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Literacy mediation as a form of powerful literacies in community-based organisations working with young people in a situation of precarity

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This paper aims at understanding the complex relations between bureaucratic literacies, the lives of young people in a situation of precarity, and the work of employees of two community-based organisations in Québec (Canada). Drawing on the perspective of the New Literacy Studies, the focus of this article is around the role of literacy mediators that can play youth workers. It also endeavours to clarify the meaning of the term precarity (*précarité*) by suggesting a multidimensional perspective on it. This paper reveals that literacy mediation can be a form of powerful literacies that offer opportunities to counteract dominant literacies and support new ways of learning. Finally, it suggests a reflection on the importance of the work of community-based organisations in countering the situation of precarity experienced by some young people. It underlines the fact that these organisations are also experiencing financial uncertainty and insecurity that affect their services.

Keywords: precarity; young people; community-based organisations; ethnographic approach; bureaucratic literacies

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to understand the role of literacies in the complex relations between institutions, young people in a situation of precarity, and the community-based organisations working with them. More specifically, it looks at how employees of two community-based organisations in Québec (Canada) act as literacy mediators; helping young people to understand bureaucratic literacies and take action with regard to them. Since the 1990s community-based organisations in Québec have adopted a paradoxical position of 'conflictual cooperation' (Duval et al. 2004) that implies that they receive funding from the state (governments of Québec and Canada) to offer services, but still maintain a critical stance towards it. This kind of alliance between community-based organisations and the state means that advocacy and mobilisation have remained central to their work even though they depend on public funding.

Many social actors share a common concern, namely that young people whose education has been interrupted, should keep learning (Thériault and Bélisle, 2012); hence, the large number of social programmes aimed at this group of people. Bélisle's study (2004) on the use of literacy in community-based organisations in Québec has shown that it is central to social and professional insertion programmes. The young people attending these programmes are often referred to as being 'at risk' of experiencing various difficulties (addiction, criminality, health problems, etc.). Discourses about 'drop-outs' and young people in a situation of precarity frequently make assumptions about these young people's lives and problems.

The term precarity is central to this article. According to Barbier (2005), the use of this term rather than precariousness, in English academic literature, is relatively novel and seems to refer to the way the term *précarité* has been used in France. But what does precarity (*précarité*) actually means in Francophone countries, and more specifically in France and in Québec? A

considerable amount of literature has endeavoured to define, understand the complexity, and explain the origins of the term (see amongst others, Barbier 2002, 2005; Bresson [2010] 2013; Cingolani [2006] 2011; Eckert 2010; Nicole-Dracourt 1992). Precarity has a plurality of meanings and a broad scope of usage. It is impossible to find one unequivocal definition of the term. In this article, I will endeavour to clarify its meaning and suggest understanding it through a multidimensional perspective. Also, I will use the lens of literacy studies to explore some processes that can contribute to create precarity in the lives of young people, such as the bureaucratic literacies used by some institutions. This article also focuses on the work of employees of community-based organisations, which support young people vis-à-vis these institutions. I will give examples of the kind of support offered by youth workers, which can be described as literacy mediation.

Precarity: plurality of meanings

Precarity can be associated with vulnerability, fragility, poverty, exclusion, marginality, persistent poverty and unemployment (Barbier 2002). Yet, two terms – uncertainty and insecurity – seem to describe the essence of what precarity means. It is generally seen as something negative and is used to denounce the effects of neoliberal economies at various levels of society and people's lives (Bresson 2011). The term neoliberal refers here to economies that put emphasis on competition, individual responsibility, self-improvement, free market and a general disengagement of the state with regard to social structures (Apple, 2004; Kipnis, 2009). The term precarity is generally used to describe new forms of employment originating from flexibility and managerial strategies associated with neoliberalism (Barbier 2002). The notion of precarious employment (*emploi précaire*) started being used to refer to part-time jobs, temporary jobs and

other 'atypical' types of jobs (Barbier 2002, 7). Precarity is also used to characterise society in general. Neoliberalism affects the whole society and, therefore, a general process of precarisation (*précarisation*), affecting everybody seems to be going on (Barbier 2002; Waite 2009). Waite (2009, 426) explains this as 'generalised societal malaise'. According to Bourdieu (1998, 96), even though not everybody is directly affected by precarity, everybody's 'consciousness is haunted' by its possibility and, as a consequence, this makes people feel that having a job is a privilege even if the working conditions are poor and deplorable.

Precarity and insertion

Barbier (2002) indicates that the term precarity, in France, has often been associated with 'insertion'. I would suggest that it is also the case in Québec. Three usages of the term have been identified by Barbier and Théret (2001). The first one relates to the social services offered to specific groups identified as socially excluded, to help 'them to use their social rights, socialising them through health and housing counselling, access to benefits and so on, but also counselling, training and employment schemes explicitly linked to the labour market' (2001, 158). The second use directly concerns employment and is generally understood as the transition from school to work. The third use is specifically related to public policies, '"insertion" is a complex social process eventually leading to social integration', and drawing on Castel (1995) they claim that the state has a role to play in assuring a smooth transition between different periods of life (Barbier and Théret 2001, 158). In Québec, the expression 'social and professional insertion' (*insertion sociale et professionelle*) is used to describe the work of community-based organisations and programmes attended by young people whose education has been interrupted, and are beneficiaries of financial support from the government (see Yergeau et al. 2009). The term

insertion covers a different network of phenomena than other words used in English such as inclusion, and integration. Insertion is not only concerned with economic aspects of people's lives (work), but also includes supporting them to find housing, go back to school, improve their social relationships, reduce their alcohol and drugs consumption, access health services, and so on.

Precarity and young people in Québec

In Québec, the term precarity has been generally associated with young people and their professional insertion. It was widely used during the employment crisis of the 1970s and 1980s to talk about the difficulties young people were encountering in finding their first employment (Gauthier 2011). It has been later used in relation to the changing nature of the job market, which led to young people being more likely to have part-time jobs or short-term contracts (Gauthier 2011). Youth are seen here as a homogenous group, and the difficulties they experience are lumped together without distinction (ibid.). Precarity seems to be something uniquely concerned with the economy and employment. As Gauthier (2011, 4) puts it, this focus on economy and employment:

> in wanting to encompass everything, it can distract from the "real" precarity, it has certainly something to do with employment, especially with regard to employability, but also calls for other support measures which are not always directly related to the job market. (Original in French, my translation)

I agree with Gauthier and in this paper, I understand precarity as something that also affects other aspects of life and not only employment. The other aspects that can potentially be affected by precarity include: accommodation; family relationships; social relationships; mental

health and physical wellbeing; experience at school; drug and alcohol consumption; legal and criminal issues and so on. The participants in my study were taking part in social and professional insertion workshops in community-based organisations, working with youth workers to improve their life situations. They had various goals such as going back to school, improving their physical and mental health, finding a job and traveling in different countries.

Towards a comprehensive approach to precarity

I agree with Waite (2009) that the term precarity is more useful when applied to a specific group of people than to the society in general. This implies that precarity cannot be experienced similarly by all the members of a society, but that it is rather experienced by individuals and groups of people in various ways. This observation relates to what other authors have claimed (Barbier 2005; Gauthier 2011) about the effects that neoliberalism has on specific groups of people more than others. According to some authors (Barbier 2002, 2005; Eckert 2010) the groups, which are generally more affected are women, immigrants, young people, older workers and people with disabilities. This implies that particular individuals with such characteristics (gender, age, race, etc.) may experience precarity. It is also the case of people living in specific neighbourhoods described as 'dangerous' and 'poor'. This geographical characteristic might also play a role in the way some individuals experience precarity, and particularly employment difficulties (see, e.g., Bresson [2010] 2013 for an overview of the question). It would be easy to continue on a narrative of victimisation and blame (Smyth and Wrigley 2013) about people experiencing precarity. Labelling these groups of people is not useful (Bresson [2010] 2013; Waite 2009). This is why I would like to suggest another perspective on precarity, which not only takes into consideration the individual characteristics of people but also the 'external forces'

(Smyth and Wringley 2013) over which they have limited power.

In Québec, the term 'situation of precarity' (*situation de précarité*) is also used especially to refer to young people's lives (see Bourdon and Bélisle 2008, 2015). The term 'situation of precarity' (*situation de précarité*) is used in Québec to refer to the lives of people who are generally referred as marginal, vulnerable, at risk, disadvantaged, and so on. 'Situation of precarity' is preferred in my study to refer to young people attending activities in community-based organisations aiming at their social and professional insertion (see Bourdon and Bélisle 2008). I use the term 'a situation of precarity' in its singular form since it is the closer translation to '*en situation de précarité*' that signifies any or all the multiple situations of precarity that can be experienced by people.

In order to explain the meaning of this term, I found inspiration in Bonvin's article (2011) in which he suggests using Amartya Sen's capability approach to address employment precarity. Bonvin explains that precarity has to be considered as a multidimensional phenomenon in order to understand the actual liberties of people with regard to employment. I would like to apply this idea of a multidimensional perspective on precarity to the social conditions of people, not solely to employment precarity. In this perspective, the focus is not only on the employment aspect but looks at (1) the interactions between 'opportunity structures' (McInerney and Smyth 2014) and public policies, (2) the individual characteristics and particular events in the lives of people, and (3) the political, economic and historical context. The amalgam of these three dimensions allows a better understanding of precarity. With this perspective, it is possible to explain how people with individual characteristics, from certain neighbourhoods, which put them 'at risk' of precarity, manage to avoid it. I would like to emphasise the idea of 'situation of precarity' to highlight the fact that precarity is situational, is experienced in different ways by different

individuals and groups of people, and can change over time and in relation to the evolution of the three dimensions mentioned before.

Waite (2009) notes the political potential that is implied by the term precarity. She gives examples of the large social movements which arose in Western Europe in the 2000s in opposition to neoliberalism. Yet, I argue that this resistance and its political aspects can also be observed at a much smaller scale; in the services of community-based organisations which specifically work at improving the everyday lives of people in a situation of precarity. In this paper, I will explore the place of literacies (written text, reading and writing) in two community-based organisations. More specifically, I will look at the role of literacy mediators – the employees of these organisations, the youth workers – play in the lives of young people. They often mediate between the difficult living conditions of the young people and the bureaucratic literacies of the institutions, which directly contribute to create the situation of precarity. According to Waite (2009), there is a need to understand who the people in a situation of precarity are, and how the processes creating precarity work.

Theoretical framework

I adopt the lens of literacy studies in order to study some processes (bureaucracy) that create precarity, and some others (literacy mediation) that might help counter it. Drawing on the work of Smith (1999), this paper highlights the importance of literacy in large-scale organisations and, more specifically, bureaucracies. In order to understand the role of text in ruling relations—between individuals and bureaucracies – I draw on the perspective of the New Literacy Studies (NLS). In the following sections, I will introduce this perspective and also define two key concepts associated with it – powerful literacies and literacy mediation.

The New Literacy Studies

The NLS is a research perspective developed in the 1970s and 1980s by researchers from various disciplines – notably empirical psychology (Scribner and Cole 1981), anthropology (Street 1984), sociolinguistics and education (Heath 1983). According to Barton (2001), the NLS originated from dissatisfaction with purely cognitive conceptions of reading and writing. These 'over-simplistic psychological models' were particularly influential in schools (93). In the NLS perspective, literacy is seen as more than just reading and writing. It considers literacy as social practice. People use an amalgam of modes (incorporating artefacts, gestures, visual, written and spoken language) while accomplishing tasks and making sense of their everyday lives. Literacy should, therefore, be understood from people's perspectives and seen as situated in context. The concept of literacies (plural form) is then more comprehensive and representative of the uses of literacy in everyday life and in different cultures and sub-cultures (Street 1984).

Powerful literacies

In their books Powerful Literacies (see also More Powerful Literacies, Tett, Hamilton, and Crowther 2012), Crowther, Hamilton, and Tett (2001, 1) argue that 'literacy is deeply and inescapably bound up with producing, reproducing and maintaining unequal arrangements of power.' These edited books include different empirical studies which present forms of literacies that could give back power to groups of people whose literacy practices are not valued in society. The authors coined the term 'powerful literacies' to describe these kinds of literacies, which 'have to open up, expose and counteract the institutional processes and professional mystique whereby dominant forms of literacy are placed beyond question' (3). They also argue that

powerful literacies should create new alternatives to traditional ways of teaching and learning. For them, instead of literacy addressing economic needs, powerful literacies should be grounded in everyday life and be animated by issues of social justice. For these authors, it is necessary to understand what kinds of literacies are useful and important in people's lives. It is clear that these are also situated in social contexts and cannot be understood solely in terms of economic benefits and skills. In this paper, I will argue that literacy mediation can be placed within this category of powerful literacies.

Literacy mediation

According to Papen (2012, 74), the concept of literacy mediation 'allows researchers to capture the jointly accomplished nature of much reading and writing in everyday life'. Literacy mediators 'can be faithful transcribers, editors or composers of texts. They may read word by word, paraphrase, translate or summarise a text they [are] given' (74). According to Papen (2010), literacy mediators often assist others with texts of genres and registers that they are not familiar with. She also explains that a person will often need the support of a literacy mediator while 'enter[ing] new spheres of social and/or economic activity, which demand of them new roles, understanding of new practices and familiarity with new discourses.' (79) These new 'spheres of social and/or economic activity' (79) potentially use different genres and registers. For instance, in Kalman's study (1999), public scribes in Mexico were navigating between different genres: love letters, governmental forms, academic essays, etc., and Baynham (1993, 309) explains how he paraphrased the content of an official letter to a Moroccan immigrant using both technical and non-technical registers. Thus, register refers to the level of language, the type of vocabulary or kind of words used within a particular social context.

Another important aspect of literacy mediation is its close relation to power distribution. Papen (2010) claims that literacy mediation 'is a process that can challenge the power of dominant literacies and discourses by allowing those not commonly familiar with these practices – via a mediator – to access and deploy them for their own needs' (79). This idea of power relationships within literacy mediation is also reflected in Jones' study (2000a, 2000b) on Welsh farmers. She illustrates how economic globalisation affected local literacy practices of farmers and the amount of bureaucratic literacies they have to deal with. Drawing on Giddens's work on the consequences of modernity (1990), Jones (2000a, 2000b) claims that institutions are nowadays 'disembedded' of local contexts, and formal literacy is at the core of this process. Jones (2000b) points out that '[i]n face-to-face bureaucratic encounters, professional mediators symbolically take on the position of the "delegates" of an institution and accomplish what Giddens (1990) refers to as the "facework commitment" on behalf of the faceless institution which employs them' (215). Jones' work illustrates how the concept of literacy mediation allows researchers to look at the effect of wider social structures on local practices and relationships (Barton 2009).

In sum, I would describe literacy mediation as interactional, and as something that can occur in both informal and formal contexts. It can also involve professionals or members of the social network (e.g. friends and family), is often multimodal and multilingual, bridges different genres and registers, and always involves issues of power distribution.

Methodology

Because of the difficulties of measuring insecurity and uncertainty, and also due to its complexity, precarity is not considered as a fruitful variable for quantitative comparison between

countries (Barbier 2005, Bresson [2010] 2013). Also, a quantitative approach to precarity might not address people's subjective perception (Paugan 2000) of precarity; focusing instead on an objective perspective such as part-time employment rates and other economic variables. Without rejecting the relevance of this quantitative information, an ethnographic approach can provide valuable inputs about the situation of precarity experienced by people. Indeed, there is a long tradition of qualitative research in the study of precarity, and especially with groups who might be 'at risk' of experiencing it (Bresson [2010] 2013).

My study endeavours to understand the relations between the literacy practices used in two community-based organisations and those of the young people attending their activities. It adopts a critical ethnographic approach (Madison 2005). This means that it endeavours to challenge preconceived ideas about literacies and young people in a situation of precarity (e.g. that they do not like to read and write [Bélisle 2003]). It also aims to question the idea that literacy and learning are confined to formal forms of schooling. In order to do so, my study gives voice to the people directly concerned – young people themselves and the employees of community-based organisations who are working with them.

Both organisations – *Le Bercail* and *L'Envol* – offer services to young people aged between 16 and 30 years old, living in a precarious situation. Pseudonyms are used for the research participants and the two community-based organisations. My study was reviewed and accepted by the University Research Ethics Committee. The services offered at one or both organisations include a youth shelter for runaways, supervised apartments, a gathering place, structured workshops, artistic programmes (e.g., art gallery and theatre), and career advising and counselling services. The study involved two main phases of data collection. In May 2012, I conducted about 122 hours of participant observation in the two field sites over a period of 2 months. In total, 27 people took part in these sessions. In addition, I interviewed 21 participants;

14 young people (5 women and 9 men) and 7 youth workers (4 women and 3 men). In April

2013, I conducted five participatory workshops in the same two organisations. I wanted to offer

participants an opportunity to be involved in the data analysis, but I could not ask them to analyse

the interview transcripts for ethical reasons (similar to Finlay [2013]). Also, this would probably

not have been an interesting task for them. In these workshops, I invited the participants to use

visual material in order to reflect and generate ideas about important concepts identified in the

first phase of data collection. We did activities such as mind mapping, card sorting and

storyboard writing. One of the activities was specifically focusing on questions of literacy

mediation. I asked the young people to think about a letter they had received recently and that

had had an important effect on their lives. I provided them with a sheet of paper as a blank

storyboard. They were asked to indicate who sent the letter, what it was about and what they did

afterwards in relation to it.

On the first day of fieldwork in each organisation, I explained what my role as researcher

was and clarified the fact that I was not a youth worker. As Riemer (2011, 166) claims,

participants are 'expert about their lives and their practices' and I always emphasised this with

the young people and the youth workers participating in my study. I explained to them that it was

important for me to spend time with them and to get their points of view.

For this paper, I have selected data from the two phases of data collection. The interviews

conducted with the youth workers during the first phase were included. I also used the activity on

literacy mediation organised with young people during the second phase of data collection. I am

also drawing on my observation notes to present an example of literacy mediation observed in

one of the organisations. A content analysis (Gibbs 2007) was performed on the selected data.

Discussion of data

In this section, I first present a general overview of literacy mediation at *Le Bercail* and *L'Envol*, noting that the youth workers acted as literacy mediators with/for the young people in relation to various forms of literacy. In this article, however, I only focus on bureaucratic literacies (e.g. contracts, forms and letters from institutions). Then, I offer an overview of the participants' perspectives on bureaucratic literacies. The comments made by the young people and the youth workers are presented and analysed. In the last two sections, I provide concrete examples of literacy mediation as described by the youth workers and also in my observation notes.

Literacy mediation and bureaucratic literacies

During the first phase of my study, the youth workers mentioned provided literacy mediation relating to various genres of bureaucratic literacy: registration forms (especially for adult education centres), governmental forms (welfare, unemployment benefit, immigration, public health services, etc.), rental leases, and institutional and bureaucratic letters (schools, governments of Québec and Canada, banks, telecommunications companies, etc.). According to them, literacy mediation occurred in their everyday job, from at least once a month (n=2), twice a month (n=2) and once a week (n=2) to many times a week (n=1). It is important to note that because of their different roles, some youth workers were acting as literacy mediators more regularly than others. For instance, one was acting as a careers counsellor and the services he provided were addressing a large group of young people.

Participants' views on bureaucratic literacies

During the second phase of my study, I organised an activity with the young people around

questions of literacy mediation. As a result of this, the majority of the young people shared

situations when they had had to deal with bureaucratic literacies. Richard, at *L'Envol*, said,

'When I receive letters from my lawyer, I really don't like him, and I don't understand what he

wants to tell me.' On the sheet of paper provided during the workshop, Richard gave an example

of another type of letter that he had received recently (see Figure 1). This letter was sent to him

by an organisation in charge of the supervised apartment he was renting at that time. Richard

wrote down that the content of this letter was related to a debt (*dette*) he had accumulated with

this organisation. He indicated on the sheet of paper (see Figure 1) that after receiving this letter,

he simply threw it away.

Figure 1. Richard's notes about a letter sent by a housing organisation, *L'Envol*, 11 April 2013

Another participant at *L'Envol*, Cassandra, claimed, 'Before I didn't know anything about

income tax documents, I was asking my mother about it because I didn't understand. About all

the government documents as well.' She later mentioned that youth workers were also people she

would ask support from with bureaucratic literacies. Richard, Jacques and Pierre-Luc stated they

would often search online, on Google or Wikipedia, in order to understand bureaucratic

documents they receive by mail. They would search for the procedure to follow with specific

documents, or the meaning of some words and expressions used.

At *Le Bercail*, Laurence said bureaucratic literacies were different from other forms of

literacy since they are 'more official', and Darya added that they are also 'more stressful'. Julien

described them as 'more formal' especially when a letter starts this way: 'To the attention of Mr.
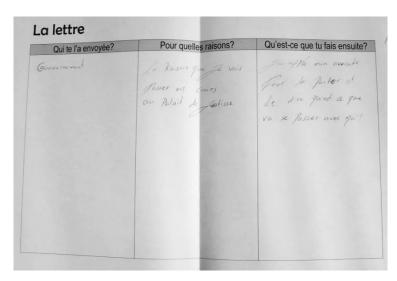
...'

Figure 2. Darya's notes about a letter sent by the Canadian Government, *Le Bercail*, 18 April
    2013

During the activity about an important letter received recently, Darya gave the example of

a letter sent by the Canadian Government in relation to her immigration status. She explained that

this letter informed her that she had to go to court. She then wrote (see Figure 2) that following

the reception of this letter she called her lawyer to ask what would happen to her.

Darya and Julien claimed that they never sought literacy mediation from the youth

workers. However, I have observed many events involving literacy mediation and these three

young people at *Le Bercail*. It is interesting to observe that some of them did not spontaneously

remember that the youth workers, or other people, had helped them with certain genres and registers. This echoes Mace's claim (2002) on literacy mediation being so common that people do not even notice it.

In the interviews conducted during the first phase of data collection, the majority of the youth workers at *Le Bercail* and *L'Envol* said that young people often panicked when they received government letters or letters related to financial matters (e.g. banks and telecommunications companies). According to Ève-Lyne, a youth worker at *Le Bercail*, 'They are so sure it would be difficult to understand that they don't look at it.' The youth workers claimed that young people would ask them questions such as: 'What should I do with this?', 'What is going on?', 'Did I understand it correctly?', 'Why are they sending this to me?' and 'What is it about?' They confirmed this feeling of disempowerment young people expressed.

Catherine, a youth worker at *L'Envol*, said that because of young people's anxiety problems and their difficult financial situation, bureaucratic documents generally had an emotional charge that was difficult to cope with. Another youth worker at *L'Envol*, Carl, also claimed that young people sometimes feel judged by some questions asked in official forms. This could also explain the feeling of disempowerment expressed by some of them. Carl argued that the young people he works with do not trust institutions, in general, and might ignore the information received or misunderstand it because of this.

This relates to Malan's study (1996); based on a rural town in South Africa, she (1996) describes how community members were ignoring written notices from the municipality office. Inspired by Bakhtin's work (1981), she claims that ignoring written documents is also a form of dialogue and 'a way of confronting the monologic voice of powerful institutions' (Malan 1996, 111). Young people in my study might also adopt this attitude for the same reason.

Based on my observations, literacy mediation seems to offer an alternative to ignoring the bureaucratic literacies. With the support of the youth workers, young people could, for instance, appeal against an unfair decision or contact the institutions to receive clarification. The process of literacy mediation will be further explored in the two following sections.

Literacy mediation in action

The youth workers at *Le Bercail* and *L'Envol* explained that the registers (level of language) used in some bureaucratic documents are often difficult to understand, even for them. The majority explained that they summarised the official documents using simple words. On this matter, Tommy, a youth worker at *Le Bercail*, said:

> We will read the outline of the document and then say: 'The aim is that you have to call this person and then, ask her these questions.' I'm just guiding him or her on two or three sentences to say, and then I'll be next to her most of the time listening, because she might need help while making the phone call. For instance, she might say: 'I don't understand the electronic menu!' It's all about supporting and presenting information in simple terms. (Interview with Tommy, *Le Bercail*, May , 2012).

This example of literacy mediation illustrates the 'cultural brokerage' (Baynham 1993) youth workers offer for the young people at *Le Bercail* and *L'Envol*. As in Baynham's study (1993) on Moroccan immigrants in London, Tommy paraphrased the content of an official letter, acting as a literacy mediator between two registers, bureaucratic and everyday language. Some young people mentioned, as stated before, that they did not know enough about certain genres and registers used by certain institutions (e.g. courts or Inland Revenue) to deal with them by themselves. Also, they would probably not know the practices of these institutions and their ways

of interacting with citizens, which would consequently make institutions' expectations difficult to understand and to fulfil.

All the youth workers interviewed in my study mentioned that they consistently endeavour to encourage the autonomy of the young people through literacy mediation. For instance, Ève-Lyne, a youth workers at *Le Bercail*, said: 'I always start by looking at the form with him or her and say: 'I won't do it for you.' […] They finally realize it's not that difficult.' Others describe how they guide and support young people, emphasising the importance of fostering their learning.

In the following section, I will give an example of literacy mediation taken from my observation notes. By presenting this fine-grained account, I aim to explain the relation between bureaucratic literacies, literacy mediation and situations of precarity; linking back to the multidimensional definition of the term presented before.

Laurence's Health Insurance card

I observed an important number of situations during which the youth workers were acting as literacy mediators with the young people. Here, I have selected one of them, which happened at *Le Bercail* in May 2012. It involved a young woman I have named Laurence, and three youth workers: Frédérique, Ève-Lyne and Tommy.

Before the presentation of Laurence's example, a few contextual clarifications are needed. According to the *Régie de l'Assurance Maladie du Québec* (2014), everybody in Québec is eligible for the Québec Health Insurance Plan (some exceptions are applicable). A proof of residence must be provided in order to obtain a health insurance card. This has to be presented every time that a person requires free health services. If the card is expired or lost, some fees will

apply to the health services received. A renewal notice is sent 3 months before the expiry date on the card.

Laurence had recently moved out of an apartment she had been sharing with her former partner. She was looking for a place to stay and was, in the meantime, living with her sister. At a more personal level, Laurence had complained about abdominal pain the weeks before and was increasingly worried about the method of contraception she was using at that time, and felt it was not appropriate for her body. My field notes are as follows:

A challenging renewal process

Laurence was about to leave *Le Bercail* to attend her annual medical examination with the local general practitioner (GP). Frédérique offered her a lift since it was raining on that day. Laurence replied that she could go on foot since [Name of the Clinic] was not far from *Le Bercail*. She said goodbye to everyone and left *Le Bercail*.

Laurence came back about 20 minutes later. She seemed devastated. Ève-Lyne asked her what the problem was. Laurence said that she was not able to attend her appointment because her health insurance card had expired. She told Ève-Lyne and Frédérique that if she wanted to attend her appointment without the card she would have had to pay CAN$80 but she did not have this kind of money. She told Ève-Lyne that she knew that her card had expired in September 2011, but she did not think that it could prevent her from attending her appointment for free. Ève-Lyne explained her that if she had had a serious accident she would have had to pay a lot of money out of her pocket for medical care. Laurence had the renewal notice in her bag. [She has been carrying it with her for a while.] She also had her photograph taken the day before (for the card). Frédérique then offered to help Laurence with the renewal process. They left *Le Bercail* immediately and went to the *CLSC* (*Centre Local de Services Communautaires*, Community Health Centre) where they could submit the completed form and photographs.

Frédérique and Laurence came back to *Le Bercail* about 20 minutes later. Laurence seemed even more discouraged. She then explained to Ève-Lyne that Frédérique and she were not able to renew the card because she did not have any proof of residence. Her name did not appear on any lease or bills. The receptionist at the *CLSC* told her that she must obtain a sworn statement to confirm that she was living with her sister. Ève-Lyne wondered how to get such a statement, Frédérique did not know either. Tommy, who was passing by, explained

that Laurence would have to go to the bank with her sister. Laurence's sister would then have to swear before an employee of the bank that Laurence was really living with her. (Field notes, *Le Bercail*, 10-05-2012).

This extract shows all the complexities of bureaucratic literacies and how they can be overwhelming for young people living in a situation of precarity. Technically, everybody living in Québec can access free health services. However, as illustrated in this example, this right is accessed and mediated through bureaucratic literacies. The situation of precarity that Laurence was experiencing at that time made it even more difficult for her to access this right. She did not have an official address, and was temporarily relying on her sister's help as she did not have a good relationship with her parents at that time. The pain that she was experiencing probably made this situation even more difficult for her. As previously mentioned she had to endure an unsuitable method of contraception and could not have access to a GP. Her financial situation was difficult; she was only relying on the state benefits for her participation in the workshops at *Le Bercail*. This example supports a broader definition of precarity that entails more than employment status and work-related difficulties. Other aspect of people's lives can be marked by precarity such as health, housing and social relationships.

Laurence's example supports the idea that 'literacy is deeply and inescapably bound up with producing, reproducing and maintaining unequal arrangements of power.' (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett 2001, 1). The data presented above suggest that the 'opportunity structures' (McInerney and Smyth 2014) that young people in a situation of precarity could benefit from are generally mediated by literacy (e.g. forms, letters, information documents). Literacy is then often involved in the situation of precarity experienced by young people, a point also supported by the examples provided by Richard (letter about an accumulated debt) and Darya (letter concerning her immigration status).

Laurence seemed to have misunderstood the way the health system was working in Québec. She did not know that an expired card would prevent her for getting free health services. Laurence misunderstood the letter she had received, not because she had difficulties with reading and writing – two activities that she said being good at – but rather because she did not know enough about the specific practices of this institution. The youth workers played a role of literacy mediator with an emphasis on cultural brokering (Baynham 1993). This signifies that they helped Laurence understanding the culture of the *Régie de l'Assurance Maladie du Québec* and the Québec public health system, in general; their practices and ways of interacting with people.

The youth workers at *Le Bercail* supported her in this situation. Frédérique went with her to the *CLSC* to renew the card as she knew where to go to submit the renewal form. However, Frédérique and Ève-Lyne were as puzzled as Laurence about where to get a sworn statement and who could act as a commissioner for oaths. Tommy offered helpful advice on this matter. This episode also highlights how youth workers help each other by sharing the knowledge they have of bureaucratic literacies.

Literacy mediation can be considered as a form of powerful literacies since it offers opportunities to counteract dominant literacies and support new ways of learning. It is important to underline that Laurence but also Frédérique and Ève-Lyne seem to have learned from this literacy mediation process. This could be related to what Lave (2011) calls apprenticeship, since she explains that this form of learning is more complex than someone who knows who is showing how to do something to someone who does not know. According to her, everybody involved in this process learns something since 'apprenticeship is a process of changing practice' (Lave, 2011, 156). The examples of literacy mediation presented in this article indicate that the youth workers accompanied the young people in learning new ways of dealing with bureaucratic literacy; instigating a change in their practices.

Conclusions

This paper has argued the need for a multidimensional perspective on the term precarity. I offered an interpretation of the term 'situation of precarity' – as it is used in Québec – that reflects the complex and changing relation between the opportunity structures and public policies, the individual characteristics of a person or a group, and the political, economic and historical context. I also argued that literacy mediation can be qualified as a form of powerful literacies. Based on the data presented above, it seems that literacy mediation can offer an alternative to counteract dominant literacies and support new ways of learning. This article also contributed at highlighting the complex role of literacy in the situation of precarity experienced by young people.

As mentioned before, literacies are often a grey area or invisible aspect of the work of youth workers. Literacy mediation is not promoted as an important part of their work, and they do not receive training about it. All the youth workers participating in this study claimed that literacy was not a topic addressed in their initial training at college or university. Yet, they have to navigate between extremely different and complex literacies. The youth workers explained that they learn how to deal with bureaucratic literacies by talking with their more experienced colleagues or from personal experience. Consequently, there might be a need to raise awareness concerning the important place literacy mediation takes in youth work. Literacy mediation, as illustrated in the examples presented in this article, can have a positive effect in the lives of the young people and might help in countering their situation of precarity.

The community-based organisations and the youth workers I am working with have also been experiencing insecurity and uncertainty. Year after year, they are uncertain about the

funding they could receive from the provincial or federal governments. Carl, a youth worker, mentioned having witnessed a deterioration of the quantity and the quality of the services offered to young people; especially regarding access to health services, financial support and education provision. This might directly affect the dimension of precarity, which I identified as being related to the opportunity structures and public policies. Throughout this article, I have been careful not to use the term precariat to refer to the young people participating in my study. As other authors (Bresson [2010] 2013; Waite 2009), I am reluctant to label the young people participating in my study as a homogeneous group. My fieldwork observation and other data collected do not allow me to claim that there is a new social class in Québec, and that my research participants were part of the precariat. However, the cuts in the public services and community-based milieu might have a direct effect on the lives of such young people and therefore on their situation of precarity. An eventual lack of support provided by community-based organisations and the disengagement of the state might contribute to the precarisation of the young people. The question is then: Are we in the process of creating a new social class in Québec – the young precariat?

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