Cliff Top Literacies: Digital Technologies Supporting Composing Literacies in an English Primary (Elementary) School

Background and Purposes

In England, primary schools and teachers are working under the strictures of a literacy curriculum heavily geared towards achievement in standardized assessment tests on spelling punctuation and grammar (SPaG). The Early Years and Foundation Stage (age 0 – 5) reading curriculum emphasizes the use of phonics to decode words; a phonics screening test mandatory in state supported schools checks the extent to which a 5-6 year old can read decontextualized words and pseudo words. In May 2016 Key Stage 2 for 10-11 year olds national literacy tests were widely reported as "ridiculously hard" with accounts of even able children being unable to understand questions and collapsing in tears (Times Education Supplement 2016). The President of the UK Literacy Association commented: "In Key Stage 2 children are/were being made to face questions in the SPaG test that even professional grammarians couldn't answer….There is a growing argument anyway that many of the accountability measures being implemented lately lower standards because children have to spend valuable time practicing for the next test-hurdle rather than learning which will really develop their minds" (Lambirth, 2016: 1).

In her recent case study of the school writing practices of one "at risk" child in England Marsh (2016) neatly pulls together the effects of the phonics-based curriculum, the financial and policy drivers behind such policies, and the associated neglect of the actual and potential place of digital literacies in children's lives in what she terms the austerity literacy model. In a supportive response to the collection of Marsh's and other case studies of composing literacies (Dyson, 2016); Miller and Sahni (2016) build a case against the globally resounding rhetoric of increasing standardized testing, instead urging "increased responsiveness to children's lives [and] building upon the resources they already have, which is the way to improve children's literacy levels."

In the UK our New Purposes, New Practices, New Pedagogy (NP³) project, funded by the Society for Educational Studies, shares a commitment to that responsiveness and aims to explore the use and impact of digital technologies on innovative pedagogic practices, social justice, and pupils' development of digital literacy in primary school communities. Through a single case study, this paper investigates three of the project's research questions:

RQ1 What are the digital practices that pupils bring to their learning in school?

RQ2 Across subject domains what do teachers' intended and enacted pedagogic practices indicate about their awareness of and the value accorded to pupils' digital competencies, and how do pupils' experience these pedagogic practices?

RQ3 What institutional circumstances and practices enable or undermine how pupils' digital competencies and practices are recognised (RQ1) and integrated into teachers' practice (RQ2)?

These research questions are explored by means of research in a coastal primary school in North East England in an area suffering considerable economic deprivation.

Theoretical framework
Key frames of thinking include:
Critical literacies, power and agency (Janks, 2009): empowering children to make meanings with texts in collective practices;
Multiliteracies: conceiving of composing literacies as including attention to situated practice; overt instruction; critical framing and transformed practice, within an understanding of composing as multimodal, embodied design
Digital literacies as connecting to place, identities and sociomaterial entanglements (Author; Mills and Comber 2015, Comber 2016)

Methods
Data was collected during the school year 2015-2016 through two extended field stays and online engagement. A participatory ethos aimed at an ethnographic sensitivity. Ethical procedures were agreed through both university ethical review boards and fully informed consent obtained from children and parents. (Consent to the various potential procedures was itemised enabling partial opt in or out). Instruments designed by the project team were adapted on site in consultation with school teachers and children. These included:
- Classroom observations
- Interviews of teachers
- Written accounts by teachers accompanied by evidence in a variety of formats.
- Group and individual interviews of children
- "Walk through demonstrations" by children
- Focus group discussions with parents/carers
- Examples of work/play produced at school and in the home and shared in a variety of formats.

Data was analysed conceptually according to the research questions and inductively; and by format according to material characteristics and networked relations.

Data sources
Over 300 items of data analysed included videos recorded by the researchers, audio, images, physical artefacts, texts and vlogs recorded by children.

Results
Results are presented in multimodal vignettes of composing literacies.

We begin in the final week of their primary school of the Year 6 eleven year olds. They are creating multimodal autobiographies, using an Explain Everything interactive screencasting whiteboard app. Their style is modelled on the Draw My Life genre of YouTube productions by pop stars, which the children introduced to the teacher. He has promoted critical engagement with these professional productions while encouraging the children's creative springboards. They combine timelapsed recordings of drawings with photographs and drawings into a slide show.

Our second vignette is from the same group of children earlier in the year. They are composing narratives, a mainstay of the curriculum upon which much mandated items of SPaG knowledge can be hung. The handwritten narratives are crafted with enthusiasm, in part since they concern the adventures of Bike Baron (Mountain Sheep), a mobile gaming app the children have been playing on tablets. Yet their exercise in creating narratives is paralleled by another: they are also crafting the narrative through the capture and manipulation of several images with short textual additions in a comic strip creation app: Strip Designer (Vivid Apps). A student walks the researcher through her processes of creating the multimodal text. She moves spontaneously into sharing on the whole school platform where she also keeps an eye on her little sister's productions. This app is one the whole school makes use of, including Early Years children and teaching assistants.

Our third vignette is from a Year 2 ICT class, taught by a specialist. This lesson is part of a scheme of work for this group centred on children's books written and illustrated by Mairi Hedderwick about a child Katie Morag living on the fictional island of Struay. In the following day's Geography lesson the class teacher discussed Hedderwick as a professionally trained artist, related her own experiences of living on an island and engaged the children in a dialogue about the differences in living in a coastal community to an island. Later she discussed Hedderwick as a professionally trained artist and segued into the afternoon's activity of painting a Struay scene. However, the children have already hand drawn a map of Struay. In the ICT lesson they work carefully, using both their own drawings and book illustrations as prompts to draw the island with desktop pc equipment, considering shapes, colours and symbols in their productions.

In the final vignette a Foundation Year teacher assists a small group of children to draw with their iPads. They are recreating jellyfish they saw in a recent whole school visit to the beach. This was simultaneously a shared school experience, an important resource for positive affect yet with differentiated surrounding curriculum activities according to age and capability.

Discussion and conclusions

In this school environment, a decision has been taken that some projects, apps and experiences will be prioritised and shared among everybody, to enhance confidence in skills and encourage more collaboratively creative dialogues. Technologies are a part of this picture, rather than being subject to simplistic policies such as the blanket banning of cellphones, a more nuanced view is taken. The school acknowledges in many ways that "the relationship between users and mobiles does not take place in a social vacuum; it is situated in a larger context, constituted by both discourses and practices" (Merchant, 2012: 771). The boy who worries whether there will be sufficient electricity in the meter to play with his XBox at the weekend faces no such concern here. The sudden explosion of interest in Pokémon GO (Niantic) at the end of the school year was met by a combination of shared excitement and fascination with the details and discussions of actual and potential dangers.

Investigation of RQ1, the children's digital practices, revealed a great diversity in children's interests despite the superficially homogeneous impression of the estate surrounding the school on which the children live. Digital logs, subsequent interviews and vlog entries display multifarious pursuits; often trajectories are pursued across online and physical world settings. Occasionally students or their parents are unsure whether a specific interest, favourite app or skill first emerged at school or in the home.

This theme, of many forms of the "permeable curriculum" (Dyson, 1993) is also present in our investigations of RQ2, enquiring into pedagogy. Undoubtedly the mandatory curriculum, phonics programmes and all the rest impact strongly on classrooms, yet nevertheless seem to be woven into days where the needs, values and interests of the children remain paramount. Agency is made visible as a collective pedagogic practice, enabling "a way of positioning oneself to as to allow for new ways of being, new identities" (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007: 6).

RQ3, enquiring into the enabling practices and circumstances at the level of the institution sensitised us to the continuum in time and space of making and remaking of the school ethos. At one level are the policies, put carefully into action, regarding shared cross school priorities and experiences, guaranteeing children a secure trajectory into the demands that will be made of them in the year above. At quite another, in the fleeting moment, is the attention given to every child's question and

comment to the Head in the playground. Between are many levels of engagement, such as the safety and friendship policy that connects the physical and virtual dimensions. Constantly remade is the environment, including people and technologies, in the words of (Malaguzzi, 1996: 40): "We place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force in creating spaces for relations, options, and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security."

Scientific and scholarly significance of the work

From a context outside the USA, the paper addresses the conference theme: "Knowledge to action: achieving the promise of equal educational opportunity." In the US as much of the world, literacy curricula are becoming more standardized, accompanied by high-stakes testing. This apparently and dangerous "unstoppable juggernaut" (Miller & Sahni, 2016: 145) is in danger of delegitimizing the resources that children from less privileged backgrounds can mobilize. Such resources may most fruitfully be conceptualised as a "literacy of possibilities" (Wohlwend, 2008: 127) permeating across home, school, school and home in a respectful, dynamic dialogue across many modes and genres of communication.

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