Literacy practices in the learning careers of childcare students

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Abstract

This paper draws from the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* research project, funded through the Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Drawing on the empirical study of literacy practices in eight Childcare courses in Scotland and England, we seek to demonstrate that, integral to the learning careers of students are literacy careers through which their learning is mediated. In the process, by drawing upon the lens of literacy, we also challenge some of the common sense understandings of learning in Childcare. In particular we suggest that the literacy practices of lower level courses can be more diverse than those of higher level courses, producing potentially confusing literacy careers for the students involved. We also highlight the complexity of the range of literacy practices in Childcare, which can go unrecognized as requiring explicit tuition, and unacknowledged even when students use them appropriately. Courses in Childcare are textually mediated in many different ways, which vary depending on the level of study. A greater acknowledgement of this multiplicity and diversity could lead to more appropriate forms of assessment, and more relevant ways of interpreting the curriculum. We argue that students on vocational courses have more complex literacy careers than is often assumed and that a literacies approach to learning helps to reveal this complexity.

Key words: Further Education, literacy practices, literacy careers, childcare, learning careers

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Introduction

The Literacies for Learning in Further Education research project (1)
(www.lancs.ac.uk/lflfe) was a three year study between 2004 and 2007, which sought to
explore the literacy practices associated with learning in a number of curriculum areas in
English and Scottish colleges. It also explored the everyday literacy practices of students
of those subjects and the ways in which these could be drawn upon to enable them to
learn more successfully. Part of the rationale for the project was to compare and contrast
literacies for learning between the English and Scottish Further Education (FE) sites,
given the different policy and curriculum contexts. In order to do this, of the four
curriculum areas studied within each of the four colleges with which the project worked,
it was decided that we would research Childcare courses across the different settings. The
focus of this article is those Childcare courses.

The macro-policy initiatives of both England and Scotland position Childcare and Early
Years' Education courses in colleges as direct routes into the workplace. These courses
are also meant to provide the potential for student progression into higher education. This
is part of wider reforms in the labour market to provide career progression for those who
begin working with children in less qualified positions. Further Education Childcare

courses can therefore fulfil a dual role. However, while there are similarities between England and Scotland in relation to overall policy, a major area of difference in FE relates to the meso-level, in particular in relation to awarding bodies and curriculum development.

In Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the sole, non-departmental, body responsible for the development, accreditation, assessment and certification of qualifications pertaining to Childcare. The introduction of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has led to the potential for clear progression for students to higher levels of study. All parties involved - employers, learners and FE staff - can track (in principle) which level of qualification leads to the next, how many credits each qualification has and how they relate one to the other.

In England, there is a separation between awarding bodies and curriculum development. While the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) provides quality assurance for courses that receive FE funding, there are a number of awarding bodies who design, develop and verify qualifications, namely in the case of Childcare, CACHE and Edexcel. Consistency of levels is monitored across these qualifications through the regulatory criteria within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is managed by QCA. The QCA regulates and develops the curriculum, assessments, examinations and qualifications. But qualifications are granted by the different awarding bodies. An awarding body must gain recognized status from the QCA before it can propose qualifications for accreditation within the NQF. The complexity arising from the

qualifications structure in England therefore differs from the supposedly more rationalized Scottish system. The extent to which these differences have significant impact on pedagogic practices was part of our interest in conducting a direct comparison between the Scottish and English colleges in the area of Childcare.

Using literacy as a lens for looking at learning, this article explores the literacy practices associated with learning Childcare subjects in FE. From the findings of our research, we seek to challenge some of the assumptions made around Childcare as a subject, in particular the assumption that it is an area which can be associated with limited literacy. We also expand the notion of learning careers that has been taken up elsewhere in the study of FE in general (Bloomer 1997) and among Childcare students in particular (Colley, *et al*. 2003). The concept of 'literacy career' is introduced as it enables us to explore the ways in which students come to adopt certain forms of reading and writing as 'allowable' within their learning careers. In addition, we explore the curriculum tensions in the Childcare area that have emerged from attempting to put in place a career and qualifications structure that enables both preparation for the workplace and educational progression. Our aim then is to help illuminate certain issues and debates in the Childcare areas that have emerged from our study of literacy practices, but also to expand conceptually the notion of learning careers. We also believe there are implications relevant to the curriculum more generally.

While there has been much attention given to the literacy practices of young children (e.g. Gee 2003), particularly in relation to their interactions with digital technologies

(Plowman and Stephen 2005), significantly less attention has been given to the literacy practices of those who work with children. It is the latter which is the focus of this paper. The article is in four parts. First, we provide the conceptual background to the LFLFE study. Second, we outline our methodological approach. Third, we explore the key findings of the project in relation to Childcare as a subject, expanding on the points made above. Finally, we will indicate some of the possible inferences from these findings.

Background to the study: Conceptual issues

Media representations and educational policy often treat literacy as an autonomous value-free attribute lying within the individual - a set of singular and transferable technical skills which can be taught, measured and tested at a level of competence. Such assumptions tend to result in individual deficit views of students' capacities to engage in and with reading and writing (Canning 2007). By contrast, the LfLFE project worked with the notion that literacies are not an abstracted set of skills that can be learnt in isolation from contexts of use, but rather are developed within meaningful and purposive activity. Hence our use of the term 'literacy practices' rather than literacy. We also viewed literacy practices broadly as embracing icon and screen as well as text and page, and the many multimodal artifacts and genres of communication which are to be found in colleges and everyday life, including the use of a wide variety of literacy technologies - computers, mobile phones, etc. (Kress 2003). The importance of recognizing the situated and context-specific nature of literacy practices, how they are shaped by the institutional imperatives, epistemologies and cultural practices of the contexts in which they are located, has been demonstrated by work in the New Literacy Studies (Barton and

Hamilton 1998, Barton, et al. 2000, Lankshear and Knobel 2003). This research has raised serious questions about the pedagogical integrity of teaching literacy as a set of isolated, transferable technical skills. A situated view of literacy focuses on the meaningful and practical work people do through textual mediation. Specific forms of reading and writing are engaged with in the attempt to do things. Thus our focus was on literacies *for* learning rather than the learning *of* literacy.

A situated view has also been used in the elaboration of the concept of learning careers in FE.

> 'The concept of learning careers refers to the *development* of a student's dispositions to knowledge and learning over time. But that development is not to be understood simply as arising from the determined impact of enduring psychological traits upon dispositions. Rather, dispositions change as the result of the partly unpredictable influences of a variety of social and other factors, themselves mediated through horizons for action.' (Bloomer 1997: 150, emphasis in original)

The concept of learning careers has developed in the attempt to provide a sociological understanding of the complex interactions between structure and agency, and past, present and future in the development of specific disposition to learning and knowledge. However, while situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991) does engage with the discursive aspects of communities of practice, what is noticeable in its uptake in relation to FE is that it does not address the semiotic mediations of these sociological processes.

Thus, while the cognitive and material aspects of learning are addressed in the concept of learning careers, the communicative dimensions are overlooked. In our project, therefore, exploring as it did learning through the lens of literacy practices, we started to posit that learning careers are also literacy careers, which develop dispositions toward certain forms of reading and writing in the textual mediation of learning.

Methodology

To undertake this project, we adopted a collaborative ethnographic approach. To this end the four university-based researchers worked alongside sixteen FE practitioners (four in each of the four participating colleges). In each of the participating colleges, two Childcare units at two different levels were researched and the four Childcare tutors acted as college-based researchers (Table 1). It was the intention of the project that the units chosen for the research would cover different levels of study, different student populations and different learning settings. However, the practicalities of working in the dynamic naturalistic settings of colleges meant that the final selection became focused more on full-time units, with only one unit from a part-time programme. Across the four colleges, we looked at four units within the higher level of HNC (in Scotland) or Level 3 (in England) and four units at the lower levels. Each unit consisted of approximately 40 hours of learning and teaching.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Within each unit, we also worked with four students to examine their literacy practices in and out of college. Where possible the students themselves became involved in the process as co-researchers and not simply respondents. However, it was recognized by the team that for many of the students, the use of the term 'co-researcher' to represent their involvement was more aspirational than evident from practice. Other than the three students who were on the Edexcel National Certification in Early Years (level 3) programme in England, which was aimed at mature students, the student participants were learners aged 16-19.

With one exception, the 32 students were female. Similarly, all of the Childcare tutors who worked with the project gathering data were also female. One college had a male head of provision for Childcare and there were male teachers in the departments from which Childcare operated. However, they were usually Social Science teachers or Science-based teachers who taught some aspects of the courses related to health. Colley *et al*. (2003) found when studying FE that Childcare continues to be a feminized vocational area. It is not within the scope of this article to explore this aspect of Childcare provision, but we feel it is worthy of note that there has been a growing drive to improve the status, pay and conditions of those working with children. In three of the four colleges the programmes we studied were called 'Childcare and Education', but in Scotland during a later phase of the research, these course titles were changed to 'Early Education and Childcare'. This change in emphasis reflects a move to professionalize Childcare work by aligning it with the already professionalized area of Education. Over time, it will

be interesting to see if that has any impact on the gendered employment patterns in this area, and how it might impact on 'academic drift' in Childcare courses.

The LfLFE project used a collaborative ethnographic approach. The data-gathering process involved university-based researchers to provide an outsider perspective and FE practitioners and students to provide the insider perspective. A series of informal semi-structured conversations were carried out with the college-based researchers relating to the courses they were teaching and the literacy demands of studying that unit. There were also observations of classes and discussions about the use of texts in the teaching of their subject area. The students were engaged in a series of interviews using a range of methodologies to gain insight into their literacy practices both in and out of college.

To summarize, methods used on the project included the following:

(1) a comprehensive collection of texts from two discrete units at different levels in each curriculum area;

(2) individual or small-group interviews with students about their everyday literacy practices, using various methods of elicitation, including: a 'clock-face' activity in which students noted their literacy-related activities over a 24-hour period (Satchwell 2005); photographs taken by students over the course of one week; an icon-mapping exercise (see Smith, J. 2005);

(3) interviews with students about their views on specific texts used in the pedagogy of their courses;

(4) interviews with practitioners about their subject areas and about the pedagogy of the specific units in question;

(5) classroom observations and subsequent discussions between practitioners and observers.

Using these approaches, we collected data on the multimodal literacy practices associated with the teaching, learning and assessment on each of the units, and we explored the everyday literacy practices, both within and outside the college, of the random sample of students on each of those units.

For each student and for each curriculum unit a case study was compiled. These individual case studies were based on the triangulation of data from many sources, and on the synthesis of multiple perspectives from the ongoing sense-making dialogues between university- and college-based members of the team. The team then produced 32 'Combined Case Studies' (CCSs). The insights arrived at in this way were 'subject-specific', and allowed for comparisons between levels, colleges and countries. Further cross-case, project-wide understandings emerged from a holistic, interpretive process of comparing all 32 CCSs.

These case studies were subject to forms of descriptive and thematic analysis and the outcomes were explored in a one day workshop in which the university-based researchers and FE Childcare lecturers participated.

Literacy Practices in Learning Childcare

From our analysis of the data relating to the literacy practices on courses, we identified four categories of literacies for learning:

- literacies for learning to be a student, e.g. registration, use of learning resource area
- literacies for learning a particular subject: content focused learning including the development of knowledge, understanding and skill in a specialized area
- literacies for assessment
- literacies for learning related to an imagined future e.g. placements, work simulations, Higher Education.

In focusing on the Childcare curriculum, we will primarily be examining practices within the latter three of these (for information on the first, see Edwards and Smith 2005).

The project also identified thirteen aspects of a literacy practice (see Table 2). A change in any aspect will change the nature of the practice, suggesting the complexity of the process of developing a literacy career, as it is not simply a linear accumulation of the skills of reading and writing, but an interplay of diverse and multiple situated aspects.
[Insert Table 2 about here]

The textual mediation of learning Childcare, as with the other curriculum areas studied, presents a multifaceted picture of practices and expectations, arising out of a complex interplay of factors. For example, deciding what and how to teach about different theories of child development involved the teacher referring to the awarding body criteria for assessment, but also less specifically to the perceived demands of the workplace, and the anticipated practices of higher education. It also involved considering the culture of the college department, the tutor's professional training, experience and expectations, and the judgment of the lecturer on the approach to be adopted in teaching specific topics in specific ways. In every instance of curriculum enactment these factors can play out in different ways and for different reasons. In relation to Table 2, the tutor's choices of classroom material and assessments were more likely to be related to the content and the activity, than to other aspects of literacy practices such as audience, purpose, and identities. This is because the assessment criteria tended to be more explicit concerning these aspects rather than the other more implicit aspects of literacy practices in educational contexts.

As a result, the range of artifacts used in the teaching tended to rely mostly on what we suggest are fairly traditional styles of pedagogic mediation. For example, tutors used overhead transparencies (OHTs), PowerPoint presentations, information sheets and worksheets, which students were expected to engage with in prescribed and accepted ways. Hence students took notes from OHTs, completed worksheets, drew spider grams, and so on. To enable students to engage in forms of 'research' and project work, tutors also used magazines, leaflets, journals and photocopied sections of textbooks or other

extended texts and encouraged students to use them in preparing presentations and wall displays, producing leaflets, advisory booklets, posters, writing menus for one week, and designing game shows. Students also researched topics using the internet. This indicates a wide range of literacy practices being used in the process of learning the subject content, but only a small number of these were explicitly taught or explained. Many others were assumed. For example, most students followed the convention of copying bullet points from overhead slides (although we encountered a number of variations in styles and annotation added by individual students); students were also guided in the format and content expected for writing menus, and indeed for writing reports required for assessment purposes. However, generally students were assumed to know how to research topics using the internet, and how to convert the information they found into a different format, such as a poster. Our research found that these assumptions were not always well founded, particularly because, although students were familiar with the artifact of the computer and with the process of searching for information, different values and identities came into play in the college setting from when students surfed the internet for their own purposes (see Satchwell & Ivanic 2008 for more on this).

Literacy practices at different levels of study

Between the levels of programmes, there was a definite difference in the range of literacy practices with which students were expected to engage. As might be expected, there were more practical exercises at the lower levels, but what emerged was that students were also engaging in a greater variety of literacy demands.

An example of a task involving 'hidden' or additional literacy practices was when a SCQF level 5 (English level 2) group was asked to produce (as an assessment) a handbook aimed at parents to help them understand their own child's developmental stages between 0-5 years. The students' concerns centred around how to address this audience; how to get a professional finish so that it looked neat; the layout they needed to adopt and which images to use, if any. These were concerns about the practices around the production of a leaflet rather than the practice of producing evidence of understanding about children's development as required by the assessment criteria. In this particular case, all of the students had to remediate their assessment because aspects of the performance criteria had not been fulfilled. The students could not draw on their own literacy experiences as none of the group was a parent, and they did not come from a background of media production. In giving them something different and potentially engaging, the teacher had added a new dimension to the task of demonstrating knowledge, as the students had to develop a new set of practices around the complex processes of leaflet production. It was thought that this was unproblematic, as they had passed their basic skills assessments. This assumption about a literacy artifact was based on a skills-based view of literacy that ignored the complex range of activities that surround the use and production of any form of text.

However, it was also noted that both students and staff enjoyed the experience of producing the leaflet because it was practical, they could work collaboratively, they could use pictures either drawn by themselves or taken from magazines, it was multi-modal and multi-media, non-linear and generative. As a learning activity, it had many benefits

therefore, and can be seen to relate to characteristics of students' everyday preferred literacy practices (see p.20). However, because it was an assessment artifact the students had to meet the performance criteria. We would argue that the multiple purposes of fulfilling assessment criteria and producing a realistic leaflet, along with the multiple audiences of (imagined) parents, subject tutors, and external assessors were too complex for this task to be successful as an assessment. The *form* of assessment became the students' focus, rather than learning about the aspect of child development. This may well have been a legitimate learning experience, if they would have to produce such a document when qualified or if every subsequent assessment required similar literacy practices. However, their teacher said that they would be unlikely ever to have to do this. What is significant here is the genre of writing for the assessment and its (lack of) relationship to the course and future area of work. Writing a leaflet aimed at parents is a highly specialized literacy practice. While the teacher's intention may have been to make the assignment more *interesting*, it is not necessarily made more *relevant* by imposing a literacy demand which will not be useful in the workplace, nor if the student progresses to higher level courses. In this case, it was unsuited to its pedagogic function of demonstrating knowledge.

This variety expected of lower level course students may mean that the courses can be more complex from a literacy perspective than higher level courses. In other words, students' literacy careers are more diverse than they might be given credit for, rather than being focused on developing a narrower range of reading and writing as required specifically for work or Higher Education. This challenges many common sense

understandings. Students at the lower levels received multiple messages about what is necessary for them to do to succeed. At the lower levels, not only did students have to learn to develop literacy practices they did not need in the workplace, but these same practices were not required at the higher levels of study either, where the assessments students were likely to be asked to produce were one or at most two text-types across the programmes: essays and reports. We are not suggesting that teachers should only use *relevant* literacy practices which are fulfilling their course requirements and imagined futures, but if they do introduce new literacy practices, they do have to be aware of the additional requirements they are placing on their students. To help do this, we suggest that, as well as considering their students' careers as learners, it would also be helpful for curriculum development and pedagogic practice to consider the development of the students' literacy careers and how these can best be scaffolded.

One of the colleges had responded to complaints from placement nurseries and schools that students were ill-equipped with certain skills by providing extra teaching of handwriting using a printing style, supporting children's spelling, and writing on a board. But these skills were seen as additional to rather than as inherent in learning the curriculum, and therefore assessment tended not to incorporate such skills. Rather, the assessment relied on more traditional literacy requirements. However, for students expecting to work in Childcare, assessment through displays, presentations, visual and other multimodal forms of communication would seem to be highly appropriate.

At the higher levels students received a more consistent message about 'appropriate' forms of reading and writing, which did relate to progressing to higher education. For example, one tutor said of a level 3 course:

> "It's very much, it's overhead projector, reading in the book, it's going to happen because it's theories, and you know, you can do games after you've taught it, guessing games - which theorist am I, but actually it's quite intense writing, because there's no other way around it."

There is thus greater consistency in the literacy careers they were being required to develop. This is not to say that students at the higher levels had fewer literacy challenges. They faced different demands with an increased textualization of assessment based upon more extended reading and writing rather than work-related activities.

Staff acknowledged that writing an essay would be difficult for students. As a result they organized classes on how to write essays at Induction, taught mainly by core/key skills teachers. The practice of teaching essay writing as a set of generic skills which can be transferred later is part of the autonomous view of literacy. This involves not only assumptions about student capabilities and the extent to which literacy practices are assumed to be transferable, but also whether tutors choose to use pedagogic strategies to develop those capabilities or work with the existing repertoires that students bring with them. The literacy demands of assessment were often additional to any literacy practices that students needed to develop within the workplace, as there was an anticipation of the

demands to be faced by students in progressing educationally rather than entering the workplace.

Courses in Childcare are textually mediated in many different ways as an effect of the various types of factors that impact on the process. A significant factor in these cases was the level of study and their associated assessment practices. An awareness of why this diversity prevails and what the different factors are that influence it could illuminate the curriculum making process and its diverse array of enactments (Miller, *et al*. 2008). A greater acknowledgement of this diversity could also lead to more relevant ways of interpreting the curriculum, and more appropriate forms of assessment, to encompass both the kinds of literacy practices that students engage in most readily, and those most likely to be required in the workplace.

These differences in literacy demands between lower and higher level courses were noticed in all four colleges in Scotland and England. Although there were specific characteristics to each course, these were determined more by the specific prescriptions around content and assessment of the course, the tutors' individual background and experiences and the specific organizational sites than by the national policy contexts within which they were operating.

Drawing on students' everyday literacy practices

For this project, we were interested in not only the ways in which learning could be developed within the context of the college classroom, but also the ways in which

practices in that context could draw upon the practices in which students engaged in their everyday lives. When we investigated what students did in their daily lives, we discovered both a quantity and diversity of literacy practices in which they participated which far surpassed the expectations of the lecturers. When analyzed, the literacy practices which students tended to use in their everyday lives were, on the whole:

- multi-modal, i.e. combining symbols, pictures, colour, music

- multi-media, i.e. combining paper and electronic media

- shared, i.e. interactive, participatory and collaborative

- non-linear, i.e. with varied reading paths

- agentic, i.e. students having responsibility

- purposeful to the student

- having a clear audience

- generative

- self-determined in terms of activity, time and place.

Their literacy practices included using a wide range of technological communicative devices, such as: mobile phones; computer and video games; msn and email; websites; teletext; music downloads and so on. Some of the characteristics that these literacy practices shared were that they were collaborative, non-linear, self-determined, generative and multi-modal. Partly as a result of the way the concept of literacy is discussed in everyday life, and partly as a result of literacy being embedded in the activities, the students were not aware that literacy was involved in these activities until

they participated in the research. They thought that 'reading' only meant reading 'proper' novels and 'writing' only meant creative writing, so they almost unanimously said that they did not read or write anything outside college. It is perhaps unsurprising that none of the practitioner researchers was aware that their students engaged in such a wide and complex variety of practices in other areas of their lives either.

The range and variety of literacy practices could be seen to contrast with the more limited uses of reading and writing in pedagogic practices. For instance, while teachers did use ICT in their teaching, it was not always their first choice of communicating information, and also it was often not available (the implementation of ICT facilities in colleges has lagged behind both schools and universities in the UK). Also, although all four colleges had Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), at the time of the research these were often used as a means to access traditional handouts or OHTs, rather than as representing a different multi-modal form of semiotic mediation. In many ways then, the learning environment was less rich from a literacy perspective than that often experienced by students in their everyday lives and also their prospective workplaces, especially when we take into account the huge growth of technological children's toys (Luckin, *et al*. 2003). Students did use these artefacts and engaged in technological literacy practices in their everyday lives, but in our project there was little evidence of these practices being brought into the classroom specifically in relation to teaching or in the students' play with children. Rather, the students themselves introduced mediation between college literacy practices and those they carried out in their everyday lives, by, for example, using computers – often at home – to research and complete their assignments.

Our research overall suggests the benefits to be gained from paying attention to bringing

elements of everyday literacy practices to bear on college tasks more explicitly. While

some lower level forms of classroom tasks and assessment drew on these aspects, as they

required students to work collaboratively, using multimedia and multimodal approaches,

at higher levels of study the literacy practices were limited to more paper-based and

individualized tasks. We would argue that in teaching and learning about Childcare,

literacy practices which resonate with those of students' everyday lives - insofar as they

share some of their characteristics - will be more relevant not only to the students' lives,

but also to those of the children with whom they will be working.

The mediation of college learning and work placements

Drawing on multimodal literacy practices to mediate the everyday and classroom is one

form of mediation in which Childcare students were engaged. Another was the mediation

of college learning and work placements through the maintenance of a logbook – a

common artifact in FE courses in which there are placements or simulations. The logbook

was a central artifact in being a Childcare student. While all the students appreciated and

valued the actual placement experience, writing the logbook was seen as a chore by many

of them, partly because it consisted of completing proformas. These logbooks differed in

format across the qualification bodies but essentially were the same in purpose. Within

the placement time, each student was expected to undertake a variety of tasks which

covered the range of activities they would be expected to meet in a Childcare setting. The

logbooks were designed to capture this experience and to provide opportunities both to

record what had taken place and to reflect on the student's development during placement. For many of the students recording of the activities presented few problems. However, the reflective element caused considerable challenges, as it consisted in moving from a descriptive mode of writing to an analytical mode, which was a particular genre of writing with which many students were unfamiliar.

In Scotland, the logbook consisted of 50 planned learning experiences (PLEs); 20 observations and 10 reports. Some of the students talked about completing five or more proformas at one time. The physical space of the box in the proforma limited the amount of writing the students undertook, which was in tension with the purpose of writing reflectively which entails more extended text. These logbooks were designed to be read by the placement staff and/or the college tutor and then discussed with the student. All the students reported that this discussion happened infrequently and, when it did, it covered a number of proformas at one time. One of the students commented that: 'I don't think she reads them really. She just signs them.' It seemed to the students that these documents served no real purpose. Many found them repetitive and did not use them for reflection but rather as a reference to tick off which aspect of the curriculum they had covered. Students often repeated similar phrases each week. One student wrote in over half of her PLE's 'I think my organizational skills could be improved.' She did not refer to her previous notes, citing this as a problem, nor did she reflect on how this could be improved, indicating that she was 'ticking boxes' rather than engaging fully in the practice of completing a reflective log.

One important aspect of the placement for students was child observations. One English student disliked these more than any other aspect of the course, describing them as 'boring'. It became clear that what she found boring was not observing the child, but writing up the observation. She said: 'You have to do twenty and it takes ages to write them up.' This is a case of the literacy practice becoming a demand on top of the task itself. On the whole students did not use the logbook as a reflective tool. They used it to log events as they happened and to check they had completed all the tasks expected of them in the placement. A reflective logbook required students to engage with a new set of literacy practices with which they were not familiar. Staff wanted the students to be more reflective and they commented on the entries lacking a reflective quality, but there seemed to be little if any explicit understanding of the literacy practices entailed in writing reflective documents and the need for that writing to be meaningful for the students.

Inferences

In terms of comparison, when exploring literacies for learning, there would appear to be more similarities than differences in the Childcare curricula in Scotland and England. What differences did emerge appeared to be as much to do with the pedagogic stance of the lecturer as any other factor (Miller and Satchwell 2006). Indeed the differences may be more significant within countries as between them, in particular in England where different awarding bodies, CACHE and Edexcel, provide different curriculum contexts within which to operate. Specifically, the lecturers perceived a major difference as being that CACHE prescribed assignment tasks, while Edexcel allowed more freedom in that

tutors could write their own according to the assessment criteria. At the level of literacy practices within the pedagogy of Childcare, country differences appeared not to be significant.

It is clear from the above that an integral aspect of learning careers are literacy careers. This is significant not simply for Childcare in FE, but for the curriculum as a whole in any setting. In relation to the vocational curriculum, it would seem logical for the students' literacy careers to develop into wider complexity as they progress. Starting with the more practical work-placed activities, more academic literacies would be gradually introduced on top of the developing practical and occupational literacies. However, we have found that students at the lower levels actually deal with many and varied literacy practices which are not necessarily recognized and which can be regarded as adding an unnecessary level of complexity. In addition, their literacy practices within the classroom largely do not seem to prepare them adequately for either the workplace or the next level of study. The implication is that new literacy practices introduced into the classroom need to be recognized as such, and that their potential relevance to the students' futures should be considered. Here there can be a tension in the literacy practices to be developed, given the dual purpose of the curriculum to both prepare the student for the workplace and/or for educational progression (for further discussion on this point see Edwards and Miller, 2008).

From the data, we note two tensions in the literacy of assessment. A general observation is that the literacy practices associated with the production of assignments at English

level 3/Scottish HNC appear to be less related to those required in the workplace than the more practical literacy tasks assigned at level 2. Even though the tasks at level 2 may be more related to the workplace, there is not always a recognition that this is the case, and so the practical skills of creating displays, writing on the board, mounting work are not recognized through formal assessment: rather they become sidelined as incidental to the main task of assessing understanding of the theoretical content of the course. There are two elements to this point. First, there is a tension between educational imperatives and occupational imperatives in terms of literacy practices, types of texts and types of engagement with texts required by students, especially as they progress in terms of level. What is required for educational progression and what for the workplace may differ and this difference is reflected in assessments. So the policy prioritizes certain academic literacy demands rather than the workplace, even as it ostensibly positions employability and the workplace as a central concern. There are tensions here within educational policy. Second, there is the issue of interest and relevance. An assignment may be intended to be more interesting, as in writing an article for a magazine, but its relevance to the students may not be apparent. Higher level courses require writing essays, reports, letters, and other extended written documents. Without a fuller understanding of exactly what would be required in the workplace, it is difficult to say how relevant these activities are, of course. There is the argument that education should offer more than that which is necessary for the workplace.

This raises the most fundamental of questions. Is the purpose of the programme to extend academic development and/or to fit vocational context? Each has implications for the

literacy practices in which people participate - both students and lecturers, and the trajectories of learning careers. If it is to do both, then the issues of what is valued as literacy and the resources necessary for the multimodality of the world will need seriously to be addressed in the curriculum expectations and pedagogic practices of Childcare courses. An extension of this is the debate in Childcare around practice and professional development. Many of the lecturers felt that the programmes they were providing were about development of practitioners, yet the changes being made at policy level are focused on the idea of developing a professional role of the students, which according to management structures involves achieving higher level qualifications. The third phase of our research, when college-based researchers initiated changes in their teaching practice, showed that the students and the tutors responded well to the curriculum being enacted so that the connections to the workplace and to academic development were made more explicit through thinking in more detail about the different aspects of any given literacy practice.

At the broader conceptual level, this study points to the centrality of semiotic practices to the learning careers of students, and that greater pedagogical consideration of their literacy careers, the forms of literacy practices required, formed and scaffolded, could enhance their learning. While the general discourses of policy and practice focus on students' deficits in literacy, exploration of Childcare students' everyday practices indicates it is the multiplicity and abundance of literacy practices which is an issue, when compared with the very specific sets of practices that are valued within the context of further and higher education. Literacies for learning are fostered not simply by focusing

on the development of individual skills, but by increasing the meaningfulness of tasks to students, taking into account that many students are still exploring what they might do as well as seeking preparation and qualifications in a certain vocational or subject area.

Notes

1. This article arises from work done within the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* research project, funded by the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (grant number RES-139-25-0117).
2. Level 3 or SCQF 7 is equivalent to the level of 'A level', or the level expected for school students studying at age 17-18. Level 2 or SCQF 5 is equivalent to GCSE, normally taken in the UK at age 16.

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Table 1: The Childcare Units in the Research Sample

Name of Programme	Name of unit	Level (2)	Country
HNC in Childcare and Education	Assessment Approaches in Childcare and Education	SCQF 7 (level 3)	Scotland
HNC in Childcare and Education	Curriculum Approaches in Childcare and Education	SCQF 7 (level 3)	Scotland
CACHE Diploma in Child Care and Education (DCE)	Preparation for Employment	Level 3 course (SCQF 7)	England
EDEXCEL National Certification in Early Years,	Human Growth and Development	Level 3 course (SCQF 7).	England
NC Early Education and Childcare	Care and Feeding of Babies	SCQF 5 (level 2)	Scotland
CACHE Certificate in Childcare and Education	Practical Work, Personal Development and Anti-discriminatory Practice	Level 2 course (SCQF 5)	England
NQ Intermediate 1 Care (Children)	The Pre-school Child, Food, Clothing and Play	SCQF 4 (level 1)	Scotland
Foundation Childcare Award (FCA),	Play and Practical Activities	Level 1 course (SCQF 4)	England

Table 2: Aspects of a Literacy Practice

PARTICIPANTS, i.e. those taking part
AUDIENCE, i.e. who is likely to read/hear/see the product
PURPOSE, i.e. what the product is for
MEDIUM, e.g. paper, electronic
MODE, e.g. using colour, pictures, symbols, language, sound
ARTEFACT, e.g. mobile phone, computer
GENRE/TEXT-TYPE, e.g. letter, essay, text message
CONTENT, i.e. what the text is about
ACTIVITY, i.e. the processes involved in engaging in the reading/writing
PLACE/SPACE, i.e. where it takes place
TIME/TIMING, i.e. when, how often and for how long it takes place
VALUES, e.g. adherence to Standard English, or use of creative language
IDENTITIES, e.g. the role of student, motorbike-rider, or nurse