'*A day in the life*': relating understandings of 'eating events' to the concept of 'literacy events' as cultural activities in the lives of two-year-old girls in diverse global communities

Julia Gillen[1], Beatrice Accorti Gamannossi[2], & Roger Hancock[3]
[1] Lancaster University, UK, [2] University of Florence, Italy, [3]Open University, UK

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Abstract

Nelson (1997) articulated a synthesis of a body of language research when concluding that 'event knowledge' and 'making sense' are at the heart of learning. Event knowledge connects with the project's understanding of 'culture as evaluative conversation' (Hammel, 1990) and as patterns in the social practices of everyday life (Cole, 1997). Making sense relates to both interpretation and production of intersubjective understandings.

Drawing upon Heath's (1983, p. 386) conception of 'literacy events' we draw a parallel conception of 'eating event', also understood as a negotiated social practice. With illustrations from our data we will explore the interplay of the child's agency, including her constant wish to play, with the adults' nurturing and broadly pedagogic agendas. We draw from the different datasets to explore the communication of values as the affordances of artefacts in the environment are explored. We observed the children's agendas to be of playful exploration and adaptation of the contexts in which they function. These agendas informed the ways in which adults adapt their strategies for ensuring that the child be well fed and intellectually stimulated.

While offering support for Nelson's emphases from our data, we extend understandings of these loci of development in part through demonstrating how the multimodal affordances of video allow us to perceive a range of semiotic modes in the communication of values and sharing of practices. While recognising limits to the effectiveness of the methodology, we conclude by suggesting that our eco-cultural approach to studying childhood has promoted endeavours to consider the realities of daily life of families in their complexity and diversity (Rogoff, 2003).

Key words**:** early childhood; eating; culture, literacy

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Aims

This paper stems from an international project: an ecological investigation of culture in the lives of two year old girls in their family settings. Our primary aim when we started the project in 2002, was to identify diverse ways of thriving through study of the early home lives of 'strong' children in various contexts across the globe. We sought to avoid a crude comparative approach, but rather to explore interpretive approaches to research opening up of rich empirical data to interpretation, where the interpretive practices themselves provide opportunities to think reflexively about the meaning-making processes of all involved.

Nsamenang (1992) suggested applying an ecocultural framework to developmental studies. He draws on Pence's (1998, p. xii) assertion that this is 'far more conceptual than methodological, more a call to thoughtful, systematic awareness than an operationalised, methodological guide'. Considering relationships between researcher and researched, between researcher and researcher, is not a question of accessing transparent 'realities' but rather that of negotiating new meanings.

This interpretive approach may be contrasted then with more positivist approaches springing from the desire to achieve discretely measurable outcomes. See for example Weisner (2002) who investigated ecocultural contexts for young children in a variety of communities. He applied an 'Ecocultural Family Interview' founded upon North American conceptions of the motivations behind 'everyday activities' and then in turn derives 'scores' for family routines. 'Evaluating children's development across cultures' then is conceived as an achievable research aim, deliverable by outsiders in 'cross-cultural' studies that seek to instantiate a universal developmental outcome (characterised there as 'well-being') that varies along a dimension known as 'community' or 'culture.' One issue with this is that there is a failure to interrogate the North American conception as a starting point.

Working together as participants from different countries and from origins in multiple disciplines: early years education and psycholinguistics, literacy research, developmental and health psychology, etc., we evolved not a list of research questions, but rather a broad, initial shaping of our research. We sought to explore specific aspects of cultural activities seen by participants (parents, local and distal researchers) as constructive to healthy growth. We decided to do this not by pre-identifying the domains of activity we were going to study, eg. play, relationships with parents etc. but to use a more inductive approach to the data and see what seemed significant in the children's lives. So, for example, musicality emerged as a theme that we have explored (Young & Gillen, 2006, 2007).

An interpretive approach must be distinguished from inductive, bottom-up approaches such as grounded theory (as expounded by Glaser & Strauss, 1967 and extended by numerous scholars). On the contrary we recognise that all participants, including researchers, have pre-existing interests and attitudes, that together are well captured through Bourdieu's (1977, p.214) notion of habitus: 'a *way of being*, a *habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *disposition, tendency, propensity* or *inclination*' (emphases as in original).

We are concerned in this paper to reflexively consider our investigations in eating as a cultural practice through the lens of our studies of literacy events in the project and vice versa, ie in turn to imbue our considerations of literacy events with our developing understandings of sociocultural practices in the lives of these two-year-old girls, their caregivers and other companions at home. Nelson's (1997) ideas that 'event knowledge' and 'making sense' are at the heart of learning, concepts developed by her in the context of language research, provide us with useful synthesizing ideas in reaching conclusions about the development of cultural knowledge.

Cultural practices in the lives of two year old girls and their families

Here we briefly outline some significant theoretical starting points for us in taking an ecocultural approach to research. (See also Cameron & Pinto, [2008] presented at this same conference for further reflections on our project.) The term has resonance for us in our sociohistorical perspective, as it is evocative of the complex, networked and dynamic activities we think of as cultural. 'Culture' has many have observed has become far extended in different disciplines so that it can be difficult to pin it down. Two particularly useful ideas for us are as follows:

Cole (1997) proposes that any simple correlation of culture as a uniform ensemble of 'shared beliefs, values, symbols tools' etc: in what he refers to as a 'configurational' approach is flawed but suggests:

> "There is no doubt that culture is patterned, but there is also no doubt that it is far from uniform and that its patterning is experienced in local, face-to-face interactions that are locally constrained…" p.250

This notion of patterning (as opposed for example to contrasts and comparisons that are measured according to one particular 'norm') is extremely useful, and, as we shall explain further below, our methods are designed to enable us to investigate the details of these 'local, face-to-face interactions' and some of the ways in which we might explore some of the 'local constraints'. A view on these comes from Hammel's (1990) useful interdisciplinary consideration of culture. Published in a journal for demographers, his account makes use of work in social anthropology, sociology, and economics, and in its breadth of vision for the social sciences is potentially relevant to any of us involved in studying human development. One of the key 'components' of his exploration of culture and its impact on research methodology is constituted by the following idea:

> "Culture is an evaluative conversation constructed by actors out of the raw materials afforded by tradition and ongoing experience. It is continually modified by them in processes of social interaction, and their behavior is guided by anticipation of such cultural evaluation." (Hammel, 1990: 457)

We do not take from this a solely literal sense of Hammel's word 'conversation' here as the dialogue he alludes to, especially perhaps in the context of the behaviour of two year olds, may be more meaningfully semiotic in other modes (Anning & Edwards, 1999). Video is an extremely useful tool for picking up not only the minutiae of spoken dialogue, but also that of

bodily alignment, attention directing and other embodied communicative actions (Flewitt, 2006). Detailed perusal of the video and other qualitative data in this project brought not only literacy-related activities firmly in the purview of 'cultural practices' as we might have expected, but also eating events. We must now turn to the methods through which our findings emerged.

Methods

Our approach is ethnographic in the sense that we make use of multiple routes to reaching understandings and seek to approach the perspectives of research participants, rather than thinking of ourselves as 'objective' outsiders. Gaskins (1999: 27) encapsulates the two principle prongs of our approach:

> The process of development can be understood only by … a dual research agenda. First, one must study children engaged in their daily activities to observe the unit of child-in-activity-in-context that represents the locus of the developmental process. Second, one must also study the cultural belief systems and institutions that are responsible for consistency in the everyday contexts of behavior experienced by children."

Our approach, in common with that of Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989), documents the daily rounds of young children in context, and inspects those contextualized activities from a variety of both professional and personal perspectives. Colleagues indigenous to the child's home background as well as those from different cultural backgrounds; colleagues from a range of different disciplines observe footage of the child's day; and family members review and comment on segments of the day, all providing good connections to assist us in comprehending the values of a culture and its modality of transmission.

The basic scenario for getting specimens of the phenomena involves video taping a "Day in the Life" of a two-and-a-half-year-old girl in homes situated in seven different countries: Thailand, Peru, Italy, Canada, the UK, the US and Turkey.

Each local project followed a five-phase protocol (Gillen, Cameron, Tapanya, Pinto, Hancock, Young, & Accorti Gamannossi, 2007).

1. Locating research participants

Colleagues from different countries designed the initial protocols and located an appropriate family, with an apparently thriving two and a half year old girl, willing to engage in the project. We chose to focus on a strength-based analysis of the roots of female resilience.

2. Pre-filming: family preparation

Two researchers visited the family to establish initial rapport and collect basic demographic, health and lifestyle information through a semi-structured interview. The project aims, extents of commitment, confidentiality and participants' rights, were fully discussed with the families. There was also a one-hour session of filming to accustom the child and her interactants at least slightly to the experience of being in the presence of a video camera-person and field-note taker for an entire waking day.

3. Day in the Life first iterative filming

The two researchers arrived at the family home soon after the child woke and stayed for as much of the day as possible. Videoing was stopped while the child was asleep or engaged in toilet activities. At least six hours of film was obtained in each location. The researcher present who was not videoing, quietly observed, making notes on a spreadsheet on a clipboard, identifying the times the child changed her activity or location and people present at the scene. S/he also wrote explanatory notes about other activities or features of the environment.

4. Selection of focal interchanges

"Day in the Life" videos were collected and perused individually and then together by two distal project investigators. The focus on real time viewing and reviewing by the investigators who are from two different countries and disciplines, afforded a sense of attunement with each local "day". Working together the principal investigators edited a half hour compilation video of approximately six five-minute clips that in collaboration they considered displayed a variety of the activities and kinds of interactions the child had engaged in over the day, and which appeared to tap in on the family's striving to support the healthy development of their child.

5. Second iterative stage

After scrutinizing the compilation video, the local investigators returned to the target family with the tape. They filmed an interview during which the participants together watched the compilation video, pausing between sections for reflexive discussions. Families in each context responded with reactions to the selection of video data in ways that often enhanced or reoriented the researchers' provisional understandings. The families demonstrably enjoyed their participation. The meeting afterwards was welcome and of course the participants appreciated their gift of the compilation tape (Gillen et al., 2007).

We then had as data the video of the whole 'day' and associated field notes, records of the initial interview and field plans

Approaches to analysis

Our approaches to analysis are inspired by Rogoff (1997: 275):

> "From a participation perspective, similar or contrasting processes are sought across activities, with the generalizations being in the nature of the patterns in the dynamic processes of activities rather than residing in the individuals or in the materials or tasks."

As researchers, we begun with a considerable interest in children's language, embedded in our professional habitus. Nevertheless in what might seem a paradox, we did not necessarily begin with a direct focus on language itself. This is partly because in the early months of the project, when we engaged with enthusiasm with data from the various countries we did not necessarily immediately have access to translations; these came later. It has been impossible indeed to translate all verbal interactions into all languages, although we have shared English-language translations. However, both because the data itself is so multimodal, we have found ourselves less disposed to focus on the detail of the children's language immediately, than we are used to

doing. One reason for this is that the project seems to us to offer a glorious opportunity for a holistic approach to learning, that of course very much includes language, in an unusual way. Katherine Nelson suggests that the long term trajectory of her work, which has included direct and longitudinal studies of language, have been to confirm a sense that the child's learning of language occurs within a process of developing 'event knowledge.' She observes that:

> 'Very young children seem to understand and participate in everyday activities with enormous enthusiasm even though they lack the language tools used by older children….Overall, it appears that event the most voluble children of 3 years or younger are not relying on language to guide their activities (although they may be using language pragmatically for a number of different functions), but rather are demonstrating remarkable nonverbal intelligence in their everyday activities." (Nelson, 1997, p. 105.)

It is understandable that in the context of a programme of research that focuses above all on language Nelson has used the word 'nonverbal'. We slightly prefer to the terms 'semiotic' and indeed 'multimodal' to capture the multiple dimensions of communication to a lexically negative word.

We will now explore, with illustrations, our approach then to studying 'literacy events' within our data and how we came to apply the concept to 'eating events', again with a display of our analysis, as we realised that eating is a significant cultural practice and so much more than 'merely' nutrition and nurturing.

Literacy events

Creating and using symbols to communicate and to structure social life is a strikingly human cognitive skill. Linguistic symbols, written language, mathematical notation, art, music, are objects of cultural transmission and exchange; indeed, they enable individuals to save time and effort by exploiting the already existing knowledge and skills of others. The mechanisms in the cultural transmission of symbolic communication are situated importantly in cultural-historical environments that give rise to and place different emphases upon a wide range of social practices that accumulate over time. Each language community has its own inventory of symbols, coming from differences in the forms and functions of oral and written language tracing back to different cultural needs. Our broad interest is in identifying experiences that influence children's acquisition of various symbol systems like knowledge of print and drawing activities. The emergent knowledge of written notational systems is presumed to be a developmental precursor to conventional forms of symbolic communication.

From the "Day in the Life" dataset, we reviewed the corpus and identified all passages that revealed:

a) the attention of the child towards written symbolic systems,
b) their spontaneous engagement in literacy activities,
c) their request for assistance in joint involvement,
d) parents' facilitation of the development of awareness about notational systems, noting how they calling attention to print and other notation conventions, and

e) how often mention is made of written-form terms (such as “page”, “word”, “title” etc.) (Ravid and Tolchinsky, 2002); and how often they mention drawing terms (using “pen”, “colour”, “paper”, etc.).

We expected to identify, in the different settings observed, typical features that the literature distinguishes as important for the emergent development of symbol systems, such as the presence of written materials, shared child-adult attention, dyadic asymmetrical relationships, and reciprocal involvement (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002). But we expected at the same time to find important variability that characterizes the different contexts (for example different focuses of the activity on emergent literacy, different levels of material sharing, diverse degrees of joint interactional style, etc.).

We have found evidence of the different pathways through which knowledge of symbolic systems may be attained in different settings: adults exposing their child to opportunities for learning about symbolic systems by engaging with texts and images, developing an appreciation of print conventions, narrative forms, and metalinguistic awareness, and calling attention to the differences between picture and print and print and other notations. We confirmed the omnipresence of promising settings for shared literacy experiences. In all contexts, written materials (mostly books), shared child-adult attention, dyadic asymmetrical relationships, and reciprocal involvement are present.

So, for example, we studied graphic depiction (Pinto & Accorti Gamannossi, 2007). Video analyses and interviews showed that all family settings studied implicitly and to some degree explicitly considered graphic depiction a socially supported activity emerging and developing from scribbles to simple forms in children at least from 2 years of age. Our careful observations confirm that drawing is the product of culturally and socially transmitted conventions that children come to know by seeing and reproducing the graphic models available in their life contexts. The cultural transmission of symbolic systems is situated in an environment embedded in cultural features that deserve to be taken into account, as they give rise to and exploit different sociocultural practices.

In this paper however we offer a study of a literacy event around a joint book-reading engagement. The emergence of shared attention toward written language is with reason thought to be an experience that influences children’s acquisition of literacy. A strong association between home literacy environment and preschool-age children’s emerging literacy is broadly supported in the research literature (Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2005). As Bus (2002) pointed out, joint caregiver-child book reading has a long history as a family routine. According to social-constructivist theories, book reading is a socially created, interactive activity in which the child’s interest is as much a prerequisite as a consequence of book reading. Book reading brings young children in touch with story structures and schemes and literacy conventions that are prerequisites for understanding texts; reading books to children also exposes them to modes of written language and multimodal textual conventions (Bus, van IJzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995, Whitehead, 2002, Barton 2007).

In her landmark study *Ways with Words*, Heath defines (1983: 386) a literacy event as “any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension

of print plays a role." Such a conception became necessary in the field of literacy studies when it was recognised, through observational studies of literacy practices, that the narrow conceptualization of 'reading' as 'decoding the text of a book' missed a very great proportion of authentic literacy learning engagements. We now present an instance of a literacy event from our data, in which we endeavour to be sensitive to the various modes of communication in ecocultural relation, instantiating too a sense of 'culture as evaluative conversation' (Hammel, 1990, 457; see discussion above).

Peru

Lina lives with members of her extended family in a small town in rural mountainous central Peru. Her parents own a shop. Lina spent the day moving quite freely between a number of locations within the compound that was her extended family home and place of economic activity: including small livestock as well as the shop.

At about 4pm Lina's grandmother is sitting in a chair in the compound while one of her daughters (Lina's aunt, who spends a great deal of time looking after her) is sitting alongside, knitting. On the floor of the compound are some cut down branches that will be made into brushes. Lina, who often keeps at least half an eye on the doings of her six year old cousin who she calls 'Tintin' (a nickname) notices her standing at the side of grandmother's chair. Tintin is looking at the large illustrated book that grandmother has on her knee. It is a book about making clothes. Lina comes up to the two of them and begins touching the page herself, pointing out one of the pictures while grandmother continues her reading turning the pages. Aunt pauses in her knitting for a while to watch the girls interacting with the book before returning to the knitting. Cousin and grandmother respond when Lina points out something and names it, but also, especially perhaps grandmother, continue following their own interests. For a while aunt and grandmother quietly discuss something in the book and grandmother moves Lina's fingers away in order to focus on an item more successfully. Then grandmother turns to another page (she is not moving through the book in order, but appears to know fairly exactly how to find what she wants) and points some items out to Tintin, including trousers and a sweater. Lina occasionally taps the book and listens to what the others are saying. Very probably deliberately, (we surmise) grandmother turns to a page with a picture of a cat.
'Yato!' exclaims Lina excitedly.

Earlier that afternoon she had been looking at a picture book of animals with her aunt, who had been trying to teach her what word corresponded to each animal. Learning the names of animals appears to be a theme for Lina, she has been responding enthusiastically both to illustrations of animals she has presumably never seen, such as giraffes and elephants, and also said, in an animated fashion 'dog' when a dog barked, and repeated 'sheep' after someone has mentioned that the sheep have been let out of their stockade.

After quietly discussing another image on the page with Tintin, grandmother points to the picture of the cat and says 'gatto' (cat) to Lina. Lina points herself and pronounces the word herself. The aunt then intervenes in the interaction to correct the girl's pronunciation:

Lina: "Meow... Meow…. Yato ! [incorrect pronunciation for cat]"

Aunt: “No! Gatto!” [cat]
Lina: “Gatto!”.
Aunt: “Gatto!”.
Lina: “Meow… Yato!”.
Aunt: “Gat-to!”.
Lina: “Yato!”.
Aunt: “No, Yato. Gat-to!”.
Cousin: “Gatto”.

On the page, it might read as if this exchange is fiercely pedagogic and even misguidedly so (in that overt correction of young children’s mispronunciations is an ineffective pedagogic strategy [Braine, 1971]). But the affectionate tones and the distribution of the word among all four participants serve as it were to distribute the cognitive task of recognizing this image, identifying the correct term and pronouncing that term correctly (Hutchins, 1996). Lina keeps repeating the word until eventually tiring of it as she brings her toy rabbit from the basket of possessions she had earlier put on the ground before her. She flings the rabbit onto the book as if introducing a new topic. Cousin quickly removes the toy while grandmother pursues her interest in the text, encircling with her finger a point of interest while talking quietly. At these points where she talks quietly it seems as if her language or topic are too specialized to involve Lina directly, but aunt pays attention as she indicates by looking over from her knitting. The six year old cousin is pivotal throughout, maintaining evident interest in the book, her grandmother’s mediation of it, the aunt and her inputs, and yet also Lina and her actions, which she is almost always highly responsive to. The removal of the toy rabbit is one such moment; she has realized that the introduction of the toy is inappropriate to her grandmother’s pursuit of the text, and yet the action of removing it is not ungentle. The next time however Lina places an object onto the large book she takes it off while telling Lina she should not do that, and the third time she both rebukes Lina and takes hold of Lina’s finger to move it and the third object from the book. Cousin then spots a picture of a baby in the book and points it out while looking at Lina and saying ‘Baby!’ This labeling act is a familiar one in many communities as a literacy practice with young children; it is usefully pedagogic as combining a routinised pragmatic act with a potentially rich selection of slots, whereby a new lexical item might be easily understood in its ‘slot’ as combined with the image. It may therefore, while taking place across semiotic modes (the image and its referent) be functionally identical to the ‘slot and fill’ technique which may be an important element of language learning (Peters and Boggs, 1986; Gillen, 1997).

Figure 1 A literacy event in Peru

Then, in a somewhat similarly way to the interchange around 'cat', Lina, cousin and grandmother all point and say 'cushion'. Many literacy events are regular, repetitive and routinised (Barton and Hamilton, 2000). Following this however, Lina goes to turn the page somewhat roughly and is gently restrained by her grandmother who tries to stop her through playful anthropomorphic fantasy:

"No, don't bend it, little one, don't bend it! The book cries, boo boo… it will cry!" Smiling, Lina trots away to her aunt while the grandmother and cousin return with intense interest to the book. If bounded at this point as a literacy event from Lina's perspective, it has lasted four minutes.

The interaction has clearly had pedagogic elements and yet it is very firmly situated as an authentic engagement with a text. The original and persistent stimulus for use of the text has been the grandmother's genuine interest in it; she has kept the book oriented to her viewpoint at all times and has maintained overall control of its navigation. Yet the participants have used the text to involve Lina, her own interests as conveyed spontaneously by her and what they see as potential bridges to further knowledge and competencies for her. Very relevant here for us in considering Lina's participation is Katherine Nelson's concept of 'making sense':

> "My research has long been concerned, sometimes implicitly but usually explicitly, with the question of how children encounter the social world, and in particular how children integrate messages from social partners with their own understandings about the world, how they use

> both their own observations and the structure and substance of others' knowledge representations to "make sense" and thus to perform competently in their world. Making sense is to my mind an important watchword for understanding many aspects of cognitive development. It focuses attention on the child's efforts to achieve coherent understanding of the dynamic reality that surrounds her. Making sense means being able to predict the actions of other people and the routines and locations of daily life, its objects and activities." (Nelson, 1997, p. 99).

Emergent literacy in this context is thus built through the ready transition from the implicit, tacit knowledge to an explicit intra-mental one (Mercer, 2000). Adults structure the context of shared reading providing the children a bedrock on which the comprehension and mastery of essential properties of literacy are facilitated (Bruner, 1983). The adults we observed appeared sensitive to the apparent effectiveness of such communication.

The child appears to be learning in a very social context for conventional written-language use, by being encouraged by the adult partners to understand the intentional use of the symbolic practices of book users. The partners are acting within a special mode of interpretation of the written text, calling the child's attention not only to the meaning, the message, but also to the specific lexicon in which the meaning is embedded. This introduces the child not only to reading but also to thinking about language in a new, more abstract way (Pelletier, 2002).

This data supports the conclusion reached in other analyses of literacy events within this project (see Pinto, Accorti Gamannossi & Cameron, 2006) that considerable literacy and language-related activities occurs before children receive formal reading instruction, and they happen in a variety of informal settings. The nature of our data does not allow hypotheses of the recurrence of different patterns nor about their exclusiveness in each context and any conclusion drawn from these data must be provisional. However we can suggest that the construction of competences in notational systems is a commitment within the settings examined.

Before turning to another domain of activity, we would like briefly to allude to the collaborative nature of the 'making sense' of this event that has underpinned the analysis that might perhaps be overlooked owing to the crafted narrative style in which it is presented. But these ways of seeing and interpreting the data were actually not at all transparent. To construct our account we have made use of firstly and most obviously, the data presented by the video which was recorded when none of we authors were present (since the project methodology makes use of locally situated investigators at this stage) and their notes. So, for example, the hastily noted description of the book as a 'sewing book' was, much later, of considerable benefit. We watched the video many times before accessing the translation, but even after having the services of a South American Spanish translator, she explained to us that at times her skills were insufficient to cope well with the local dialect. In addition, of course, she sometimes could not pick up the language as, for example, with some of the quickly murmured turns by the grandmother to the aunt contained within the interaction as referred to above. We have a number of resources then in accessing this interaction, but need, we think, constantly to remind ourselves and our readers of the necessarily always subjective and incomplete nature of our interpretations.

Eating events

Given the salience of practices around eating in the socialisation of young children it is quite astonishing that this topic has been largely neglected in childhood studies. In an ecocultural approach to studying childhood it makes sense to consider the lived realities of daily life in their complexity and diversity. Eating practices frequently appeared in our data. Interactions around them were complex; this is an aspect of life of considerable emotional significance to caregivers and their children, an arena where dramas may be played out daily.

As might well be expected given the international scope of our study, there were differences in the foodstuffs that were consumed and some aspects of the interactions around them. In organising our data we developed the concept of eating event by analogy with the concept of literacy event as explored above. The definition of eating event then was proposed as 'any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the offering and/or consumption of food plays a role' (Gillen & Hancock, 2006; Hancock & Gillen, 2007). We have found this useful firstly in making a move towards detaching ourselves from preconceptions around the consumption of food firmly anchored in our own community/communities. For example, one might, as Newson & Newson (1968) did forty years ago in their longitudinal study of children in an urban English community, equate 'eating' precisely with mealtimes in line with community values found then. Secondly it assists us, just as when considering literacy practices to pay attention to the extent to which eating in families is immersed in a deeper context of cultural practices that impart meaning. (Briggs, 1998). In adopting the notion of an 'event' involving food, it is important, as with literacy, (Barton, 2007) not to forget the extent to which eating in families is immersed in social contexts that provide meaning.

The selection of the extract concerned is not motivated as being either highly exceptional or 'typical' of the eating events available, partly because in practice neither of these aspects have emerged as potential characterisations.

Italy

Beatrice and her mother and father live in a city in Italy, in a small apartment with a balcony. The eating event studied here is 13 minutes long, during the provision of Beatrice's midday meal. Her mother has already cooked pasta for her, but it was 'too hot' so she didn't eat very much. The event begins with Beatrice returning to the kitchen, having put her doll 'to bed' as requested by her mother. She moves towards the kitchen table which is high, roughly at chin height and reaches for a spoon. Her father is clearing the space in front of the child's seat which is attached to the end of the table. He doesn't stop her from taking the spoon and putting it into her mouth, although she is doing this as he prepares to lift her into her seat. Indeed the mother says, approvingly:

Mother: "Ah, you clever girl. You ate ricotta, sheep ricotta."

This initial utterance during the eating event by the mother is worth commenting on immediately as this moment encapsulates some key features of the event. Both parents are involved in her feeding and focus with interest on supporting her engagements with food. In this turn, the mother communicates her approval of the action of tasting some of the food that is available on

the table, albeit not a constituent of the 'meal'. She takes the opportunity also to teach Beatrice about food, in this case the precise name of the foodstuff (not merely the more generic 'cheese' label available) and tells her about the origin of this specific cheese. Father has waited until the fork is safely out of her mouth and Beatrice indicates through gesture that she has finished this tasting. He lifts her into the seat and puts a cloth bib around her neck. Beatrice takes an interest in her mother's informative utterance.

Beatrice: "Sheep?"

Mother: "Yes, how does the sheep go?"

Beatrice: "Baa!"

Mother: "Good girl!"

Beatrice then pulls her drinking cup to her and has a short drink, playing a little with the drink in her throat and then singing quietly, neither of which actions are remarked on by the parents in any way. Father approaches with the bowl of hot food. He stirs it around carefully with a fork, an operation that takes some attention as the bowl is very full. He then loads a spoon and blows it very carefully; at this moment Beatrice's visual gaze switches from watching her mother's culinary activities to the father. Satisfied, he pushes the bowl closer the Beatrice, instructing her, "Feel if it's hot" and hands over the spoon so that she can try it for herself. She puts it into her mouth but rather than eat, appears to feel heat emanating and therefore pulls the spoon back out of her mouth, nodding back towards her father and passing him the spoon which he takes and again blows on it carefully.

This exchange concerned with whether the food is too hot to eat continues for a number of turns. When mother asks, "How is pasta? Is it good?" she answers, "It burns!" It becomes apparent that the food cannot really at this point be too hot, but Beatrice is still resisting eating it for a while. (Mother declares that she likes saying it is too hot as an attention-seeking strategy). Then Father succeeds in feeding her a large spoonful, which she appears to take happily and then accepts the spoon back into her own control. He looks approvingly at her when she feeds herself with a mouthful and moves away. Beatrice feeds herself a few more mouthfuls, Father sits down next to her, and, while not neglecting to converse with his wife, shows himself very attentive to every detail of Beatrice's manipulations with the spoon, for example taking her hand gently when she begins to tap the food in a way that does not seem directly oriented to feeding herself. He models precisely how to stir the food and load the spoon, encouraging her own feeding of herself. After a time she moans a little in apparent frustration, immediately eliciting more assistance and after this a considerable number of mouthfuls are taken successfully, some by Beatrice, some with Father's help with the spoon. After a while he can leave her as she is feeding herself successfully and substantially. Eventually she gets to a point where she expresses some reluctance to continue, but Father's renewed attention results in one more mouthful being taken.

Mother approaches and asks her for a taste; Beatrice feeds her a mouthful with evident enjoyment then takes a drink herself. She shows reluctance to eat much more but accedes with delight to Mother's suggestion to feed father a taste. They handle the spoon together with considerable delicacy of touch, he tastes the food and then twirls his cheek gently with his finger, a local gesture indicating gastronomic pleasure. She offers him a drink (with her babycup) he

says no, with that European gesture of putting his hand up in the direction of the offerer, as if conveying at the same time a sense of gratitude for the offer and reluctance at being unable to accede to the generous gesture. As he offers her more food, she begins to wipe her mouth, shake her head and say no, yet does none of these with any vehemence, as if also learning polite ways of rejecting food, appropriate to her child persona. As he persists however, she begins to cry a little more and Father finally leave her to it.

It is as debatable as in a literacy event whether to draw the boundary of the event here or elsewhere, since food does not totally disappear from the family's activities at this point. However attention shifts to a very different food related activity and so we will draw a line here, as that particular dish has been finished with by Beatrice.

Figure 2 An eating event in Italy

Both mother and father have been closely involved in Beatrice's meal. They provide food for Beatrice and sometimes feed her, although often she feeds herself. She also chooses to give them tastes. There is much conversation about food, as there is indeed at other times in the kitchen. The qualities and origins of food are a point of discussion; the parents reveal great concern over Beatrice's likes and dislikes. Such encouragement for articulation of values has been noticed in a large-scale study of families in urban Italy, where the researchers also noted the active role the children played in their own socialisation (Pontecorvo, Fasulo & Sterponi, 2001).

To some extent this mealtime eating event has some qualities that make it almost formal—with a beginning and end and two people in careful attendance around the eater—something like exceptionally warm and friendly waiters. In essence, Beatrice is eating alone, although she does actively draw her parents into the event through feeding them. They are available to be drawn in despite not actually sitting around the table for the meal. Beatrice's engagement with the food is maintained by the surrounding life supporting her eating.

Caregivers are capable of taking a 'long view' of the importance of nutrition. Adults often develop tacit understandings and are willing to enter into subtle bargainings and trading with their children in order to maintain the flow of eating. Our video analyses such as this one ,

reveal interplay of adult-child participation, desires and interests. Beatrice's parents as other caregivers in our data, approach eating events with a high degree of understanding and creativity even as their precise strategies differ. They offer considerable support to the children's own wishes and preferences regarding how they want to engage with the process of eating, and their interactions with a range of artefacts. Meanwhile, Nelson's concept of 'making sense' is surely just as relevant here as it was of literacy events. Beatrice has been learning a great deal about authentic eating practices within the context of the constantly evaluative conversation that is culture, just as Lina did about literacy. Both 'eating' and 'literacy' were themes we have selected to consider, but for the children both occur 'naturally' as it were embedded in the flow of family life. The children are learning, indeed, but so are the adults as they acquire ways to make meaningful their own cultural knowledge to their children. In the context of studying family mealtimes, Pontecorvo, Fasulo and Sterponi (2001) usefully proposed a concept of 'mutual apprentices': as the child is being socialised into the ways of the family, so the family is socialised into the ways of children.

Conclusions

In terms of the way in which eating and literacy happens and is 'managed' by the studied families, it seems that our children (because of their intense wish to be ever playing) often impact upon both as focused or formal family events organized and planned by adults. In her study of the way in families enable the literacy learning of their children, Taylor (1983) found that this learning tended to be informal and subtly embedded in the stream of family life. Our study echoes her finding for children's literacy learning but also suggests that this is very much the case for eating too.

An ecocultural lens on the development of young children entails the theoretical abandonment of the possibility of studying an aspect of cultural development as belonging solely to an individual, in a process of 'acquiring' discrete items of knowledge or decontextualised skills.

As Nelson (1997, p. 101) wrote
:

> …we must abandon the ideal of the autonomous child as a system in and of itself, and instead recognize that the child's mind is embodied within a system of social interactions in a culturally designed world where the actions and interactions of other people pose problems and solutions for the child's contemplation. This is a world in which knowledge is not just acquired but is also displayed interpersonally.

Literacy understood as a social practice is most fruitfully looked for and richly visible where it is embedded in social interactions of everyday life (Barton, 2007). Our glimpses into thefamilies' worlds do seem to support a generally bidirectional view of socialisation (Hérot, 2002) as children and adults learn to co-construct their worlds. Close examination of (relatively) naturalistic data has assisted the analysis of this element of the ecocultural framework within which these children and adults are learning how to develop their diverse needs and intentions in cooperation. Children as 'strategic actors' (James and Prout, 1996: 47) are seen to be successfully intermingling their personal interests and, at the same time, meet the expectations of their carers in engaging with books and eating food. The carers in our study, for their part, also

appear adept at maintaining this harmony of interests, sometimes by adopting a playful persona themselves.

We have referred to Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus' – the socially acquired, embodied predispositions in relation to the family. Bourdieu emphasised agency in his conceptualization of practices. The family habitus provides many opportunities for a set of potentialities of ways of acting, but it is for the child and family to take these up, to improvise anew (Tomanovic, 2004). As we have described, we found much fascinating complexity in the subtle interactions and negotiations around literacy and eating practices. Our methodology has enabled us to pay attention to the multiple semiotic modes in which cultural understandings are developed, in interactions. It seems to us that applying an approach to literacy as social practice may be useful in studying other cultural domains.

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Contact: j.gillen@lancaster.ac.uk