Leisure and Work in Library and Community Programs for Very Young Children

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Abstract

This article presents findings from an observational study of library and community programs for babies and toddlers with their caregivers. The analysis is based on field notes from observations made during fifty visits to eight program sites in two Canadian provinces and is underpinned by two related beliefs: first that leisure experiences are produced through ongoing interactions among participants and program leaders, and second, that observing social interactions in program sites can provide clues to understanding the work involved and the processes of production. Our findings indicate that leisure activities in all program sites functioned as contexts for institutional work associated with Canadian policy goals for early childhood education and care (ECEC): promoting early childhood literacy, positive caregiver-child relationships, and social support. Library programs foreground literacy work. We contend that a rigid commitment to program rules could undermine educational and social support outcomes. Our findings support flexible and improvisational approaches to program delivery and leaders' active involvement in the informal components of programs.

Public libraries have long provided leisure programs to introduce young children to the pleasures of reading. Librarians have claimed that programs for very young children and their caregivers can have enduring implications for children's reading and for their overall well-being. As Leslie Burger, the president of the American Library Association, observed, lifelong literacy "all starts with the public library. . . . Young parents bring their children to story hours, toddler lap-sits, or a myriad of other programs for the very young to begin the socialization process but also to

build . . . early literacy skills" (Burger, 2008, p. 45). When describing the contributions of teachers and librarians to young children's emergent literacy, the professional literature for librarians, until recently, contrasted librarians' *leisurely* love of reading and children's literature with teachers' *workerly* expertise on the process and techniques of reading (McKenzie and Stooke, 2001). During the last two decades, however, talk among librarians about promoting a love of books has been superseded by talk of the need to educate parents about their roles as children's first teachers. Supporting children's early learning, albeit in the context of highly engaging leisure activities, is now viewed as important *work* undertaken by librarians. The ALA's *Every Child Ready to Read* program well illustrates the public library community's awareness that the intensity of a child's engagement in language activities and the quality of talk between a parent and child are central to the preparation of children to be "ready to learn" at school. As Burger observes, part of the public library's lifelong learning mandate is to provide programs and services that "build the early literacy skills *that are so essential to ensuring that children are ready to read by the time they enter kindergarten*" (Burger, 2008, 45, our emphasis).

Programs supporting the early learning of a community's youngest residents therefore operate at the intersection of "work" and "leisure" in three important ways. First, such leisure programs, like visits to a zoo or a museum, can function as contexts in which important kinds of work, including fostering literacy and social support, get done.

Second, even the most leisurely of activities require work to create and sustain them. A program only functions because all participants play their parts: the program leader's work of preparing the space and materials, the child's work of learning how to sit, where to look, when to respond and when to stay quiet, and the caregiver's work of coordinating snacks, diapers, transportation, and family schedules to get the children to the program space and support their participation within it.

Finally, the leisurely activities associated with programs for very young children are linked to activities more often perceived as work carried out in other places. Burger's comments well demonstrate that what families experience as a leisure activity has implications for the work of school teachers and educational policy makers.

This article draws on an ongoing, observational study in Canadian public libraries and other publicly-funded community-based programs for very young children and their adult caregivers. Like DeVault (2000), Tardy (2000), Maätita (2003), and Blackford (2004), we seek to understand the social activities that take place when young children and the adults who care for them gather in public spaces such as libraries, museums, zoos, playgrounds, or community centers. By describing the various kinds of *work* embedded in leisure pursuits, our analysis brings into view ways in which program activities for and with young children blur distinctions be-

tween everyday understandings of work and leisure activities (Prigoda and McKenzie, 2007; Stooke, 2004).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE "WORK" OF LEISURE

Jenna Hartel (2003), one of the few Library and Information Science (LIS) researchers to have focused on leisure to date, works from Stebbins' critique of the dichotomy between "work" and "leisure" (Stebbins, 1992, p.3; for an introduction see Hartel, 2003). However, even this critique fails to capture the complexity of the often unwaged activities associated with caring for children and supporting their development (see Aitchison, 2003, p.41). Researchers in a variety of disciplines pay serious scholarly attention to hidden, unwaged, and often marginalized forms of work, including the support and service work required to carry out leisure activities. Feminist scholars, for example, have called for a revaluing of the invisible work traditionally carried out by women at home (Aitchison, 2003).

We seek to transcend the work/leisure dichotomy by taking a different conceptual approach. We draw on the theoretical writing of the Canadian feminist sociologist, Dorothy Smith (1999, p.7), who proposes that "life as usual" in any social setting is constituted by "the ongoing concerting and coordinating of individuals' activities,"—which Smith defines as *work*—and the social order of any setting is the product of these activities (see also Smith, 1987, 1990, 1999, 2005, 2007). Like Smith, we define work generously to include any activity that contributes to the maintenance of "life as usual" in a setting, even a leisure setting. Our inclusive definition of work thus brings into view work activities that are not commonly understood as work, even by those who engage in the activities.

In contrast to her inclusive definition of the term *work*, Smith's definition of the term *institution* is more narrowly focused. Smith starts from an assumption shared by researchers in sociology's interpretive tradition that social life is produced through the routine interactions of all participants in a social setting. She builds on this assumption to claim that the routine actions of individuals are connected to routine actions of people in other settings. Activity in any setting is therefore coordinated locally and extralocally. Smith further argues that this extralocal organization of activities takes place when individuals' actions are hooked into social relations, by which she means sequences of actions that connect the work of individuals in a web-like fashion. In Smith's theoretical writing an institution is defined as a cluster of social relations "organized around a distinctive function" (Smith, 1987, p. 160) in society such as education, healthcare, or the economy. Libraries are not "institutions" in Smith's definition, but sites of institutional activity.

We contend that even the most routine activities may be mobilized as institutional work. For example, when a mother draws a young child's attention to the librarian's glove puppet, she does not necessarily do so with

the child's future educational success in mind, but her work nevertheless helps prepare the child to participate in future social situations as an audience member and above all as a pupil. The seemingly inconsequential act of turning a baby to face a program leader, what Marjorie DeVault (2000) calls "the coordination of looking," is thus hooked into the web of institutional relations that organizes educational work in diverse sites.

METHODOLOGY

Holstein and Gubrium (2005, p. 84) place Smith's work within a stream of interpretive methodological writing that "engages both the *hows* and the *whats* of social reality . . . centered in both how people methodically construct their experiences and their worlds, and in the configurations of meanings and institutional life that inform and shape their reality-constituting activity." Smith's institutional ethnography approach has been adopted in a variety of professional and human service disciplines, particularly education and nursing. Although her 2007 keynote address to Library Research Seminar (Smith, 2007) received a very enthusiastic response, her approach has not yet been widely taken up by library and information science researchers (For three examples, see Lundberg, 1991; Stooke, 2004; McKenzie, 2006).

Smith's perspective has implications for data collection. Whereas survey researchers seek objectivity through standardization of interview routines and phenomenological researchers seek to learn about respondents' subjective states, researchers working in this tradition focus concretely on what members of a setting do and on their accounts of what they do. Informants' accounts of what they do are not considered as windows into their subjective states, but as texts that embed clues to the ways these activities are linked to activities elsewhere. Data are analyzed relationally, an abductive strategy in which the researcher makes a creative leap to propose "how a particular event fits into a broader picture or explanation" (Davis, 1972, p. 4). In institutional ethnography the broader picture or explanation is conceptualized as a map showing links between work carried out by individuals at local sites of activity and work carried out elsewhere (Campbell & Gregor, 2002).

The Context

The programs we observed can be viewed as part of a trend since the early 1990s, a constituent thread in what DeVault (2000, p. 485) has called "a larger story, about the changing character of middle and working-class family life," that seeks to address two related concerns. First, there is a widespread perception among social and educational policy makers that to participate in the "new knowledge economy," children must arrive at school "ready to learn," and programs implicitly or explicitly reflect these goals. Second, there is a recognition that the pace of life for families with

young children has accelerated (Canadian Council for Social Development, 2006). The current proliferation of programs therefore also aims to address parents' needs for social support known to mitigate stressors.

Following social policy makers in the United Kingdom and the United States, Canadian governments have implemented policies to increase multi-sector involvement in the education of young children and to coordinate social supports for families without bringing the support networks under direct control of governments (McCain and Mustard, 1999). The new social policies created competition among agencies (Stooke, 2004), but the result has been more rather than fewer programs, each aiming to support young children's development by reaching out to the adults who care for them.

Data Collection
Our analysis draws on field notes from our observations during fifty visits to eight program sites in two Canadian provinces. Three of the programs were sponsored by public libraries and four by other not-for-profit community organizations. One was jointly sponsored. All programs were led by at least one paid employee and described by program leaders as free of charge. All but one were described as universally accessible. Programs took place in a variety of locations: two public library branches in a mid-size city, one large metropolitan public library, one rented space in a childcare center located in an inner-city neighborhood, three neighborhood community centers, and one parent-child resource center. Although most of the programs took place in a space associated with their sponsorship, there was some crossover; for example, a community program run in a library and a library outreach program that operated in a community space. The three library-sponsored programs comprised six weekly half-hour sessions. One community-sponsored and the jointly-sponsored program took place over ten weekly two-hour time blocks. The other three community-sponsored programs were ongoing weekly drop-ins. In all eight sites, each program session included a formal activity period and one or more periods set aside for informal socializing, but the length of the program and the proportion of time assigned to formal and informal activities varied.

Numbers of participants varied, but programs were set up to accommodate about fifteen adults with one or two children each. In accordance with Canadian research ethics guidelines (CIHR, 2003), we sought and gained consent from adult participants. For child participants we sought and gained consent from a parent or guardian. We therefore spoke with all adult caregivers about their relationship with the children they brought to the program. Most adults identified themselves as the child(ren)'s parent. One or two people per site identified themselves as non-parental caregivers (paid babysitter or grandparent).

At each location, a research team including one or both authors and one or more of our nine research assistants observed six to ten consecutive program sessions. As of November 2008, data collection is ongoing at one site. We placed ourselves as unobtrusively as possible and observed program sessions and hand-wrote field notes. As participant observers, however, we also participated with adults, children, and program leaders in group activities that included listening to stories, looking at picture books and chanting, singing, and "doing the actions" for nursery rhymes, and chatting with children, caregivers, and program leaders and planners. We audio-recorded sessions in those sites that gave us permission to do so, although, in most cases, the recordings were not sufficiently clear to get a good transcript. We talked with participants during informal socializing times and made notes about our conversations. This analysis is taken from our field notes on all of our activities. We have anonymized both participants and locations.

Data Analysis
Consistent with the tenets of institutional ethnography, the purposes of our study were to identify work carried out by all members of each setting and to investigate its social organization. Initially we conceptualized three broad types of activity: support for early childhood literacy, the care and parenting of young children, and the information seeking, giving and exchange that went on among participants. Through an ongoing review of field notes and regular debriefing sessions with members of the research team, we began to identify the kinds of work common to all sites and to examine how the work was actually getting done in specific sites.

In keeping with Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria for quality in constructivist and interpretivist research, we aimed to establish trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is an analogue to internal validity (Patton, 2001, p. 546). In our study credibility was established through the use of a precise but generous definition of "work" and a commitment to concrete descriptions that were separated from interpretations in our field notes. We also aimed to bracket our preconceived notions about the kinds of work being accomplished in order to focus more concretely on what we saw and heard and to bring into view what we call "seemingly inconsequential" actions.

> Newly-walking baby and his dad approach the ball pool. Program leader: How old is he? Dad: Ten months. Another mum, about her baby: She's eleven months.
> [I definitely got a sense of comparison here: [the other baby]'s not walking yet, but I'm not sure whether [her mum] actually said this.]

Patton writes that dependability is an analogue to reliability. We triangulated our data by observing in multiple and diverse sites and by making sure that at least two researchers made observations at each site, but we did

so with the knowledge that a singular truth was unattainable. We each observed from different areas of the room and therefore saw and recorded different things. Moreover, we each brought our own perspectives to the task.

> I'm reminded that my kids grew up on the Elephant Show twenty years ago and [leader's name] was in the playroom then. . . . [Research Assistant] is twenty-something so must be seeing this routine through different eyes altogether.

Rather than adopting strategies inappropriate to our analytical framework, such as intercoder reliability, we welcomed the multiplicity of perspectives and engaged in peer debriefing sessions.

Confirmability is an analogue to objectivity. Institutional ethnography eschews the distance implied by objectivity.

> [Institutional Ethnography] is a method of inquiry into the social that proposes to enlarge the scope of what becomes visible . . . , mapping the relations that connect one local site to others. Like a map, it aims to be through and through indexical to the local sites of people's experience, making visible how we are connected into the extended relations of ruling and economy and their intersections. And though some work of inquiry must be technical as mapmaking is, its product should be ordinarily accessible and usable, just as a well-made map is, to those on the terrain it maps. (Smith, 2005, 29)

Neither did we seek generalizability of findings, but aimed instead to explicate the unique, site-specific processes though which commonly occurring phenomena were actually being produced. Bringing visibility to an action that at first glance appears to be "inconsequential" is an abductive process in which the researcher makes a conjecture about how the action fits into a larger picture, in our case an emerging map of the social relations organizing programs for very young children.

As do all ethnographers, researchers who employ institutional ethnography must establish foci for their observations and often need to refocus the lens of observation in light of their informants' comments. For example, early in the data collection process a leader voiced her concern that the people for whom the program was actually designed often "dropped out" early. In response to her comments, we began to examine data pertaining to the establishment of rules for participation in programs. Our current interest in the blurring of work and leisure categories was also provoked by informants' comments. A small group of mothers told us that they came to the program because it was a place to have fun, but then jokingly asked us if there was evidence that "it actually makes a difference" to their children's development.

The remainder of this article discusses the intertwining of leisure and learning in the formal session activities and of leisure and social support in the informal socializing times before, after and sometimes during formal session activities.

Findings

Leisure, Loving, Learning: Formal Session Activities
Leisure programs support children's early literacy and learning while at
the same time supporting the development of loving relationships be-
tween children and the adults who care for them. The programs we ob-
served demonstrated commitment to each kind of work in a variety of
ways. During a program for babies and caregivers, for example, several
leaders included a song called "La La" in which each verse consisted en-
tirely of a monosyllabic "word" that rhymes with "la."

> Leader: The words are easy. . . . [Leader] led the group through several
> consonants, doing just the first four bars of the song and then said
> "When you've done nearly the whole alphabet you can do [then she
> sang the ending with the big MWAHH kiss.]"

Songs such as "La La" appeared to be highly enjoyable for the adults and
babies, but they also promote sensitivity to the sounds of language, what
educators call *phonological awareness*, and as such can be viewed as develop-
mentally appropriate language and literacy lessons. Likewise, an emphasis
on nutrition as a component of healthy child development was evident in
the work one program leader did to set up her drop-in:

> [Research assistant] notices that the little table by the toy kitchen has
> new plastic food on it. She picks up a clear plastic glass filled with white
> plastic. [Leader] explains that it's healthy eating week, so she's put out
> a variety of healthy foods, along with a paper sack so that the children
> can put healthy groceries in the bag. She shows us some of the food
> items she's added, putting them into the bag one by one: meat, chicken,
> grapes. . . . The books [on the display table] are definitely matched to
> the healthy eating theme. . . . The blonde girl's] mum squats by the
> table with the baby in her lap. She's got scissors and a piece of paper
> in her hand: looks like a photocopied colouring-book page of healthy
> food outlines. She's cutting out food shapes.

Two of the programs we observed identified themselves as Parent-Child
Mother Goose (PCMG) programs. PCMG was developed by a former To-
ronto children's librarian and acclaimed storyteller in partnership with a
community development worker (PCMG, 2007). Its philosophy embeds
a strong commitment to the use of rhymes, songs, and stories to support
emotional well-being. PCMG's *Teacher Training Manual* (1994) instructs
leaders to encourage parents to memorize rhymes and lists among pro-
gram outcomes: "Interact using language, eye contact and touch; Take
away a shared repertoire of rhymes, songs and stories; Find new ways of en-
joying being together" (PCMG, 1994, p. 20). Aspects of PCMG program-
ming have been taken up widely in early childhood education and care
(ECEC) and we inferred its influence in all the programs we observed. In
particular, our field notes contain numerous references to leaders explain-

ing how to hold or position children. During action rhymes such as *The Wheels on the Bus* or *If You're Happy and You Know It*, for example, several program leaders explained to parents that children could be positioned to face away from their caregivers (out) or toward them (in).

> The leader says, "Here's where you really have to work." Jack-in-the-box sits so still. Won't you come out? Yes—I will. The babies get lifted in the air. I notice that for this rhyme, most of the babies are faced away from their moms and toward the program leader, but the moms nuzzle the babies' necks, plant kisses on cheeks and find other ways to let babies know they are right there.

It is worth noting that while library program leaders generally preferred children to be facing them so they could see the books and puppets the leader held, PCMG-trained leaders often suggested that children face their caregivers so that the two could interact.

Leaders also told us that they chose specific rhymes and songs to soothe children when they became "overexcited," or that their goals included helping the adults to acquire a repertoire of songs. "[R]hymes, songs and stories can be of great help in dealing with . . . difficult times" (PCMG, 1994, p. 3).

> Several children are running across the center of the circle, crashing into one another and collapsing in giggles. The leader . . . announces . . . , "I think we should do *Sleeping Bunnies*, don't you?" The children immediately curl up on the floor, imitating bunnies. . . . *Sleeping Bunnies* seems to cue the children that it's time to listen again. At the end of the rhyme they settle back with their own caregivers.

As the above description of PCMG activities suggests, each program tended to foreground a particular kind of work. In library-based programs the most highly valued activity appeared to be language play and support for early childhood literacy. Librarians always shared books, even when the children appeared to take little notice. Indeed, one librarian took time out from her performance to walk around the circle of caregivers and babies to show each child the pages of the books "up close." By contrast, only one of the community program leaders we observed read books aloud to a group.

Library program leaders also made extensive use of physical artifacts (e.g., puppets, books, feltboards; McKenzie, Stooke, and McKechnie, 2007) during the storytime. By contrast, community programs provided a wide variety of interactive toys during the informal, socializing times, but except for introducing bubbles at the end of a circle time, almost exclusively conducted their formal programs using only words and gestures.

Just as leisurely activities such as sharing rhymes, songs, and stories provide deeply pleasurable ways for parents or caregivers and children to develop emotional attachments, leisurely activities can be pleasurable

contexts for very young children to become familiar with the future world of school. The ritualized form and tempo (McKenzie and Stooke, 2007) of all of the programs echoed the form and tempo of a preschool or kindergarten circle time. Children in all the programs were practicing how to "be" at school in a number of ways: practicing how and recognizing when to calm down and focus on the "teacher," repeating what was said, taking turns, following the directions of an authority figure. We do not mean to say that participants consciously taught the children about school. Adult caregivers supported children's learning less through direct teaching than by modeling "good student" behavior through "audience etiquette."

> Librarian and infant's mother are talking, researcher joins in, asks how old infant is. Mum apologetic for breastfeeding, because "we missed all the stories," will try to get him to nurse beforehand next time.

We noted too that adult participants were encouraged to act as the children's "first and most important teachers" by copying the leader's actions and in turn modeling those actions for the children and that even when leaders asked the adults or children to suggest their favorite rhymes or games all but a few adults appeared to look to leaders to set the tone and pace of a program. Finally, we noted that leaders most frequently communicated the nature of appropriate activities. Private conversations among adults were not encouraged during formal activities, although they were explicitly encouraged before and after the formal program. Children's exploration of the physical space was likewise discouraged during formal activities in library programs although it was tolerated in community programs and in one program was explicitly encouraged.

In each program individual children, caregivers, and leaders created what we call private leisure spaces. Not surprisingly, it was children's actions that most often and most dramatically disrupted the often unspoken expectations for the formal portions of programs. More than once we observed that most of the adults were singing or chanting a rhyme together while most of the children were exploring the physical space or socializing with each other. The first of the two field notes that follow describes what happened when the librarian's "child-friendly" practice allowed for small bits of informal leisure time to be snatched even within a fairly structured program. The second narrates how a community program leader set aside plans to begin formal "circle time."

> The librarian walks around the circle showing the book to each child. *This little piggy*: E's mum and P's mum are talking while the piggies are being handed around. Two other mothers are also chatting.
> L's mum is up now getting a bottle. L. cries, buries his face into the rug where he's lying face-down. [Leader] says "Oh she's coming!" and takes L. onto her lap. L's mum comes back.

Unspoken rules can remain invisible until they are broken. The physical needs of babies seemed to be met without disrupting programs, but in one program the exuberantly "leisurely" singing of a group of mothers brought into view the more serious, program-defined goals of the leader.

> Pam asks [program leader] about how leaders remember songs. [Program Leader] says the leader needs to keep a step ahead. She says, "There is a little group of moms who over-sing me." She means the moms sing too fast and too loud. She doesn't know why they do that, but some other moms have talked to her about it. . . . I ask about the bicycle song that she taught that day. . . . I ask if her purpose was to bring the group's attention back to her? She says, "Well I wanted to refocus and regroup. People were disengaging with their children and engaging with each other. I wanted to bring them together. . . . I think about what I'm going to do based on the needs of the group."

The conversation reported above points to leaders' responsibilities toward the whole group. However, attending to program rules could result in a participant's needs being unmet for no obvious reason. In one program the leader's reluctance to provide printed copies of rhymes for a francophone mother made it difficult for the mother to commit the rhymes to memory.

> Danielle's mother approaches the leader and asks if she could have the words to the rhymes. English is not her first language. She cannot understand the rhymes and songs. She needs to see them. The leader explains to the mother that this is an oral program. No books, no print—although this leader adds that she is not so hard core. She gives the words out after the last session.

It is not our intention to critique the important work carried out in community programs for young children. We would point out, nevertheless, that our observations corroborate findings published in highly regarded education journals that a rigid commitment to any mandated program, however research-based, can function as a barrier to inclusive and ethical practice (Heydon and Wang, 2006; Tobin and McInnes, 2008). In other words, by "getting serious" about young children's learning, program leaders may be undermining their own efforts. We therefore propose that program leaders foreground leisure as a goal when planning programs.

Leisure as a Context for Providing Social Support
The PCMG program's *Teacher Training Manual* (1994, p. 3) described parenting of young children as a "lonely job with little guidance and support available unless the family encounters a real crisis." Since the mid-1990s federal and provincial governments in Canada have made concerted efforts to coordinate community assets for young children. Consequently, PCMG programs, library storytimes, and other programs for very young

children are now construed as constituents of larger institutional initiatives that aim to support early child development and provide social support to families.

> We are working with our community partners—school boards, public health units, municipalities and child care and children's services providers—to make sure that more children and parents can access a seamless network of early learning and development services and supports right in their own communities. (Ontario. Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007)

In the previous section of the article, we drew on observations made during formal session activities to identify and discuss ways that leisurely activities functioned as contexts for institutional work associated with caregiver-child relationships and "readiness to learn" at school. We now draw on observations made during periods of informal socializing that went on before and after formal program sessions to consider ways that leisurely activities functioned as contexts for work associated with social support. Specifically we discuss instrumental support and social support, two categories of support described in social work literature (Finfgeld-Connett, 2005).

Instrumental support is practical in nature. One public library administrator, for example, told the researchers that the library provides space to relax. She said that many families living in small, downtown apartments were starting to use the public library children's area as an extension of their living rooms. In the programs we observed instrumental support most often took the form of access to toys, snacks, and information about other services, but we also observed a leader helping a participant to fill out a form and at one site the program leader read aloud a book written by a participating mother and encouraged other participants to order it. The following field note lists some of the flyers provided in one site:

> Two half- 8½ x 11 page workshop flyers, top one says "Loving each one best," lower one "Building secure relationships"; then two full-size flyers: the middle one on Terrific Toddlers/ Feeding Your Toddler and the bottom one on Terrific Toddlers. Inside [a folded poster]was a piece of white paper with a few paragraphs labelled "Tough to cut down on yelling." . . . Three business cards for people with the title "parent educator" were attached diagonally across it. . . . more fringe-bottomed event announcements: Bullying—what can parents do? Loving touch dads/infants; baby food basics [both on the same flyer]. At the bottom was one with no fringe, for [a program for new parents], co-sponsored by the [local] Health Unit.

Social support is less tangible than instrumental support. We inferred that leaders provided social support when they welcomed adults and children as individuals and spent extra time with first-time attendees. Some leaders made a point of greeting newcomers, even when a newcomer's

arrival disrupted the formal program. Moreover, we observed that all program leaders represented themselves as friendly elders or as peers rather than as experts. As, Finfgeld-Connett notes, nonprofessionals are often preferred over professional service providers.

> Leader: While I was just upstairs, I asked my friend up there, I said when is it that babies start to do peek a boo? And she said, I think they start to do it right away, when they put their tongues in and out of their mouths all the time and they mimic you doing that. But according to [in sarcastic, mock-important voice] the Princeton Center for Infancy and Early Childhood [several voices laughing] it says that [baby vocalizes loudly] peek a boo is a game that appears about the beginning of the 5th month. But **we** all know, as mothers, that **our** babies do it long before that.

Social support can take the form of access to social networks, opportunities to talk with nonjudgmental others or simply to be distracted from the "problems at hand."

> Baby N. and his mother come over to the change table for a fresh diaper. I chat with N's mother. She explains that she has a toothache, which she's had all weekend but couldn't do anything about it on the weekend. She feels lousy and came to the program today in hopes of seeing her friend, who just got home last night from her two-week trip to the grandparents'. She's talked to her friend a lot while she was away and since she's been back but hasn't seen her yet. N's mum says she missed yoga this morning because she had to wait for the emergency dentist to call her back about an appointment. . . . So "we hauled our butts out" here to this program to see [friend] but [friend]'s not here today.

We concede, however, that there is no objective way for an observer to judge whether a leader's actions or interactions are experienced as supportive by participants. For example, we do not know if a leader's invitation to caregivers to share their strategies for coping with the winter gloom was actually experienced as supportive by everyone present. We infer that the invitation was supportive for some participants because several people responded with ideas and their responses were accompanied by laughter from others. Attributing the social support to leaders' actions is challenging too because leaders do not necessarily provide social support directly. Sharing a snack can provide instrumental support in the form of nutrition, but it also provides opportunities for participants to converse with one another.

In the programs we observed, leaders indirectly provided social support by creating spaces for participants to socialize with one another. At some programs leaders left the program space soon after the formal session. Participants could visit for a while or depart at their leisure. At others, including both PCMG programs, leaders actively participated in socializing with participants and gave attention to adults who appeared to be isolated or new to the group.

> [Leader] comes over and sits across from [mother] on the square rug.
> This mother   has really chosen to sit far away from a fairly close
> knot of people and at this   program that's an indication for a leader
> to go and check in.

While a program room can shield participants from the scrutiny of the childless world outside (McKenzie & Stooke, 2007), we found, like Blackford (2004) and Maätita (2003), that it did not always shield program participants from the scrutiny of one another. We observed that participants at individual programs appeared to share assumptions about how they should participate to be seen as the "right sort" of participant in that context. At one program, children were actively encouraged to explore the program space during snack break; at another they were encouraged to sit with their caregivers and sample new foods. At library programs, books and copies of rhymes were regularly taken from librarians' displays while book displays at a neighborhood drop-in site were frequently left untouched. Once we observed that being the right sort of participant involved having a child at the appropriate age for the program. At a program for toddlers, a mother of an infant sat alone at a table for the entire snack break. Most participants had been together since their own children were infants and the group had developed into a tightly knit social network. More than once, we observed that being the right sort of participant involved being roughly the same age as the other adults. At a drop-in program we talked with two women who had met each other through an online mothers' group. The women told us they felt too young for the program. However, the following week they attended a different drop-in sponsored by the same agency. The participating parents and caregivers were, on average, younger looking and over a period of a few weeks the two women appeared to have achieved a comfort level that was not present at the first location.

Talk among participants who were meeting each other for the first time often began with "safe" topics that drew on common experiences such as children's ages, their developmental status, feeding and sleeping patterns. Safe topics could be vehicles for the forging of more meaningful connections through which participants could provide and receive what Finfgeld-Connett (2005, p. 6) calls unconditional positive regard. A comment about a baby's distinctive shoes, for instance, opened a space for the baby's mother to tell the story of how the baby had come to live with her family. The "shoe conversation" provided an opportunity for the other mothers to discuss the baby's adoption as an equal but different "birth story" (McKenzie et al., 2007). Our observations also corroborate Maätita's (2003) finding that playgroups are places where women seek validation from one another and from leaders. At one program a mother told the group that breastfeeding "on demand" was causing her chronic sleep deprivation. The mother was ambivalent about weaning her child

and asked for the group's advice. In the following excerpt from field notes a mother needed instrumental support to warm up a bottle, but she also received the unconditional regard of other participants, most of whom chose to breastfeed their babies.

> J's mum and others sitting are on the rug discussing where to get milk heated up. J's mum: "I bottlefeed." Other mum: "Go to the mall, there's a microwave there." We mentioned this conversation to the program facilitator, who incorporated it into what she talked about during the following week of the program, offering the library's microwave to bottle-feeding mothers.

It is noteworthy that most program leaders worked to diminish social gaps between themselves and participants, but tended to ignore social and cultural differences among participants. An exception to this practice was observed at a Chinese language PCMG program in which leaders regularly switched and translated from Cantonese to Mandarin and English. Leaders also served Euro-Canadian snacks along with traditional Chinese snacks and encouraged adults and children to experiment. However, at another culturally diverse program, the "healthy food" display contained a hamburger but no tofu, even though a number of Chinese-speaking families regularly attended.

Ironically, failing to acknowledge social difference can lead to exclusionary practices. The following field note brings into view how a casual question posed by a program leader failed to recognize participants' unequal material and social circumstances.

> Leader: What are people doing for Valentine's Day? She moves around in a circle asking each parent. A's mom is first: "we are getting a sitter and going to a hotel." Caregiver of three children who attend says she is making Valentines with her son to give them out at school. D's mom says they are staying home, celebrating her husband's birthday. . . . C's mom: They celebrated their anniversary the night before, went to a hotel and friends looked after C. M's mom: She goes to school every night from 6–9 and so "no time" to celebrate Valentines.

We are not suggesting that the leader intended her question to be anything but inclusive, but the responses listed by the researcher highlight the fact that not all participants had romantic partners, let alone friends who could look after their child and enough money to consider a night in a hotel. Questions related to the program itself, such as: "What could we make for a Valentine's snack next week?" would have been more inclusive.

Reflecting on our findings, we concluded that data collected during formal program sessions and data collected during informal socializing periods were telling us related but not entirely congruent stories. Whereas observations during formal sessions led us to advocate for flexible, responsive, and improvisational approaches to program delivery, observations

made during informal socializing periods lead us to conclude that simply providing time and a physical space in which to socialize cannot provide access to social support for all participants. Leaders need to balance the need to be unobtrusive with the need to support participants in making social connections, especially where social differences exist.

Conclusion

The analysis we presented is underpinned by the related beliefs that the leisure experiences are produced in the ongoing interactions among participants and leaders, and that observing those interactions in program sites can provide clues to understanding how leisurely experiences are produced. We contend that our findings, because they are based on empirical data and because they are somewhat counterintuitive, have practical implications for LIS professionals and researchers.

Our critique is twofold. First, we reiterate that important work related to early child development and getting "ready-to-learn" at school was embedded in seemingly inconsequential leisure activities. We propose too that a rigid commitment to rules or "best practices" can undermine a program leader's educational intentions. Second, we reiterate that leaders must be sensitive to social differences among participants to actively mediate social support. Treating each participant as an individual is an inadequate strategy for inclusion.

We also found much to celebrate in library and community programs. Public librarians can learn from community programmers. They might specifically ask why the scheduling of staff for children's programs is so often based only on formal or "active" program times or why the "leisure" use of a space cannot be viewed as a valuable use of resources. Could public libraries invest more staff and space resources into doing the kinds of things we observed in community sites: for example, sitting down and talking with mothers in supportive ways? Stooke (2004) found that some librarians did exactly that, but their work was not valued by colleagues and in some cases was not acknowledged as work.

At the same time we might ask what community program organizers can learn from public librarians. The short response to this question is encapsulated in two words: engagement and multimodality. In library-based programs, children were invited to experience the pleasures of playful language, the beauty of books as physical objects and the magic of social symbolic play through interactions with puppets and other artifacts. For young children and especially for parents and caregivers learning English, the multimodal nature of library programs scaffolds language acquisition, but it also scaffolds the acquisition of new literacies in which visual and multimodal design are playing an increasingly important role, even for young children (Rowsell, 2006).

Paradoxically, in recent years children's services librarians have been exhorted to eschew the library's image as a place for leisure and recreation by adopting research-based, school-like, print literacy practices. We acknowledge that the public library's image as a recreational agency has not always served its interests (Walter, 2001; Franklin-McInnis, 2002; Stooke, 2004) and well understand the importance of librarians taking strategic approaches to advocacy. However, we give the final words to the mother, who, before she left the program that denied her a print copy of its rhymes, found an alternative program where "we have fun."

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