my conversations, I was essentially probing for whether librarians (and later mothers) would bring up the issue of gender as a criterion for selecting stories. Are librarians cognizant of sexist portrayals of both girls and boys, and men and women? Do they find this to be an issue they consider when selecting books, especially given all that we know about the powerful and detrimental messages present in modern day stories.

With this in the back of my mind, I proceeded to ask: What kinds of stories do they look for? What do they like in a book? What would they purchase or share with others? Table 3 below lists the main criteria librarians stated during our interviews as important elements they consider when selecting a book. The bolded responses are the ones I found to be mentioned most frequently.

**Table 3: Librarian Criteria for Selecting Stories**

<b>Length</b>
<b>Illustrations</b>
<b>Age appropriate</b>
Interesting
Have I read it?/Favourite books
Big enough
Not too busy
Interactive
Simple
Everyday topics
Rhymes
Rich language
Funny
Fundamental concepts- numbers, letters, etc.
Repetition

Gender did not come up as an important aspect when selecting a story. Each librarian had their own reasons for choosing certain stories over others, but it seemed that the main pull towards certain stories over others comprised mainly of the length of the story, the aesthetic appeal of the illustrations, and the age appropriateness of it. Karen for instance, looks for books that are fun, interesting, and short:

Oh...um...I usually go by...well...first by what things we have...what books we have, and what books we recommend from the library, but then when I'm picking

a book myself, I am looking at ...is it going to be fun? Is it interesting? And, is it too long? (Karen, Library Clerk)

Lacy on the other hand, looked for books that are age appropriate and large enough in size for the entire storytime group to watch:

Well it should be age appropriate number one. And it should be big enough because you are sitting in front of the group, so you have kids saying, "I can't see, I can't see", then they get up and move. So you want a book that can be lent to that. So, you also don't want something really, really busy. You want maybe to have one picture on a page, or something like that. You know, because you have got to keep their attention, or then they are going to be all over the place

For Ava, a library assistant currently running a "Baby and Me" storytime for new parents and their infants, her preference aligned with books that would be suited for her target audience of babies:

For baby time, definitely super simple. Very large, colorful pictures obviously are really important. Text, you know fairly minimal, but the pictures are really just important as the text. The words would have to be simple enough for them to hear to get into their minds, so not just a jumble of words. Certainly, rhymes, something that can be put in a song, and things that are very simple. Concrete everyday things—baby, bedtime, bath time, tooth brushing—things like that. Maybe animals, snow, you know, very basic things. Certainly moveable stuff that you can...like flaps, pullout, tactile that they can touch.

Both Ella and Iris felt that humor, among other reasons such as illustrations, length and fundamental concepts were among the main reasons to choose a book:

Ella: ... my sort of no-matter-what age, the criteria would be not too much text, definitely um, preferably large illustrations, although I have not limited myself to that. I love books where I can, much like Iris, where I can do different voices or expressions or whatever. So I prefer stories that are more active and just funny...

Iris: Like the fundamental ones have to be on the theme I am working on—so letters or numbers or shapes or colours or opposites or whatever. I like funny books, humor to get it across to the kids that reading is fun. So I choose stories that sometimes are a little bit harder than what their parents would probably choose for them, but I do that on purpose because I know they can handle it. I would do it on a regular storytime as well. I may throw in a story that is lengthy even if they are not used to it. For me, it is about something I know they would want to read again.

Joe and Cal both touched upon the importance of short story:

Joe: For the Alphabet Soup, it is the letter. In terms of the criteria, I would have to say it would be the illustrations, the story itself, and for the age group I deal with. Like preschool, they have a decent attention span, but because they haven't actually had the experience of formal schooling, an overly long story will lose your audience. So most manuals will say do a long

story first, we do three... a long story in the beginning, medium one in the middle, and short one to tie things up.

Cal: Finding that book that meets your length requirements. Looking for ones that have interactive elements, but not too many elements.

### **What Kinds of Books do Librarians Avoid?**

I wanted to further probe the subject of gender: Maybe, if they didn't actively look for books with positive gender portrayals, at the very least, maybe they avoided the books that had sexist messages? I asked librarians a very open ended question: Were there any kinds of stories/topics/themes/subjects etc. that they tend to avoid reading/buying/sharing and so forth? Again, by asking this question, I was looking to see first whether librarians would bring up this topic without me asking directly about gender, and whether or not gender portrayals or sexism may be among the list of reasons they would refuse to read, buy, or share a book. Table 4 describes the most frequent answers extrapolated from the interviews with librarians regarding their reasons for avoiding a particular book or story:

**Table 4:** Topics Avoided by Librarians when Selecting Stories

Death, Dying etc.
Culturally/Race specific
Too wordy/Lots of text
Too long
Religion, Spirituality etc.
Haven't Read
Wordless
Graphic Novels, Comic Strips

---

Scary  
Unappealing illustrations  
Not engaging/Interactive

---

There was no mention of gender as a potential reason to avoid a story. Many if not all of the librarians spoke to me about the topic of death as a red flag, along with books that may delve too far into religion or culture. The quotes below further exemplify this:

Ella: Definitely, the rule of thumb for all of us, is never grab a book off the shelf and just read it to a group because, some books, look really, really innocent from the cover, but instead it might be something about the death of a grandparent, or the death of the pet, or a homeless person. Like, it is hard to tell right from a cover? So absolutely the rule of thumb never to grab a book and just read it blindly, because it could raise a lot of, what I call, “ticklish topics”, I think it could raise a lot of concerns.

Joe: I avoid religious themes, anything that is scary or concepts that parents would not want you to touch upon, so things like death, the heavy topics. For me anyways it is suppose to be fun and light. I want to convey the concept that the library is a fun place to come, we are not banging you over the head saying learn this stuff.

Much like what librarians mentioned they looked for in stories—short and sweet—wordy stories, or stories that were just too long also seemed to be a big negative for librarians:

Karen: ...just too wordy and too long...too many words per page, so the children aren't going to listen to it.

Joe: Again, something that has a lot of text. The trend over the past thirty years is away from wordy stories. There are some classics from the eighties but if you look at them they are just too text heavy and you will lose your audience.

Through of all this, I still continued to asked myself, does gender come into play in any way for librarians? Maybe they had never considered gender portrayals to be an issue? Maybe they did, but did not find it was an important distinction to make? Either way, I felt that this was something I needed to explore a bit further.

### **Exploring the Concept of Gender with Librarians**

Only one of the librarians, Ava, mentioned in our conversation about topics to avoid that she prefers to have books that are “sort of equal in terms of gender stereotyping”, but did not delve further into this matter. I decided to bring up the subject of gender myself. I asked each librarian: Given the recent talk over the years about the portrayals of gender in stories, did they find it to be an issue for themselves when choosing stories? Each of the librarians seemed to have different reactions to this question.

Many of them, when I initially proposed the topic of gender, understood the “issue” of gender in terms of showing *enough* stories about boys and girls, or showing *too* much of one:

Karen: ...most stories I think are geared to girls. Okay, so I like every once in a while to gear the program for boys ...Because, I think, it is just more appealing to girls. Whereas the boys, if it is not about trucks or dinosaurs, snakes and gooey-stuff, they are not really interested. So they will sit through a story but it has to be a really good story to get them to sit through. Or a story, that makes them think, what's going to happen next. So, every once in a while I will do just a story-time for boys, with dinosaurs and trucks and different things like that. And the girls like it just as much as the boys do, but it is just to sort of balance it out.

Cal: Well I just want to make sure that the books I end up with don't all have male characters... so if you end up with all your stories about boys, then I wouldn't plan it that way. I would try to find some stories with girls in it.

Ella: Well we like to make sure that the boys and girls will enjoy the program.

I thought at first librarians may have misunderstood my question about gender in stories, however, I noticed that these responses continued to occur. When I asked about gender portrayals in stories, librarians understood this to be a question of how they deal with gender in terms of selecting books to appeal to "gendered" children. To make sure that they understood what I was questioning, I asked librarians whether they found any issues with the representations of male and female protagonists in stories. Karen for instance, responded: "No, the issue is if it will be fun and interesting for the kids". This was the general consensus for many of the librarians. It would seem that the issue was not necessarily how are males and females portrayed, but rather, the issue became the



*frequency* in which they were shown. Thus, they come to see gender as an already given, and select books that they think will appeal to the already gendered child.

In conversation with Iris, she also spoke to me about “story packs” that librarians develop for parents to take home. Essentially, these story packs come pre-packaged so parents “in a rush” can come to the library and choose packs with pre-selected books:

Then the story packs are for people who are really in a hurry. I really love this service because we have pre-selected and stood behind these books, they are great. Often, maybe out of five books, four are perfect and one is meh, maybe not so much, but that is okay because you are always going to have your favourite books. It is easy, and it is recommended, and pre-selected.

On this subject, Iris makes the claim that “...when Karen makes the packs, sometimes she will make like a boy one and a girl one...so books for each gender to read”. This quotation further illustrates the role that gender plays for some of the librarians at Smallville: as a defining criteria in terms of what they expect boys and girls to read; again selecting stories for the *gendered* reader.

The issue when I brought up gender was in terms of girls/boys books, and whether the librarians stereotyped in terms of suggesting certain books for gendered children. On this subject, Ava says:

I try...you know, not to “genderize” and say here are girl or book books.

Sometime it is helpful to know if it is a boy or a girl, but it is always an iffy issue of course. .... Sometimes, when you get to the kids reading on their own...you get...there is an undeniable preference...like girls want these princess books

[laughs], and boys sometimes don't necessarily...they want boy protagonists. You know, you try not to encourage "gender-izing", some parents are sometimes very conscious of the gender...but sometimes it comes into play...some parents are very specific and they want that, like books that are meant for boys... and some boys...want books catered to boys. There is certain attention level...if they like superhero's or action or whatever, you don't want to reinforce stereotypes, but also, you want to be honestly aware that there are different preferences for girls and boys and even if the parents seem to be...um...promoting it maybe.

Ava seemed to be struggling with her own experience with "gendered" stories. However, through my interviews, the majority of the librarians didn't think gender was *as* important as other factors. For instance, while Ava mentioned that she tried to stay away from "gender-izing" and attempts to keep more balanced books, she still had no problem using such books if other factors (such as illustrations, plot etc.) were strong:

There is this book...like I like it...it is a great classic , but it is so, so dated. It is from the forties and it is definitely like *See Dick and Jane*, but very.... incredibly stereotyped, but it is so sweet and adorable and it is a lovely book that it is... I don't want to not use it, but I do give a little caveat just to say, like "oh you will notice this book was published in the forties, and there is no doubt when you look at the girls and boys in this book, you will know it was published in the forties, so just take that with a grain of salt and enjoy the touchy-feeling things in the book".

Ava was not alone in her response. Ella and Joe both elaborated on Ava's message:

Ella: ...but I don't think it is a huge conscious decision, where we are saying "ooohh...does this seem a little bit sexist?" [long pause]. I wonder what others will say about that...but yeah I haven't felt it.... But, but you know what? err, yeah.

Joe: ...Then you know your gender group, usually for me, the focus is on a letter each week, that is more the focus on finding a book...it is more or less finding a book that relates to the letter and in-between rhymes and anything that pertains to that specific letter. So that becomes more my focus rather than something about gender or anything like that.

Some librarians justified their response with the belief that "gender was getting better":

Honestly now in picture books, there are so many feisty, fun girls, yes...it is true, *Pinkalicious* books and that whole pink culture, like there are all those things still with the girly girls, and the princess things, but there is also some spunky girls, and I don't see it so much for the books for preschoolers, I think possibly, it is more as they get older in the chapter books. Yeah... I mean...for sure, for sure there is still a lot of the pinky-princess-y things with the little girls, but it is better...I think.... (Ella, Children's Department Manager)

In Ava's opinion:

...generally now there is a much more awareness than there was ten to twenty girls ago, definitely more strong female characters.

Through my interviews, I developed the impression that librarians at Smallville had never really been asked about gender in their story selection, nor had they come to ever see it as

an issue. This fact lent itself to a very important conceptual point in my research: *but how would they know to consider gender as an issue in stories?* Gender is often silenced in many ways, as nobody (including authors, publishers etc.) ever really talks about gender as it related to portrayals in stories as a problem. Interestingly, many of the librarians made the claim that females are represented in much more frequency nowadays than males, hinting to a more balanced distribution. “Going back to the whole thing, I would say it is biased towards girls. The literature is more biased towards girls” (Lacy). Librarians believed that the literature is much more “equal” because females are represented more frequently now than in the past. In fact, Cal spoke to me about an example of a book he considers to be “gender positive”:

Basically the characters in the book, a mother and daughter, they are waiting for their pizza to be delivered. The daughters impatient and wants it to arrive now. So, as a game, the mother says, what if when you and you answer the door it is not a pizza man, but a pizza lady or pizza animals. It is not about the fact that she is a girl and she is with her mother, it is the fact that here is a story with a girl and mother in it.

It is these subtle messages that continue to go unnoticed in picture books. These representations continue to promote an ideal version of motherhood—one that positions her as home and in primary charge of her children with an absent father (something to be explored a bit later on in this chapter). It was striking that many librarians argued that there were more females present in stories, when numerous scholars (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Hamilton et al., 2006; McDonald, 1989; Turner-Bower, 1996; Wharton, 2005)

have argued that females tend to be a largely invisible group. In fact, MacArthur and Poulin (2011) have argued that this consistent underrepresentation of females in children's literature is not a chance occurrence, but rather a reflection of a broader culture perpetuated by authors and publishers that continue to afford a higher status to males than females. These messages are deliberately not attended to by authors and publishers—by the very people in charge of producing books that end up in places such as libraries.

Other librarians made the argument that gender is “not visible” so much anymore because there are much more animals now, which means gender is not really there:

Ah...[long pause]. I don't know. I don't find that an issue. I wouldn't choose any book that was obviously like that...um... [long pause]. I mean, a lot of the stories are about animals, you know some of our favourites have main characters that are not a child now that I think about it. For me, I know that because I am always making up these crazy voices for characters... So I don't find that an issue really. No, nor in terms of how I pick books... I mean everyone says I generally have a good choice of books, so I have never had anybody say anything. And we do ask that on our feedback, like what do you like most, or if there is any thing you could change. I have never seen anything like that. I find more and more books are not about children now. Or the subject matter is real, but the characters are animals. Like they might have a bullying issue, or making fun of other people, but it is not people, not children. Like...*Spot* books, *Corduroy*, *Red Wagon*...it is animals, not people. (Iris, Librarian)

Various scholars have made the claim that gender roles in stories are repeatedly still found within animal depictions, which often time take on a more humanized role (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Hamilton et al., 2006). Animals in stories, especially those designated as “heroes”, continue to be overwhelmingly male, while female animals continue to be shown in ways that support gendered roles. Even in stories suggested above such as *Spot*, *Corduroy* and so on, the main characters are still meant to be representative of male children—not females. It has even been found that families of clothed animals in stories do have more traditional structures than families of humans in stories for young children, and these representations in stories continue to reproduce and internalize norms of gender (Brugeilles et al., 2002). Such uses of animals in stories as replacement for humans, along with a strong focus on technical issues of reading outlined previously (such as big pictures, letters, numbers, etc.), essentially are working around the issue of gender in children’s literature. The question of gender in stories then becomes a social rather than individual issue—it is not what librarians (and mothers) are failing to “see”—it is what authors and publishers are failing to produce. The question then becomes how to bring such issues to light?

Joe also works through this idea of animals in stories through in his interview:

I think for a while it was like okay we have this sexist approach to things because we want them to read, and now it is like they are reading they are here so you know. For our stories, I mean often times...it is interesting through, again...like for me, if it is a bear, it is just a bear. Often times they don’t apply a gender...but then by default, I guess if it is a bear, it is often times assumed to be a male. So

but, it hasn't really influenced my approach because again, I am like it is a good story? Are the illustrations are interesting? So I think it is probably something that is there, but there are other factors that make it less of an issue at the age level that I am dealing with.

Although Joe negotiates his understanding of animals as representative of a gender, he still contends, much like previous librarians, that other factors like illustrations and plot lines outweigh the concept of gender. Conversely, Joe continued to speak about libraries approaches to gender, reflecting on what has traditionally been done, and what more they could do:

Joe: So interestingly we will have girls at the preschool aged who want Barbie princess, so it's like here it is, you can have them...but then if the customer is requesting something specific then we would just take them to it. We don't really say here try something else. It is interesting, in the middle, beyond the picture books, they start to have this gender attachment...weird gender issues that come up. Some of the Barbie books and the fairytale books are just kind of like. ...[makes scrunched up face]...yeah...you know...fluffy.

Interviewer: So you don't find gender to be an issue for you when selecting stories?

Joe: It is interesting...not picture books. I think a lot of thought goes into picture books, so I do think those things perhaps by the author or publisher are touched upon. It depends too, like a picture

book...maybe a non-fiction book for pre-school level maybe has firefighters and construction boys...and cookery and flower girls...so there is that kind too [Pause]... but not so much at the pre-school level...in recent years there has been this whole focus on...like talking about boys as reluctant readers, and we want themes...like you do sort of have this sexist approach in terms of what you think each gender will like.

Much like other librarians at Smallville, Joe seemed conflicted as to the role gender plays in stories. He quarreled with the idea of gender—believing at first that publishers and authors are likely with such issues beforehand, unaware perhaps, that the bulk of gender stereotypes in literature for children go unnoticed, as they are often times not obvious. In fact, scholars such as Hamilton et al. (2002) have argued that recently, there have become more subtle ways in which the sexes are portrayed stereotypically — “Perhaps authors consciously or unconsciously resort to subtle sexism because blatant sexism no longer passes noticed. Prejudice and stereotyping tend to go underground when their more overt forms become less socially acceptable” (p. 764).

In fact, it seems that the “issue” of gender so to speak, derives largely from publishers and authors producing stories, in which the invisibility of gender becomes a deliberate action on their behalf. Turner-Bower (2008) made the argument that for many years, authors of children’s literature portrayed females with narrow characteristics—as secondary characters, regularly found in domestic settings; often in need of rescue by male characters, and male characters in their own stereotyped roles. While this has



changed to show more girls and women in increased central roles—representing a concerted effort by authors to reduce the sexism in children’s books—findings still suggest a type of “modern discrimination”, in which the “overt behaviors expressed through feelings of prejudice toward a certain group have changed, but the underlying problem remains” (p. 474). Thus, there continues to exist a prejudice towards gender, but surfaced in more safe and socially acceptable ways, which are often difficult to identify” (pp. 474-475). It is no wonder then why librarians (and mothers) fail to see gender as a concern when selecting stories—for the problem in itself is not easy to identify.

Another important note that arose in Joe’s responses was “boys as reluctant readers”. His understanding of gender, along with the idea of a “problem” with boy readers came up numerous times, even in conversation with other librarians. This fact allowed me to gather that this was a more important “gender” issue than sexist portrayals in the literature.

### **Gender and Literacy**

In my discussions regarding gender and story selection with librarians, something unexpected continued to come up: that boys and girls are different when it comes to literacy. Over and over again librarians continued to speak about boy readers in ways that see them as having a “reading problem”. The end goal for librarians, according to them, was to help boys become avid readers:

Karen: Yes. We have to appeal to them [boys] too. That is the reason why they are coming to the program. So we can get them, boys, interested early to read...because boys don't like reading—that is a known fact. But if we get them interested in reading when they are young, it becomes a normal thing for them, and then it doesn't bother them that they are really reading well at school. So it...and we see the difference. So I can try this and make it fun, especially if they have a boy who doesn't want to sit still.

Iris: I have boy and a girl and the girl was reading much sooner than the boy, but that is just a, you know, boy-girl gender thing. Boys just don't like reading. He likes it now too. He took a lot longer to be able to read and sound out words. (Iris)

The problem in such an approach, as Martino (2003) has outlined, constructing boys as disadvantaged raises the questions about the ways in which literacy gets narrowly defined to construct boys “as potentially at risk in a way that does not acknowledge the need for a broader definition of literacy and what this might mean for both redefining school based literacy and pedagogical reform in schools” (p. 13). Martino argues as well that this idea of boys as reluctant readers needs to focus on how issues of social class, indigeneity, sexuality and so on intersect with particular gender regimes in boys' lives to position them in relation to particular literacy practices in quite specific ways—What is required in an approach which does not lose sight of the complex ways in which the social practices of masculinity interweave and impact on boys' literacy practices, while not ignoring the influences of other forms of economic, social and cultural capital” (p. 24).

Rather than seeing gender as a social issue, for librarians, gendered topics become oriented to the “gendered” child (as in boys don’t like to read). This is one of the ways in which gender issues become contrived and addressed.

In another example, Lacy touches on the boys as reluctant readers argument to make a call for “boy books”:

A girl will sit down and listen to a story, whereas a boy won’t, unless you train him very early. But, by the same token, if you don’t have a book that shows a boy doing something, or being the hero, then they are not really going to pay attention either. And so, I guess that’s the big thing. Boys and girls read for different reasons. Girls read more because it is a social thing, like “oh all my friends are talking about this *Candy Apple* book”, so they all go through that, and they talk to each other about that. Boys, its like okay you know, fine, big deal. But boys like action and adventure.

There becomes large assumptions made then about the *reasons* why boys and girls read, along with assumptions as to *what* they like to read (again taking away from issue of gender in stories):

A lot of the times what we get are reluctant readers—boys. Boys will come in, and you know, don’t give him *Anne of Green Gables*, give him *Hardy Boys*, give him *Time Warp Trio*, give him *Stinky Cheese Man*, give him the appropriate things. (Lacy)

But just what are we to consider “appropriate” books for boys? Ava attributes some of this gendering of stories to the work of parents:

It is not all the time, but the parents will sometimes say, “oh yeah, my boys are reluctant readers” which isn’t that uncommon, they don’t use that phrase necessarily, but I will say “oh here is whatever it is, *Nate the Great*”, but if it is a girl protagonist, some of the parents will say “oh he is not going to be that interested”, because the boy is not that keen on it now, as they get a little older, maybe. So there is that environment. I am not going to teach them and say, “Oh but you should, it is really good”. You want to give them something if they are reluctant already, give them something to encourage them to read.

She continues to say that:

...there was a you know, a strong community of certain background of people who mostly newly immigrated to Canada, and all the little girls want princess books and there is a bit of bias unfortunately, especially in that culture as I understand towards the boys, and it is more...just being aware and observing families and how they interact and how they treat the boys and girls, but we are not teachers and there is only so much you can do with sharing a few stories.

Her conceptualization of the role of librarians was a very limiting one—“there is only so much you can do”. Ava didn’t seem to think that her position entailed her to help change the way gender is perceived in stories. She didn’t seem to think, despite what scholars have argued, that she had the ability as she shares stories, to create “critical consumers of the written word” (Diekman & Murnen, 2004); to help frame the discussion about how genders are portrayed. If interaction with fictional texts have the power to evoke and shape conceptions of gender roles for young children as I have shown in previous

chapters, then the implications become significant not only for librarians such as Ava, and mothers, but they become especially important for authors and publishers to consider (Agee, 1993).

Joe in comparison, was one of the few librarians who reflected and self-analyzed about how libraries have traditionally dealt with gendered book choices and the overall approach they take:

...the whole idea of ...boys have been seen as sort of how do I put it? A priority group, so there was...the way I interpret this is it became an excuse, like boys will automatically like the fantasy fiction book and that sort of thing. I think there has been for a while this approach. Again, probably more of what we should be doing is going out into the community and not worrying about the gender...I guess this goes more into the concept of outreach, and it is not so much boys being reluctant readers, as it is disadvantaged children, boys and girls who don't have the opportunity. If you start to look at it from that perspective then we will go away from "Oh but we want to make sure it is something a boy would be interested in". Also, we don't want to start saying like you are boy so you should read *Captain Underpants*, because then it is the whole idea if he wants to read a book about *Barbie* then we should just let him do that— he is reading right?

Joe also reflected on how this gendered approach to choosing stories for children may not necessarily be the best way to go about it; admitting that librarian staff may not be very conscious about the way they tend to recommend books (again, raising the question of how to promote such awareness amongst librarians):

... like when children come to the desk, for someone in the adult department we try to conduct a reference interview, so open-ended questions and determine what the customer is looking for, because they either don't know, or they are asking for something...like I am looking for books about China...okay like the country or table settings? For children I think we have to remember as professionals, determine what they like to read so apply the reference interview. It is difficult...I guess the classic for that age level is that oh if it is a boy they will read *Hardy Boys*, if it is a girl, *Nancy Drew*. I think we may be too quick to assume what boys and girls should be reading. Well, it's like it shouldn't be so gender biased; maybe the boy wants to read *Nancy Drew*—who cares? They are reading! I guess that is what it should really always come down to. Maybe we are not very conscious of this.

Joe raises an important point in this discussion. He alludes towards a shift to move past this traditional gender ideology about what boys or girls should or should not be reading; a shift away from seeing boys as reluctant readers. For the majority of librarians at Smallville however, little attention is paid to gender portrayals in stories, as the tendency is to take an overall gendered approach to selecting books for young readers. The problem as I described, is that these issues do not exist in isolation—books that are being written and published are failing to recognize gender as an issue that needs to be attended to. These books subsequently become the ones librarians assume have been “filtered”. As Turner-Bowker (2008) argues, “authors are attempting to make changes in what's obvious, what's most easily seen. However, in order to eliminate sexism from children's

books, attention also needs to be drawn to the more subtle forms of bias” (p. 475) such as re-examining the disproportionately high number of male characters represented in titles and pictures, and looking at the way mothers and fathers are shown. These kinds of messages not only teach girls and boys their different places, but such language can serve as a vehicle to perpetuate or abandon stereotypes. As a result, it becomes imperative that editors, publishers, even teachers, librarians, parents, and those in positions of power, are able to induce change, and take on responsibility of doing so” (p. 477). To this, I turn the conversation to mothers to contrast their approach to story selection with librarians.

### **How do Mothers Select Stories?**

Like my discussions with librarians, I wanted to inquire more about how mothers select their stories. I began by asking mothers the same initial question as librarians: where do you begin selecting stories and gathering ideas about what kinds of stories to read? In asking this question, I was interested in understanding the extent of their dependence (if applicable) on librarians and other recommendations. As somewhat expected, most of the mothers in this study turned to libraries and librarians for suggestions on the kinds stories to pick up for their children:

Chloe: I will pick the best sellers and just go to the library to see what the teacher gave the kids. Like last week we read *Five Little Monkeys*, so I took it home and borrowed it.

Lena: ...Library to tell you the truth. I will get...like all the librarians have their picks out. I usually find those books are awesome. I will also take the ones on the table after class sometimes.

Elyse: I usually take books from the table after storytime.

Amy: Now I am just coming to the library and seeing the books on the shelves. I walk around. There are Top picks that they have there, so I will look at that. I have looked at that before.

Angie: So I get my ideas from the library

If not libraries or librarians, some mothers indicated that they turn to other “experts”, such as pediatricians or parenting books for suggestions on stories to read:

Parenting books, they will recommend some books. There was lots of books about math to make it fun, or dealing with math issues. When we come to library, we go around, they go look at the pictures, and I will read. My pediatrician...she also told me some books that is good because you get lost sometimes with all the books. She told me a couple of them that were good, and they lead you to other books. (Elyse)

Often times, mothers let their children choose their own books:

Elyse: So they pick, I pick. They will ask me, can we get this, can we get this? I will say okay, look at the pictures, and say okay yeah we can get this. Then I go and pick my educational ones.

Tara: She picked one book she liked this morning, so she was adamant on it, and then I picked one, so we sort of do a she picks one, mommy picks one.



Chloe: She picks them for herself.

Sometimes, ideas of what stories to read come from third party sources such as Scholastic book orders from schools, Chapters, or the internet:

Elyse: Mmm.... We get the scholastic book orders things from schools. So I get some ideas from them. I ask if the library has it. If not we go to Chapters if we are so miserable about it.

Tara: I am on Pinterest. So there is a lot of stuff there. I see other moms posting, and sometimes there are activities that tie into the stories that you can do too.

Others look towards trusted and familiar authors, or bestseller lists as indicators for a good book:

Amy: If I get a good book by a good author and she likes it, I will look for other books by the same author. I search online; mostly I search online.

Chloe: I go online and see what are the bestsellers.

In short, when it comes to selecting stories, there reoccurring trend for mothers is to lean towards “experts” such as librarians or pediatricians, among other sources, for recommendations on the kinds of books they should be reading.

### **Important Criteria for Mothers**

As with the librarians in this study, during my interviews with mothers I began to probe about their criteria for story selections. What are important criteria for mothers of young children when they are selecting stories? What do they look for? What elements of

a story must be present? The following chart outlines the most important criteria for story selection as suggested by mothers during our interviews:

**Table 5: Important Criteria for Mothers when Selecting Stories**

What their children like
Illustrations/Pictures
Life events
Day to day routines
Life lessons
Funny
Love/affection
Shapes, colours
Books for a boy/girl
Price
Rhymes
Age Appropriate
No bad words
Humor
Plot lines
Little Text
Interesting for child
Educational
Relatable characters
Seasons
Can I stand to read it over and over again?

Similar to my findings with librarians, there was little mention of gender within my conversations with mothers. In fact, the only mother to bring up gender as a criterion was Chloe. Surprisingly, for Chloe, gender was brought up as a factor when *choosing* stories. Moreover, she preferred to choose “gendered” books (i.e. books catered to a girl or boy):

Mmm...if it is for boys, I would go for some kind of airplane or balls or sports—like boy stuff. For girls, I would go with this kind of “girly stuff”...I think just...I am used to do it. I am used to girl stuff. If for boy, I would go for blue. If for girl, pink...but sometimes when I buy the book I still pick main characters as girls. I

want her to know like boys and about airplanes and stuff. When we grow up and if there is a boy in our class in Taiwan, and if he is playing with a doll we will call him a “sissy”. So then he will stop. It is kind of a cultural thing. I still think boys like things and girls should like other things.

This theme of the “gendered” reader applies again to Chloe’s case, as she looks to find books she thinks will appeal to what she thinks girls and boys traditionally like. Chloe’s strong attachment to her cultural identity most certainly impacted her views of gender—specifically how they relate to story selection. Other than this conversation, gender was nowhere else to be found. There were many other separate factors listed as reasons for selecting stories, such as humor:

Yeah, she loves funny books, things that would make her laugh. Like silly stuff. Or, really lovey—like, affection, I will love you forever kind of books, she really likes those, so those are the ones I tend to pick up. (Lena)

For others, it was shapes, colours, and letters—more educational components that initially attracted mothers to certain books:

When she was little...I look for books about shapes and colours, just knowledge things...not too much about the whole story. One thing is colours, she likes colours. (Chloe)

Sometimes we want to focus on a specific sound. So one day we got a “C” book, so we were talking about all the words that start with the letter “C”, and the sounds that “C” makes. Another time it was just a “1,2,3” book. (Tara)

Day-to-day events were also factors in selecting books:

Chloe: I look basically...if it is normal life...okay in this book she goes to school and pictures are cute. So I will buy it for her.

Amy: When she was a baby it used to be mainly pictures, not a lot of text, more pictures. More of something that she can associate with...like her day-to-day routine. Brushing teeth...things like that. Maybe some pictures, something that she can associate something with. Then she would be...interested.

And of course, rhymes and good illustrations:

... good rhyming and rhythm to the book, if it is long. Illustrations are important because if she is not interested looking at it, words aren't enough at this age. Even if it is a really good book, it is not enough. (Angie)

Overall, mothers in this study tended to select books that above all else, their children seemed to enjoy and engage with. These results seem to echo findings from Anderson et al. (2002), who found that in general, parents of their study were influenced often times by their children's gender when choosing books, along with their children's interests.

### **What Kinds of Books do Mothers Avoid?**

Given mothers diverse backgrounds, I found the question of what kinds of book topics/themes avoided particularly interesting. Had any of these mothers, all coming into the library with different experiences, given any thought to gender portrayals in the stories they choose for their children? I was curious to find out if and how their answers

differed from librarians at Smallville. Table 6 below shows the most frequent answers to the question of what kinds of stories are avoided.

**Table 6: Topics Avoided by Mothers when Selecting Stories**

Commercialized (i.e. <i>Dora, Franklin, Disney</i> )
Scary/ghosts/monsters
Bad behaviour/bad words
Goes against culture/religion/beliefs
Gay parenting
Halloween
Boy/girl relationships
Sad
Hard concepts
One sided/biased Stories
One word books
Push button books

Through looking at this chart it would seem that once more, gender seems to be notably absent. Instead, some of the major reasons for avoiding stories had to do with issues such as consumerism for example:

Lena: I just...I feel like it is so commercialized. It is so like... *Franklin*...like all these books, are based on what is on TV. Then they read the books, then they want the toys, like it just seems like it is one big consumer thing. I try really hard to avoid those. I find for Sarah, she likes funny books the best.

Angie: I try to avoid media books like *Dora the Explorer*. I do, do *Sesame Street* though.

Mothers also seemed to have problems with books that challenge(d) some of their cultural or religious beliefs, such as gay parenting, or books that have “hard” concepts.

Elyse for instance shared an experience she had with her daughter:

Zara picked up a book and it said, "Two moms". And I am like...ah...a picture book, for this age? How am I going to explain now? I said I am going to read it, but we are not going to read it to you because this is not something I like, it is against our view. Then I felt bad because Zara was about to read it, and I said no you don't read it. So I still have it, and I am going to talk to her about it. She is going to learn about it anyways, but it is better that she learns from me. Normally, I don't pick those books. Yes, it is a reality, and it is unnatural, in my opinion. Some people do it, and the book shows that they are happy, but the fact is not because my husband is a physician and sees all kind of cases right, so in a scientific way, it is not natural, and it is not right. This is how I am going to explain to Zara.

Amy also found certain stories difficult to share with her daughter:

I can see sometimes even now for kids there are stories about gay parents. When I see those I think ooh I don't think she is ready for them now. Things like that I won't read to her. If it is something hard for her to understand, like the concept, I won't buy it.

The same applies for books that showcase traditions not associated with their particular religion:

...And the Christmas books I avoid it...because we are Muslim. I don't want them to get how beautiful it is...and why we are not beautiful.... And Halloween books we avoid them because I don't want my kids to get into it. We talk about the background of it, and I said that yes that is what people are doing, and it looks

like so much fun, but the route is wrong so we don't do it. Anything wrong we don't do it. (Elyse)

It seemed that out of all the mothers who partook in this study, Elyse tended to have the most reservations when it came to choosing stories because of her strong religious and cultural attachment. Along with avoiding stories that display gay parenting and North American holidays, she also listed gender as a topic she strayed away from—but not in terms of the representations of boys and girls, or mothers and fathers, but rather, in showing relationships develop between boys and girls:

Elyse: I avoid books that talk about boys and girls.

Interviewer: In what ways?

Elyse: ...like valentines books we avoid it.

Interviewer: You mean books that show relationships?

Elyse: Yes. We avoid those books. Now Zara is asking why? So, I explain...yeah okay because it doesn't reflect our view, and I don't want you to get the wrong ideas. I don't like those kinds of stories.

Elyse seemed to have many objections to stories for her children, but gender portrayals did not seem to be one of them.

At one point, during my conversation with Lena, she brought up the franchise, *Disney*. Initially, when she suggested *Disney* books were stories she tended to avoid, I thought it may have to do with the gendered messages embedded in many of these stories (such as finding a prince; the appeal of beauty etc.). Instead, *Disney* for Lena was avoided because:

I find a lot of the *Disney* stuff is very dark. Like there is a lot of villains involved, or poisoned apples. Stuff like that...you don't think about it as an adult reading it. Stepsisters, and step-moms and evil...prince and princesses. I just find there is a dark component involved. Which I just don't like to deal with at home.

In contrast, for two other mothers, Tara and Angie, *Disney* evoked a difference set of responses. They were the only two mothers in my study to bring up the topic of gender as something they avoided in *Disney*:

Angie: um...*Disney*. I don't do *Disney*. I will avoid *Disney* at all costs.

Interviewer: For what reasons?

Angie: Because I can't stand *Disney*.

Tara: It is "Happily Ever After..." the woman always has to find a man.

Angie: Yes, thank you. And the princesses and the tiaras and that, just that general attitude...I think because Juliana's a girl, then she has to be a princess, and look like a princess, and her life will be complete if she is a princess.

Tara: We got a series of *Disney* books given to us, and I went through them...and in every story it was about getting yourself ready to find a man. I am like okay...you know what...

Angie: Very stereotypical roles of women.

Tara: I will stay away from princess books, from...I will stay away from traditional women's roles...I sort of like...that is why I have



looked at Robert Munsch, because they have like Anna climbing up the tree, and she is independent. There is *Paper Bag Princess*, she rescues him. *Disney* world, I find just to be...I find there is just so many different avenues to *Disney*. Whereas, with the books it doesn't progress into a TV show or *Walt Disney*. I just hate them. I have a deep hatred towards *Disney*.

Angie: I think that is why I go for more animal books...to stay away from this.

Out of all the mothers in this study, it seemed that Tara and Angie had a better grasp and understanding of some of the gender roles that tend to plague many children's books, especially in *Disney*. While Tara and Angie were quick to notice overt sexism in *Disney* stories, as my next section will show, this did not necessarily extend to more subtle depictions in other stories, or to the representations of mothers and fathers—nor was it as important for these mothers as other factors. Also worthy of noting in the discussion above is Angie's reference to animal books as a way out of the gender issue so to speak. As I discussed earlier, animal representations of humans in picture book for young children often times do exert stereotypically messages about gender roles. In fact, Dewitt (2005) argued that:

If children can readily accept personified behavior of non-human characters, authors need to be aware of the potential influence even animal character portrayals have on socialization. A child who identifies the role of a mother can

recognize expected behaviors attendant with that role whether the mother is a human or an apron-clad donkey. (p. 128)

This point brings us back to the importance of authors in creating more egalitarian stories. Authors need to make a greater effort to widen the roles of women and girls, as to not assume that animal characters will disqualify gender from being an issue. In a similar respect, publishers also need to put in the same kind of care for gender as they do for other subjects (such as race), as many seem to not notice the stereotypical and out of date images shown in stories (Flood, 2011). While Tara and Angie did begin to notice gender representations, generally speaking, most mothers in this study continued to pick up a story insofar as the stories do not show overt sexist messages in pictures or words.

### **Mothers and Gender in Children's Literature**

For most mothers in my study, gender was not something they considered when choosing stories for their children. Many mothers (similar to librarians) did look however for obvious signs of sexism in places such as the texts or illustrations. The problem is that both mothers and librarians are largely ignoring the fact that many pictures for instance, still do depict very taken-for-granted sexist messages even with a rather "gender friendly" text. By this, I mean that the text of stories often times contain a neutral plot line—making no reference to boys, girls, mothers, or fathers—yet they may still have subtle illustrations that still support a gendered discourse. For instance, Robert Munsch books (as some mothers mentioned) usually have a very funny, rhythmic plot line that engages

readers. However, a closer look at the images of mothers and fathers in some of his stories will show mothers in the background illustrations making breakfast, or doing laundry, or pictured in the home with a child during the day. These depictions often times go unnoticed.

Like librarians, some mothers also saw the abundance of animals in stories nowadays as a ticket out of the “gender problem”. Lena, begins with this claim, but then seems to negotiate and work her way through her understanding of just how prevalent gender is:

Do you know what? To tell you the truth, I have not though a lot about the gender stuff. I try to look more at the message and not refer to...actually I find children’s books have a lot of animals, like it is not always boy and girl right? No I don’t think about that so much. I am trying to think of any books we have with girls...in the primary role and in the strong role that Sarah identifies with.... [pause] You know, I am just thinking about it, and I guess there are a lot of...I have never really thought about it. Even shows she watches, a lot of the main characters are boys with the girls on the sidelines. I don’t find it so much with books, I find it is a lot more animals, critters, weather...but the princesses stories and that kind of stuff yeah absolutely.

Even with this newfound realization however, she still believes it is not *the* most important thing when selecting a story. “Yeah, no I don’t think about it at all. I think the other stuff is more important like the message, and what they are talking about”. After the interview, Lena approached me and said that I made her “think about these gender

issues”, for she had never considered it. For her, it was a newfound “awareness” that children’s picture book could quite possibly contain such indirect messages about the roles of males and females; once more assuming that authors and publishers account for such issues. Lena’s discussion of gender is noteworthy, because my initial probe of gender allowed her to begin to question and conceptualize gender issues in places such as children’s literature. This means that if more mothers and librarians could be made aware that these issues exist, then maybe there will be less of a chance that gender portrayals will go unnoticed.

Lena’s characterization of gender as irrelevant and as something she had never given much thought to also summarized the experience of other mothers as well:

Elyse: No. I look whether it is age-appropriate and the ideas are good, so I just do that. Gender is not an issue.

Amy: Oh no I have never paid attention to that.

Some mothers, such as Chloe, preferred more traditional books, in which gender was not so much a problem as it was a preference:

I know it is...I saw it from the website, it says, don’t teach her that boys and girls are different. She should blend in...but from my growing up...I still think there is difference. So I still when...like...if there is a book about potty training for girls and one for boy, I will pick a girl one. I still pick girl stuff for her.

Amy, admitted that she had not taken any notice to the ways that gender is represented in stories for her child, yet she was very aware of how books are marketed towards young boys and girls:

I don't like it. Like when you go to stores, like toy stores, you see it has a pink isle and blue isle. I hate it. I don't like to do that because as we growing up, we never saw that pink and blue thing, and we never had that distinction of this is for girls, and this is for boys. Like for instance cars are for boys, and dolls are for girls. We never were raised that way, so I don't want to do the same for her too. I don't think it is good. Whatever they like doing, I just want to give it to her. I want to give her everything, and whatever she chooses, she chooses. I want to make sure she is exposed to everything.

Despite this keen awareness to the "pink/blue" phenomena, Amy still only looks for explicit sexist messages in the stories she chooses as indicators of a bad book. As we already know though, many authors and publishers do not necessarily make such stereotypical portrayals obvious, and it is not always as easy as looking for words explicitly in the text:

I don't really notice who is the main character of the book. I am not seeing the sex of the character at all. If the story talks about it in such a way that they want you to know it is a girl, and only girls do this, then I would not pick it up. There are lots of books where the characters are only girls or only boys, but you wouldn't even notice if it was a girl or a boy. It is just a story and they have chosen a girl. Or it is a story and they have chosen a boy. As long as the message is not like only girls can do this...then I am okay. I don't even see it really who is the character. I just see whether the book is good. If they are on purpose giving a

message that you know, girls can only do this, then I don't like that book, and won't get it. But I usually look for the overall story and message. (Amy)

Generally speaking, mothers who attend Smallville library came to either see gendered messages in stories as non-existent, or irrelevant insofar as they were made overt in the text.<sup>6</sup> With that being said however, some mothers still began to question the portrayal of gender in stories that are being produced— proving that with greater awareness, such issues can be addressed.

### **Gender in the Literature: What is Being Read and Recommended?**

I decided to interview librarians and mothers on their book selection process and their experiences with gender in stories— hearing first hand accounts of opinions, and then turning to analyze the actual stories that are being recommended and read by librarians and mothers. Delving into such an inquiry can be a whole study in itself, however, for the purposes of this research I will look briefly at some of the books read during storytimes, books shared as personal favourites through interviews, and as recommended through handouts (See Appendix I). Table 7 below shows some of the books both librarians and mothers prefer.

**Table 7: Books Read/Recommended by Librarians and Mothers**

<b>Title of Book</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Year</b>
<i>Candy Apple Series</i>	Various Authors	2006-Present

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<sup>6</sup> It is important mention here that while the librarians all seemed versed in the “boys as illiterate” problem, because all of the mothers in this study had daughters, this topic of reluctant readers did not come up once. In fact, all the mothers took pride in the fact that their children loved reading!

<i>The Berenstain Bears Series</i>	Stan & Jan Berenstain	1962-Present
<i>Franklin Series</i>	Paulette Bourgeois	1986-2003
<i>Pinkalicious Series</i>	Victoria Kann	2006-Present
<i>Jillian Jiggs Series</i>	Phoebe Gilman	1985-2002
<i>Llama Llama Series</i>	Anna Dewdney	2005-Present
<i>Geronimo Stilton Series</i>	Elisabetta Dami	2004-Present
<i>Spot The Dog Series</i>	Eric Hill	1980-Present
<i>Curious George Series</i>	Margret Rey & H.A. Rey	1941-1993
<i>Caillou Series</i>	Christine L'Heureux	1990-Present
<i>Corduroy Series</i>	Don Freeman	1968-2008
<i>My Big Book of Everything for Girls</i>	Chez Pitchall	2011
<i>Me Hungry</i>	Jeremy Tankard	2008
<i>Day out with Daddy</i>	Stephen Cook	2006
<i>I'm So Embarrassed</i>	Robert Munsch	2005
<i>Andrew's Loose Tooth</i>	Robert Munsch	2002
<i>No, David!</i>	David Shannon	1998
<i>Where's Our Mama?</i>	Diane Goode	1995
<i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i>	Eric Carle	2002
<i>Chicka Chicka Boom Boom</i>	Jr. Bill Martin, John Archambault & Lois Ehlert	2000
<i>Five Little Monkeys Wash the Car</i>	Eileen Christelow	2010
<i>Periwinkle Smith</i>	John & Wendy	2009; 2010
<i>How to Lose all Your Friends</i>	Nancy Carlson	1997
<i>If you Give a Pig a Pancake</i>	Laura Numeroff	2000
<i>How do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?</i>	Jane Yolen	2000

The message and overall purpose of this chapter was to drive home the message that 1) stories containing implicit and indirect messages of gender roles for young boys and girls and mothers and fathers are abundantly present in much of the literature being circulated, 2) these messages often contain really vivid and limiting views of males and females, and 3) these issues are often times neglected by authors and publishers. Among the many

features to these stories, what I began to notice was firstly, strong *male protagonist* based characters. Stories such as *Curious George*, *Caillou*, *Spot*, *Geronimo*, and *Franklin* have stories that revolve around male characters. They have exciting, adventurous male leads. Take the *Geronimo Stilton* series for instance, a popular series books for older readers. This series focuses on Geronimo, a male mouse who keeps getting intertwined in crazy adventures. Series such as *Geronimo* are being read by many of female children of these mothers. This would not be so much an issue if the alternative—female leads—were not entrenched in gender stereotypes. A considerable amount of literature recommended and read that did focus on females, focused in on their *gendered* nature. Stories such as *Pinkalicious* for instance, continue to play up the pink “girly girl” type child. Consider this description off of Amazon.ca:

Pink, pink, pink. More than anything, Pinkalicious loves pink, especially pink cupcakes. Her parents warn her not eat too many of them, but when Pinkalicious does . . . she turns pink! What to do? This sparkling picture book, filled with such favorites as pink bubble gum, pink peonies, pink cotton candy, and pink fairy princess dresses, celebrates all things pink while showing that being yourself is best of all.

For female protagonists, often times the premise of the story has to be tied into her gendered nature—pink, and princesses—with no alternatives; whereas male characters are allowed to take part in adventure and action without the story line making a large stereotype about their gender. Tsao (2008) made the argument that illustrations have conventionally placed females in passive observer roles, while males as pictured as



active. Such illustrations do confirm the subordinate and less valued role of female, while simultaneously stressing the active, adventuresome, and admirable role of the male.

Consider also the *Candle Apple* series, another popular novel among young readers. The series is geared towards pre-teen girls, with all female protagonists. Some of the titles of their books however include: *Candy Apple: I've Got a Secret*; *Candle Apple: The Boy Next Door*; *Candle Apple: How to be a Girly Girl in Just Ten Days*; *Candy Apple: Drama Queen*. Again, such books continue to build on the stereotype that girl readers will only be interested in topics such as boys, fashion, and gossip. Authors, according to Turner-Bowker (1996), often fall into the trap of gender stereotyping when describing the behaviour or attributes of girls and boys. By doing this, authors are presenting a model that teaches our daughters and our sons their different places. To build greater gender equality within literature learning environments, it becomes important to consider the role of authors in the book process, as ideally, all children's books used in classrooms and in libraries should have well-rounded male and female characters (Tsao, 2008).

I suggest that the most under acknowledged feature in children's literature is the portrayal of mothers and fathers. Books such as *The Berenstain Bears* series, *Jillian Jiggs*, *No, David!*, *Llama Llama* (all books read by librarians and mothers) continue to show mothers pictured in the home, as primary caregivers to their children, as domestic workers, as non-full time employees, as white, as middle class, and the list continues. Griffith and Smith's (2005) notion of a mothering discourse points to a "type" of idealized motherhood. According to Horwitz (2003), there are many myths and messages contained in the current dominant discourse on mothering. However, the main message of

this discourse is that mothers are solely responsible for the physical, spiritual, and psychological well being of their children, and therefore, are held responsible (i.e. blamed) for their children's difficulties. The "perfect" mother is supposed to be responsible for caring and nurturing all of her family members (O'Reilly, 2006)—for cooking, cleaning, and child rearing—regardless of whether or not they are engaged in paid work. This idealized mother figure is present in many of the circulated books and stories.

While the role of the mother may not be crucial to the plot of the story, women as mothers continue to be depicted in the background as homemakers for the most part, shown more often in traditional areas such as the kitchen or completing laundry, which raises the question of what kind of "ideal" mother is being represented? In my conversations with Tara and Angie, I asked them about the kinds of books they read that had strong female characters:

Tara: ...*Jillian Jiggs*, she is an adventurous young girl

Angie: Juliana seems to like *Periwinkle*, she is an explorer. Like, it is a role of an explorer. So there is a lonely star and she wants to befriend the star...how does she go about befriending the star? It is her making the space-ship, it is her building it to make it fly...so yeah she does the flower and the heart bit, but there is like...she is trying to be friends with the star. It is not this traditional girl role where, she can't do anything. She is trying to figure out how to befriend.

*Jillian Jiggs* (1985) is a popular series for young readers. This is a prime example of a story that transmits indirect messages of the mothering discourse. The story is centered around Jillian Jiggs who was supposed to clean her room, but instead uses the vast materials available in her home to play—“They dressed up as dragons and tress”. “They dressed up as bad guys who never say please”. “They dressed up as chickens, cooped up and caged” and we see through a series of photographs of Jillian along with friends that “Whenever they thought that was it, they were through, she changed all their costumes and start something new”. Jillian’s mother eventually comes in with her mop, “took one look around and...fainted, KERPLOP”. These stories support my previous claim of a *type* of idealized motherhood that the mothering discourse produces—Jillian’s mother is a heterosexual white woman who depends on her husbands earnings (as she is pictured at home all day, that is what the reader is left to assume). It leaves the reader to gather that she is of a middle class, as there is an assumption not only that mothers will be available at home to clean up a mess their children make, but that mothers will have the resources and materials available for their children to make the mess in the first place.

Other examples of stories that support discourses of mothering come from *The Berenstain Bears* series, again a popular text found in nearly all libraries. The series, while attempting to help explain many important “life lessons” to readers (such as eating too much junk food), have embedded messages of gender roles through main characters of Mama Bear and Papa Bear, who continue to demonstrate women’s and men’s roles in the private and public spheres respectively. Take a recent story, *The Berenstain Bears: Sick Days* (2009). Examining only the cover itself, we could see implicit messages about

the mothering discourse: Mama bear is crouched over taking Sister's temperature, while Papa Bear hurries off to work—again demonstrating not only that it is the mother's responsibility to tend for her children when sick, but there is an underlying assumption that there will even be a mother home. Does that mean that mothers who work and cannot stay home to take care of their children if they are sick are not "good" mothers? According to Chase and Rogers (2001), the "good mother" is one who is above all, selfless. "Her children come before herself and any other need or person or commitment no matter what...she arranges her job around her children so she can be there for them as much as possible, certainly when they are sick or unhappy" (p. 30). In a similar fashion, the newly introduced series, *Llama Llama*, focus on a mother-son relationship. Throughout many of the books, Mama Llama is pictured at home with her son, showing her doing dishes, or putting him in bed. In one story, *Llama Llama Home with Mama* (2011), Llama Llama stays home from school and the entire story is filled with images of Mama Llama serving her child bringing a tray to him, reading with him, playing, making him a sandwich, and tucking him into bed. In both *Sick Days*, and *Llama Llama Home with Mama*, the mothers end up getting sick because they catch their children's illnesses—but of course, they don't mind. Both these stories transmit the messages to readers that 1) mothers will be home during the day, 2) fathers are not home, so they must be out at work, and 3) mothers must provide constant care for their children throughout the day, even if that means risking their own health while doing it.

Lastly, the absence of fathers in many of these stories was quite notable. Scholars have made the argument that fathers remain largely underrepresented in general,

appearing in fewer books than mothers, and causing them to be “invisible parents” (Adams et al., 2001; Quinn, 2009). For example *Day out with Daddy* (2006), a favourite story to share according to some librarians, centres around a “special day” with daddy when mommy is out of town. While the story is showing a young boy spending time with his dad, this plot is all too obvious—mommy leaves town so the “fun” parent parents—starting off breakfast with donuts and pastries, watching late night TV, everything as the books says, is “extra fun”. Such stories assume that the work that the mother does on a regular basis are considered “the norm”, and when the father is depicted, it is always “extra”, “fun”, outside of the usual. This construct of the humorous males ties in with the current social discourses regarding the “fun daddy role”—constructed as complement to the role of the responsible mother (Wharton, 2005, p. 249). More often than not, fathers are depicted outside of the home. The portrayals of men in the public sphere, and women in the private was found as far back as Weitzman et al.’s (1972) study of picture books, who argued that motherhood was portrayed as unrealistic; as always confined to the home and not providing an accurate picture of what mothers do, nor a realistic image of fathers as husbands who tend to rarely be pictured engaging in mundane duties of child care or domestic work. The fact that this study was completed in 1972, and yet *still* applies to modern day stories is disheartening and shows how little authors and publishers have progressed. In fact, Turner Bowker (1996) has argued that given that high production cost and price of books published in the past, much of children’s books are made to last a long time in places such as libraries, as publishers are quick to re-issue

them to maximize the return on their investment. Thus books published in the early eighties and nineties are still being read and circulated today.

Tara and Angie argued that they don't like books "that have a stereotypical role of men doing the construction and fixing things, doing all the hard work, smart work. ...whatever the stereotypical men role. So I try balance the two". They maintained that they:

... like books where daddies are doing things with the kids. So often, if you go back to books from the fifties, um...*Dick and Jane*, daddy just shows up and plays whenever he wants to play, and daddy makes things, and that is it. Like there is no room for real father involvement. I think that is culturally changing.

Like dads are there and dads are changing.

In light of this, I asked them what kinds of books they read or know of that showed strong father figures. Unfortunately, neither one of them could think of such stories, nor could they suggest any. The inability to recall any story for young children with a strong representative of fathers suggests something very absent in the literature that is being produced. Returning to Smith (1990) and textually mediated discourses, we can see how such texts represent ideals and discourses of masculinities, femininities, girlhood and boyhood. They construct this according to Wharton (2005), for the purpose of their own textual world, contributing to the construction of masculinities and femininities in society. To this, many scholars have argued that we need to help children deconstruct such dominant discourses found in the literature, and to provide them with the tools to do so—the question of the “social duty” of books (and the authors who write them) becomes

a real problem (Wharton, 2005). Children need to see opportunities and expectations that reflect a new reality, learning that their potential lies in their innate abilities and not limited by their gender (McDonald, 1989, p. 400). That is why it becomes important for all those with direct influence on children's literature and story selections—early childhood educators, librarians, teachers, parents—and especially authors and publishers, to realize the importance of exposing children to books that challenge traditional gender roles (Anderson et al., 2001).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the role of gender in librarians and mothers story selection. It has considered both how librarians and mothers select stories—much of which included personal favourites for librarians, and external recommendations for mothers—and their criteria for selecting and avoiding certain books. As it turns out, for the majority of librarians and mother in my study, gender was not a main consideration for selecting stories, despite the fact that gender roles continue to have a very visible presence in many of the books used. What this calls for is an increased awareness of the role that gender has in story production; examining the responsibility of authors and publishers to provide greater gender equality in books. This in turn would provide mothers and librarians with a more balanced selection of books to choose from.

I have used interviews with both librarians and mothers to show how they negotiate and work through their understandings of gender both as it applies to storybook

selection, and readers. For librarians, the issue became the “gendered” child (as in boys are more reluctant to read for instance) rather than how gender is shown in stories. Their ideas about gender issues consisted of choosing gendered stories they believe would appeal and capture the attention of reluctant boy readers. For mothers, generally speaking, gender was not a central factor they considered when selecting stories.

Overall, the criteria of gender did not seem to be *as* important as other factors for librarians and mothers. While some of the participants in this study did acknowledged their preference of gender positive stories, many were left to assume that the authors and publishers dealt with topics of gender beforehand, not realizing that many popular stories still show very indirect and implicit representations of boy, girls, mothers, and fathers. This demonstrates the avoidance of publishers and authors to tackle these issues, as I have shown that Griffith and Smith’s (2005) concept of a mothering discourse continues to be translated into literature for young readers. An analysis of read and recommended stories, reveals that many of the books used by both librarians and mothers continue to show: more boys in adventurous/lead roles; female protagonists described in gendered terms (i.e. girly, princess); mothers illustrated in the domestic sphere; and fathers as either absent or “fun”. Through this chapter I have attempted to show that while librarians and mothers do not hold gender issues on high regard—the bigger issue becomes how gender has been erased as a concern from the authors and publishers who produce these books.



## **CHAPTER VII**

### **CONCLUSION**

When family literacy programming allows women to explore a full range of options in their lives, when mothers and daughters, grandparents, and community members can learn and teach each other in an open, safe, and intellectually stimulating environment, when fathers and other male community members are involved in children's education, and when women have a full range of educational opportunities, then family literacy programs will have achieved a major goal in overcoming gender biases – (Cuban & Hayes, 1996, p. 14).

This final chapter presents an overview of my research and the results generated from this study. This includes a brief outline of the methodology used in the thesis, along with some of the major findings from each of my data chapters. Furthermore, I will also provide some of the limitations to this study, followed by some of the implications of this research for future work examining gender and early literacy.

#### **Review of the Study**

Initially, I began my study interested in the kind of mothering work that goes into story selection. I wanted to understand how mothers choose stories for their young children, and how the construct of gender is related to the work they do and in the stories they choose. As I stated in my methodology chapter, this research approach shifted significantly. After doing preliminary work to find a group of mothers to interview—a group who would assumedly have a large commitment to early literacy—I was introduced to storytime programs at a local library. I developed a newfound curiosity and interest in storytime programs, along with librarians who run them. I wanted to have a

better grasp of the ways in which (and if) gender is a factor in both programming and librarian's experiences, alongside the experience of mothers. My research question then broadened to include library and librarians experiences in early literacy: *How do social constructs such as gender and class guide early literacy frameworks, including library policies, librarian and mother experiences with early literacy, and storybook selection.* In this sense, I had hoped to gather a larger picture of how gender and class operate in terms of structuring early literacy work and story selection.

In order to carry out this research, I asked for volunteers at a local library in the GTA to participate in my study. The only criteria required was that librarians must have had some experience running storytime programs, and mothers must be participants in these sessions. In total, I ended up with seven different librarians to interview—all holding different jobs within Smallville library. There were in total six mothers who partook in this study, all of whom were registered in storytime programs at Smallville as well.

Working with a qualitative methodology, data was gathered in three different ways. I first spent time in Smallville library observing and recording detailed field notes and observations of storytime programming. Once I had developed a better picture of how storytimes work, the next methodological piece consisted of in-depth interviews with both librarians and mothers. I used an open-ended interview guide in conjunction with face-to-face interviews held at either the library or participants' homes to increase my understanding of their experiences with storytime and storybook selection. Interviews were transcribed and later coded for analysis. Lastly, in addition to in-depth interviews, I

also preformed a content analysis on some of the read and recommended books mentioned by librarians and mothers. Using this as a methodology allowed me to explore some of the embedded messages regarding the mothering discourse and gender roles in the illustrations and messages of popular texts for children.

My theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this study consisted of: 1) Griffith and Smith's (2005) mothering discourse. This theory assisted in understanding some of the taken-for-granted, yet widely held assumptions about the centrality of mothers roles in children's lives, particularly in relation to early literacy work. 2) Bourdieu's (1973) theory of cultural capital was also employed to explore the kinds of "valued" skills and expectations associated with early literacy work and librarian frameworks; including some of the linguistic and cultural competencies considered necessary for school success. 3) Lastly, Smith's (1987; 1990; 1999; 2005; 2006) work on Institutional Ethnography (IE), ruling relations, and textually mediated discourses were used to help frame the discussion on the everyday work of mothers (and librarians). In particular, Smith's work proved useful for understanding the nature of the early literacy work being done, along with how dominant discourses affect people's lives. Her work bridged the gap between librarian and mothering work and institutional and discursive forces.

## Summary of Results

After analyzing my interviews with librarians and mothers, and examining popular stories, I gathered some interesting conclusions to support my initial research question. My results were divided into three sections, each taking on a different topic:

### I.

In Chapter Four, the spotlight was placed on family literacy programs at Smallville. In the first of my three results chapter, I wanted to probe how gendered and class discourses drive expectations of “parenting” practices—In other words, what kinds of expectations were in place? To gather information, I asked librarians and mothers’ various questions about their experiences with storytimes at Smallville. Alongside interviews, I analyzed some of Smallville library’s institutional documents such as *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) and a *Family Literacy Calendar* (2013) which were handed out throughout programming.

When I began my observations, I noticed right away the language in which librarians spoke to participants. Much of what librarians were dictating to participants had entrenched expectations about what “parents” should be doing. Librarians continued to refer to “parents” despite the fact that mothers were predominately in attendance. Thus, there was as blurring of the work of mothers under the guise of “parents”. This proved to be a crucial piece to my research because it essentially erased the work that mothers do; failing to see it as just that: work.

In my observations, I picked up on something I heard librarians repeat over and over again: *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011). Librarians would use this as a caveat to talk about “proper” literacy habits. *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) turned out to be the library framework that guided much of the work and philosophies of librarians at Smallville. My discussions with librarians revealed the impact and importance that this text had in influencing their ideas (as well as mothers ideas) about kind of early literacy work that *should* be happening in the home. My findings suggested that librarians had strong attachment towards a particular kind of early literacy engagement: one that assumes “parents” should be transmitting school practices into the home. Librarians in my study encouraged “parents” to transfer the work of schools into the work of home. For them, it was crucial that “parents” take the necessary steps to prepare their children for school by encouraging *specific* kinds of literacy practices—practices that were applied to *all* families, regardless of individual cases. Thus, what my research insinuated was that within the institution of the library and literacy practices, there was a middle-class biased held, as librarians believed that *all* families should engage in predetermined early literacy work, indicative of their actual circumstances. Families that did not engage in such prescriptive early literacy work became categorized by librarians as “at-risk” or “in-need” of services to further support their learning.

Mothers in my study listed various reasons for attending storytime programs, but among the strongest was a determination to help their children acquire skills needed to succeed in school. There was not one mother in my research who did not at one point or another reference subsequent success in education to be among the reasons why they felt

storytimes were important. Just as librarians had encouraged “parents” to have an enriched home life, so too did mothers in my research feel as though there were “appropriate” and specific literacy guidelines to abide by in the home. They all participated in a vast array of activities (i.e. reading, crafts, trips, etc.) that support the work of schools, yet were intertwined into their home life. Despite the fact that all of these women hail from diverse cultures and religions, my discussions with mothers revealed that they all worked to conform to a particular kind of learning; again, a kind of learning that supports what dominant ideals suggest are “proper” early literacy techniques for families to engage in. Mothers were quick to adopt western songs, stories, rhymes and the like, while neglecting to see their own cultural literacy habits as worthy.

## II.

In my second set of findings, I examined the gendered approach to family literacy programs and early literacy work. As my previous results revealed, librarians and mothers held strong attitudes about the kind of work expected to be done—both in terms of what librarians expect out of “parents”, and what mothers expect from themselves. In this chapter, I took up the idea of “parental work”; unpacking what this term means in the context of early literacy.

Even before any interviews took place, my observations alone alluded to the gendered nature of this work, as I witnessed a substantial difference in the amount of mothers attending storytime programs versus fathers. During storytime programs, librarians often provided suggestions as to what “parents” should be doing, however, they

consistently shifted back and forth from “parents” to “mothers”. I found this to be true even during my interviews with librarians, as often times “mothers” would be used in place of “parents”, or vice versa. This indicated a very embedded assumption about who exactly is meant to take on the bulk of early literacy work. There was no doubt that librarians believed mothers were more inclined to fulfill these duties, as they often times spoke about library programming as being a large benefit for mothers to socialize and learn from one another.

Perhaps the most striking finding from my study was the examination of Smallville library’s guiding framework, *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011). This was yet another example of a textually mediated discourse with embedded assumptions about who is meant to be involved in early literacy work and how they are expected to be involved. This pamphlet suggests that in order for “parents” (again, not making visible the work of mothers) to support their children’s literacy, they must be heavily involved in at-home literacy practices. It positions “good” parents as those who engage in a number of predetermined activities that, among other things, require sufficient time and money. This pamphlet is entrenched in the discourse of mothering as many of the suggestions offered (i.e. do household chores together) link literacy work to domesticity, which as we know, tends to be taken up by mothers. Such policies take for granted and assume that there is a generic type of family (two-parent, heterosexual, middle class) that can afford to either have one parent home during the time, or the time in the evening to support their children’s learning in such ways.

My results indicated that while librarians were conclusive that mothers do much of the work, and dominate the majority of storytime sessions, the absence of fathers did not seem significant. In fact, librarians spoke about the work of mothers in a very matter-of-way; as if this was something natural, normal, and obvious. Librarians held their own opinions about the difference in interaction styles of mothers and fathers, arguing that mothers tended to be on average, much more passive and easy going with their children, while fathers who attended seemed to be more dominant, present, and in control. Despite the lack of male figures in storytime programs, the only reference to encouraging more fathers to attend was an unsuccessful attempt to pilot a solely “dad and me” program. This program quickly reverted back into what librarians called a “normal” storytime—mothers and their children—because in the end, mothers would come in place of the fathers.

All the mothers in my study acknowledged that they tend to take on the major role in their children’s early literacy work, which includes doing the majority of reading, or taking them to the library and so on. Mothers naturally took up this role without much hesitation—it seemed to be a natural idea for them to do the work and have their husbands “help” out when they can. Interestingly enough, my conversations with mothers suggested that even though they admitted to taking on responsibility for much of the early literacy work, some still straddled between their own ideas about who should be in charge of such early literacy work (both parents), versus the reality of the situation (which was that mothers tended to be the ones doing the most work).



Mothers also described storytime programs as way for them to learn from other mothers. Thus many felt as though storytime sessions served the larger purpose of uniting mothers, and allowing them to discuss early literacy techniques with one another. They came to see this as an advantage of attending, which again, reaffirms the role of mothers in early literacy work. Mothering work became a social process for these participants, as they were able to jointly participate in the discourse of mothering, learning from each other about what they *should* be doing. This social participation of mothering work also led mothers to compare themselves and the work they do against “other working moms” who may not be able to afford to engage in similar activities. The discourse of mothering then structured the way in which mothers compared themselves with one another, and the ways in which they came to see librarians and other kinds of professionals (i.e. pediatricians) as “experts” in guiding the work they do. Much of what they thought they *should* be doing (i.e. reading everyday, not allowing a TV in the home) emanated from other mothers and the opinions and advice of said “experts”, rather than their own. This reaffirms the notion of “motherhood” as being a social creation.

### III.

My final data chapter explored the construct of gender in story selections of both librarians and mothers. I concluded that overall, gender did not play a very large role for librarians and mothers in this study in terms of selecting books to read with children at home and in storytime programming, despite gender having a large presence in many of the read and recommended books.

To probe the topic of gender, I began by asking librarians and mothers' general topics about the nature of their story selection, such as where their search for stories begins, what their general criteria was for choosing one book over another, and whether there were any reasons to avoid certain books. Librarians often began their pursuit of stories either through staff meetings or through personal favourites to share with the storytime group. Mothers usually looked for recommendations either through the library or bestseller lists. Popular motives for selecting one story over the other included factors such as length, illustrations, or overall general appeal, while reasons to avoid a story included topics such as death, scary stories, long or wordy stories, and those stories that touched on or challenged a particular religion or culture.

The issue of gender however seemed absent for the majority of librarian and mothers. While a few librarians and mothers touched briefly on the subject of gender in stories, for the most part gender issues (in terms of the portrayals of males and females) were largely invisible. This was among the most striking results from my research: that much of what librarians and mothers were reading had a very gendered bias to it, yet the topic of gender seemed to be a very unspoken and silent issue. Both mothers and librarians responded differently to the question of whether gender was a key consideration when selecting stories.

For librarians, taking up gender issues meant choosing stories they think will appeal to either boys or girls. The issue was to consider the gender of the child, rather than the ways in which boys and girls are shown in stories. Thus, their construction of gender was oriented towards the "gendered child"—seeing children as already having

predetermined interests that they must attend to. This was true particularly of boys, in which librarians believed were at risk of being reluctant readers and required storytimes that catered more towards their “gendered” interests (i.e. dinosaurs, trucks etc.). The majority of mothers never considered gender as a criterion worth examining, and had for the most part, come to see gender as a nonexistent issue. This proved to be one of the most interesting pieces of information that emerged from my research, as librarians and mothers in general believed that gender was either unimportant, not *as* important as other parts of stories (i.e. illustrations, message), or non-existent because of reasons such as animal characters in place of humans.

Looking at some of the stories used by librarians and mothers, I demonstrated how the mothering discourse could be found in children’s literature, as many underlying assumptions about motherhood (along with fatherhood) continue to be made visible in many subtle ways (such as pictures). The undertones of the mothering discourse continue to be embedded in a social location that favours the white, heterosexual, middle class, as the pictures and messages in many stories depict stereotypical images of mothers at home during the day with their children, or engaging in household chores, while fathers are either absent or shown in fun and playful ways. Messages were not only limited to mothers and fathers, but many stories in use continue to show boys and girls in very limiting and stereotypical ways—boys as heroic, adventurous and leads, while females continue to be described in ways that tie in their assumed gendered interests (pretty, pink, gossip, fashion etc.). While librarians and mothers were not cognizant of gender portrayals, my results raised a very profound point: authors and publishers who are

producing such stories continue to play largely on comfortable stereotypes about children and parents, as these kinds of books continue to be found and used widely in libraries.

This issue cannot be seen then as an individual issue insofar as librarians and mothers were not “seeing” gender; rather, my results raised the question of how would they know otherwise? The implications of my findings, and the conceptual issue that arose from my chapter became the question of how gender has been largely ignored by those in charge of producing books (such as authors or publishers). My research called for a greater examination of the responsibilities and roles of authors and publishers in ensuring a more egalitarian representation of gender in stories.

### **Study Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

This research set out to achieve a greater understanding of librarian and mothering experiences of storytime and early literacy. Still, there were some limitations to this study. First off, this research was limited to only one library site in a suburban area of the GTA. Thus future research should consider the relationship between demographics of a particular area to the expectations, and involvement of parents and librarians, and their selection of books. Studying urban areas such as the downtown core or other geographical pockets may lend themselves to a different set of results, which would make for an interesting comparison.

In addition, as I outlined in my previous methodology chapter, the mothers involved in this study were either unemployed or working part-time. As a result, there

was an absence of full-time working mothers in my study. The experience of full-time mothers should thus be taken up in future work, attempting to window in on their involvement in early literacy work. In addition, fathers experience with early literacy should also be considered, as to contrast their opinions to that of mothers would make for an interesting study. It would be noteworthy to understand how fathers conceptualize early literacy and mothering “work”. The experiences of same-sex parents should also be studied, to see whether the discourse of mothering structures and guides their work in much of the same way as it did for the mothers in my study. Furthermore, unintentionally, it turned out that all participants in this study had daughters. Perhaps however, this was no coincidence—it is quite possible that mothers assumed their daughters would benefit or appreciate these programs more, which contributed to their reasons for coming. Future research should also examine mother and father participants with sons as well, as to see whether there are (if any) differences in terms of their engagement in early literacy work, and more interestingly, the kinds of stories they select.

Lastly, and most importantly, future research should consider the roles of authors and publishers in further contributing to gendered messages in many stories. I could only sample a handful of books, however I still gathered an impression that gender was not given adequate consideration from those in charge of producing texts. This means, as Turner-Bowker (2008) pointed out, a closer look is needed at how books become ranked as “the best”, as these are the books that often times are selected by librarians and mothers. More so, research must examine the guidelines used by publishers and library associations to ensure equal gender representation of literature. This is the starting point

for future research, which needs to examine whether authors and publishers are aware of subtle aspects of gender stereotypes found in books ranked as “the best”, and whether they would be prepared to change definitions of what “the best” entails to include books that more accurately represent real people (Turner-Bower, 2008, p. 478). While there may be no guarantee that authors and publishers will produce such texts, it becomes important to consider ways to teach librarians and mothers how to confront and filter through many gender biases they will encounter in stories.

Lastly, research should also look into, and consider, how libraries and librarians could adapt storytime programs to take into account all the different socio-economic and background of families, making sure to address taken for granted things such as access to libraries, times, recourses, and the like.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Family literacy programs can enhance children’s literacy learning and be valued by communities if they are rigorously designed, sensitively implemented and comprehensively evaluated (Hannon et al., 2003, p. 23). The challenge for literacy educators are to value what families bring to programs, “but not to the extent of simply reflecting back families’ existing literacy practices. Somehow programmers must offer families access to some different or additional literacy practices—but through collaboration and negotiation rather than imposition” (Nutbrown et al., 2005, p. 27). Caspe (2003) reminds us that literacy should be more than a set of neutral and objective

skills. The purpose of literacy programs should not be viewed as simply for the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant standard language or priming children to be school literate. Rather, the purpose of literacy programs should be situated and viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform, and make sense of the world, together.

Reforming the way literacy has traditionally been approached also means expanding conventional ideas about gender roles—broadening our understandings of the work that mothers are expected to do, and making sure to include fathers in this equation. This means encouraging a greater number of men to participate in early literacy work and storytime programming. The larger issue in all of this, is not necessarily the “work” involved:

...the problem is not whether women should or should not support their children’s learning. The issue is the state’s ambivalent role in emphasizing the importance of providing optimal early learning environments, early literacy, parental involvement in schooling and so on while relying on individual mothers to carry out the necessary pedagogical work. (Smythe & Isserlis, 2002, p. 14)

The regulation in library texts such as *Every Child Ready to Read* (2011) or Family Literacy Calendars (2013), as I have shown throughout this research, are entrenched in the discourse of mothering; essentially suggesting that the kind of “work” needed for literacy success is rooted in the daily work of mothers. The concern here is as Smythe and Isserlis (2002) have argued, is not the emphasis placed on learning and reading, as the majority of people (if not all) do want their children to succeed in literacy, in school,

in life. The *real* issue becomes how institutions such as libraries, and frameworks (i.e. *Every Child Ready to Read*) continue emphasize a particular kind of work that needs to be done — work that is deemed to be important by “experts” — while simultaneously implying and producing discourses to suggest that it is mothers who must carry out this pedagogical work. Libraries are vital sites for mediating advice, and as such, they should also consider themselves to be sites for critically reflecting on the intersections between institutional expectations and situated experiences, in hopes to bring women’s domestic literacy work out of the private domestic sphere, and into the realm of debate and social action (Carson, 2009, p. 297).

Family storytime programs according to Caspe (2003), maintain participant control, and in order for change to occur, there must be an invoked dialogue about the pedagogical process—developing a content that centres on critical social issues from participants’ lives to create pathways for action and social change. This becomes true for stories as well. Institutions such as the library must take opportunities to demonstrate how to critically read stories; using them to explore social issues, and to identify and resist gender stereotypes. Thus, we must find way to guide librarians and mothers to make more conscious efforts to show examples of strong males and female figures outside of traditional spheres (Cuban & Hayes, 1996), and to choose selectively for more balanced portrayals of gender, until the time when authors and publishers provide us with such a balance. It is indisputable that more effort is needed from authors and publishers to provide children with literature that more closely parallels the roles of males and females in contemporary society (Hamilton et al., 2006; Tsao, 2008).



In sum, it seems that family literacy programs often have fixed assumptions about the necessary steps for “proper” literacy habits to form, along with ideas about who has the primary responsibility to ensure and follow such prescribed work. There becomes a silence then, about who is meant to improve children’s literacy, and what kind of necessary family is needed to do so. As my research has shown, there is a growing importance to recognize how gendered discourses are intertwined with early literacy—acknowledging the work that mothers do, understanding some of the textually mediated discourses of institutions such as the library, and the expectations of early literacy work, while also calling into attention representations of gender in stories. Addressing and raising awareness to these issues can pave way for a more egalitarian approach to future early literacy work—moving towards shared parental responsibilities, institutional frameworks to support it, and a more balanced selection of stories to expose children to.

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**APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTION OF STORYTIME PROGRAMS HELD  
AT SMALLVILLE LIBRARY**

<b>Name of Program</b>	<b>Drop-in or Registered</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Descriptions</b>
Rise & Shine	Drop-in	All Ages	Free	Saturday Mornings	"Start your day with some toe-tapping and hand-clapping fun! Rise and shine with stories, songs and rhymes"
Sweet Dreams	Drop-in	All Ages	Free	Tuesday Nights	"Almost ready for bed? Want to encourage sleepy time imagination? Join us for a weekly storytime where pajamas are encouraged, teddy bears are an asset and fun is a must"
Welcome to Canada	Drop-In	All Ages	Free	Thursday Nights	"A storytime designed specially for newcomers to Canada. Join us for stories, songs and rhymes with a focus on new words, concepts and ideas!"
Shake, Rattle and Read	Registered	Birth-Crawlers	\$15	Tuesday Mornings	"Babies laugh, babies bounce, babies dance! A fun program filled with stories, bounces and lots of laughs for pre-crawlers. Caregivers participate actively"

We're ONE-derful	Registered	12M-24M	\$15	Monday Mornings	"a one-derful storytime for children 12-24 months of age plus their adult caregiver. First stories, music, rhymes and whole body movement. Sing along with the storyteller-it's fun for all!"
Terrific TWOs	Registered	24M-35M	\$15	Thursday Mornings	"A fun storytime for toddlers aged 24-35 months for age plus their adult caregiver. Join in with the stories, music, songs and rhymes"
Alphabet Soup	Registered	3Y-5Y	\$15	Wednesday Mornings	"Each week storytime focuses on one letter that is used in rhymes, stories and songs, encouraging parents and preschoolers to learn about literacy together"
Kinderfun	Registered	4Y-5Y	\$15	Wednesday Afternoons	"A new program to help get your child ready for and excited about kindergarten. Sing, rhyme, and read together while exploring basic concepts and FUNdamnetals including letters, numbers, shapes and colours"



## **APPENDIX B: INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT**

As you know, my name is Jessica Rizk, and I am a Masters of Education student at York University. Right now, I am conducting research for my thesis, which broadly stated, aims to look at, and understand the relationship of families and literacies. More specifically, my research looks at how parents engage in early literacy activities with their kids, through coming to programs held at libraries. I am also interested in looking at what kinds of books they choose and why.

In addition, there is also a large librarian component to my research. I am interested as well in looking at librarian interaction with stories, along with the kinds of stories librarians choose and/or recommend for parents, why certain books are chosen over others, and just learning more about the storytime sessions in general. This is important for understanding the kind of engagement both parents and librarians have with child literacy, as it is a niche in current literature. Right now, I hope to interview around five to seven librarians before Christmas time, and begin to interview around five to seven mother participants in the New Year.

For your information, everything we speak about during this interview will be completely confidential. Your name will not appear anywhere in the write-up. Your identity will be completely anonymous. Also, your participation in this study is completely voluntary. So if you choose to be involved now, and later down the road decide you would like to be removed from the study, that is completely alright.

As we go through the interview questions, I would just like you to know that there are no right or wrong answers. I am particularly interested in your experiences with storytime sessions, literacy, book selections and so on. If there is a question you do not understand, or would not like to answer, please feel free to tell me. If you have any questions right now I would be happy to answer, if not, you may ask at any point during the interview or email me later and I would be happy to answer. If you agree to continue, may I ask that you sign an informed consent form. One will be yours to keep for your records, and the other will stay with me.

## APPENDIX C: LIBRARIAN INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Please tell me about the storytime sessions....
  - a. How long you have been doing them...
  - b. Were you asked to join or did you want to?
  - c. How did the story-time sessions arise? Demand from parents or library?
  
2. How do you choose stories? ...
  - a. the ones you recommend...
  - b. the ones you look for...
  - c. the ones you avoid...
  - d. Why do you choose certain stories/themes over others?
  - e. Where do you get them from?
  
3. It recent years, there was a lot of talk about gender in stories, especially in terms of male and female representations. Do you find that to be an issue when choosing stories?
  
4. Tell me about the groups you conduct...What do you see in groups?
  - a. Who comes to these kinds of groups? (demographics of the area...)
  - b. Experience with fathers/nannies?
  - c. Any books participants don't like?
  - d. Is it very top-down?
  - e. Do participants ask questions about what kinds of books to read?
  - f. Do you adapt to language of parents?
  - g. Do you find books in other languages?
  
5. What about the time of day you choose to hold these sessions? (Difference between sessions & night)
  
6. What do you want or hope that participants/kids will get from the storytime programs or library experience?
  - a. What will those who attend receive?
  - b. What do you want to see more of? Less of?
  
7. In your opinion, how would you describe the relationship between literacy and preparation for schooling?
  - a. i.e. every child ready to read pamphlet?

Conclusion:

Do you have any questions? Or is anything else you would like to speak about?  
This has been great. Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me. Just a reminder that everything will be confidential, and you can feel free at any time to ask not to use this interview.

## APPENDIX D: MOTHER INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Your Background
  - How old are you?
  - How many children do you have (ages?)?
  - What is your occupation
  - What is your partner (if applicable) occupation
2. Library Visits
  - How long have you been coming to the library? How often?
  - What are your goals for your family visits to the library?
  - How do you use library materials and resources during visits and at home?
  - How often would you say you as opposed to any other family member (partner, relative, grandparent etc.) take your children to the library/read at home/engage in literacy activities
3. Experience with Storytimes
  - What was it that made you decide to register your child in the program?
  - Did you start as a drop-in?
  - What has been your experience with storytimes
  - What is it about the storytimes that you feel benefits your child
  - What do you like most about them?
  - Anything you dislike?
  - What do you feel your children are leaving the program with?
  - Do you feel you benefit in anyway?
4. Literacy/Prep for schooling
  - In your opinion is this kind of literacy work in a way, a preparation for schooling?
  - Do you think it makes a difference? If you start earlier as opposed to later in life?
  - How did you learn to teach kids how to read or know that reading is something you wanted to instill in your child at an early age?
  - Who do you think has the primary responsibility to teach children to read?
5. Picking stories
  - What are the kinds of stories you look for/recommend
  - What is important for you when picking stories
  - Are there any kinds of stories you avoid?

- Where do you find/buy/read stories?

#### 6. Gender Issues

- In recent years there has been issues raised about the representations of boys and girls in stories. For example –boys as adventurous, overrepresented vs. girls less as lead characters
- Do you pay attention to those issues when selecting books?
- If so, can you give me an example?

#### 7. Conclusion

- Any questions?
- Topics we haven't covered?

## APPENDIX E: LIBRARIAN INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Date:**

**Study Title:** Mother knows best: Factors associated with maternal story book selection<sup>7</sup>

**Researcher:** Jessica Rizk, MEd candidate, Graduate Program in Education, York University

**Purpose of the Research:**

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between mothers and literacy, and the kind of “mothering work” that goes into storybook selection. Specifically, it is to look at how mothers select stories for their children; the kinds of stories that are selected; and why certain stories are chosen over others. It will also examine portrayals of mothers in popular stories for young children. The research will be conducted through focus groups consisting of 5-7 mothers. The discussion will be recorded and used for data in my subsequent thesis.

In addition to understanding the connection between mothers and literacy, this study also seeks to understand the relationship between librarians and the drop-in story-time sessions held at local libraries. In particular, the focus is on the role of the librarians in conducting and organizing these sessions, and the rationale behind them.

**What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:**

In this research, you will be asked to participate in an interview regarding the nature of story-time sessions. Questions will be focused on the librarians’ work in facilitating such sessions—Who decides what stories to read? How do certain stories/themes emerge? How are story-time sessions created? The estimated time can vary depending on the nature of the conversation, however, the interview will aim to be approximately **forty-five minutes or less**, depending on the amount of time available to the participants. As gratitude, a **\$10 Tim Horton's Card** will be offered.

**Risks and Discomforts:**

I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research.

**Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:**

The benefits of this to the researcher are the ability to examine a niche in the area of child literacy and mothering. Exploring the steps towards the creation of story-time sessions, and how certain topics, themes, and books are chosen, will help to further understand the rationale and planning that goes into holding such sessions, and the potential benefits towards mothers. Participants in this study are able to self-reflect on the story sessions that they run, and their methods and strategies for organizing them. The

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<sup>7</sup> Name of study is tentative and may change

interviews provide an opportunity to discuss any concerns/worries/issues that librarians may face when planning such events.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

**Withdrawal from the Study:**

You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. If you decide to stop participating, you will still be eligible to receive the promised pay for agreeing to be in the project. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or York University. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, all data generated as a consequence of your participation will be destroyed.

**Confidentiality:**

All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and, unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The data will be collected via a taped recorder and some handwritten notes. Once complete, the data will be transcribed and stored on a personal computer. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility and only the researcher will have access to this information. Once the thesis is completed, the data will be deleted from the computer. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

**Questions about the Research:**

If you have any questions about the research in general or your role in the study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor, Alison Griffith.

Jessica Rizk  
416-821-6010  
jessica\_rizk@edu.yorku.ca

Alison Griffith  
416-736-2011 Ext 88796  
agriffith@edu.yorku.ca

The graduate program in Education may also be contacted.

282 Winters College  
Tel: 416-736-5018  
Fax: 416-736-5913  
gradprogram@edu.yorku.ca

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this

process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca

**Legal Rights and Signatures:**

I \_\_\_\_\_, consent to participate in *Mother knows best: Factors associated with maternal story book selection* conducted by Jessica Rizk. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant )

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher)



## APPENDIX F: MOTHER INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Date:**

**Study Title:** Mother knows best: Factors associated with maternal story book selection<sup>8</sup>

**Researcher:** Jessica Rizk, MEd candidate, Graduate Program in Education, York University

**Purpose of the Research:**

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between mothers and literacy, and the kind of “mothering work” that goes into storybook selection. Specifically, it is to look at how mothers select stories for their children; the kinds of stories that are selected; and why certain stories are chosen over others. The research will be conducted through focus groups consisting of 5-7 mothers. The discussion will be recorded and used for data in my subsequent thesis.

**What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:**

In the focus groups, participants will be asked to share their thoughts/opinions/feelings/concerns/questions/comments regarding their approach to selecting stories (i.e. where do they begin looking? Why are certain stories chosen over others), and the kind of “work” that goes into this. The estimated time can vary depending on the nature of the conversation, however, the focus group will aim to be approximately **forty-five minutes or less**, depending on the amount of time available to the participants. Participants will be offered light refreshments during the session and a **\$10 Chapters gift card** as a gesture for taking time to participate in the study.

**Risks and Discomforts:**

I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research.

**Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:**

The benefit of this research is to examine “mothering work” in terms of story-selection, and the steps taken on behalf of mothers to encourage literacy habits within their children. This is a gap in current research, and it will shed light to an unexamined area in the domain of mothering and literacy.

Participants in this study will have the opportunity to share and compare their ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences regarding mothering and literacy in a safe and respectful environment. They have the chance to engage and discuss with other mothers the similarities and differences in their story selection process, along with any concerns/worries/difficulties/questions they may face in selecting appropriate books for their children. The focus groups will also be a space to address many issues surrounding child literacy (such as gender portrayals in stories and finding the “right” books).

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<sup>8</sup> Name of study is tentative and may change

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

**Withdrawal from the Study:**

You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. If you decide to stop participating, you will still be eligible to receive the promised pay for agreeing to be in the project. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or York University. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, all data generated as a consequence of your participation will be destroyed.

**Confidentiality:**

All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and, unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The data will be collected via a taped recorder and some handwritten notes. Once complete, the data will be transcribed and stored on a personal computer. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility and only the researcher will have access to this information. Once the thesis is completed, the data will be deleted from the computer. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

**Questions about the Research:**

If you have any questions about the research in general or your role in the study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor, Alison Griffith.

Jessica Rizk  
(416) 821-6010  
jessica\_rizk@edu.yorku.ca

Alison Griffith  
(416)-736-2100 Ext. 88796  
agriffith@edu.yorku.ca

The graduate program in Education may also be contacted.  
282 Winters College  
Tel: 416-736-5018  
gradprogram@edu.yorku.ca

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior

Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca

**Legal Rights and Signatures:**

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Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant )

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher)