

**Transforming Public Libraries as Spaces of  
Refuge & Resiliency During Climate Crisis:  
Toronto Public Library Youth and Staff Perspectives**

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**A Major Paper or Major Project Report or Portfolio or Thesis  
submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Environmental  
Studies York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada**

**July 31, 2019**

**ABSTRACT**

As climate change progresses and environmental degradation threatens life on earth, public libraries have the potential and obligation to transform their roles to become a true place of refuge and resiliency for their communities. This can be accomplished through a dramatic change in their vision, to include: focusing heavily on their environmental responsibility to their communities, enhancing environmental literacy education, furthering environmentally-friendly organizational practices, and creating solid community networks to manage climate emergencies which will result in more resilient communities. As a Toronto Public Library employee for over eight years, my own experiences and reflections are discussed. Interviews were conducted with four children who frequent the Toronto Public Library Jane Sheppard branch and one Toronto Public Library Librarian. As one of the leading public library systems in the world, the Toronto Public Library has the capacity to become a prime example of developing their branches successfully to be hubs of the community providing refuge and resiliency during climate crisis.

## FOREWORD

York University's Master in Environmental Studies (MES) degree provides a deep focus on interdisciplinary research in finding solutions to environmental issues. There is very little literature regarding utilizing public libraries as spaces for climate change solutions. The focus has been on providing communities with environmental education and moving towards using environmentally-friendly practices as an organization. As a Toronto Public Library worker for many years, I witnessed the potential for the fields of environmental studies and library information sciences to merge in providing relief for communities during climate crisis. Having completed requirements for the Graduate Diploma in Environmental/Sustainability Education (offered jointly by the Faculty of Environmental Studies and Faculty of Education) I was provided the platform to delve into the nature of community organizations, like the Toronto Public Library, and investigate how they can further their vision of assisting communities but with environmental crisis in mind. The point of this research is to use Toronto Public Library employee reflections and children's voices as a guide in transforming the role of public libraries as places of refuge and resiliency, with a heavy focus on the environmental impacts their communities are facing. The solutions found include further improving patron environmental literacy, organizational environmentally-friendly practices, deliberately preparing for climate change disasters, and creating sound community connections with residents and other organizations to provide protection and refuge. The goal is that through these outcomes public libraries can change to become community hubs of refuge and resiliency in the preparation for and aftermath of these inevitable situations.

**DEDICATION**

To Bear, for being the best example of loving others and helping me discover my purpose and path to serving the planet and everything in it. To Steve Alsop, a million thanks for being such a marvelous and thoughtful supervisor. To each and every kind-hearted patron and colleague I've encountered at Toronto Public Library over the years, your embodiment of sincere community spirit is what moved me to write this paper. To the brilliant and resilient kids who eagerly participated in this research (before even knowing what was in the gift bags), you truly are the light of this world guiding us home.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Toronto Public Library is situated on Indigenous land and Dish with One Spoon territory. This is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. Toronto Public Library gratefully acknowledges these Indigenous nations for their guardianship of this land. York University acknowledges its presence on the traditional territory of many Indigenous Nations. The area known as Tkaronto has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron-Wendat, and the Metis. It is now home to many Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region. According to Koleszar-Green (2019), regarding York University's land acknowledgment, "it talks about the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant treaty...the central circle represents a dish, and in that dish the great peacemaker, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, cut up the beaver tail and put it in that dish, so we can serve it to each other with one spoon. That dish has three simple teachings. First, never take more than your share. Second, make sure there's enough food to go around for everybody. Number three, don't foul the dish or take the dish."

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## Introduction

### How can Public Libraries Become More Useful as Climate Change Worsens?

“A library in the middle of a community is a cross between an emergency exit, a life raft, and a festival. They are cathedrals of the mind; hospitals of the soul; theme parks of the imagination” (Moran, 2012, p. 92).

We are facing a world-wide crisis. Anthropogenic climate change is threatening our lives and the lives of future generations. The time for action is now, as we face: increasing weather extremes; irreversible damage to flora and fauna; destruction of the infrastructure necessary for operating a society; rise in sea water levels due to melting ice caps; escalation of resource insecurity (leading to further violence, wars, and famine); pollution damaging air, land, and water quality; rising income inequality (leading to exponentially more instances of poverty and health risks); human overpopulation and overcrowding; and degradation of well-being, the human-nature connection, and community spirit (IPCC, 2007; Pink, 2018; Tangney, 2017). What use are current institutions and advancing technologies if they are not put to work to tackle the fast-approaching planetary collapse that is due to climate crisis?

With time ticking and climate issues rapidly becoming more complex and intertwined, how can we educate the public (through trusted means) to get the truth out and create spaces for sincere conversations and collaborative solutions? This paper argues that as climate change progresses, public libraries have the potential and obligation to transform their roles and become a true place of refuge and resiliency for their communities. This can be accomplished through a drastic change of their vision to include their environmental responsibility to their communities, enhancing environmental literacy education, furthering environmentally-friendly organizational practices, and creating solid community networks to deal with the patrons that seek refuge in



libraries during climate emergencies, which will culminate in more resilient communities. As a Toronto Public Library (TPL) staff member for over eight years, I will discuss my own experiences and reflections. This paper will also use thematic analysis to evaluate interviews conducted with four children who frequent the Jane Sheppard TPL branch, as well as an interview with a TPL Librarian. As one of the leading public library systems in the world (Toronto Public Library [TPL], 2016), TPL has the capacity to become a prime example of a space that focuses on providing refuge and resiliency for communities while climate catastrophes escalate.

## **Chapter 1: Personal Reflections as a Public Library Worker**

According to the TPL *Strategic Plan 2016-2019* website (TPL, 2019b), “TPL is ranked first in North America in circulation, visits, and electronic visits per capita among libraries serving populations of two million or more in 2015, the latest year available for comparative data. There are more than one-hundred branches within the City of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. TPL is a large, complex, dynamic system that can transform communities by focusing much more seriously on the present and impending climate issues facing Toronto. As a current Public Service Assistant and employee for over eight years I have witnessed communities share and grow in these spaces, shape public libraries, and be shaped by them. All members of our society are welcomed. We regularly face understaffing and an overflow of patrons. Public libraries are used for such a variety of reasons it can be difficult to pin down in one sentence why they are so relevant. From my experience, for those who value these spaces it is often for the immeasurable resources offered, the constant opportunities for ongoing dialogue, and the physical presence of a place to just exist freely without the pressures of consumer culture. How many indoor spaces can a community member be in that does not categorize them as a loitering delinquent simply because they have not spent money?

It seems that public libraries are not valued enough for what they truly are: a space where all aspects of a community are being played out. They can be seen as mirrors that mimic all the dynamics of a community, or society, in one place. Whatever issues occur within a community (or nation), you can walk into a library and witness these same issues unfold at the local level. If there are people with oppressive ideologies within society, you can be sure there will be a few patrons and (sadly) staff members that perpetuate this as well. For those who care for their communities, the hope is that people who carry power (politicians, doctors, police, teachers,

librarians, etc.) will use that power with great compassion and tact. The even greater hope is that systemic issues that plague public libraries will be overcome by a restructuring that puts emphasis on their role as a place of refuge and resiliency during climate crisis. TPL can serve as a great example of a famous public library system becoming the refuge and place of resiliency for communities as climate crisis magnifies.

### **History, Services & Vision of TPL**

The Toronto Public Library began as a private subscription library, founded December 9th, 1810 (TPL, 2019a). The Free Libraries Act was passed in 1882 by the Ontario Legislature (TPL, 2019a). Alderman John Hallam, who later became the first chairman of the Toronto Public Library Board, led the campaign to create a free public library in Toronto (TPL, 2019a), see Appendix A. In 1883, the Free Library By-Law was approved by the majority of Toronto voters (TPL, 2019a). In Ontario, the first municipalities to establish free public libraries were Toronto and Guelph (TPL, 2019a). On March 6, 1884, the Toronto Public Library officially opened in the old Mechanic's Institute building between the streets of Church and Adelaide (TPL, 2019a), see Appendix B.

Today, in order to access all services for free, one must: live, work, own property, or go to school in Toronto (TPL, 2019b). Within 2015, there were more than 18 million visits to more than 100 branches, over 34 million visits to the official website [www.tpl.ca](http://www.tpl.ca) and more than 962,000 participants attended over 40,000 library programs (TPL, 2019b). Clearly our organization has a significantly positive impact on the people we serve, as shown in TPL's strategic plan (TPL, 2019b) and economic impact study (Stolarick & Silk, 2013). For the *Strategic Plan 2016-2019* (TPL, 2019b) TPL consulted with Torontonians and developed goals, including: "creating online and in-branch environments that connect neighborhoods and

communities, offering opportunities for partnerships, civic engagement and resident participation” (p. 20). This would be a great way to further attention on aiding communities during environmental emergencies.

The overall TPL vision states: “Toronto Public Library will be recognized as the world’s leading library by informing and inspiring Toronto and its communities, making us all more resilient, more knowledgeable, more connected and more successful” (TPL, 2019b). This statement appears to encompass what is necessary for Torontonians to meet the climate crisis challenge. As TPL branches have long-established themselves as spaces of refuge, the need now is to enhance these places so communities can build resilience, knowledge, connection, and successfully overcome the obstacles of environmental crises.

### **Public Library Naysayers**

When I first started working at TPL I was surprised to find that the fact public libraries even exist is actually quite a contentious one. Over the years when the subject of my job has come up, I have encountered some people who are strongly opposed to public libraries. These same people are commonly financially fortunate enough to fully participate in capitalist systems and purchase their own private items, like computers or new books. The same ignorant argument is frequently used that they see no need for public libraries to continue to exist since the only remedy for poverty is employment, which would result in no one needing public libraries. Some have literally argued that public libraries are “a waste of taxpayers money!” or “a place where lazy people, who don’t feel like working, go to use a computer”. To hear this kind of harsh and uninformed rhetoric was a bit jarring, at first. However, I now appreciate these conversations as they have taught me to hone my arguments in justifying why public libraries are so important to all community members. Furthermore, these conversations have opened my eyes to the myriad

of ways public libraries already serve their communities through environmentalist principles, such as sustainability and refuge during times of environmental danger.

It seems to me that at the heart of many arguments against these public-serving institutions are pervasively capitalist, neoliberal ideals. According to a capitalist perspective, there will always be better and newer entertainment to consume (books, movies, video games, music, etc.) or technological devices to purchase (Klein, 2015). If one takes an anti-sharing approach, when does the waste end? Once that book is read or that device is “outdated” what happens to these products? The key oversight here is that this is exactly what they are: products, commodities. How can we measure these items against human suffering, species loss, habitat destruction, and the impending extinction of life on earth? In Naomi Klein’s (2015) book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. Climate*, the Canadian social and climate activist, author, and filmmaker warns against the neoliberal capitalist compulsion of economic growth. Klein (2015) argues that most governments now embrace ‘extractivism’ as a road to development, which is the process of ceaselessly and carelessly turning natural resources into waste to fulfill the never-ending desires of humans. In a speech given at The New School, Klein (September 20, 2014) explains that climate crisis can be used as a catalyst for global transformation forcing our systems to change for the better:

Climate change can be a people’s shock. A blow from below. It can disperse power in the hands of the many rather than consolidating it in the hands of a few, and radically expand the Commons rather than auctioning it off in pieces... It is a civilizational wake up call. A powerful message spoken in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions. Telling us we

need an entirely new economic model and a new way of sharing this planet. Telling us that we have to evolve... It means we have to contract the parts of our economy that are at war with the Earth and expand those parts of our economy that are already low carbon, like the caregiving professions, like education, like the arts... these are the parts of the economy that will allow us to care for one another as we encounter the heavy weather that will inevitably come.

What would our lives look like if we used climate change and the extinction of life as we know it as a deadline to reinvent the way communities work, by using the spaces we already have, such as the public library?

### **Environmentalism at TPL**

In the book *Public Libraries Going Green*, author Kathryn Miller (2010) argues that libraries have the opportunity and obligation to fulfill two roles within their communities: (1) to become an example of environmentally friendly practices, and (2) to provide communities with environmental education in order to help improve the systems in which we live. This paper goes even further to claim that public libraries need to make these roles a heavy part of their main focus as climate crisis progresses, since public libraries, I argue, are already inherently environmental institutions. Environmentally-conscious behaviors are naturally integrated within the processes of the library system itself through the act of borrowing books and other materials, which is reuse. Sharing resources with other community members instead of buying an item for personal use (and eventually disposing of it) significantly reduces consumerism and waste. Many patrons explain that their love of reading would be unsustainable when it comes to buying books,

movies, and so on. Some even complete a book a day and see no reason to purchase and waste items. They express their joy in sharing with fellow Torontonians, even if they must wait months on a list for the newest and most popular reads. This is not just the attitude of people with lower incomes. I have heard this repeatedly from patrons of affluent Toronto neighborhoods, such as Leaside Library (located in a wealthy neighborhood in Midtown). A multitude of people have expressed that even if environmental reasons are not the first thing on their minds, using the library simply makes economic sense. This is a great example of a way to disrupt consumerism by focusing on sharing resources within local communities.

All branches provide computers, some even allow people to sign out personal laptops for three hours at a time. Printing and photocopying can be done at all branches at fifteen cents a page, which helps many people avoid buying a printer when many only need it occasionally. Scanning and emailing documents is completely free. All these practices occur locally yet largely reduce the overall environmental impact on our city. It is important to note that we are facing a great wealth gap in Toronto, so these resources are vital to those experiencing economic strain. In Toronto, fifty-percent of children in families of annual incomes under \$30,000 do not participate regularly in out-of-school arts or sports programs (TPL, 2019b). Through TPL, the youth who would not normally have access to wi-fi, devices, printing, or materials (literature, films, music, etc.), or programs, are given the means to complete homework, experience leisure activities, use social media like their peers, learn new skills and develop hobbies. I often see this leading to children and teens feeling a sense of belonging with their age groups and experiencing greater well-being. In my professional capacity I have witnessed, in the more at-risk neighborhoods (such as the Jane Sheppard and Jane Finch areas), the space of the library also offering a chance to make friends with other people that may have similar financial, social and

environmental struggles. They also appear to feel less stigma since everyone present is freely using these resources without having to identify as needing them, which reduces shame. Once basic needs like this are met youth are able to participate more fully in finding solutions to community issues that matter to them such as through the Youth Advisory Groups all branches offer. The participants are even given bus tokens to attend these meetings.

The focus on providing patrons with resources to enhance environmental literacy is already underway at TPL. Environmental literacy is defined by Roth (1992) as, “the capacity to perceive and interpret the relative health of environmental systems and take appropriate action to maintain, restore, or improve the health of those systems”(p. 10). The *Our Fragile Planet Series* (see Appendix C) delivers programs from themes of practical low-waste-low-cost activities (such as demonstrating how to reduce waste, reuse, recycle, and maintain a Toronto garden) to deeper environmental topics (such as learning about local at-risk species in Toronto, protecting the Great Lakes, and living a zero-waste lifestyle). Since 2018, TPL has hosted three Environmentalists in Residence who conduct programming and are available for community consultations to come up with initiatives that can be done on the local level in Toronto neighborhoods. Today, eleven libraries have outdoor reading gardens: Morningside, Jane Sheppard, Mount Dennis, Taylor Memorial, Bendale, Scarborough Civic Centre, Dufferin/St. Clair, Beaches, Brentwood, Bloor/Gladstone, and Albion.

### **A Place of Community Gathering**

There are countless conversations I’ve had with patrons explaining that they visit libraries to meet with their neighbors in a casual and organic way and to discuss what is going on in our communities. I’ve watched one widow convince another to join a knitting program in order to get to know her neighbors and get out of the house, essentially creating a stronger social network



she can rely on if local emergencies occur. I've watched residents promise to help each other shovel snow when we experience extreme and erratic snowstorms. I see these dynamics play out daily and they should not be overlooked as a way to tackle climate crisis on the grassroots level.

Why reinvent the wheel?

As climate catastrophe accelerates, producing further un-natural disasters, public libraries will bear the brunt of providing shelter and resources for their communities. For example, in 2015 the City of Toronto experienced a severe winter ice storm that greatly impacted residents. With the erratic temperature changes, from warm to a quick cold snap and ice storm, many Torontonians were unprepared for such an enormous disaster (and many would not have been very prepared either way due to economic strain). Those with houses that could not afford to have a generator suffered immensely for it. Shelters were at capacity and many had to stay with family, to survive up to twelve days of no heat and electricity in some areas. Many scaled the snow and ice to take refuge in their local library branch. Several TPL staff, including myself, recall patrons taking turns using outlets to charge their devices and contact family and friends. We gave pitchers of water and glasses from the staff lounge but had nothing else to provide. Neighbors were cuddling up on the ground to take a warm nap and rest. As a staff member, there is no question in my mind that we need to accept these experiences will worsen and we must organize ourselves to brace for the impacts.

### **The Variety of Roles Already Expected of Library Staff**

I have been told by many librarians and library workers that, at TPL at least, the culture of the 'shhh' environment has changed quite a lot. TPL is very much trying to progress in becoming the center of the community, seeking out residents. This requires staff that assist the public to embody countless roles in order to fulfill their duties and maintain the mission and

vision of TPL. From the Pages (book-shelvers) to the Branch-Head Librarians, we are impromptu information technology educators, assisting those who have never even used a computer, scanner, or photocopier, to get on the internet and accomplish whatever task they need. From teaching how to print a will for a grieving widow, to setting up an email address for someone with a physical impairment. Due to TPL internal policy we must also make sure not to do this work *for* the patrons and only assist them as they go through these processes. Such experiences may be time-consuming and even frustrating for those who are not tech savvy or patient (which includes patrons *and* staff). We offer 'book-a-librarian' which allows private one-hour lessons on any technological device a patron needs help with (usually requested by seniors and newcomers).

We are counsellors and therapists, mindfully and compassionately listening to those who are grieving, lonely, going through difficult times, or abuse. We are social workers, always trying to be cognizant of what is happening, such as where the unattended children are compared to where the possible-harmers-of-children are. When we see abuse or neglect, we need to involve the Toronto Police or Children's Aid Society (CAS). Many times, over the years we have stayed after close if negligent parents or caregivers do not pick up their children (and call 911 or CAS if needed). We must stay up-to-date on all incident reports across all branches to be prepared for dangerous interactions with those who have violated our policies or are trespassing. We also need to be aware of the possibility of patrons looking at pornography or showing pornography to children, either on our devices or their own (unfortunately this has happened multiple times). Many libraries do not have the resources and funding required to have security guards, so we take on that role as well, such as attempting to de-escalate scary or violent situations and possibly involving police. We must assert boundaries when it comes to inappropriate comments,

physical touching, and entitled behaviour, while remaining calm and professional. We must be aware of fellow staff members and be ready to jump in to work as a team. At times staff must become fast-acting first aid responders. At two TPL branches I have worked in, Jane/Sheppard Library and Yorkwoods Library (Seaman, 2018), there have been two separate incidents of staff needing to provide medical attention to wounded victims of stabbings or shootings. We have been mandatorily trained in sighting a drug overdose, and voluntarily trained in administering the life-saving medication naloxone (Warren, 2018). When there is extreme weather or a state of emergency (heat or cold warnings, winter snowstorms, hail, dangerous winds, floods, blackouts, etc) we are expected to stay open as shelter for all community members. People may come to our branches because their homes are experiencing power-outages or they cannot safely reach home, and must: warm up (especially to prevent frost-bite, falls, and ultimately emergency room visits), charge their devices, use our computers or even the single branch telephone to call loved ones, find out where shelters and other services are, and more.

When newcomers, refugees, and immigrants come in and need to know what to do next, we then become intake workers directing them to the appropriate social service agencies and resources, navigating language barriers and any emotional distress they may be experiencing. We must have in-depth knowledge of the programs, festivals, and services available in the city. We often do the marketing and publicity of the resources we offer. We are allies, or identify as, LGBTQ2S patrons. I personally love to put specifically social justice and climate change related materials and program posters on display to create awareness of these vital issues facing our communities. We protect these spaces to promote well-being, whether a patron is looking for contemplative quiet (to read, meditate, pray, etc.) or social interaction (through programming or organic socializing). How many places welcome the homeless, disenfranchised, refugees,

immigrants, seniors, and children, while treating them all equally and allowing them to just sit and relax? There are plenty more things we do and the multi-tasking required is not for the faint of heart. A slip up in any of these areas can escalate a situation quite rapidly, so tact is key. Most of all, if we are any good at our jobs we maintain compassion and optimism throughout these interactions.

### **Plans & Policies: Public Libraries & Environmental Emergencies in Toronto**

Batt (2011) points out: “The provision of public good services is, after all, rooted in political choices, and within democratic societies, free access to knowledge and ideas touches at the very heart of the relationship between the individual and society” (p. 406). Legislation will differ across various municipal regions, however in order to hold governments accountable for funding public libraries with climate change in mind it may take: creativity in using current policies, and advocacy in developing more relevant ones in the future. It is vital that the scientific data demonstrating the true risks of climate crisis be taken seriously by policy-makers. Advocacy is required by everyone (communities, agencies, even corporations) to point out the benefits of working together to build comprehensive and proactive measures. Multiple City of Toronto policies are directly relevant to the notion that public libraries are necessary for community refuge and resiliency in the face of climate change. According to the City of Toronto’s *Legislation, Bylaws & Policies* website: “the authorities, roles and responsibilities of City agencies and corporations are established through a range of legislation, City bylaws, Council-adopted policies, and City Council-approved Relationship Frameworks with City agencies and Shareholder Directions and Declarations” (City of Toronto, 2019a). Therefore, there is a diverse network of organizations across the city that are expected to collaborate in order to improve the lives of Torontonians. The most relevant to public libraries and climate crisis is the *Toronto*

*Resilience Strategy* (City of Toronto, 2019b). This 2020-2030 Action Plan was created to address many issues Toronto residents face, with climate change as a serious part of the focus, including: providing supportive infrastructure and community services through public libraries and community centres; developing complete communities; updating the land use planning framework to enhance viable housing options and safer neighborhoods; design more open and safer spaces for children to play; preparing for extreme weather (floods, heat waves, and cold snaps); and designing systems of engagement allowing for residents to have meaningful participation in governance (City of Toronto, 2019b).

Several TPL branches were used to receive community feedback and perform consultations for this strategy (City of Toronto, 2019b). TPL is actually named in *Action A2.1 Priority Action: Neighborhood Resilience* as a community partner that will help address climate change as part of the local networks and grassroots organizations that will be strongly prepared for shocks and stresses (City of Toronto, 2019b). Climate change focus on the grassroots level can be further realized by utilizing Toronto's recent key investments to advance equitable outcomes through the *Toronto Strong Neighborhoods Strategy 2020* (City of Toronto, 2019a). The *Neighborhood Resilience Initiative* states:

Community organizations are at the forefront of neighborhood resilience and this action seeks to support the efforts, creativity, and expertise of these organizations. This initiative will be a collaboration between Social Development, Finance and Administration (SDFA), the Office of Emergency Management (OEM), Toronto Public Health (TPH), the Resilience Office and community-based organizations (such as TPL) and residents" (City of Toronto, 2019a, p. 84).

Other City of Toronto (2019a; 2019b; 2019c) environmental policies, plans, and reports relevant to public libraries and the issue of climate change include: *TransformTO: Climate Action for a Healthy, Equitable and Prosperous Toronto*; *ResilientTO*; *Pollinator Protection Strategy*; and the *Environmental Progress Report*.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Addressing Anthropogenic Climate Change

Climate change is a global phenomenon leading to calamity and ruin for our entire planet and the human race. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Fourth Assessment Report* based on the available scientific, technical, and socio-economic literature, many catastrophic impacts are estimated to occur very soon (IPCC, 2007). Between 2020 and 2050 the worldwide average temperature is expected to increase by 2.6°C (IPCC, 2007). By 2050, sea level rise will be at least one metre which will be especially destructive to the 10% of the world population that live in coastal areas (IPCC, 2007). Climate scientists agree that if we continue at this rate there will be no Arctic ice by 2070 (IPCC, 2007). Since there is scientific consensus that climate change is caused by human activity, this means the burden of responsibility is on humans (and especially local communities) to take mitigation and adaptation measures (Koger & Winter, 2010; Pink, 2018; Tangney, 2017).

Those who deny these facts either have a vested interest in not taking action or are simply following the opinions of those who do (Klein, 2014, 2015; Pink, 2018; Tangney, 2017; Washington & Cook, 2011). Regardless of the scientific evidence demonstrating this state of planetary emergency, there is still a political rhetoric being pushed to the public (through certain powerful people, corporations, politicians, and media outlets) that will lead to the catastrophic demise of the planet if left unchallenged (Klein, 2014, 2015; Pink, 2018; Tangney, 2017; Washington & Cook, 2011). Washington and Cook (2011) argue that resistance to climate change evidence is based in fear that addressing the problem will result in: limited economic growth, loss of freedom, and change to the way things are now. They have identified five types of the climate change denial argument: conspiracy theories; fake experts; impossible

expectations; misrepresentations and logical fallacies (such as arguing climate has changed in the past without acknowledging the current unnatural anthropogenic causes); and cherry-picking by selecting isolated research papers that challenge the consensus (Washington and Cook, 2011).

Regarding research on community collaboration and climate change impacts, Pearce et al. (2009) support the stance that active involvement is required by local, regional, and national organizations, along with community members. In order to assess the vulnerability and adaptation capacity of communities, it is necessary to research specific communities to become familiar with: local social and cultural conditions; the more general economic and political environments; and the knowledge and experiences of local residents (Fazey et al., 2018; Pearce et al., 2009).

### **The Role of Public Libraries**

In order to understand the responsibility of public libraries, one must understand their purpose within a society. According to *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century* (Gorman, 2000) libraries are often seen as focal points of their communities since there exists an innate human need to gather with others. Public libraries serve communities defined by political boundaries and are generally funded by the public through taxes, therefore these organizations belong to the people they serve (Gorman, 2000). They are typically run by civil servants, such as: ages (book-shelvers), public service staff, librarians, program assistants, service specialists, information technology professionals, and facilities staff, to name a few (Gorman, 2000). The heaviest users of public libraries are usually the most vulnerable and least powerful (youth, seniors, newcomers, immigrants, and those with lower socioeconomic status, etc.) so it is often most valuable to those with less privilege, power, and access to resources (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Brewster, 2014; Carr, 2011; Derr, 2017; Gorman, 2000; Houghton & Miller, 2013; Lang



& Lacuta, 2013; Leckie & Hopkins, 2002). Public libraries are often referred to in the literature as ‘third places’, a term created by Oldenburg (1989), whereas the: ‘first place’ is your home, ‘second place’ is your work, and ‘third place’ is somewhere you visit in your free time to connect with others. There is no obligation to stay or go (Oldenburg, 1989). Public libraries are considered ‘third places’ as they are often used for self-care and social connection, especially in urban areas (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Houghton, Foth & Miller, 2013). According to Sheppard (2006) and Figueroa et al. (2015), the focus of most recent library and information science research is heavily based on technological advancements, leaving little attention to the vision and trajectory of the future of libraries in other respects.

### **A Place of Refuge**

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (n.d.) the term ‘refuge’ is defined as, “a place that provides shelter or protection from danger or distress”. Over the years I have learned very well just how flexible public library staff must be to provide equitable services to our communities while maintaining peace, thus providing a place of refuge. The most relevant paper I have found in the explanation of the ways libraries are experienced is *Public Libraries are Safe (and Neutral Spaces)...when people aren't in them!* (Derr, 2017). Derr (2017) makes the case that assuming the library is a safe space is a great misconception, even stereotype, that has dangerous consequences (especially for inner-city libraries). The argument lies in the understanding of the term ‘refuge’, which has the option of being safe but does not inherently assume it, however refuge will always infer a place for aid, relief, or escape (Derr, 2017). Libraries have greatly evolved from the time of King Charles as silent and contemplative places, only allowing the ‘right’ people in (Derr, 2017). Today, libraries attempt to seek out all people, allowing for socializing, programming, and providing for community needs as they arise (Derr,

2017). Due to this drastic change, at times there is conflict in public perception of how libraries should be utilized: the way they are used; who is ‘allowed’ to use them; and the way staff manage them (Derr, 2017). Yet, there has always been a large amount of public trust in libraries and this has not wavered over time (Derr, 2017).

### **A Place of Democracy**

The following passage by Vickery Bowles, the City Librarian of TPL, explains the launch of the program series *On Civil Society*, which promotes grassroots democratic discussion within Toronto libraries:

I am struck again at the central role that libraries play in the life of a city and a nation... Libraries are, in many ways, the last public spaces where disagreement is accepted and even encouraged. But even this will be lost if we don't remember that we have to learn how to listen to each other... This is what the library can offer democracy: a chance to engage in a true and sophisticated way with our fellow citizens. To hear them and to make small steps towards understanding them even when we vehemently disagree with something they believe. The late Elliot Shelkrot, the long-time Head of the Philadelphia Public Library, once said that ‘Democracy depends on an informed population. And where can people get all the information they need? — At the Library.’... By offering the chance for people to experience what living in an intellectually free society means ... by accessing books with controversial ideas and unpopular opinions; by sitting in a room with hundreds of people and arguing, debating, discussing contentious issues; by taking a workshop on how to run for office even if you have no public service experience or aren't born into the ‘right’ family; by listening to a podcast and talking to our friends and family about a new point of view or perspective that was introduced (Bowles, 2018)

Lang & Sacuta (2013) state that library workers must acknowledge our role in perpetuating a system of unequal dissemination of information and resources and bear our responsibility in addressing social injustices. They argue that nothing is more political than organizing and distributing information, therefore library workers have an obligation to become acquainted with the injustices facing our communities and work to deliver opportunities for change (Lang & Sacuta, 2013). An informed population will be able to participate in the democratic processes that impacts their daily lives (Lang & Sacuta, 2013). Vinopal (2016) argues that library workers work with diverse populations and therefore action needs to be taken to represent diversity in staffing so distance is not created with the populations we are trying to attract.

### **Striving for a Place that Fosters Resiliency During Community Crisis**

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (n.d.) the term ‘resilience’ is defined as, “an ability to recover from, or adjust easily to, misfortune or change”. Regarding the intersection of climate crisis and the future of public libraries, there is sufficient research to suggest that public libraries are often looked to as community partners during times of emergency (Fazey et al., 2018; Figueroa et al., 2015). In the article *Forecasting the Future of Libraries* (Figueroa et al., 2015) the authors argue, “As city, state, and federal governments adopt resilience as a strategy, libraries may likewise need to align facilities, services, and programs. Resilience requires community involvement - encouraging individuals to make preparatory and preventative decisions and providing resources and information prior to, during, and after incidents” (p. 31). The article *Community Resilience for a 1.5°C World* (Fazey et. al, 2018, p.1) offers a succinct guide in addressing climate change that can be very useful for public library systems:

Ten essentials are presented for community resilience initiatives in the context of achieving a 1.5°C world: enhance adaptability; take account of

shocks and stresses; work horizontally across issues; work vertically across social scales; aggressively reduce carbon emissions; build narratives about climate change; engage directly with futures; focus on climate disadvantage; focus on processes and pathways; and encourage transformations for resilience. Together the essentials highlight that resilience initiatives seeking to retain the status quo will be detrimental when they enable societies to cling to unsustainable activities. Instead, climate resilience initiatives need to be viewed more as a process of transformative social change, where learning, power, inequities and relationships matter. Finally, there is an urgent need for researchers to shift focus away from examining the nature of resilience to accelerating learning about fostering resilience in practice.

Public libraries have the opportunity to take control of the mission and vision of their organizations and adapt these ‘essentials’ to their practices. Building climate change narratives is especially relevant to public library systems as they already control the dissemination of information at the grassroots level in the communities they serve and have always maintained a high level of public trust (Derr, 2017; Gorman, 2000; Lang & Sacuta, 2013). Recording the shocks and stresses of climate crisis are mentioned as well, which can be headed by public libraries since they carry the resources to document history as it is happening. Encouraging climate change resilience through transformation is the goal of this paper, and from the research within the intersection of these fields (climate change, environmental studies, library and information science) it is evident that public libraries have the refuge, responsibility, and resources necessary to contribute. Fazey et al. (2018) argue that we are now in urgent need of drastic solutions and to keep the current slow-moving processes as they are will only be disastrous in the long-run. It is time for organizations of all levels and communities to quicken the pace in finding bold, practical, and timely solutions to climate crisis. Public libraries can be

excellent vessels to provide their communities with relief through: learning (accelerating fact-based knowledge distribution and environmental literacy), power (since they are well-established and protected governmental institutions), equity (dedication to providing fair and dignified services for all); and building community relationships (to broaden and strengthen support networks in the face of local emergencies).

As aforementioned, Fazey et al. (2018) argue that an essential part of addressing climate change is to focus on aggressively practicing sustainability at the organizational level. Therefore, all community organizations should make this a part of the plan to address environmental crisis. In the book *Making Sustainability Work: Best Practices in Managing and Measuring Corporate Social, Environmental and Economic impacts* (Epstein, 2018) the following reasons to implement sustainable practices are given: government regulations and codes; community relations; cost and revenue imperatives; and societal and moral obligations. According to Epstein (2018), the dominant research demonstrates that the benefits of sustainability cannot be ignored. Noncompliance with government regulations and policies are important in order for organizations to avoid penalties, fines, legal costs, and a negative reputation (Epstein, 2018). The general public and activist non-governmental organizations are becoming highly aware of the environmental impacts that organizations and corporations are having on local environments, therefore making sustainable practices a priority will garner trust and a positive reputation (Epstein, 2018). Another incentive would be the economic benefits: "...costs can be lowered due to process improvements and a decrease in regulatory fines. Identifying the areas where good for the society, good for the environment, and good for the company intersects is key (Epstein, 2018, p. 22). Since companies and organizations inevitably impact the environment and society, they have a social and moral responsibility to prevent damage and reduce impacts (Epstein, 2018).

Within a public library this can be done by transforming branch processes by improving these processes in a much more drastic way: reuse materials, prevent waste, discuss social and environmental issues, and take the initiative in becoming a sustainable leader in the industry by coming up with new and innovative ways to improve sustainable strategies.

### Chapter 3: Listening to Children's Voices

#### Methods

Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was used to find meaning and patterns in the lived experiences of the children that frequently visit TPL's Jane Sheppard Library. I met with four children individually for one hour each within a two-week span in July, 2017. The ages ranged from ten to twelve years old. The identified genders were three girls and one boy. These children were selected because they would regularly attend Jane Sheppard library and highly participate in programming and events, borrowing materials (books, movies, etc.), and utilizing the public computers and children's section. Of all the people who frequently use Jane Sheppard resources, these young patrons have shown some of the highest engagement and are well-known to staff. The Jane Sheppard neighborhood is considered an "at-risk" neighborhood, under Toronto's *Strong Neighborhoods Strategy* (City of Toronto, 2009a), therefore these children are considered "at-risk" youth. As an employee of Jane Sheppard Library for several years, I had already established a strong rapport with each of the children. This seemed to garner each child's trust and comfort in answering questions. A possible limitation would be that they tailored or censored their replies, since I was a staff member they regularly required services from.

Approval to conduct these interviews was obtained from the York University Office of Research Ethics and Human Participants Review Committee. The children were recruited through flyers left around the branch and conversations in person or by email with the children as well as their parents and guardians. The study was thoroughly explained and understood by the children, parents and guardians before the consent forms were signed. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The goal of this research was to find a deeper understanding of their experiences within the library, in regards to: access to library resources; encounters with the

services the library offers about environmental topics and climate change; the experience of the library environment; experiences of learning in the public library compared to their school; and ways in which the library can improve climate change education and services for youth.

The interviews were conducted in the Jane Sheppard Library program room and were booked for privacy. The Jane Sheppard branch is fairly compact with only one floor and is officially known as a “neighborhood branch” (the smallest kind). The program room has large windows overlooking the inside of the branch and the reading garden outside. Parents and guardians were given the choice to be present during the interviews, however in all four cases they opted for waiting outside the room. The list of semi-structured questions used in each interview can be found in Appendix D. Compensation was given in the form of a gift bag at the end of the interview consisting of: a small pot of organic soil and organic basil seeds; TPL publicity, bookmarks, and *Our Fragile Planet* programming schedules; Toronto-based species identification guides; a guide to finding environmental and climate change literature at TPL based on the Dewey Decimal System; a booklet made for the children including facts on climate change, organic gardening in Canada, and ways children can address climate change through environmentalism; a list of popular climate change books for youth; colored pencils; animal-shaped erasers; and various small toys (a sea creature art kit; a ping-pong paddle, bouncy ball, and temporary animal tattoos). The gifts were intentionally chosen to encourage outdoor play, species identification within their local neighborhood, indoor or outdoor gardening, as well as promoting literature and art based on nature.

Dunn (2000) identifies four dominant reasons for using interviews: to collect information other research methods cannot provide; to analyze complex motivations, actions, and situations; to compile a variety of viewpoints; and to provide a method that empowers and respects the



participants. Considering the lack of research on the intersection of public libraries, climate change, and children's experiences, semi-structured interviews seemed to be the most appropriate method to collect data. Thematic analysis is a method for: "systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2018, p.75). Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the data in order to find the meanings and commonalities present in the children's experiences (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) in relation to the research topic of public libraries as places of refuge, with the possibility for building community resilience, during climate change.

### **Findings**

After thoroughly analyzing the interview transcriptions, three main themes emerged from the children's interviews: demonstration of character-building resourcefulness (self-discipline, self-imposed daily routine, resistance to negative influences, voluntarily educating themselves, self-care, utilizing city services to enhance personal achievement and well-being); resilient reaction to climate crisis (showing a clear adult-level of understanding of the causes and dangers, coping through tension-relieving humor, fearful while maintaining a hopeful perspective); and eagerness to find solutions to climate change (deep compassion for nonhumans as much as humans, excitement in learning how to make lasting change in their local communities, interest in environmental literature when done in a captivating way).

The first pattern, or theme, that came up in many different forms was the demonstration of character-building resourcefulness. These kids displayed enormous self-discipline through focusing on their tasks (whether school-related or personal goals) and delaying gratification until what they needed to do was complete. The children each had weekly routines they organized for

themselves which included regularly visiting the library of their own accord (whether they walked, took the bus, or had a family member drive them).

A significant sub-theme that emerged is the children's deliberate resistance to negative influences, which is a challenge considering the magnitude of crime in the community. The Jane Sheppard neighborhood is considered an "at-risk" area by the City of Toronto, with crime and gang-activity commonly taking place in and out of the branch. Staff have witnessed teen gang-members attempt to groom children these ages by convincing them to commit petty thefts in the library in exchange for protection and belonging. Often these children and youth do not realize this is gang-activity, they are simply just trying to make friends. This is a serious issue that requires significant ongoing dialogue with Toronto Police. There have been instances where other troubled youth and teens have even threatened to shoot TPL staff. Such factors have negative impacts on the experience of safety and refuge for all who frequent the branch, especially youth. These incidents were occurring more often around the time the interviews were conducted. One of these participants, an eleven-year-old (renamed "Child A" for anonymity) elaborated:

**INTERVIEWER:** So how do you feel when you're in the library?

**CHILD A:** Um... usually I'm feeling very um... Sometimes I'm, like, happy that I get to use the computer yet sometimes I feel anxious because there's, like, groups of kids who usually are, like, outside of the library, like, around where I live they usually do bad stuff... so I don't, like, want to get into fights with them. I don't want to get in trouble so sometimes that makes me anxious.

**INTERVIEWER:** Aw I see, okay so you recognize these kids from around here?

**CHILD A:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** So, if they didn't come in, would you feel more comfortable being here?

**CHILD A:** Yes!

**INTERVIEWER:** Would it be better if there was an adult or like a librarian that paid more attention?

**CHILD A:** Like, I don't want to feel like I'm the *cause* of them not being able to come here anymore or being heavily watched. It's just that I'm not, like... I don't feel *secure* around them. I'm just trying to keep quiet, so I don't end up, like, getting hurt or anything.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah, that makes sense, that's very smart actually. So, do you feel like that all the time when you are here or are there times when you feel differently?

**CHILD A:** Sometimes I feel different, because like... sometimes I just know I can't get hurt because I have, like, my friends around me and, like, they help me so there is no need to be scared.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right, yeah. So, is that why you prefer to walk to the library, because you would come with your friends?

**CHILD A:** No, I prefer to walk to the library because I come here whenever I want to. And it would be way more convenient than always begging my mom or dad.

In response to the same initial question regarding how they feel when in the library, the following ten-year-old (renamed "Child B" for anonymity) explained: "It's relaxing like nobody's yelling because at home, well nobody yells, but the TV is on or the radio is on so, like, you're not concentrated. But here it's quiet."

In some way or another all children expressed their affinity for library services and their enjoyment of borrowing (books, films, music), using the computers, and sharing the spaces.

They all regularly attend the (free) science and arts programs and mentioned in the interviews that they keep coming back because they have fun, learn new things, and get to socialize with others. Three of the children explained they visited the branch weekly (sometimes daily) while the other said she visited only monthly (in the past six months of the interview) due to her private

school schedule being too rigorous for her parents to allow her to read for pleasure. When asked why they enjoy visiting the branch so frequently, one participant said:

**CHILD A:** Like in school I can't, like, for example... well in both school and the library we can't be that loud... but I can't be, like, interrupting in school because the other students are trying to learn. But at the library I could pretty much do what I want because it's me on my own time, doing my own thing, learning by myself. I'm like liberated from the stress of having to - stay put.

*[\*laughs\*]*

The children commonly described the freedom of moving around and only doing what interests them. They expressed that they enjoy the branch because they are able to decide for themselves which resources to use without being told by a teacher or parent. Most of the time (if they are feeling safe) they are able to explore their interests and develop their skills in the contemplative atmosphere. "Child C", also ten-years-old, seemed to gain a sense of well-being from the routine of visiting the branch, "Learning in the library... we can get, like, whatever we want to learn about. You can do research on what you just learned about and you can, like, come to a library, get how much you want, and then repeat the same thing over and over again." The twelve-year-old participant "Child D" articulated the different experiences of school versus the library and the 'Mad Science Experiments' programs at TPL:

**CHILD D:** One of the big differences is... well it is really similar, but one of the differences, in my opinion, is in school we learn and in the library we learn but in both we learn in different ways. Like in school we learn by the teacher, the teacher doesn't give time for the kid's ideas. It is mostly just the teacher writing on the board, copying homework, and stuff like that... But in the library when she [*library assistant*] does programs she gets other people's ideas and sometimes with her experiment that she is going to do, we mix it up and we add our own ideas to it and it turns into something different.

All four children explained their appreciation in: being involved in science and environmental programs, picking what they learn, having the option to stay or move on to something else, and having their opinions taken seriously. They demonstrate self-discipline because they have taken their learning, well-being, and interests in their own hands, so to speak. Child A goes on to explain how at ease they feel navigating the book collections: “Yeah, I’m pretty comfortable. I usually have a section I keep in mind when I want to look for a book. But usually when I can’t pick up the book I usually pick, then I start looking in the chapter-book section until I find a title that interests me. Then I read the back. So, I’m pretty comfortable”.

The second theme that emerged was the tendency for each of the children to show a resilient reaction to climate crisis. One child explained she either did not learn about climate change in school yet or was not paying attention. The other three seemed to have a basic understanding. They all welcomed the brief climate change definition sheets provided. They showed great compassion for nonhumans and humans and the need for a clean, thriving environment:

**CHILD C:** It makes me feel sad when people, like, say that there isn’t global warming going on because the animals can die. There can be fishes, polar bears, and some polar bears can be like small and babies, and there can be walruses. Sometimes, like, the First Nations People they use the animals for food, and then they use the fur for clothing, and then sometimes (before, I think) they used their bones for tools. People can stop like trying to do pollution, like, instead of going in cars and buses they can try walking or they can, like, ride a bike. Or if they want to do something with a factory, instead of just leaving it like a factory in one area without any plants or anything, they can put lots of trees around the factories. So when the polluted air comes out, like the carbon dioxide, then the plants can take it in and make the oxygen coming back out so then we can breathe it. And then people should mostly, like everywhere in

the environment on Earth, they should, like, go out and collect the garbage and they shouldn't only do it on, like, Earth Day. They should do it on every other day too, to, like, stop the polluted air. Sometimes people, like, throw their garbage in different areas, like in the water or on the ground or, like, in a forest. Then an animal can come and think it's, like, food for them and they can swallow it or it can get tangled on their feet. And if they swallow it they can die, and if it gets stuck on their feet it can cut it off or something and they can get, like, hurt.

All four children demonstrated an adult-level comprehension of the risks and dangers of climate crisis. Another sub-theme found was the resilient reactions the children often displayed by coping with these difficult topics through laughter and humor:

**CHILD A:** Climate change is when the climate starts to change and global warming is when things like smoking cause the world to heat up and that's not good because in arctic places the glaciers are melting and falling into the ocean and the sea level is rising... I think I learned it in social studies, or social science. Global warming really wouldn't be good because if the sea levels did rise, eventually it gets so high that we might end up drowning. I feel bad whenever I see someone smoking or polluting the air because the heat adds to global warming AND I CAN'T SWIM TO SAVE MY LIFE! [*\*laughs\**] I remember learning it too from *Bill Nye the Science Guy*... and they made a joke about it on *Fairly Odd Parents*.

Although these topics can elicit a lot of fear (in anyone) by seeing it somewhat explained in media, and piecing together what they have learned here and there in school and other places, they are comfortable enough to speak on it, yet they are not complacent in these destructive behaviors. In fact, they seemed to speak as if they *are* responsible for the actions of all people on earth. When asked how knowing about climate change makes them feel, this participant replied:

**CHILD C:** It makes me feel like I can help the environment and I can help the community, like, when I grow up and when I'm little too. By preventing pollution and when people

throw garbage on the streets... It's like something that I'm interested in. I didn't learn it at school, it's just something that I think up.

They expressed sadness and fear, yet they remained optimistic about making change.

The final theme that emerged in the data is the eagerness to find answers to climate crisis, often motivated by helping their communities, people, flora and fauna. Three of the children were very familiar with the books and films based on Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* and *The Magic School Bus: The Climate Challenge*. When asked what advice they would give children's environmental literature authors, this child explained:

**CHILD D:** [*\*holding up a non-fiction book\**] You know how these books are like this? I mean they *are* interesting, but like how do they expect - I can't believe the author expects kids to be reading this, be interested in the book and like the book compared to *The Lorax* or some other book. You see it's a good book because it has pictures and stuff but it is not like... you know... nowadays we read fiction most of the time. Like if you even look at a non-fiction book, you aren't really going to read it because you're not used to it. They have to like - how do I explain it? They have to make it more interesting!

Each of the children explained they prefer fiction, even historical fiction based on facts, to non-fiction books about climate change. Two of them mentioned that they enjoyed a series of kid's books called *I Survived...* based on true stories of children who lived through environmental disasters or large-scale accidents, and how they would enjoy books like that but with climate change stories.

## DISCUSSION

Although these children may experience many barriers to feeling safe and comfortable in the branch, considering the propensity for crime and gang-activity in the area, it is quite remarkable that they frequently utilize so many services. It seems that schools need to take a stronger lead in teaching children about climate change. Whether they feel they have not learned

it yet or they have only learned some aspects, none of the children seemed confident in their understanding of climate change (which is understandable considering the complexity of the topic). It appeared they felt somewhat uninformed and this caused discomfort and embarrassment. When I felt this was happening, I explained that if they do not know something, it is good because it is an area for the world to improve on and their opinions will be shared through this research. I explained that they are experts in the way their schools and libraries work and their perspectives matter greatly. As mentioned, once it was further discussed and explained they all were more comfortable giving their opinions on how it made them feel and how they wanted to help make changes in their community. Although these topics were difficult to address, especially regarding species loss and environmental degradation, the children often: laughed, used humor and made jokes. It seemed to lighten their mood, relieve tension, and give them a moment to think of a positive action that could offset that particular issue. In regard to the advice the children had for environmental literature aimed at their ages, there was a consensus that fiction books are much more engaging and captivating, even historical fiction based on facts. It seems from these interviews that children prefer to read fictional stories about environmental issues and climate change and actually participate in fact-based environmental education, climate science experiments, local activism, and community gatherings to learn more about their local surroundings and how to improve their environments.



## Chapter 4: A Conversation with a Librarian

### Methods

A one-hour semi-structured interview was conducted with a TPL librarian and thematic analysis was used to find themes and patterns. I met with the librarian in July 2017, and the interview was conducted in a TPL private office (the specific branch location will not be disclosed for anonymity). This librarian was chosen as a participant since she has various years of experience working in many branches across Toronto. Through previous interactions she demonstrated a wealth of practical experience and knowledge. As a TPL librarian she regularly attends meetings regarding branch operations and is part of branch decision-making procedures. I asked for her participation in this interview process and she agreed. Since I previously worked in a branch with this participant, we already established a bond as colleagues, which appeared to foster trust in the interaction. Although the identity of this participant is concealed for anonymity, a possible limitation would be that the librarian censored or tailored her answers as she is speaking as an employee and is representing the views of TPL in this capacity.

Approval to conduct this interview was obtained from the York University Office of Research Ethics and Human Participants Review Committee. The list of interview questions is found in Appendix E. The study was thoroughly explained and understood by the participant and the consent form was signed. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. The goal of this research was to find a deeper understanding of TPL librarian experiences in regards to: TPL policies, especially regarding environmental topics; access and experience of the branch; collections and environmental literature; planning, design, and renovation goals of branches; TPL, social justice, and neutrality; and the roles of librarians and public libraries in the face of

climate crisis. Compensation was given in the form of a gift card to Starbucks in the amount of twenty dollars.

### **Findings**

By analyzing this librarian's interview exploring her experiences as an employee of TPL, the following three themes emerged: importance of ease of access; the slow move towards more environmentally-friendly practices; and 'quiet change the library-way'. The librarian explains that first and foremost, ease of access (the first theme) is always a vital aspect of TPL. It is often considered on many different levels, discussed in the following subthemes. The designed environment is physically simple with plenty of room for mobility (well thought-out and policy-consistent placing of furniture, displays, and shelves). Regarding designing the branch with children in mind, the librarian mentions: "We definitely use nice colors, comfy, cozy-looking, you know, very soft. It doesn't look hard like school. You don't want kids coming in like 'Ugh. I'm back in school, now I have to sit on this hard chair and use this hard desk', they want something nice and fun". TPL is also focused on keeping everything visually uncluttered and aesthetically inviting to foster efficiency in finding materials and promoting calm:

**LIBRARIAN:** Keeping in mind again that, you know, the libraries are no longer "shush environments" they are more of hubs now. They are more of a space that is drawing the community in and giving them more of a place that they need. That is what we are adapting to and we are still providing information, it's just a different way of providing reference... what used to be 'let me find you this book', is now: 'let me find you this journal' or 'let me access it online', 'let me show you how to use an e-book or e-reader'... You can sit at the computer and do this on your own. You can bring in your own stuff and use our wi-fi, and calm yourself down in one of our nice seats facing the window. You know what I mean? Like that kind of an element. I think we are trying to

make libraries as relaxing an environment as we can, with the way that society is at the moment.

Another sub-theme is the intention of removing barriers by providing equitable service regardless of patron identity (race, gender, wealth, physical or mental abilities, political views, citizenship status, etc.).

The second theme found is the slow process of TPL moving towards more environmental practices. TPL has already begun planning for more environmentally-conscious goals, however the process has been very slow with many delays. Plants are kept to a minimum (if given as gifts by patrons) or not placed at all indoors due to allergies. Outdoor reading gardens are an important aspect of recent branch design and planning since they extend physical reading space and provide an element of nature. So far only eleven branches have reading gardens, while there are more than one-hundred branches. An issue with using the reading gardens for TPL programs (when the weather is appropriate) is preparing all the bureaucratic paperwork necessary with the city. This often delays programs or events, or requires them to be cancelled altogether due to approval not being given in a timely manner.

Staff are no longer allowed to purchase plastic water bottles for staff meetings, instead water pitchers and glasses are now used. Printing is kept to a minimum and certain documents that used to be printed are accessible on staff computers instead. There is a focus on energy-efficient bulbs, solar roofs, and more natural lighting. Eco-friendly branch renovations are much needed for environmental and economically-efficient reasons, however since many TPL branches are quite old buildings it is very difficult to find funding for such complex and time-consuming renovations. North York Central Library has been under on-going renovations for several years (at times remaining partly open, other times not open at all). She argues that these

changes will be very important to the mental health and well-being of staff, in particular, since they can often be stuck in windowless rooms under fluorescent bulbs all day long.

The final theme ‘quiet change the library-way’ comes from the librarian’s explanation in how TPL is moving away from neutrality on the subject of climate change into a more hushed activist approach. A sub-theme emerged of the lack of staff education and training in environmental literature whether fiction or non-fiction. When asked what she has learned about children’s environmental literature in her Master of Library and Information Science degree or TPL training, she explained:

**LIBRARIAN:** Not an awful lot, not an awful lot. So, I will be absolutely honest in the fact that I don’t know very many of the children’s environmental literature. The only one that I always kind of go back to is *The Lorax* and that’s the one that I absolutely adore and I think it is so relevant. Even today it doesn’t stop being a relevant book. Any time a teacher will come and ask, that is usually what I go to. I’m always trying to learn about new ones and find new literature, especially with the way that the world is moving right now. I really think it is important that we have more environmental books. We are having a whole bunch of programs that are promoting the planet Earth and moving forward with that, and they are offered throughout the city, the *Our Fragile Planet Series*.

The participant also discusses understanding and listening to community needs in order to provide relevant resources and communicate this to the higher-ups in the organization for a bottom-up approach. When asked about how the children’s environmental literature collection is curated, she replied:

**LIBRARIAN:** Most comes from the Collections Department. So, many things are coming from there looking at what’s being checked out, what are the numbers based on the Dewey Decimal System and those kinds of subject lines, what is being checked out from particular branches. They also look at the community: is this a community that is very into environmental protection? Is it an area that really thrives on

bicycle lanes, and is it trying to reduce that carbon footprint? Those will definitely have more of a push. They will definitely have more items in their branch. The same way as if you are in a high LGBTQ community, those branches will definitely have more availability of books and a larger selection. Most branches will have something on it but it depends on what it is geared towards. It could be just as simple as picture books or it could be as advanced as adult non-fiction. Input from the customers is always helpful. And it just depends on whether the Collections Department is looking through to say, 'Okay yes, we can actually put some more funding into this here'. If we are trying to run a program that is based on climate change, we would promote that. Try to maybe have a registration to gauge how many people would come in and see how well it is received in the area. Usually that is our way of doing it, is evaluating our programs and seeing the interest. Based on that we are able to then say, 'so we have a really high interest in this based on our program that we offered, we really need more materials'.

The participant explains climate change is becoming an important topic to expand on in TPL, but it is being introduced in a 'typical' quiet library fashion so as not to upset those who are opposed to the idea that climate change exists. TPL will still always remain neutral in literature collections to prevent impeding on people's right to choose what they consume. The librarian makes it clear that the point is not to censor people, but to provide them with enough resources to decide their perspectives for themselves. She goes on to say that although they have the right to their opinions, it is vital that TPL stay up-to-date on fact-based literature considering the amount of misinformation found on the internet:

**LIBRARIAN:** I really do think that there should be some more literature on climate change and environmental issues, especially because with the current political climate, this is a hot button issue. I mean four years ago you would have never expected the United States would have been out of the Paris Climate Accord, but there are a lot of people who do not believe that the world is experiencing climate change. We have to be respectful of both sides of that opinion and there should absolutely be more

books geared towards that. It is something that is in high demand right now. I think that the more you educate people, and that is not to say we educate them ourselves, but the more that you have those resources available for them to read and to advance their knowledge of a topic... it is the only way we can really move forward with people understanding the way that the world is... Librarians always like to say 'librarians are the original Google'. You know, we *are* the original Google. You can ask Google a question and they'll give you a million responses but we will give you the *right* one [*\*laughs\**]. I know it sounds like I'm really being egotistical but it is like our running joke! It's the idea of, you know, you want to be able to provide the right kind of answers because people will search the internet and not realize that half of the stuff on there is being paid for by corporations or being paid for by biased opinions. So you want to be able to provide them with resources that have been fact-checked. Regardless of whether it is an opinion that we don't agree with, it is there and it is written and they can find it and they can access it and maybe make their own decision. The libraries should always be, as they always are, the guardians of this information.

## **Discussion**

By evaluating the patterns that came forth from the interview it seems that TPL is very focused on community needs which can be a great way to promote focus on climate change preparation and a more advanced focus of environmental literacy within branches. It has been very encouraging as an employee to see the additions of reading gardens in more recent years, which is a sentiment the librarian also shares. It is important to note that a significant amount of the year the weather is too cold for these spaces to be used, however even the visual aspect of seeing it from inside and around the neighborhood can have a positive impact as patrons still feel the space belongs to the community (instead of a commercial space). Although the organization of TPL is neutral in their collections (books, films, music, etc.), they have clearly started to take a more proactive approach to delivering environmental programs to all ages and growing their

collections to suit the growing interests of climate change and environmentalism. However, as the librarian mentions, this is a slow and quiet process due to the sensitivity around those who have political opinions of climate denial versus those who share a fact-based view on climate change through the scientific literature.

As a TPL library staff member and Master's of Environmental Studies candidate myself, I would argue that TPL needs to take a harder stance on climate change and move more rapidly in the direction of helping communities connect and prepare for the consequences. Yes, collections should always remain neutral in acquiring copies of books that both stand for and against contentious issues, however it is important to distinguish opinion from scientific fact. We must help residents understand the real-world repercussions of being environmentally illiterate. The difficulty with climate crisis is that denial literature is not considered as destructive as it truly is. Just as public libraries have progressed beyond providing literature that promotes racism and hate, it is time to progress on climate change and make it clear that if you subscribe to such ideals you are actively going against science and the well-being of the environment and those who inhabit the entire planet. Furthermore, TPL should stop taking such a timid approach to climate crisis and more boldly demonstrate their stance on agreeing that climate crisis is real.

This can be done by creating branch-specific environmental committees that heavily invite and include all members of a community, especially youth since the next generation will inherit our issues. As a staff member we have so many youth requesting to join the Youth Advisory Group to fulfill a mandatory Toronto high school volunteer requirement of forty hours. Sometimes we receive so many requests some branches must put them on a waiting list, which is becoming an increasing issue since the city is becoming more populated. This problem can be eliminated and these youth can put their efforts towards environmental activism within their own

communities while receiving credit for school. If communities take a stand on issues that matter to them, that will create a bigger push towards securing the funding to further these advancements. This will show management and the City of Toronto that people are serious about utilizing the public good that ultimately belongs to them, their public library system.



## Chapter 5: Recommendations

Fazey et al. (2018) state that it takes a combination of assets to determine how resilient communities will be overall, however it is not always clear which combination of assets will be key in fostering resiliency. They mention public libraries and their contribution to community resiliency in the face of climate change:

In the UK, for example, resources such as park wardens and libraries, which are at the frontline of cuts in local government, have been found to play an important role in promoting community resilience. Enhancing community resilience therefore needs to build on and retain a diversity of assets. Overall, adaptability is fundamental to, and even sometimes equated with, resilience and needs to be nurtured and enhanced as a key part of community development activities (Fazey et al., 2018, p 31)

Public libraries already serve as helping communities build resilience against negative impacts, within the branches and through networking with differing community organizations (and even corporations) across all levels (Fazey et al., 2018). The literature and lived experiences of the voices in this research provide sufficient evidence that libraries need to push much further and boldly transform their operations. There are many practical ways we can move forward.

The following are suggestions for future (hopefully not too far in the future) research and applied practices within public library organizations. A contentious issue right now is making public libraries in Toronto open twenty-four-hours a day. For such a densely populated urban city this would be a huge step in the right direction, especially for the homeless, precariously housed, students, those living in abusive households, etc. However, with drastic cuts coming

from the current Ford government, libraries are already going ‘staffless’ without any public consultations on the matter. This means that instead of staff overseeing the branches (which is already challenging with the little staff we have now), patrons will be allowed key access to these branches overnight, which can have grave consequences. The Toronto Public Library Workers Union CUPE Local 4948 has been seeking community aid in bringing light to the issues that staffless libraries create: a threat to public safety, a two-tiered library system, and a threat to local jobs (see Appendix F). Such Canadian authors as Margaret Atwood, Dr. Vincent Lam, and Joy Fielding (to name a few), are part of the campaign to ‘Save Our Libraries’. In a world where libraries were recognized for the public good they are, they would have abundant staffing, resources, funding, be open twenty-four-hours a day, and highly focus on healing and connecting community members, not harming them.

Personally, in the eight years of service I have devoted to working for TPL (I began when I was twenty-two years old), I have been dealing with undignified precarious hours. It took me seven years to move up from a book-shelving Page (the ‘lowest’ position) to the next step up, a Public Service Assistant still part-time at only seventeen hours a week. Just last year I was actually very lucky to get this position considering the only requirement is seniority. With the good fortune of having access to a personal vehicle, I have been able to drive to a very challenging construction-filled location for daily 3-hour shifts that take a total commute of three or more hours to reach (depending on traffic and weather conditions). Not to mention trekking across the city before or after to pick up random emergency shifts on an on-call basis. On average it takes ten to fifteen years of rigorously applying for each position weekly to get a full-time position. There is a stereotype within TPL that, just like being a fast-food employee or working in retail, this is a job for teens. The explanation of this position is even posted on the

teen section of the TPL website. However, the harsh reality is that all who have precarious part-time work at TPL (and we vary in age, ability, and life challenges) cannot survive without help from others, and this is a huge injustice considering the nature and difficulty of the job.

TPL does already partner with the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres across Toronto to provide staff training, consulting with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders on how to become more welcoming to Indigenous communities and further develop the Indigenous education literature collections and programs. Although this is a step in the right direction, the outcomes of these processes are much too slow as well. In fact, I had to wait for one whole year to take the training ‘Indigenous Cultural Competency’ because it is mandatory and was constantly full. Libraries (and governments) should heavily invest in expanding and connecting Indigenous community networks to work together in finding solutions to climate crisis at the micro level.

Of course, it would be beneficial to add to the environmental efforts already underway at TPL (or any library system) but at an accelerated rate. This would once again include: reading gardens; sustainable building designs, infrastructure, and organizational practices; even spaces for wildlife sanctuaries. If limitless funding was available, another suggestion is to add specialized ‘daycares’ to all branches. Not just daycares for babies and children (which does not even exist currently) but for any person, pet, or nonhuman that requires attention. As public libraries are already hubs of their communities, this would be the ultimate service in refuge. This would also be pivotal in protecting the vulnerable during any type of emergencies. A dramatic investment in emergency planning would be key: neighborhood-specific and disaster-specific emergency plans, calling/emailing/visiting trees to check in on vulnerable neighbors, shared emergency equipment (tools, snow-plows, etc.), free emergency bags and supplies for

community members and their pets, and community maps made through consultation meetings to decide as a collective where to go in the event of a disaster.

### **Conclusion: Reflections on What I Have Learned**

In *Open Conversations: Public Learning in Libraries and Museums* (Carr, 2011) the author argues that learning is a difficult and complex process that the English language does not have the adequate terms to describe. Carr (2011) states that, as humans, we must understand that being a learner is the only way towards growth, which should be something to strive for throughout life:

In *transformation* we may dissolve one way of being and emerge in a new way of experiencing and accounting for our world. We speak of change, of growth, of developing, of becoming someone else, and of recognizing a new identity. Our *transformations* may be slow, but they will have signposts and watersheds we can recognize. (p. 160)

When I had first read this quote before I began the interview process, I felt this encompassed what needs to take place in public libraries. They need to transform to help communities help themselves through climate crisis. However, I now see this quote as even more relevant. The next generation can be seen as the signposts and watersheds, and we have the absolute obligation to bring forth the necessary transformations, before it is too late for us all. We may be slow to change, but for the sake of the consequences we must begin this new community transformation as quickly as possible. I achieved the greatest education in how to tackle climate crisis, through the deeply thought-provoking messages the children of TPL were ready to share. Knowing them as patrons, and being familiar with children in general, I anticipated earnest and thoughtful answers, but I was not prepared for this. They are completely aware of the reality that they are inheriting these disastrous issues and appalling living conditions. Yet, they approach these

challenges with such grace, sophistication, concern, humor, vulnerability, compassion, and care. It may be that since children hold these qualities, we are always expecting the next generation to fix this mess. Well, time's up. Instead of beating around the bush, trying to please everyone, or arguing about which way is best, we can start tackling these issues immediately with the resources we already possess - public libraries. This research has shown me, and hopefully the reader, that everything is in place to create the environmentally-educated, socially-conscious, bold-activists we need to fight climate crisis and transform our communities to provide refuge and foster resiliency for all.

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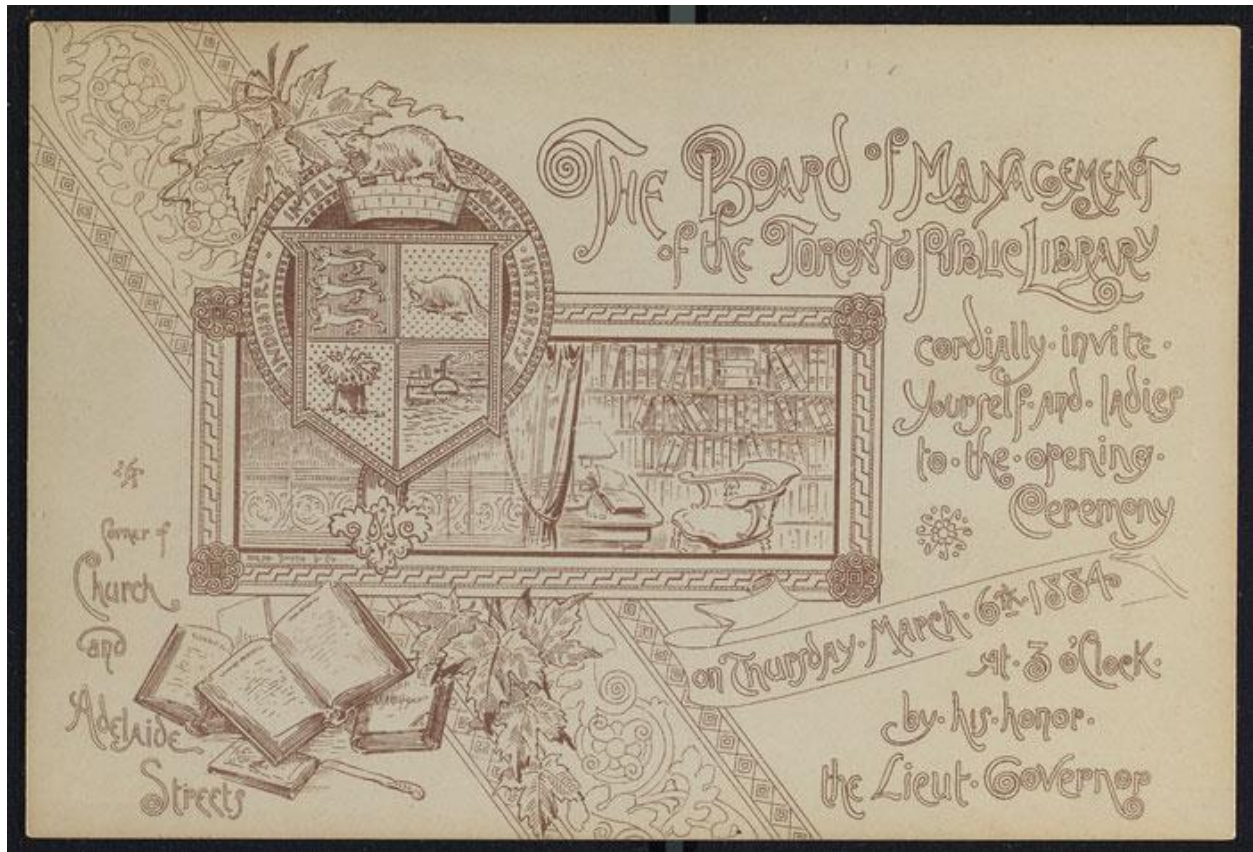
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Appendix A



A Campaign card advocating for the free public library, Toronto, c.1882 (City of Toronto, 2019a)

## Appendix B



An invitation to the opening of Toronto Public Library, March 6, 1884 (City of Toronto, 2019a)

## Appendix C



A photo I had taken of an *Our Fragile Planet Series* display at Amesbury Park Library, Toronto Public Library [November, 2018]

## Appendix D

### Children Interview Questions

1. How are you feeling today?
2. How old are you?
3. Do you live nearby?
4. How often do you come to the library (how many visits a week/month)?
5. How do you feel when you're in the library?
6. How do you feel when you're in school?
7. How do you feel about learning in the library?
8. How do you feel about learning in school?
9. Do you feel a difference between learning in the library and learning in school?
10. Do you feel comfortable looking for books you are interested in?
11. What are your favorite types of books?
12. Do you know what climate change (global warming) is?
  - **Yes:**
  - a. How do you understand it?
  - b. Where do you remember learning about it?
  - c. How does it make you feel? [\*I validate that many people feel that way and it is normal]
  - **No:**
  - a. Does that sound like something you've heard before?
  - b. How do you understand it?
    - [\*I explain a scientific definition of climate change and the impacts]
  - c. How does it make you feel?
    - [\*I validate that many people feel that way and it is normal]
13. Do you know of things we can do to help?
  - [\*I explain some actions kids, individuals, communities, and governments can do]
14. Do you remember ever looking at books in the library about climate change (global warming)?
  - **Yes:**
  - a. Do you remember what they were about?
  - b. How did you find them (you searched for them/someone showed them to you/ on display)?
  - c. Did you find them easy to understand?
  - d. Did they give you things we can do to help?
  - e. Would you be interested in finding more books on climate change in the library? Why?
  - **No:**
  - a. Would you be interested in finding books on climate change in the library? Why?
15. How do you feel these books would help you?
16. If someone was writing a book like that what advice would you give them?
17. Is there anything else you want to say?
18. How are you feeling now?

## Appendix E

### Librarian Interview Questions

1. Check in: How are you feeling today?
2. Does the branch you work in/or a branch you've previously worked in/ have a reading garden or plants/greenery within the branch)?
  - Yes: → How often is it used?
3. What do you feel are the impacts of a reading garden/greenery within a branch?
  - a. Did you come across this concept in your training/education as a librarian?
  - b. Do you think reading gardens/greenery impact customer experiences?
  - c. Staff experiences?
4. Do you feel the public library could be considered a therapeutic landscape (as in having the ability to promote physical, mental, and spiritual healing)?
  - Did you come across this concept in your education/training as a librarian?
  - Do any of your own experiences (as a librarian or customer) come to mind?
  - What do you notice are customer experiences of being in these spaces?
  - What do you notice are staff experiences of being in these spaces?
5. What do you know of embodied learning (do you remember coming across it in your education/training)?
6. Do you think public libraries promote embodied learning (as in a learning that goes beyond privileging the mind by using the body to physically access knowledge)?
7. What have you learned about children's environmental literature in your education/training?
8. What do you notice about children's environmental literature within the public library:
  - Availability within the branch (Does it depend on branch size? / Branch staff decisions or elsewhere ie. a manager, a different department, or customer suggestions?)
  - Estimates on being approached by children on this subject (school project or curiosity?)
  - Estimates on children accessing this themselves
  - Anything else?
9. Are there some materials on children's environmental literature you would recommend offhand (fiction/non-fiction/bibliotherapeutic)?
10. Do you think children's environmental literature is more effective as non-fiction, fiction or a combination (Does it depend on age, etc? Child's personality?)?



11. Have you come across bibliotherapeutic literature (bibliotherapy as in expressive therapy that involves the reading of specific texts with the purpose of healing) based on the climate crisis? Focused on children specifically?
12. How would you describe the public library as relevant and valuable to the community?
13. Do you think the role of the public library should put some/more focus on the climate crisis?
14. Do you think it is appropriate to have the role of the public library transform as more central to communities, regarding:
  - climate change
  - natural/man-made disaster preparedness
  - a place of refuge (as a therapeutic landscape or during crisis)
  - provider of bibliotherapeutic resources
15. Do you have any recommendations as a library professional (for public libraries, governments and decision-makers, environmental educators, mental health care professionals, communities) regarding any of the topics we discussed today?
16. Is there anything you would like to add?
17. Check in: How are you feeling now?

## Appendix F



A photo I took [July 2019] of the CUPE Local 4948 newsletter. Toronto Public Library Workers Union members protesting staffless libraries, talking to community members, and handing out flyers and lawn signs of support. The flyer reads:

Get the story. Change the story. [OurPublicLibrary.To](http://OurPublicLibrary.To)

Stop the Experiment. There has never been a Staffless Library in a large urban centre like Toronto. The risks are far too great. Extending library hours is a good idea. Doing so without professional and trained staff is not. You can help. Send a message to Library Management and Key Decision Makers by visiting [OurPublicLibrary.To](http://OurPublicLibrary.To) & say no to staffless libraries”