

# How Junior High School Students Spend Time in a Japanese School Library during Their Lunch Breaks: A Focus on the Role of Bookshelves

Chizuko Arai

*The University of Tokyo*

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate, through fieldwork, a school library as a gathering place for Japanese middle school students. We predicted that students would browse alone, silently. The research used cases studies based on a micro-ethnography method taken from observation data. Data were analyzed from three points of view, informal, public, and gathering, which was referred to as “the third place.” Oldenburg (1989), on which the study was based, focused on the role of bookshelves. We determine that bookshelves provide students with the public place open to all. Second, we suggest that bookshelves serve students as an informal place to spend time alone. Finally, while some students enjoy conversations with friends while among the shelves, others avoid interaction by using the shelves as barriers. Therefore, the bookshelves are not always a gathering place for a students.

**Keywords:** School library, Library as Place, Bookshelves, Junior High School Student, Field Research

## INTRODUCTION

### Oldenburg’s ‘Third Place’

Some have suggested that we use “library as [a] place” (Wiegand, 2003) in reference to Oldenburg’s (1989) “third place” for public libraries in America. Oldenburg assumed the home to be one’s first place, working location as his or her second place, and informal public gathering places as the third places. In short, third places are designed as places for people to spend their time, not only physically but also socially and psychologically.

Recently, several studies have focused on school libraries as a “third place.” For example, Estill (2006) analyzed the behaviors, relationships, and interactions between students and librarians at the high school featured in a TV series that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was shown from 1997 to 2000 in America. She concluded that school libraries are not warehouses of books, but rather are informal place that achieve a suitable fit between a sanctuary that serves as a community for students and a site to host activities to create community. Although Estill was not studying a real school library from a TV drama, it could be taken as a herald of the case studies presented here.

Kuno (2011) interviewed Japanese high school students about the main activities they engage in at third places. Then, she analyzed ordinary classrooms that are public places controlled and functioning as sites of evaluation by teachers. Contrary, Kuno suggested that school libraries are a private place where certain peer groups can open up and talk to each other.

However, since school libraries are open to all students, they remain a public place that any student can visit without a specific purpose of use or need, so long as they obey the rules. At the same time, every student may freely choose where he or she browses, which books they take an interest in, and how they read books in connection with the role of bookshelves, including interactions with other students in the library.

For the above-mentioned reasons, it is possible to see a school library as a third place in the spirit of Oldenburg’s work and in contrast to ordinary or special classrooms that have the purpose of serving as places for lessons, as an infirmary, as a counseling room, or as a place for private meetings. In short, it is

necessary to reconsider school libraries not merely as facilities to use, but also as places for students to spend their time while at school.

### **The Role of Bookshelves in School Libraries**

A school library can be seen as a third place, not only to create physical places for students to gather, but also to provide a social and psychological place where students get engrossed in books (Masuko, 1999). In particular, bookshelves play two roles in influencing students, in relation to the books' arrangement and as space partitions (Masuko, 2011). In other words, the former provide students with a place that enables free browsing, while the later serves students as a place to spend their time. Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider the role that bookshelves play among middle school students.

### **The Issues of a School Library and Its Status as a Third Place**

There are three research issues related to school libraries as a third place focusing on the role of bookshelves. First, we must reconsider libraries as public places, not as parts of existing school facilities, so that we may consider students' behaviors while they freely browse the bookshelves. This is because browsing popular books that are of private interest to students is a different behavior from searching for books for studying. Since this study is focused on third places, we paid attention to students' behaviors while browsing freely.

Second, in connection with the first consideration, it was necessary to examine a school library as an informal place. Sturm (2008) suggests that libraries might be seen as "secret spaces" that provide students with a sense of hiding, avoiding, or getting engrossed in books, in order to defuse the inevitable tensions of school. Hence, we investigated how students use the bookshelves in this way.

Finally, based on the above, we needed to understand bookshelves as gathering places where students interact. Surely, since a school library is a public place open to every student in a school, many students visit it to for a variety of purposes. However, Cesari (2014) has identified that we must monitor the interactions between students, including those that take place in "difficult- to-monitor areas" of school libraries, in order to ensure their proper development. In response to this argument, the present study examines adolescents' interactions among bookshelves.

As the above indicates, the purpose of this study is to reconsider a school library as a third place and to focus on the role of bookshelves by clarifying how junior high school students spend their time in school libraries. The research described here can also provide help with efforts to understand adolescents' uses of school libraries.

## **METHOD**

Fieldwork was conducted at a junior high school in an urban area of Honshu's Kanto district. It spanned eight days in September and October 2016.

We chose this study duration based on our prediction that students who are in periods of physical and psychological growth use the school library to adjust themselves to typical school life after a long summer vacation. A total of 130 students (in grades 7–12) visited the school library; they and a teacher librarian (TL) cooperated in this study. The school in this study is a combined junior and senior high school. Among those studied here, 80 were middle schoolers (grades 7–9), as indicated by their uniforms.

### **Data Collection**

This study observed students' behaviors on eight days at the school library. For seven of these days, observations were made during the lunch break; the other day's observation took place in the afternoon. The library was recorded using two to four video recorders, which were set on the diagonal inside the library, in order to capture the situation. Field notes complemented these videos, to aid in the understanding of students' visual lines and the library's atmosphere at the time. In addition, we conducted

an interview with the TL before and after each observation, for about 30 minutes, to confirm how focused the students normally were.

### **Data Analysis**

This study evaluated the public, informal, and gathering elements of the three natures of third places as the framework for analysis. Then, based on these different views, we analyzed how students spend their time in a school library, based on observation data focused on the role of bookshelves. Since it is possible for a student to choose to browse between bookshelves alone, to allow him or her to pass time freely without any utterances or interactions, we adopted a micro-ethnography method (Minoura, 2011; Sibayama, 2008). This method allows researchers to understand daily students' lives and to describe the observed cases comprehensively.

We secured permission for the participant observation after several discussions with the TL. Further, video recording was accepted, to protect students' privacy. Finally, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Context of the Field**

We can describe the school library, mainly focuses on its bookshelves, as follows. The library is in the first basement level, just below the school's main entrance. It consists of several spaces/areas that serve as learning rooms, in addition to a reading room and a circulation counter.

In particular, the bookshelves across from the circulation counter are the most popular with the students, as these feature collections of works by famous authors and popular series, such as J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books. These shelves are referred to as the "popular bookshelves." The popular bookshelves are set to the wall and located near four large-size reading tables, with four chairs each. There is a large bookshelf that is positioned at right angle to the popular bookshelves divides the doorway and the reading space. There are also 30 reading spaces/carrels for personal use. A full-time TL who has worked at the school for more than 20 years staffs the library, but there is no school librarian (SL).

### **The Role of Bookshelves as a Public Place**

We chose to observe an eighth grade boy, Kiyoshi, for the following reasons. Kiyoshi visited the library six out of seven times during the observation period. In addition, the TL told me that he came to the library as soon as the lunch break began almost every day. Further, Kiyoshi browsed the same bookshelves each day, those with the popular books. In short, we wondered if selecting and using the popular bookshelves frequently had special meaning for Kiyoshi.

The following observation occurred at one of the high-traffic areas in the library a little after 1 PM, when four junior high school students and the TL had a meeting at the large reading table near the bookshelves.

### **Case 1: Is the Public Place for the Students?**

At first, Kiyoshi went straight to the popular bookshelves (1-C). However, as the popular bookshelves also attract other students besides Kiyoshi, who uses them on a daily basis (1-A), it can also be said that these shelves are familiar to many students. In addition, there was another reason for their popularity. The popular bookshelves are close to the door and in front of the circulation counter (1-B), which makes them not only easy for students to access, but also conveniently located for checking out new books.

In that sense, the bookshelves played an important role for a student like Kiyoshi, who spends his time alone in the public place, and many other students.

### **The Role of Bookshelves as an Informal Place**

As shown in Case 1, although we focused on the popular bookshelves, additional considerations were given to a large shelf for journals or newspapers, which is positioned at a right angle near the doorway. This large shelf plays a role in separating the noisy doorway, filled with students coming and going, from students who wish to browse and read books calmly. In short, it is a limited place, like a cozy corner, in the school library, despite being located right in front of the circulation desk.

In many cases, Kiyoshi visited alone early in his during lunch break and read books silently. Then, we wondered if Kiyoshi visited the library not only to read books, but also to spend time on his own. The following example highlights this.

### ***Case 2: Is It an Informal Place for Students?***

We observed that Kiyoshi moved a chair, blocking off the passage (2-A), and crouched down in front of the bookshelves (2-B). So, Kiyoshi seemed to see the area not only as one where he could ensure a place to spend his time, but also prevent other students from coming to the popular bookshelves. He may or may not have done this of consciously.

In addition, in a corner where surrounded bookshelves, as Kiyoshi sat on the chair with his back to the circulation counter (2-C), his field of vision was open to the bookshelves only (2-D). In short, Kiyoshi monopolized the place on the shelves where the popular books were collected and spent his time reading alone, despite this being a public place open to every student. This shows that the bookshelves played a role in providing him, a student, with an informal place.

The above could not be seen as a use of a library as a gathering place. In the following section, we examine how students interact with each other, focused on the bookshelves, which created a corner in front of the circulation counter.

### ***The Role of Bookshelves as a Gathering Place***

There were some students observed having a nice gossip with books in their hand, while others spent their time alone in the library. Some researched books on a PC, or asked the TL about the books they were looking for. Akira, who appears in this section, is one of the boys we observed.

Akira is in the same grade as Kiyoshi, for they also have worked together as library staffs, they knew each other's face. Though it is possible that the two students interacted, the case described below is based on our observation data. Case 3 happened while Akira was looking for the book he wanted to read.

### ***Case 3: Is It a Gathering Place for the Students?***

At first, we observed that Akira was going to go the bookshelves that house the collected popular books (3-A). However, he hesitated and abandoned his plan to go to those shelves (3-B). Then, Akira took a book from another bookshelf and left the library (3-D). As mentioned above, the popular bookshelves play a role in providing all students with both public and informal places. Nevertheless, Akira avoided the popular bookshelves where Kiyoshi was (3-C). We noticed that Akira avoided all interaction with Kiyoshi.

There was little chance that Kiyoshi noticed Akira's gaze focused on the role of the bookshelves in the library (3-E). This is because Kiyoshi remained sitting with his feet toward the popular shelves, sending proximal cues implying his desire to avoid interaction with others who might want to use the popular bookshelves.

Based on the above, we can see that the bookshelves also play a role in helping students to avoid interactions and visual lines with each other, while also providing all students with a gathering place to share time with friends. Additionally, as these cases show, the placement of the bookshelves was arranged not to create a blind area. While Cesari (2014) argues that "the library's circulation desk should be centrally located with clear visibility to all areas, allowing for close monitoring of student behavior", it is indicated that even the bookshelves in easy-to-monitor areas may create not only public and informal places but also places like "secret spaces" (Sturm, 2008) where students could spent time alone and avoid interactions with others.

## **CONCLUSION**

At first, the bookshelves that house the popular books collection served the role of not only being controlled by the TL, as it was arranged in front of the circulation desk, but also allowing all students to easily access and look at it, given its proximity to the doorway.

In short, the bookshelves provided students with a public place that was open to everyone in the school library.

Second, related to the individual interests or purposes for reading and borrowing any kind of book, the shelves also play a role in providing student with an informal place to spend time alone.

Additionally, the browsing behavior among the bookshelves allowed students to narrow their visual field and to avoid other students' eyes. Therefore, the bookshelves played a hand in providing students with a more informal place where he or she could browse or spend time alone, despite being in a public place where every student could visit.

Finally, the bookshelves provided students with a gathering place to enjoy conversations and interactions with friends, serving as both public and informal places.

Despite the above, if a student wanted to, he or she could use the space or the corner created by the bookshelves to spend time alone and avoid interactions with others, suggesting that bookshelves do not always play the role of a gathering place.

When we evaluated a school library from the viewpoints of public, informal, and gathering spaces, we found that it particularly it needed to be examined carefully in terms of the gatherings taking place. While it is certain that a school library is a public place that enables students to gather, we must reconsider the idea that a school library works as Oldenburg's third place, since it is not always a gathering place, as this research has shown, The bookshelves also helped students to avoid interactions and each other's visual lines.

In conclusion, this study raises several issues. In particular, as the research was focused on only one schoolboy and his interaction with an acquaintance, it is necessary to examine a variety of behaviors and genders.

NOTE: Provided that the study was corrected and improved master's thesis by the author after it was submitted and accepted for Graduate school of Education, The University of Tokyo in January, 2017.

## REFERENCES

- Cesari, Lindsay. (2014). Arranging a library to support adolescent development. *Knowledge Quest*, 42(4), 45-49.
- Estill, Adriana. (2006). The library as place; history, community and culture. In Bushman, John E., & Leekie, Gloria (eds.), *Going to hell: Placing the library in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (pp. 235-250). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Kazuhiko, Masiko. (1999). *Library/architecture/open access/bookshelf*. Tokyo, Japan: Maruzen.
- Kazuhiko, Masiko. (2011). *The design of library space: The storage of knowledge in a digital society*. Tokyo, Japan: Maruzen.
- Kazuko, Kuno. (2011). The school library as 'the third place'. *Tosyokannkai*, 63(4), 296-313.
- Makoto, Sibayama. (2008). *The ethnography guide book for young children: From basis to practical use in techniques*. Tokyo, Japan: Shin-yo-sha.
- Oldenburg, Ray. (1989). *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of community*. New York, NY: Marlowe & Company.
- Rowling, J. K. (1997-2007). *Harry Potter series*. London, England: Bloomsbury.
- Sturm, Brian. (2008). Imaginary "geographies" of childhood. *Knowledge Quest*, 36(4), 46-53.
- Wiegand, Wayne. (2003). To reposition a research agenda: What American studies can teach the LIS community about the librarian in life of the user. *The Library Quarterly*, 173(4), 369-382.
- Yasuko, Minoura. (2010). *The techniques and practice for fieldworks: Micro-ethnography guide book*. Kyoto, Japan: Minervashobo.