The Equality Literacy Conceptual Framework

The interrelated and dynamic six elements of the Equalities Literacy framework are presented theoretically with examples drawn from the young person's narrative in order to bring it to life.

1. Pre-existing Context

From a theoretical perspective it is known that people are born into situations that are not of their choosing (Archer, 1995). We are not able therefore to deploy an entirely free will as some of the conditions into which we are born will enable and constrain our actions. That is not to say that our lives are pre-determined, but shaped by contexts that pre-exist us and that are of significance (Archer, 1995). Whilst the context pre-exists the person they are open to mediation over time. People are born into unequal circumstances; wealth and poverty, good or ill health, inclusion or exclusion are examples of the almost infinite number of differentials people experience (Dorling, 2010).

Some of the situations that people are born into are socially and culturally produced and reproduced (Thompson, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The very discourses of 'drop outs' and 'NEETs' are evidence of these socially created constructs. These socio-cultural factors exist at a micro, meso and macro levels. They include the norms and customs and invisible rules of families, communities, areas, nations, and of the world. These are technically known as habitus (Bourdieu, 1999) and as hegemonic discourses (Gramsci, 1971). These are not fixed but ever changing as illustrated by recent changes in smoking behaviours and attitudes to gay marriage in various places in the world.

Kaz's practice experience working with young people labelled as 'gang involved' and self-identifying as 'groups of young people' powerfully highlighted the importance of context. Eight months of research with these young people revealed that they had no real choice as to whether to associate with the people they grew up with, or whether to behave in the ways those people behaved in. The choice was to conform to the habitus of intimidation and violence, or to be victimised. One of the reasons the young people who participated did not want to be labelled as 'gang members' was that they had not 'joined' a gang, they had merely grown up en-cultured into certain ways of behaving. Had they been born 40 miles away in a rural area they may not have know of such ways of behaving.

The interview with the young person in Norway revealed a range of contextual factors that shaped her life:

- *YP: I am 17 I am adopted from Columbia, I have a brother who is 20 years old, my parents are still together, my parents live not far away about 2 hours away by car, so I live here with my room mate in a flat….*

- *YP: And now I go to International Baccalureat (IB), and I go to high school over here, I am in my first year of IB, its only two years. Do you know of it?*
- *YP: Its, its er… a little different from Norwegian standards as it follows an English curriculum* [as in curriculum from the UK]
- *YP: There are a lot of teenagers into motocross and physical labour and the good working, farm kind of people I guess, so they were perfectly happy where they were.*

With these factual statements the young woman shows some contextual factors that define her as different. She was from Columbia but living in Norway, she was living in a rural town but studying at an International School, she is in a Norwegian school, but studying an English curriculum. These illustrate a context that was not of her choosing in which she has to navigate her way.

2. Personal Lived Experience

These contexts set the scene, literally, for the lived experiences of equity across a range of domains of wellbeing (Maynard and Stuart, 2018). These are theoretically defined as: wealth, health, education and employment (Dorling, 2015), social capital and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1999; Putnam, 2000), security (Lorey, 2015) and precarity (Butler, 2006) and fear (Furedi, 2005). Lived experiences are open to change rather than being confined to the pre-existing context, however, the more disadvantaged that context is, the harder it maybe to change it.

Drawing from Kaz's practice experience, the young people who were 'gang involved' experienced poverty growing up in a highly disadvantaged area in the UK. Many of them were not attending school which negatively impacted on their education and employment options. They were trapped where they lived and had few choices to change their life courses. They experienced high levels of violence, insecurity, precarity and fear. A few of these young people had moved to new areas of the UK with the support of professionals in order to escape these pre-existing cultural norms, this was a difficult task however, involving a complete separation from family and friends.

In contrast, the young woman studying for an International Baccalaureat in Norway experienced life very differently. This young woman is experiencing a privileged level of education:
YP: Yeah, its kind of hard to get in so you need a certain set of, I think its called GPA, so only certain people get in, most people are from regular Norwegian schools.

But doing so also came at a cost to her, she had a long commute to and from home in order to study at the school of her choice:
YP: And I commuted an hour every day, two times a day for a year and it was really tough, it was so tiring, I was so tired.
YP: I got home by 5pm and had to eat dinner and do my chores and then the clock was 7pm and then I had to do my homework and then you've got to press the social life into that – it was really tough.

Her choice to attend this school has cost her a number of relationships with people in her home community, and even with her family:

YP: I don't socialise, I just stay in and do homework, I don't like the people I used to go to middle school with, and they are usually in the city.

YP: I don't think it has been difficult for them, but it has been difficult for me. My brother, well he isn't that smart and he really conforms to the norm at home because he is into labour work, erm, he is a construction worker, er and like, he is not that good at school. He almost failed the English which is my greatest subject and I had trouble with that because my parents always found it easier to help him because his difficulties were easier to help with like Norwegian and maths, and I got on my own they couldn't help me, and my dad is an engineer and mum a kindergarten teacher and dad could help me with maths. It was just all a mess, we were just really struggling with different aspects of my intelligence.

Kaz's practice experiences and the young woman's narrative illustrate a relationship between context and lived experience. The context may be replicated in the lived experiences, reproducing itself within young people and groups, yet it may also enable or provoke young people to be different, to change the conditions that they find them in.

3. Positioning by Others

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7. These real life circumstances creates a 'position' that is relative to other people. Theory documents the ways in which these relative positions are inscribed by labels and stereotypes. These labels are created by the state, media and society (Jones, 2015; Bourdieu, 1999) and produce, reproduce and protect a status quo (Dorling, 2010; Fox, Piven and Cloward, 2015). The resulting discourses are hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971; Ledwith, 2016; Wearing, 1998) in that they protect the interests of the 'haves' against the 'have not's', or distance a subgroup from the norm (Tyler, 2013; Dorling, 2010, Blackman and Rogers, 2017; Piven and Cloward, 1993).

An example of these discourses from British culture was the phenomenon of 'Vikki Pollard' a female underclass acted by Matt Lucas, and 'Lauren Cooper' a school failure acted by Catherine Tate. Both of these characters were comedy successes epitomising unsuccessful youth. Their creation was galvanised by societal distaste for young people and to invest in dehumanising labels such as 'Chav', 'drop out'. These discourses allow members of society; to position people as different to themselves, to protect themselves from becoming like 'the other', and to protect themselves from their responsibility to support them.

From my practice example it is clear that the young people defined as 'gang involved' had little material goods, little social mobility, little choice about who or what to be. They were also subjected to multiple positions. They were defined as 'gang involved' (a label they refuted) and described as hoodies, druggies, yobs, as violent. In contrast they described themselves as young people making their way through a life of poverty, living on benefits, surviving the street culture with very few choices. They felt totally alienated by professional services that often criminalised them, misunderstood by a society that they had no access to, and disenfranchised and betrayed by media representations of them. This shows the power of the positions that may be inscribed onto other members of society.

In contrast the Norwegian young woman had a high quality education, material wealth and many choices open to her. And some of those choices had consequences for her. Whilst this 'privilege' of a high quality education and being 'high achieving' meant that society treated her well, however, there was also a price for this position. The young woman described the pressure she felt as society 'positioned' her as responsible for dealing with many contemporary issues:
YP: Yes! There is a lot of expectations….. And its just, most young people are not like that, they are just still kids and a lot of people get annoyed that adults kind of expect them to be extraordinary and different and smart and involved in politics.
YP: But most of my peers just want to live their lives playing video games and hanging out with friends and that burden of being socially invested is really tough for a lot of young people I think as you are expected to be really into politics and if you are not you are not really helping, helping to change.

This responsibility can be very overwhelming:
YP: And do your civic duty yeah….. Teenagers go through some insane changes, and then at one time that was all we had to do, it was just do that and develop but now we have to do that and everything else too about 20 other things, a lot, its hard to differ, its like is this who I am or someone I am impressioned to be.
YP: I think its important to know that we are trying really hard at everything we do, and I think that a lot of people, especially adults take it for granted that we are the way we are, erm, or that we try to be something else.

She summarises that trying to work out what to do in life, with all these expectations layered upon you is *"like trying to shoot an arrow through a hole with your eyes closed"*. This perhaps best sums up the experience of living in a position bestowed upon you that you would not chose for yourself.

Both the 'gang involved' youth and the 'high achieving' young woman experience a positioning from other people in society. The 'gang youth' are positioned as undesirable and the 'high achiever' positioned as responsible

for self and society. These labels were unhelpful and unwanted by the recipients. This highlights that wherever you are on the privilege-deprivation spectrum, positions are applied and status' defined by others.

4. Technologies of Oppression or Liberation

Theory helps illuminate how positions are imposed on people through a set of technologies or tools. These technologies ensure that the positioning have impact and endure. They are called technologies of liberation or oppression depending on the extent to which they align with the individual's or group's self image and the extent to which they constrain or enable access to resources. As such they are key to in/equality and thus central to the Equalities Literacy framework.

The most commonly used and understood technology is perhaps stereotyping and labeling (Dorling, 2010) which most people experience at school in one form or another, and then potentially throughout the rest of life. These can be for small things at an individual level such a dress sense or huge stereotypes at a global level such as racism. The labels we accrue early in our school lives such as 'failure' or 'high achiever' may be carried with us throughout our lives.

When we stereotype we make people 'other' to ourselves, we draw an invisible line between 'us' and 'them' (either as better or worse) and create a set of characteristics that separate us. This process of 'othering' psychologically protects us from the possibility of becoming like the other, or of the other having any similarities to ourselves (Foucault, 1978; 1982, Lacan, 1988; Lévi-Strauss, 1955; Said, 1994).

Another technology, 'social abjection' (Tyler, 2013) is an extension of 'othering' whereby the 'other' is made vile and disgusting and not worthy of consideration. It preserves 'us' from becoming 'them' (Tyler, 2013; Dorling, 2010, Blackman and Rogers, 2017). This is the mechanism that has been applied with the Vikki Pollard and Lauren Cooper characters in British comedy. They have the potential to erode all empathy and enable the rest of society to look down on or indeed straight through people who need support. In contrast people of privilege may be positioned as an 'elite' which also separates them from the rest of society. Most of the literature on social abjection describes the term as applying to an 'underclass', however both privilege and deprivation can be deemed socially abject by the people who live in a different position.

Once people are objectified (Bourdieu, 2003) and socially abject, it paves the way for us to treat them as inhumane or shameful (Nussbaum, 2004, Brown, 2010) and to adopt a willful blindness (Heffernan, 2011) where we refuse to acknowledge their human rights or even existence. Shaming and willful are therefore two further technologies of oppression.

The 'other' is however always in our psyche and we remain insecure and fearful (Furedi, 2005) of the risk that they pose us, and feel the division between us as precarious (Lorey, 2015; Butler, 2006). This fuels the willingness of society to adopt negative discourses about them, to accept forms of 'legislation' (Bauman, 1989) and 'surveillance' (Foucault, 1978, 1982) that keep the 'other' in their places. The UK has seen a prevalence of reality television that presents vulnerable people as 'benefit scroungers'. This positioning erodes public empathy for people who need benefit support and could be argued to enable the government to reduce investment in the welfare service. The presence of these technologies serves to oppress and marginalize defining who people are and how they are treated by the rest of society. When people are not subjected to these technologies they have more opportunity for liberation. The absence of shaming, 'othering', social abjection and other such technologies are therefore conditions of liberation.

The young people who were 'gang involved' were stopped and searched by the police more often than young people from more affluent areas, they were treated with disrespect, fear, loathing. They felt undesirable, unwanted and unseen until visible and then reviled, dehumanised and shamed. Indeed many practitioners and members of the public would not even go to the places where they lived, creating almost 'ghetto' areas. Even the research commission under which I was employed was a mechanism of oppression creating the sense that they were 'special cases' that needed investigation.

Despite her privilege relative to the ''gang involved' young people, the Norwegian young woman also experienced some technologies of oppression included stereotyping and name calling, due to her position of privilege:
YP: It's a line for the smart people, so it's a really challenging line and going there goes with a set of stereotypes.
YP: But I think you need to have the confidence, I think its very easy to get down and to let other people get to you when you are into stuff other people consider geeky.
YP: Yeah… and the three others they stayed where they are and we never really kept I touch as my group were like the outcasts and there were groups in my year and we were just the girls who didn't fit in with the other groups and so we just sort of cling to each other and we were really good friends with really close relationships.

Whilst these young people had all experienced technologies of oppression the differences between then were stark. The Norwegian young woman had only experienced a few technologies of oppression whereas the 'gang-involved' young people had experienced most all of them on a daily basis. It is perhaps here that the wedge between the deprived and privileged is driven deepest as the technologies of oppression imposed on the deprived further wound and dispossess them.

5. Positioning of Self

The power of the technologies of oppression and liberation provokes reactions from the people who are targeted. Individuals and groups might respond to the positioning in a range of ways. Some might comply and accept the messages imposed on them, others may adopt positions of victimhood, and others again move to rebel or be deviant. This is an inter-personal process as it is in response to the positions bestowed, it is also intra-personal as individuals reconcile the messaging with their sense of self. The resulting self-position is in response to these contexts, the relative experiences of others, the positions imposed by others, the technologies of oppression and liberation experienced, and personal response. Theory shows the self-position adopted may have a major impact on the identity, agency and social mobility then experienced (Cote and Levine, 2002; Lawler, 2008). This is why there can be no fixed rules as to the trajectories of any individual or group. One person may respond to deprivation with resignation and victim mentality, whilst another may fight for a better outcome.

All of these positions were evident in the young people who were 'gang involved'. Some lived up to the reputation and propagated violent reputations for themselves. Others acquiesced where necessary to behavioural norms of the 'gang', some lived the lives they wanted counter to the dominant 'gang' culture despite the issues that created for them, and some wanted to support other young people to avoid the pitfalls that they had experienced becoming peer mentors.

The Norwegian young woman positioned herself as different in a range of ways – different in ethnicity, in education, in sexuality, in outlook in life. This was perhaps a meaningful narrative given some of her life circumstances:

YP: And I always thought I was different to my peers at home and so it was necessary for me to get a new set of surroundings, environment and friends.

YP: And me being into English meant that I liked different things to my peers. And I am scared of motor vehicles, I looked on the internet and looking at motorcross and it scared me. So being into different books and movies and popular culture, and I was always different, so even from middle schools, so now I have just gotten used to it. But now I am just like everyone else in my class.

YP: I found my sexuality and dressed more comfortably, not really conforming to gender roles so I dressed a lot differently to my friends, 'cos as I am just a lot more interested in being comfortable and I don't have a problem shopping in the boys department and I don't have a problem with that and that just kind of makes me different, and made me a lot different from those at home everyone was the same and all shopped at the same stores.

This young woman was also very aware of her response to the narratives imposed on her:

YP: I know who I am, it doesn't really matter to me what you think!

The theory, practice experience and data illustrates the range of responses possible to any context and positioning and the dynamic nature of the Equalities Literacy framework.

6. Impact and trajectory

The culmination of the contexts people are born into, their lived experiences, positioning by others and self mediated by technologies of oppression all lead to impact and future trajectory. This is only fixed moment by moment as the societal responses to individual's and groups and should not be taken as a deterministic end point. People re-author their lives moment by moment (Clandinin, Steeves, Caine, 2013).

Whilst the impact of privilege and deprivation are not fixed, theory shows that people experiencing deprivation, oppression and inequality on the whole experience a higher prevalence of negative trajectories of inequitable outcomes than the privileged (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Sen, 1999). This is the case across all areas of wellbeing – financial, social, health and education. The consequences of the lack of education as experienced by ESL's is well documented (European Union Education and Culture DG, 2013). Whilst these outcomes are not fixed, they are increasingly likely for young people who are ESL. A further issue with the negative outcomes experienced by deprived individuals is that they can be perpetuated intergenerationally reinforcing dominant narratives of deprivation, oppression and inequality generation by generation. This is particularly well documented in the context of worklessness.

The young people who were 'gang involved' were experiencing poor trajectories. Many were reliant on state benefits and food parcels (Kaz met many of them at a food bank) and they could not work due to a lack of education. For many of the young people this benefit-dependent status reinforced low self-esteem and made them more prone to a negative self-image and self-positioning. Eating poor food could have an impact on health, lacking an education or work could lead to social isolation. Whilst hypothetical, this discussion highlights the complex, interwoven aspects of deprivation and ways in which one initial deprivation may lead to a further inequalities.

The Norwegian young woman had many more options and potential open to her than the 'gang involved' young people. Whilst an privilege she found this a terrifying and disabling potential:
YP: You can't I talk to a lot of people over the internet and stuff and they are so scared of what will happen in the future because of technological development we have no ideas what will happen, and they are scared of the education that they will get and so am I, and what if I choose something wrong and then arrghh I have to go back to school and choose something new and people keep telling you you can go to school for the

rest of your life if you want, and I want more and ...I don't know what sort of job I will do, but it wont be for 30 years like my mum.
YP: I am so scared of taking the wrong choices, really so scared!

The impact and trajectory element of the Equalities Literacy framework therefore prompts questions of what impact all the other elements of the Equalities Literacy framework has had. The conditions a person is born into, their lived experiences, the treatment they get from others, and how they respond all interact to create an outcome or trajectory. This itself is not fixed and deterministic, but can change at any point.

When added together diagrammatically the interwoven and dynamic nature of the Equalities Literacy framework comes to the fore and highlights the potential of the framework to emphasise a complex, holistic and socio-cultural nexus of in/equality.

Deprivation, oppression and inequality have always existed in different forms and contexts in the history of mankind (Dorling, 2010). In this respect it has a historicity. The exact forms of inequality are produced and enacted by social and cultural groups in self-perpetuating discourses and narratives. In this respect they are socially and culturally embedded (Thompson, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gramsci, 1971; Ledwith, 2005; Wearing, 1998; Jones, 2015).

People experience and are subjected to a range of deprivations, oppressions and inequalities simultaneously. The combination is described as intersectional (Collins, 2015, Hooks 1994, Crenshaw, 1989) and intersubjective (Hegel, 1908; Habermas, 1987). These constellations (Hart, Hall and Henwood, 2015) or matrices (Collins, 2015) of deprivations, oppressions and inequalities are combinations of types of difference, levels and contexts (Ledwith, 2005). It is this very complexity that demands an Equalities Literacy.

Without such a conceptual framework people may make faulty assumptions or work from biases. Practitioners may unintentionally disempower and disable (Illich, 1971; Le Grand, 2008) as they overly help and assistentialise those they sought to empower (Jefferies, 2011). Without equity literacy there is potential for unconsciously reinforcing existing power relations and therefore positions of inequality (Bourdieu, 1979). Equity literacy is required to interrupt these trajectories, to enable people to lever assets (McCashen, 2010), and to challenge the unequal and inequitable conditions that prevail in contemporary global society (Dorling, 2010; Blackman and Rogers, 2017).

The full equity literacy model is shown in figure one below:
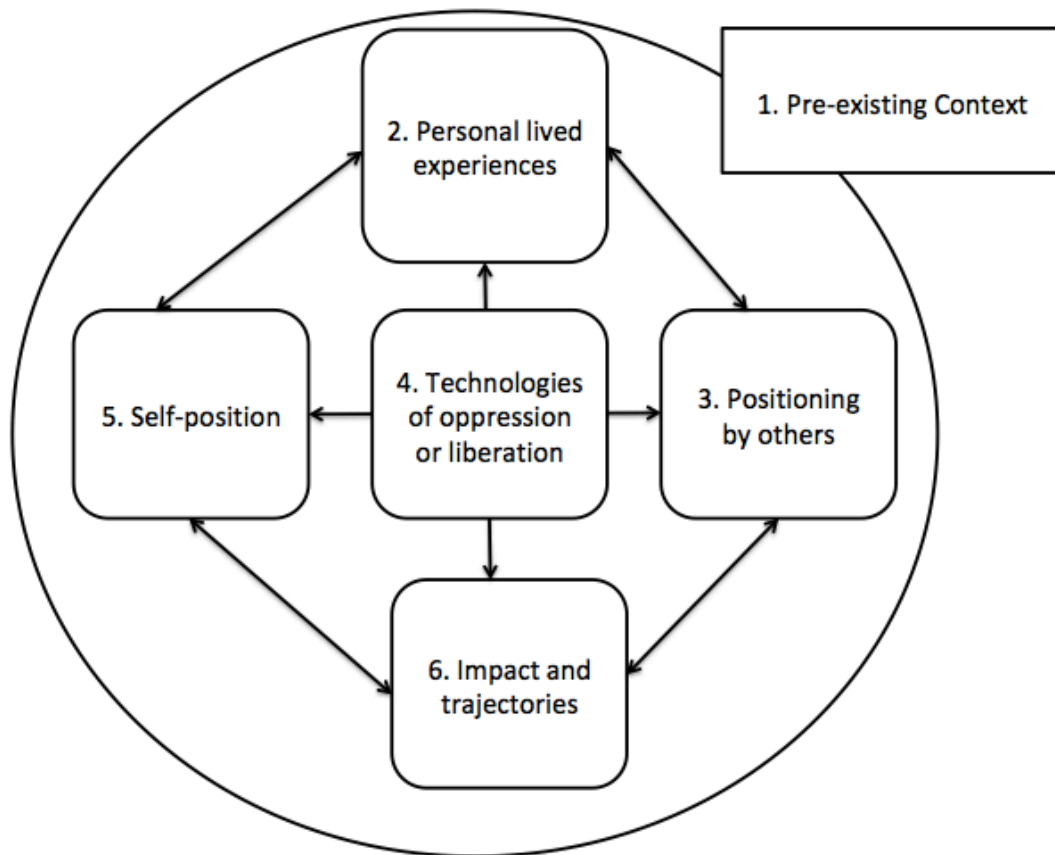
Figure 1: The Equalities Literacy l Framework

Implications for Practice

Practitioners who support the wellbeing of other human beings e.g. teachers, nurses, social workers, youth workers, need to have high levels of Equalities Literacy as they conduct their day to day practice for the following four reasons.

8. Firstly practitioners need to understand the unique contexts and lives of the people they support. This is similar to cultural competence (Rathje, 2007; Like, 2011) and includes having an inequalities imagination (Hart, Hall, Henwood, 2002).
9.
Secondly, practitioners need to understand the ways in which their life experiences and professional enculturation impacts on their language, choices and actions in practice (Bourdieu, 1999) in order for the to avoid unconsciously using technologies of oppression themselves. Once Equality Literate practitioners are able to make choices and take action that support social justice. These approaches are often referred to as 'empowering' (Illich, 1971; Friere, 1970; Maynard and Stuart, 2018) or 'critically pedagogical' (Giroux, 2011; Smyth, 2011). These collective

actions enable societies to deliberatively work towards a more socially just world.

10.

11.   Thirdly, practitioners need to ensure they do not inadvertently create further marginalisation by treating people as the locus of the problem (Illich, 1971).

12.

Finally, practitioners, particularly teachers and youth workers, have opportunities to support the Equalities Literacy of the people they support - a process akin to 'conscientization' (Freire, 1974, Andrade and Morrell, 2008). If children and young people became Equalities Literate they would hopefully then avoid unconsciously perpetuating inequality and instead treat one another with respect creating a more socially just world.

From a research perspective the Equalities Literacy framework highlights the need for researchers to reflexively acknowledge their privileged position and to understand how that interplays with the position of their participants. Methods such as the Indirect Approach, and Participatory Action Research should be used to address the inequity of such power relationships. Further, we need to do more with our research findings. Collating stories of in/equality on our living room floors is not enough as Michelle Fine has challenged and shown (2017). Researchers have a moral obligation to lift their work to the macro level to support social justice at a systemic level.

This is the aim of the MaCE research project and we look forward to reporting what we learn with young people, the solutions we co-create, the ways we go about that and the overall impact on society in the future.

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