CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

“What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.”
- Werner Heisenberg (1962)

The Journey

we wander
transfixed upon
the crowded wasteland
alone
yet surrounded
deafened by noise
voices and sound
everything and nothing
drowning
dereeper and faster
into the pool
of information
our desire
our curse
we pursue
everything
we gain
nothing
we
are lost
in a sea
of information
abandoned
left
discovering
truth?

we discover
nothing

what is reality?
what is truth?

everything
perception
I have been listening to the explanations of my children, and those children that have the patience for my lack of understanding, since 1995 and I am just now starting to understand what they are telling me. I am starting to leave the world of adults, and our important business, and enter the world of children; and to understand fully what children have been telling me. The children who have been my greatest informants are my own children: Emily, Tristan and Simon, for they are the only ones willing to put up with my blunderings and misunderstandings for so long. It is as if young children are aware that grown ups just do not understand, but are willing to explain what they are thinking and doing, when we, as adults, are willing to listen. We must learn the language of children and become fluent; a fluency I am developing. We must forget about what we think is important and how we think things work, and begin to listen and learn from the children who are our informants. Then and only then will we understand how they view literacies and how they use it in meaningful ways.

Study Design

I did not originally intend to conduct research but was just trying to understand what my children were teaching me. As I started to pursue my questions further I applied some frameworks to make better sense of my questions and to help me find the answers. Even though all of this research was conducted informally I started to use a critical ethnographic (Carspecken, 1996) stance in the way I approached my learning from my children, becoming more systematic as time went on. I was always an involved parent with an intense
interest in what my children were doing and learning. As such, I was always questioning, collecting everything the children created, and collecting our stories. I compared this material, or data, to current theory I was learning in graduate school and was using in my classroom, to better understand what my children were doing and learning. I inadvertently was using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as I was collecting this material and starting to learn from my children. The best way to describe how I organized the research presented here is as a case study of how Emily, Tristan and Simon used and understood literacies between 1995-2004.

**Case Study**

Case study is the approach that made the most sense for me as I tried to figure out what my children were doing with literacies. By case study I am referring specifically to the naturalistic observation of the children in the context of their everyday lives. As the three children share similar contexts, and I am looking at the literacies use and understanding of all the children, I am treating this whole study as a single case study and the data of each of the children as individual cases within the larger study. This is what case study is, the focused study of one or a few children, “directed toward understanding” (Bissex, 1987, p.14) and describing what they do.

“It doesn’t take much to disprove a theory – just a single exception…In language research all phenomena are significant: for the theories we develop – if they are to have power – cannot
wallow in frequency or convenience but universality. It is for this reason that the case study is a powerful theoretical tool. Because all phenomena demand explanation, theories developed from this source have more generalizability rather than less…A good model, now don’t you agree, ought to at least be able to explain the behaviour of one child before it gets implemented.” (Harste, et al, 1981, p. 368).

Research methods are not neutral tools (Bissex, 1984). They always relate to issues of power and the researchers’ relationship with his/her subjects/informants, assumptions, how knowledge is developed and understood, and even the nature of human beings. More and more it is becoming clear that research is also political, with some groups calling their literacy research scientific and other research unscientific (National Reading Panel, 2000), and some research discounted out of hand (Graveline, 2000). Nevertheless, the goal of science and research is to try to understand the external, and internal, world through observation and experimentation. This can be done just as well, if not better, through case study.

There is no reason to assume that the item which recurs most frequently is the most important or the most significant, for a text is, clearly, a *structured* whole, and the place occupied by the different elements is more important than the number of times they recur.

(Burgelin 1968, p.319 cited in Wolcott 1982, p.93)
Critical Ethnography

In trying to understand and analyze the research I have done with my children from 1995 to 2004 I have organized it as a critical ethnographic study (Carspecken 1996). I am a concerned parent who wants to understand the learning of my children from their perspective. As a mostly white, middle class family there is little of the critical analysis of class struggle found in most Marxist/critical analysis, though this is a lens I used in meaning reconstruction. The more I think about it the more I realize that all children are subjugated within our society; the fact that I feel I need to justify why it is important to at least try to understand literacies from the perspective of my children should have been an indicator that what I am doing here is some sort of radical departure aimed at transforming our society. In writing down this research and sharing it publicly, I have moved from the world of parental activism to the realm of ‘positive social change’ that defines critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996).

I am not merely trying to describe our social life but to redefine how we think about literacies and hopefully what type of research we consider important, and as a result more regularly include the voice and perspective of children. The sheer scope, social embeddedness, and length of this study define it as ethnography. As one who has lived in this context with my children during the nine years encompassed by this study I am privileged to have access to vast amounts of data which has enabled me to write thick descriptions of the contexts and social milieu surrounding each literacies event; for “…it is in the write-up, rather than in the fieldwork, that materials become ethnographic” (Wolcott, 1997).
Parent as Researcher

"No other person will ever know the child, the context of the child's life, and the particular research situation so completely as the parent." (Baghban 1979, p. 17)

As a parent researcher I have tremendous access to the site, contexts, cultures, and systems of the participants in the study. As well, as the parent I have a tremendous amount of access to the participants themselves and not just in one setting but in the complex multiple settings that we all live our lives. This allows me as a researcher more of a full picture; to see the complexities of literacies that an objective observer will never see, will never gain access to. Therefore, as a parent researcher I have intimate understandings and details about the child as a language user.

This intimacy brings with it difficulty as well. It subjects the researcher, unnecessarily, to questions of objectivity and bias. My response to this is quite simple: of course a parent will always be an advocate for their child - if they were not, we would question whether they were a good parent. I would argue, as do Denzin (1997), Carspecken (1996), and Lather (1992) that the objective observer too is biased, and is generally a person who embraces their subjects just as passionately as the parent does their own child. The difference being that for the parent this relationship is transparent, obvious and revealed; where for the clinical observer this passion is veiled by procedure, objectivity, and verisimilitude.

As a parent researcher I am hopelessly entangled with the subject matter
and my participants, we cannot be separated, and the search for understanding and truth is slippery (Britzman, 1997). Yet this is not a weakness but a strength of this research and when laid bare, as I have done, it leaves the reader to decide whether a statement is the result of a parent’s love, a researcher’s objective observation, or if it really matters in the end.

Research into the literacies use/development of children by their own parents has a long tradition, the most notable researcher being Jean Piaget (1971). Many of these parent researchers have had significant influence in the field of literacies research: Marcia Baghban (1984, 2002), Glenda Bissex (1980), David Doake (1988), James Gee (2003), Jerry Harste (1984), Prisca Martens (1996), Judith Schickedanz (1990), and Patrick Shannon (1995), have all studied their own children. Each of these studies has given us a great deal of insight into how children learn to read and write, how they represent their literacies practices, and how children use reading and writing in conventional and non-conventional ways. Each of these studies has challenged the way that we view literacies.

As a parent researcher, I needed to be wary of oversimplified theories of literacies. The power of parent-as-researcher studies is that they allow for greater complexity leading to theories of literacies which are more robust. I do not suggest that we need theories which explain every possible variant within human literacies use and understanding; such a thing would have very little practical application or use. All that I suggest is that we develop theories which allow for complexity, are multidimensional, embrace differences and celebrate them, and treat literacies as the complex system they are.
Finally, we need to embrace research which is messy, complicated, and entangling. We need to move beyond the old concepts of objectivity and admit that we are always making subjective judgments. We need to admit that research is messy and get over it. We need to rethink our concept of research and researchers and redefine who we are.

**Learning from Children**

“Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is exhausting for children to have to provide explanations over and over again.” (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p.4).

I have been transformed by what my children have been patient enough to teach me; it has affected my teaching and the way I approach literacies and learning. I believe that we need to reconsider our research model when we go into a classroom or interview children about our preconceived notions of literacies and presuppose that it is our job to teach them to be literate through some better method. Children are the reason we do the work we do; we want to help them better integrate into our societal discourse, of which a large part is reading, writing and using other literacies in very specific ways. It seems obvious to me then that we would want to understand what literacies are to children and to take time to observe and understand how they use them, and I am not alone in this belief (e.g. Gallas, 1998; Paley, 1997; Paley, 2000; Taylor, 1993; Vasquez, 2004).

We need to think about learning as a continuum and not an end point to
be achieved. We are immersed in literacies, like fish in water, it is just that it is so much part of our lives we rarely take time to notice and when we do, it is difficult to see and understand. We are all, including children, immersed in literacies that we have to use daily to make sense of the world around us. If we take the time to learn from children we can understand their literacies and we can better understand how to support all literacies. Learning from children is essential to bettering our understanding of literacies and how children learn in general. We need to view children as our informants and not as our subjects.

Data Collection

My data collection for this research was informal. That said, I have paper-based writing and art samples, several journals, books of photographs, video and audio tape recordings, emails, and countless other sources of data and information that has been informally analyzed on a continual basis. At times this analysis was more formal as I looked at the data to better understand something that was happening in my classroom, or I was using the data for a course I was taking, or for a paper I was writing on my own or with friends. I did not carefully categorize each piece of data on a weekly basis, but most pieces of data were dated with a description and then coded informally and I believe this is adequate considering the volume of material collected. This ad hoc approach to data collection and storage made analysis of this data more difficult to say the least, but it also emphasizes the need for this process to have happened. I have learned much from my children over the nine years included in this study and I
needed to analyze this data and write about it in a systematic way so that I could start to share what I have learned with others.

The Data

The data I collected includes five boxes full of paper data and what follows is an approximate estimate of what is included in this physical data: over a thousand writing samples, hundreds of drawings and paintings (which are also often writing samples), craft projects, maths writing, and countless other smaller collections of written stuff. Each of these pieces of paper has been collected by Christine, who had her own collection of the children’s work, or myself as would be expected. Christine has been assisting me with the collection of the children’s work ever since I started to take an interest in Emily’s writing during my Master’s work. More importantly than actually collecting the piece of data for me, Christine gives me the story that accompanies each piece of paper. Not all the pieces of paper have been dated and labelled, with their story written out on a Post-It or on the back, and some of the Post-It’s have been lost. In this instance we both tried to remember the story associated with the piece of paper and if we were unable to remember or our remembrances were different, then that piece of data was not included in the study.

The same is true of the approximately sixteen hours of video tape we have. Though much of what was recorded gives a fairly clear picture of what is going on, and it was my practice to often state date and place as a part of the recording process, if the story is incomplete the data is worthless as literacies are
an embedded cultural practice. Without the story of the context it is impossible to understand a literacy event apart from any other part of our lives. A literacies event is defined by the engagement with a sign system and without some form of engagement it is not a literacies event.

I used approximately ten hours of audio tape, which includes interviews about literacy events, either conducted during an event or afterward; in one instance I have a recorded reflective interview where Emily discusses her understanding of her learning to write which was done in preparation for a journal article that we planned to write together (a project we never completed). With this one exception, all of the interviews were conducted on an informal basis. In every instance the children were aware that they were being video or audio taped.

Christine and I also kept journals in which we recorded instances of the children learning or interesting instances of literacy use. Both of us are poor journal keepers, and this record keeping was inconsistent at best. We were very deliberate in our collection of physical data, but less consistent about writing about events. The greatest storehouse of the stories of the children’s literacies use and understanding are the physical pieces of paper and the many photographs we have taken of the children engaging in these practices and during these events. Christine has been diligently organising and cataloguing these pictures for the past several years and next to the physical paper samples photographs comprise the largest data source.

Christine and I have also collected stories from friends and family members. Even though “Do you remember when Emily…” or “Tristan said the
funniest thing as we drove home...” is not the strongest source of data, I have used this data in combination with other more concrete data to make sense of the children’s literacies use. The remembered stories about our children created a thread that helped tie the various pieces of data together. It also, in some instances, helped me to see a piece of data as significant that I otherwise might have dismissed.

**Literacies Events**

Shirley Heath identified a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretative processes” (Heath, 1983, p. 93). I am relying on her definition as a basis for my understanding of a literacies event but, as I am going beyond print-based literacies, I am defining a literate event or literacies act as the creation of or understanding of the meaningful use of a sign. A sign in this context is semiotic in nature and therefore motivated and meaning based. Literacies are understood as contextual, multimodal, and multiple. The difference between a literate act and daily living lies in the creation/use of literacies as meaningful signs.

For example, I would be inclined not to include sport as data for analysis, but Tristan has taught me that ball play is a literacy for him. This leaves much in our lives open for interpretation and analysis because so much of our lives are mediated by signs and literacies. My initial thought was I could discard our regular walks to the park from analysis - surely these are not literate events? But
sure enough they are rife with instances of literacies: the signs we pass, the litter (which contains images and text), the signs at the park, not to mention the rituals we experience as a part of going to the park, the activities we engage in at the park and the stories and pictures that come directly from these experiences. So much of our lives is mediated by signs and literacies in our society that very little of our lives is not affected by literate activity.

Therefore, for the sake of analysis I looked at everything, but only coded events that led to the creation of or engagement with a sign. This is what I consider a literacies event. I also make a distinction between literacies events and literacies practice; I rely on Mary Hamilton for my distinction: “Events are local activities, whereas practices are more global patterns” (Hamilton, 2000, p.18). The practices relate to the engagement with literacies in general and the literacies event refers to the specific local instance of the creation of engagement with a sign or literacy.

Participants

At the time of final data collection, 12/2004, Emily was eleven years old, Tristan eight years old, and Simon newly six years old. During the time of the study the children were involved in various activities in the community. Some of the events had more of a traditional literacy focus (these events emphasize reading and writing). During these events a story was usually read from a book and reading was seen as a valued experience. Trips to the public library were a weekly event and the children generally borrowed 10-15 books each. The
children also had a collection of well over 1000 books, ranging from board books to novels, all of which they read individually, with an adult, or with peers. Books in the house were always accessible for reading.

The children were also engaged in a variety of non-traditional literacy activities such as sport, music, drama, etc. Besides these community events, Christine regularly engaged in oral story telling with the children, creating stories out of the stuff of our daily lives. The children rode their bikes, danced, sang, and played games throughout the house and outside. Christine and I took the children swimming and skating, played ball sports and we often engaged in art activities as a family. Though each of these seem like fun activities, each involves its own complex literacies systems and each uses multiple literacies in its learning and use.

Tristan, Simon and Emily also had their own table and arts supplies, and it was from this location that most of their writing, art (painting, drawing, collage, etc.), and maths were done. This table had a large storage shelf beside it that was always well stocked with assorted coloured fine paper, newsprint, and construction paper as well as a variety of writing/art utensils: markers, crayons, pencil crayons, paints, pens, scissors, pencils, and manipulative materials. The children wrote and made pictures often throughout the day. The majority of this writing and art was self-initiated, though occasionally Christine and I suggested creating something for a specific purpose. Writing, art, and maths were often modeled by us.

Throughout this paper the discussion of activities is somewhat problematic because the activities have changed over time, as we have moved and the children’s interests have changed. This section is written in the present tense but the children are not still involved in all these activities nor is this list exhaustive.
All of the children were home schooled for various reasons. The most dominant reason was that the children enjoy being home schooled and we have been successful at implementing a constructivist approach to our family curriculum. Christine was the parent most responsible for their education and she followed the teaching of John Holt, using *Unschooling* (Holt, 1989) as the guiding principle of their education. This type of schooling is generative and follows no prescribed curriculum; the children are supported in their own interests, and everything is considered a learning experience. Emily is the only one of the three children who has had any formal schooling.

**Emily.**

Emily was born in Toronto, Canada in 1993 and I started to collect data on her writing when she was two and half years old. I started to collect data formally\(^2\) because I was taking a writing course as a part of my M.Ed. with Esther Fine and Emily was starting to do some interesting work. Dr. Fine suggested I look a bit closer at what Emily was doing and suggested I read the work of Glenda Bissex. This simple suggestion changed the course of my degree, and my life. I had started to take my Master’s as a way to better understand curriculum but I changed directions and started out on the long journey to understand how children are literate. This question has changed over time but it was because of this suggestion and through reading the work of Glenda Bissex that I became passionate about early literacies, which soon became a driving force of my life and choices over the past fourteen years.

\(^2\) Though this is the point at which I started to see Emily’s work as literate, the data I have extends to an earlier date.
Emily introduced me to the world of children; their rich thinking and deep questions. She taught me that children are brilliant and that they are born to learn and that it is we, as adults, who need to learn how to learn from children, not the other way around. This is a path I am still discovering and one which I did not understand when I started to collect data on Emily’s writing for my Master’s Research Project. I focused on her writing to keep the work manageable, as I was not ready to understand what Emily was beginning to teach me. Inherently this focus on just her writing allowed me to learn about her writing more deeply than if I had focused on more, but it also limited the type of data I collected and analyzed and so I missed a great deal about what Emily was doing and teaching me in other areas about literacies. Part of this was due to my own lack of ability to understand what she was teaching and part of it was a conscious choice to focus that learning to make it manageable.

As such the data I have from Emily is extremely limited until about halfway through kindergarten. The reasons why the quality of Emily’s data improves are threefold: first I finished writing my M.Ed. and started to broaden the scope of my learning from Emily; second Emily stopped writing for 6 months\(^3\); and finally I received a small grant to do research at the school Emily was attending and Emily was included in the participant pool. I was also learning how better to listen to children and learn from them. I was reading more and learning from people such as Jerry Harste, Carolyn Burke, and Prisca Martens. My theory of learning, and what counts as literacy, was expanding and hence so was what I considered

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\(^3\text{This piqued my attention and I started to collect all the data I could, out of sheer desperation, to try and figure out what was happening and to help her see herself as a writer again.}
valuable data.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t until I returned from Bloomington, Indiana, and doing my Ph.D. course work, that I really learned how to learn from children; friends and a few fellow teachers showed me how to open my eyes and my ears to children. It was also through a close study of the Reggio Emilia schools that I was able to truly revisit what my children were teaching me and how to learn from them. Hence the richest data I have is from the last 3 years of my research. I was tempted to just include this high quality material and forget about the rest, but the journey itself holds valuable lessons. Not to mention that even though my ears, eyes and understanding might have been clouded there is such a volume of data from these times that there is much that I learned in spite of myself. I can compare it to the work of a photographer – an expert might take one or two pictures and come out with a masterpiece whereas the amateur may still achieve this but it could take hundreds of pictures.

I have learned through practice, trial and error, and patient teaching to be more masterful in my selection and collection of data, how to look and listen, what to look and listen to and how to ask questions to learn more. But there are still nuggets of understanding in my earlier piles of data and I learned much from my children about literacies and about research throughout this time.

Tristan.

Tristan is the second child born into our family. He was born in Toronto, Canada in 1996. I have incidentally collected data from Tristan since he was born, but I again didn’t start to pay attention to his literacies use until he was
about two and half years old. The data I have from Tristan is better in some senses and poorer in others, than the data I have from Emily. The type of data I have collected from Tristan is broader than from Emily at ages below five years old, but I was not looking intently at Tristan’s work until 1998 because I had not seriously considered the idea of collecting data to learn from all my children until that time.

For Tristan writing is a more serious business than it is for either Simon or Emily. Tristan has been a very hard nut for me to crack because the way he works and thinks is often different than the way I do. Simon, Emily and I are all risk-takers and more interested in the big picture than the details. Tristan, on the other hand, is focused on the details and interested in accuracy. He looks at his written work and sees that it is not the way he wanted it to look; he wants what he writes “to be right”. I experience the same thing to a lesser degree in my art and when I play the piano, and I too look for a different form of expression. Yet with most things I just try it and work it out until I achieve a satisfactory level of success. Tristan and I frustrate each other when I tell him to do his best and he refuses to even try. This causes a further tension around writing which is not an easy form of expression for Tristan. He has seen Emily, Christine, and me writing for pleasure, for school and for others, and has seen himself as an unaccomplished outsider. And there was nothing I could to do to help him feel like he was a member of the “literacy club” (Smith, 1988). But Tristan is accomplished in many ways and in many literacies: he has a natural rhythm about him that makes playing musical instruments and dance natural; he loves all
types of sports and games and has an easy time understanding the rules and patterns associated with any type, be it active (like hockey, basketball, baseball or soccer) or sedentary (like board or card games). He seems to interpret and understand the world about him using the literacy of mathematics. He sees patterns in everything; he is fascinated with numbers and order; he is drawn to design. I on the other hand know little of this way of thinking. Thankfully, Christine understands mathematics and thinks this way as well and she has taught me to see that this is just Tristan’s way of understanding how things work.

Tristan is not the patient teacher that Emily and Simon are, carefully reteaching the lesson they want me learn or repeating what they want me to understand, but he is a talker. He expresses almost everything he is feeling and thinking. I only needed to listen and engage with Tristan to learn from him. What he has taught me the most is that literacies are broader, more complex, and more encompassing than I ever imagined.

Tristan has taught me that in our world we are immersed in more than a world of text but that there are many forms of literacies and that literacies are multimodal. He has shown me that multimodal forms of literacies, though they are complex in their interactions, give literacies users greater access and understanding to the author’s intended meaning. He is responsible for expanding my understanding of literacies beyond reading and writing to include ball play, sports and all sorts of gaming, including videogaming.

Simon.

Simon is the youngest of the three children and he was born in
Blooming, Indiana, USA, 1998. The material included from him in this study ranges from birth until he was six years old. By the time Simon was born I was intent on learning from my children and a few friends joked that Christine and I were expanding our subject pool instead of our family.

Simon is immediately loveable; he has a ready smile and an easygoing attitude that just sucks you into his world. He is a patient teacher and is willing to explain his ideas more than once to make sure that he is understood. This is largely because although Simon was linguistically advanced his articulation has often lagged behind language and semantic growth, making the oral expression of meaning understood by others more challenging for him. But he is patient and has developed many strategies to make himself better understood by others.

Simon loves writing and drawing and has been engaging with print and pictures since before he was one year old. I am certain that Emily and Tristan were also engaged with paper-based expression earlier than when I started to recognize their work, but by the time Simon was born I had expanded my understanding of literacies beyond reading and writing and was ready to learn from him. Simon also got my attention at this early point because his first instances of writing/drawing were in books. I had begun to see literacies as multiple and multimodal, so the range of data I have from him is greater. What I counted as literacies had begun to expand because of what Tristan and Emily were teaching me.

Simon’s early literacies use was not confined to writing/drawing. He could read the Wendy’s sign at nine months, making his vocalization for food as we
passed it on our regular trips through town, and he has been creating and
designing with Lego since he was two years old. Simon was immersed in
literacies like neither Tristan nor Emily largely because he did not just have
Christine and me as examples of literacies users; he had the overwhelming
influence of his siblings as well.

Principal researcher.

I have been interested in learning and literacies since I attended teacher’s
college. As a devoted father I have had the privilege of combining my academic
interest with learning from my own children. This has been an amazing
experience bringing the different loves of my life together to better understand
both. I have completed a Master’s thesis looking at the subject of early children’s
early writing; looking at Emily’s writing from the age of 2 ½ until she was 5 years
old. I was a kindergarten teacher, and I applied this learning to my classroom.
That said I am the author of this study but it is my children and Christine who
have contributed the most to it.

Settings

Christine and I have, and continue to, engage the children with activities
across multiple settings and we have moved frequently as a family as various
opportunities have arisen. As literacies are a social and cultural practice it was
important to examine literacies across different sites and cultures. In many ways
our frequent moves and Christine’s and my emphasis on the children being
active in a variety of activities outside the home has allowed me to examine more
easily the nature of literacies across the various Discourses of these sites.

We moved five times during this study. Sometimes the moves were within the city we were living in but more often the moves were between cities as opportunities presented themselves. Christine, Emily and I moved the first time from our basement apartment in Toronto to Ottawa where I was accepted into a consecutive, one year, Bachelor of Education program (this was the standard teacher certification offered at the time in Ontario).

We lived in a low-rise apartment close to the University of Ottawa, the Canadian Parliament buildings and historic sites, the library, and the Rideau Canal (where we would go skating in the winter). I attended school and Christine cared for Emily who was only one and half years old when we arrived and two years and four months old when we left Ottawa to return to Toronto. This time period is not a part of the study but is a frame of reference often referred to by Emily and is the critical starting point for the story of our family that followed.

We chose to return to Toronto because there were very few teaching positions available and I was able to work for my father who ran a manufacturing plant in this city. We also chose to return to Toronto because I was accepted into York University’s Master of Education program and we wanted to be close to the university.

While we lived in this location, the activities we were involved in and the common sites for literacies events for Emily would include a weekly bible study, children’s program, trips to the library, Sunday school, and a playgroup. Christine’s sister lived with us at that time as she attended university. It was in
this house that I started to see Emily’s work as literacy.

We next moved to a larger home, still in Toronto, where Emily shared a room with her new baby brother, Tristan, and I had room for an office to work on my Master’s degree and teaching work. We continued to have extended family living with us, but Christine’s sister now lived in a basement apartment. This house had a large back yard with fruit trees where the children often played.

Our weekly bible studies continued, as did our trips to the library, which we could now walk to. Along with Sunday school and playgroups, Emily was also enrolled in creative movement classes and swimming lessons at the local community centre. Christine babysat a friend’s daughter who was the same age as Emily, giving Emily a playmate and a co-conspirator in her new understandings of literacies. Christine provided a loosely structured preschool environment for both girls. During this time I worked towards completing my Master’s degree in education, with my final research paper focusing on Emily’s writing. It was through my interaction with Tristan in this house that I later started to understand ball play as a literacy.

When Emily was five years old and Tristan was two years old, we moved to Bloomington, Indiana U.S.A. where I would spend two years completing the coursework for my Ph.D. The old house that we lived in was an easy walk to the faculty of education, so we as a family regularly visited the university grounds, playing there as well as visiting various buildings and places of study on campus. Emily attended the local public school for kindergarten and first grade while we lived here. Simon was born in this home.

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I started teaching kindergarten in January of that year, 1996.
The literacies activities the children engaged in while we lived in Bloomington increased in number and scope. Emily was involved with Brownies, ballet and tap dance lessons and she regularly danced with a friend who was studying dance at the university, and she performed in two musical dramas at the church we attended. Emily and Tristan both took swimming lessons and learned to skate; they also regularly visited a friend’s home who had children the same ages as them where they did all sorts of crafts and activities outside of their normal play. Tristan played soccer in the local soccer league and attended a bible study for young children. Simon and Tristan accompanied Christine to a weekly bible study where they were babysat, attended library readings for young children, and a playgroup. We went to the local library multiple times a week to exchange books and Christine and I regularly attended concerts and dance performances with one or more of the children. The house was on the edge of Bloomington’s downtown so we walked a lot and regularly went downtown where the children saw and read the many store signs and various other text based literacies. We also frequently went to Indianapolis, as one of my research sites was located there, and the children regularly went to the Children’s Museum where we had a membership.

From Bloomington we moved to Burlington, Ontario, Canada. We rented a large old home with very large backyard which was in easy walking distance of Burlington’s downtown, the waterfront, local library, and YMCA. We became members of the YMCA where the children participated in swimming lessons, gymnastics, soccer, and theatre sports on a weekly basis; Tristan also took
basketball lessons. Emily attended the local public school for grade two but after this year she was home schooled. So though Emily did not participate in the weekly trips to the library for story time, or the children’s bible study in the first year, she joined Tristan and Simon the second year, becoming a helper in Simon’s bible study class. We were all active in our local church and the children went to a boys’ and girls’ club, called Treehouse, and Sunday school once a week. Our family were members of a local home schooling group and the children went on hikes in nearby conservation areas. As a family we had memberships to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), and the McMichael Gallery and visited the Art Gallery of Ontario and conservation areas; we visited these institutions frequently and all of them had special programs and spaces designed for young children. All of the children continued to skate, ride bikes and skateboard while in this home. Emily took weekly ballet lessons and our walks to the library were so frequent that she became a favourite among the librarians who invited her vote on the Silver Birch awards and took her to view books in the library’s archive.

We moved to Brampton when I had the opportunity to open a new school, as a kindergarten teacher. We intentionally found a home close enough to the school for me to walk to and that was close to the homes of Christine’s brother and sister. All of the children continued to be home schooled in this location and Christine took on a role of leadership within the local home schooling group. The children continued their memberships at the YMCA where they took swimming lessons, and played basketball and floor hockey often on a weekly basis. All of
the children took dance lessons, with Tristan and Emily taking two classes a week. We regularly went to the city’s central park where there was free skating. Christine organized monthly sport days and helped run the home schooling group’s bi-weekly co-operative (where parents shared their expertise or interest in an area and the children signed up for activities or lessons they were interested in). They joined the home school group on field trips to various historical and cultural sites throughout southern Ontario, which fuelled, in particular, Tristan and Simon’s growing interest in History. The home schooling group was also involved in an activity called ‘Battle of the Books’ where children are asked general knowledge questions about a specific corpus of books; this was an opportunity that valued Emily’s voracious reading habit and helped further pique Tristan’s interest in reading. We continued to be involved in a local church with children attending Sunday school weekly. Emily also joined the church youth group and a bible study where she was expected to study the bible on her own. The boys were involved in several organized sports: T-ball, baseball, and basketball. Emily started to take piano lessons and joined Christine on a one month trip to Holland. We continued to maintain our membership at the ROM, started a membership at the Metropolitan Toronto Zoo, and made several visits to Black Creek Pioneer Village. Christine also took care of our nephew, from the time he was one year old, on a daily basis, which added a completely new dynamic to our family.

Beyond the sites where we lived, we frequently visited the homes of friends for extended visits (up to one week) and they would visit us throughout
the year. We also lived a far distance from Christine’s and my parents – Christine’s parents live in Northern Ontario, a seven hour drive from southern Ontario, and my parents lived in the Detroit, Michigan area, more than a four hour drive from any of our homes in southern Ontario. We would regularly visit their homes for long weekends and during school holidays for extended periods. We as a family have always planned a one to two week camping trip in the summer. These sites all provided rich locations for literacies events before, during, and after visiting them.

Data Analysis

The simplest way to divide up the daunting task of discussing the data analysis from the lives of 3 children over a multi-year, multi-site project was to first deal with each child as an individual, then discuss convergence in their experiences and data and then to discuss divergent data. All the data used was analyzed using basic category generation (Creswell, 1994) and my own form of meaning reconstruction which was heavily influenced by Carspecken’s Initial Meaning Reconstruction (1996). All artefacts, stories, research notes and interview notes were analyzed through the lens of initial meaning analysis to construct basic categories and to find anomalies. These initial categories were then developed into matrices (Creswell, 1994) to show the relationships among categories; the information was coded across categories by child, site, time (both chronological and age), purpose, social setting, context, literacies being used, sibling or adult influences and intended meaning.
All data was first reviewed to gain a general impression of the material collected and general themes presented by the children’s work. This stage also revealed gaps in the data pool and whether or not I needed to find further data currently housed with family and friends. Ideally, this stage would have been conducted as I was gathering data, to constantly compare the data I had and conduct interviews with the children to fill in gaps in my understanding. But due to the informal nature of this study I did not do this; although there are a few exceptions - on several occasions either for course papers or conference presentations I visited the children’s work for examples and understanding. But this informal analysis left too many of my tacit assumptions unexamined, leading to the need for me to treat this data as unanalyzed and conduct the initial meaning analysis as a complete and separate stage. I used this stage to reveal the validity of certain tacit understandings I have developed over the years as I have been learning from my children.

After the general review was complete, I examined the data through the lens of meaning reconstruction. During this phase, I maintained low levels of inference and tried to reconstruct the meaning fields that were intended by the children in any literacies instance. As the children’s parent I am in the privileged position of being very familiar with the cultures in which the literate acts occurred, giving me an advantage in generating meaning fields which were closer to the intention of the children (Carspecken, 1996). I have also been striving to enter into the world of the children and understand their culture; this task would not have been possible at the beginning of the study because my understanding of
the children’s culture/discourse was as an adult looking in, separate. Though as a parent I was a part of the construction of the culture/discourse experienced in our home, I was distant from the children’s perception of it.

Christine and I have been striving to create a culture in our home, throughout the last five years of this study, in which the children are full participants in its generation. This is not to say that we have abdicated our responsibility as parents, but that the children are included in all family decisions and their needs and desires are forefronted in the way family is lived. The cultural divide between the adult world and the world of my children has decreased, giving me greater access to their cultures and allowing me to generate meaning fields which are closer to their intended perspective, both explicit and tacit.

From this analysis I selected stories from the dominant categories from each child’s data set that exemplified what I was learning from the children and represented how they understood and used literacies. I tried to avoid overlap between the children and used stories which demonstrated each of the ways the children used literacies to create unique identities within our family. What is represented here are only a small sample from the complex and rich data that was our lives from 1995-2004 but I hope they are enough for the reader

Summary

This study is a nine year critical ethnographic study that looks at the literacies use and understanding of my three children: Emily, Tristan, and Simon. As a parent researcher, I have had incredible access to the worlds of my children
and to their literacies use across multiple sites and contexts; this complicates the analysis process and has resulted in my collecting vast amounts of data that required processing. To help manage this task I used basic category generation and then an informal form of initial meaning reconstruction to make sense of the data in its various contexts.