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# **A Critique of ‘Early School Leaving’, ‘Drop Out’ and ‘NEET’ From the UK, Denmark and Norway: Marginalisation and Co-created Education Research Project**

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*The European Marginalisation and Co-created Education (MaCE) project co-created proposals for an equitable education system through participative action research with students and young people. Academics and university students co-researched between one and five young people’s educational experiences each using an ‘Indirect Approach’ (Bunting and Moshuus, 2017) This paper presents a critical contextual overview of ‘Early School Leaving’, introduces the Indirect Approach, and presents the findings from the first year of research across three countries in the light of the Equalities Literacy Framework. Conclusions are drawn from suggestions made by young people and researchers.*

*Keywords: equity, action research, early school leaver*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Research Project**

The Marginalisation and Co-created Education (MaCE) project was developed between the University of Southeast Norway, VIA University in Denmark and the University of Cumbria in the UK and funded by Erasmus+. The project aims to understand school students’ experience of marginalisation in education in order for the European team of academic and student researchers to co-create more equitable solutions. In year one, a team of ten academics developed the research project and framework for conceptualising equity in education. In year two the academics were joined by 30 students and this international team co-researched the narratives of 100 young people. This paper reports on the findings from this second year of research before the final year sees another 30 students and 100 young people inform educational practice.

### **Critique of Educational Labels**

Young people who drop out of school are given a range of names. Many researchers and educationalists refer to them as ‘Drop Out’s’. In the UK they are called ‘NEET’, labelling them by their status of Not in Education, Employment or Training. These are the polite, mainstream, yet deficit labels attached to young people who do not complete their education. As Fine (2017) states, this terminology is “flawed and intolerable” in three respects. Firstly, it defines a young person by something that they have not done (i.e. not been in school), secondly, it defines young people by deficits alone such as failing school (Stuart, 2018), and finally it places the entire blame of the phenomenon at the young person’s feet (Orr, 2014). A more neutral term is ‘Early School Leaver’ (ESL) yet this too, somehow, contains the assumption that it is the young person who did the leaving and therefore, the action is of their choosing. Many critical researchers

are now proposing alternative titles for this phenomenon which indicate the culpability of the education system such as ‘pushed out’ and ‘facilitated out’ (Clandinin, Steeves, Caine, 2013, p.15-42).

### Early School Leavers in Norway, Denmark and the UK

Comparing ESL across the three countries was problematic for a range of reasons. Firstly, the three education systems vary a great deal, secondly the measures for ESL vary, and thirdly, ESL’s are not a homogenous group whose experiences can necessarily be clustered under one umbrella term. As a result, description rather than comparison of ESL is provided in table one below to start to build a contextual picture of ESL across the three nations.

**TABLE 1  
EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING STATISTICS**

	Norway	Denmark	UK
Upper secondary	16-21 years of age  Entitlement if achieve in lower secondary school  27% ESL	16–21 years of age  Compulsory  20.9% ESL	16–18 years of age  Compulsory  11.2% NEET / 13% ESL
Higher education	21 upwards  Optional, funded  32% ESL	21 upwards  Optional, funded  16% ESL	18 – 22 years of age  Optional, not funded  6.2% ESL
Sources	Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg (2011) Statistisk sentralbyrå (2016)	The Danish Ministry of Education (2017) Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd (2017) Styrelsen for Forskning og Uddannelse (2018)	The House of Commons (2018) The European Union (2016) Universities UK (2018)

The table might suggest that there are fewer issues of early school leaving in the UK than in Norway and Denmark, but this is a false picture. The UK has no clear measure for ESL. The Office for National Statistics collects data on young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training but this is only applied to 16 to 24 year olds. There is no measure of young people below 16 not attending school. Nor are national statistics collected for young people who truant from school or who are home educated. As ESL is not measured it may seem as if it does not exist, but this is far from the truth. This shows one of the significant issues of ESL measurement – various criteria and tools for measurement mean international comparisons must be treated with caution (De Witte et al., 2017, p.6-7).

Despite the variations, it is clear that young people are missing school in all three countries. Given the causality between attendance and attainment (OECD, 2014) and the individual lifetime cost of ESL consequences ranging from 100,000 EUR to 1.1 million EUR (European Union Working Group, 2016), leaving school early is known to have significant impact on individual’s future prospects and welfare costs in their countries. Each of these countries has policies intended to improve attendance and attainment such as ability streaming, standardised testing, and targeted support. Critical researchers have shown these approaches to be deeply flawed and problematic often worsening the very factors they sought to improve (for more details see Giannakaki, McMillan and Karamichas, 2018). The weak data and difficulties explored above contribute to the prevalence of educational inequity as the ‘evidence base’ required within the current neoliberal paradigm cannot yet be produced (Reay, 2017, Giroux, 1983 and 2011; Hooks 1994; Illich, 1971; Wiederkehr *et al.*, 2015). Each phase of this research project attempts to critically disrupt these

labels and this hegemonic status quo (Cook, 2019) in the three participating countries from the narratives of young people themselves, the experts on their own lives.

## METHODS

The MaCE action research project works as: “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p.1). Academics, students and young people co-inquire into educational experiences and co-create solutions. This approach sought to redress the endemic marginalisation of young people from policy spaces (Treseder, 1997; Ledwith, 2005; Hart, 1997) and to model an inclusive and equitable mode of working with young people. The research is conducted ‘between’ university staff and university students, many of whom have personal experience of early school leaving themselves. This team does research ‘with’ young people rather than ‘on’ them. This ensures the solutions for equitable education and developed equitably and are well rounded.

The MaCE project involves three action research cycles. The first was a theoretical cycle, with the academics’ prior knowledge and practice experience combined in the Equalities Literacy Framework. The second year long cycle was grounded in the narratives of the young people and analyses of the co-researcher team leading to the findings reported here. The third and final cycle will repeat and iteratively develop the findings from the previous year. Multiple dissemination tools are planned to enable the team to lift the findings from the micro to macro levels of influence.

Within the action research method the project employed a specific conversational tool called the Indirect Approach. This had been developed by the Norwegian academics prior to the project commencing. The Danish and UK academics learned this technique in year one and trained the students to use it at the start of year two. All the co-researchers then used this approach with the 100 young people encountered.

The Indirect Approach (Moshuus and Eide, 2016) seeks to reduce the hierarchical power of ‘researcher’ and ‘informant’ and to elicit information in an indirect way in order to reduce the bias created by research agendas. The approach demands that the interview is replaced by a conversation, the semi-structured interview schedule torn up, with the researcher adopting a facilitative role, out on a conversational stroll with a young person, seeing where they want to go and what they see on the way. In this respect it differs from narrative research as the researcher is not seeking any particular story or narrative, only what the young person wishes to share. This contrasts to the role of the researcher as ‘miner’ digging in a determined way for deep seams of information that match their agenda. It has similarities to an unstructured interview (Tanggaard & Brinkman, 2015; Brinkman, & Kvale, 2015) and is an explorative qualitative approach, discovering something that we did not already know (Moshuus and Eide, 2016) and resonant with Participatory Action Research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

That said, the Indirect Approach is fraught with issues of its own. Whist power may be altered, it is not possible to entirely remove it from the research situation. Its differentiation from narrative research remains under question as does its position within either action research or ethnography. Ethics were also a key concern in this ‘equitable’ project. From one perspective, the researchers in this project were keen to avoid recruiting ‘drop outs’ as this may serve to reinforce their labelling, stigma and internalisation of failure. Instead, the project recruited any young person who wished to speak to us as they would all have insight into what does and does not work in education no matter how successful or otherwise they may have been. This approach rejected purposive sampling assumptions in favour of an inclusive and equitable approach, working with any young person who wanted to participate. Ethical approval was obtained from each university and research site and informed consent was obtained from organisations, parents and young people. Here, however, is an ethical dilemma, in that in entirely unstructured conversations, it is not possible to know what young people might disclose. Running ethics (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001) and re-checking for consent at the end of the conversations was therefore highly important (Lund and Kjeldahl, 2019). These vitally important issues and can be further explored in the accounts of Hornbaek Frosthalm (2019), Lund and Kjeldahl (2019) and Moshuus and Eide (2016).

In practice, this meant recruiting young people who wanted to volunteer to tell us something about their lives. Conversations occurred in a relaxed manner with cups of tea and snacks, and with the young people leading the discussion. This was relatively straightforward with confident, vocal young people and much more challenging with young people of the opposite disposition. The young people were recruited from a range of settings – schools, youth clubs, shelters, charities, social work settings. Ethical constraints in Norway mean we only know the young people were of mixed gender and aged 13-22. The conversations lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were all audio recorded and transcribed. Each co-researcher then coded their data set and embarked on an abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans, 2013) to see where links existed to the equalities literacy framework (deductively) and what other information emerged (inductively).

Each of the 40 co-researchers collected, analysed and wrote up their own research and this paper collates and thus co-creates findings and recommendations from this breadth of work. It was interesting to resist the temptation to re-analyse all the narratives to ensure ‘reliability’ and ‘consistency’, the tools of ‘evidence’. That would, however, have betrayed the co-constructive and participatory research endeavour. Each author has contributed their key findings which are collated as a data corpus under each element of the projects conceptual tool, the Equalities Literacy Framework. Whilst the findings are broad, they offer an insight into how young people experience ‘education’ within society, and what they and the researchers feel could be done to address these mixed and inequitable experiences.

### **The Equalities Literacy Framework**

The term equalities literacy refers to the ability to ‘read’ or have an awareness of equality (everyone being the same) and equity (everyone able to access the same), to choose how to intervene, and to act to address these issues (Maynard and Stuart, 2018). This equality literacy is not equally distributed itself. Often, the most disadvantaged are the most naïve as to their condition in life. Hence the work of Paulo Friere (1974) to raise the critical consciousness of the illiterate in Brazil, and the need for literacy in equality itself.

The framework aims to render the processes that create and reproduce inequalities visible (Bourdieu, 2003; Fine and Weis, 2003) and is rooted in the sociological construct of structure and agency (Archer, 1995). This field acknowledges that people are born into a world full of pre-existing structures which influence life opportunities and reproduce those very same structures (Bourdieu, 2003). If the inequality is not seen, acknowledged or addressed then society becomes complicit in its perpetuation. This research situates itself in this problematic socio-cultural space. With its structure and agency lens the framework takes account of inequitable educational contexts and individual responses. This avoids blaming solely the young person or the school for an occurrence of ESL and encourages each stakeholder to consider the range of actions available to them.

Inequity has two facets. One facet is comprised of disadvantage, oppression, marginalisation, isolation and deprivation. But this facet only exists in relation to the other facet comprising privilege, advantage, liberation, and social capital. It is therefore necessary to simultaneously discuss both disadvantage and privilege and all the positions in between (Hays, Dean and Chang, 2007; Fine and Weis, 2003). Any unequal system needs both winners and losers and privilege and deprivation exist only as relative to one another and therefore the whole socio-cultural landscape must be considered. The Equalities Literacy Framework does just this, proposing that equality is a complex interaction of elements; cultural, social, inter and intra personal, with an imperative to render them visible.

The five elements of the Equalities Literacy Framework are interrelated and dynamic and given a brief overview here before each element is used to categorise the research findings.

The first element is the context and lived experience of an individual or group. People are born into situations that are not of their choosing – for some this is rags whilst for others it is riches (Dorling, 2010). Once born into these situations our lives are not entirely pre-determined, we still have a choice as to how to respond to the situation in which we find ourselves in (Archer, 1995). Many of the situations into which 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. Privileged young people may have a context that prepares them well for education with a range of knowledge and experiences that enable them to thrive in schools, that is to say they have the social capital and a 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1999) that supports educational success. Yet not all privileged young people do well, and not all disadvantaged young people do badly, lived experiences may vary despite the context one is born into.

The second element of the framework is the positioning by others. Our context and lived experience influences the way other people treat us. Human beings tend to categorise and compare one another and in so doing create hierarchies of relative positions. The relative positions 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).

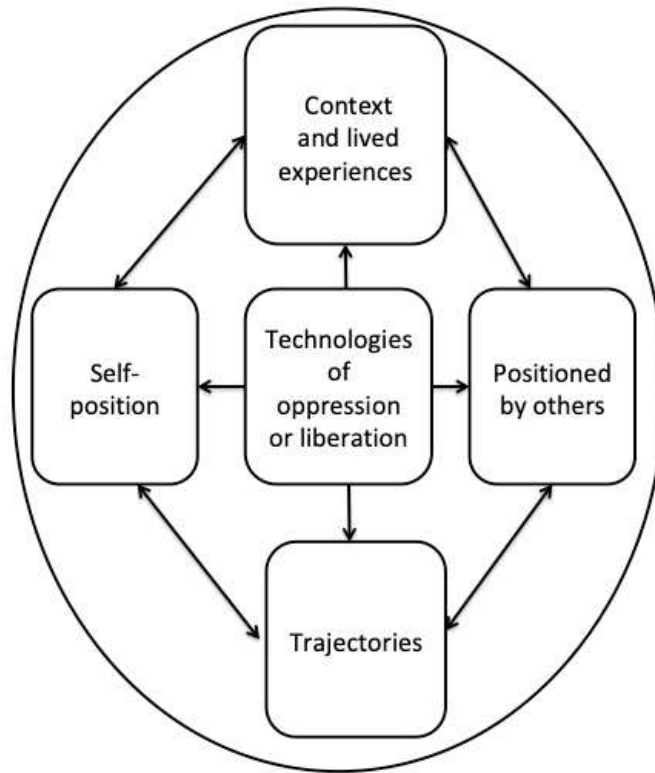
The tools used to secure these relative positions is the next element, called the technologies of oppression or liberation. Positioning occurs through a range of tools. Some tools can be used for positive or negative intent, e.g. positive or negative labelling. Others however, such as shaming, are oppressive when used, and liberatory when absent. Labelling and stereotyping are commonly known and experienced tools (Dorling, 2010). 'Othering' is an extension of this process which 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). 'Social abjection' (Tyler, 2013) may follow on from this with the 'other' made vile and disgusting and not worthy of empathy (Tyler, 2013; Dorling, 2010, Blackman and Rogers, 2017). Other technologies include objectification (Bourdieu, 2003), shaming (Nussbaum, 2004, Brown, 2010) and willful blindness (Heffernan, 2011).

The fourth element of the framework explores how the individual or group responds to their context and the positioning by others. Individuals and groups might respond to the positioning in a range of ways; acceptance, victimhood, rebellion and deviance are all possible. This is an inter-personal psycho-social 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. Theory suggests the self-position adopted may have a major impact on the identity, agency and social mobility then experienced (Cote and Levine, 2002; Lawler, 2008).

The final fifth section of the framework draws all these other four dynamic factors together into a trajectory towards an outcome. The 'final' impact trajectory is only fixed moment by moment as each element of the in/equality experienced is dynamic. Situations change and people themselves re-author their lives moment by moment (Clandinin, Steeves, Caine, 2013). The range of contexts, positions and self-positions accounts for the changeable and dynamic trajectories of any individual or group.

Mindful we must practice what we preach, we have used these elements to explore our own educational experiences, those of the young people we interviewed, and as a practice tool to surface inequality in classes of school pupils and lecture rooms of students. It is therefore a tool for reflection and for dialogue, both of which lead to the potential for change. The framework is described in brief and further information can be found in the associated paper (Stuart et al., 2019).

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE EQUALITIES LITERACY FRAMEWORK**



## **FINDINGS**

### **Context and Lived Experience**

The young people in this project repeatedly reported contexts and lived experiences that varied from privilege – supportive – neutral – negative – disabling. Challenges in home contexts included issues such as regular home moves, parental separation, poor living conditions, unsupportive parents. Other issues were experienced in the community they lived in, with high levels of crime or deprivation, negative peer influences, or lack of opportunity after school completion. This is congruent with Kardya and Jenkins (2018, p.311) analysis of the Longitudinal Youth People’s Study in England 1989/90 which found degrees of deprivation and particularly crime in a neighbourhood correlated to the volume of young people who were ESL’s.

These community based structural issues profoundly affected the social mobility possible no matter what aspirations the young people may hold. Young people also consistently reported difficulties in the school environment, they did not feel included at school, felt it was not for them, that they did not belong. From this perspective, school’s have agency to actively include or exclude the young people who attend (Doll et al., 2013).

A strong theme that emerged across the three countries was that of relationships. Relationships were positioned by the young people as vitally important aspect of the school culture, and this included both peer relationships and teacher relationships. They were seen as fundamental to the young people’s sense of belonging, investment and achievement at school. Whilst some young people had positive relationships, many also reported instances of severe bullying which had affected them profoundly – upsetting them, giving them anxiety, or even making them leave school. The school culture then, as documented by Smyth

and Hattam (2002) is a key factor in the extent to which young people feel they ‘fit in’, and the consequences if they don’t.

### **Positioning by Others**

The 100 young people made frequent references to people who put them down or made them feel like failures. The list included a wide range of family members, other kids in school, people in the community and teachers themselves. Young people more frequently made references to people who treated them negatively, emotional and psychological injuries were remembered. Some young people also, however, stated that family members, friends and teachers were supportive and had played a key part in their being at school.

Positioning does not just refer to an individual. The very positioning of the status of ‘youth’, ‘education’ and ‘schooling’ is at question here. If ‘youths’ are given negative labels in society through media messages, then they are likely to be positioned negatively collectively and as individuals. Empathy for individual issues are eroded in this situation. Social opinions about education vary and impact on individuals too. For example, Jackson (2003, p.595) found that dominant views of masculinity in school prohibit boys from studying as it is not ‘cool’. Males collectively, and a male as an individual has to decide how to respond to this hegemonic positioning of masculinity in the school building.

Unfortunately some young people, particularly from the UK, felt their teachers saw them as ‘outputs’ not human beings due to the focus on exam results. Compounding this was a set of curricula, pedagogical and assessment technologies that led some UK young people to the conclusion that schools were ‘factories’ churning out qualified pupils. An impact that follows from the lack of relationships and overly prescriptive systems focussed on results is that long term issues and out of school issues were not of interest to teachers, instead short term issues with ‘sticking plaster’ solutions were the focus on teacher-pupil interventions.

### **Technologies of Oppression or Liberation**

Examples of oppression and liberation abounded, and were often used to contrast to one another. Young people spoke of teachers who over and under estimated their abilities. Stories of stereotypical, wounding assumptions being applied were still raw. Silencing and being ignored made the young people particularly angry. A few counter illustrations existed where teachers had put the effort in and got to know them, built a meaningful relationship, and made them feel valued. Equally peers, siblings, parents were all capable of putting them in their place with these various tools. The social processes of positioning were tangible, visceral, and highly evident to the young people.

In schools, ‘being sent to see someone else’ was often a positioning tool. Whilst a referral to a specialist to deal with mental health issues maybe highly appropriate, doing so in a dismissive ‘don’t bring that to me’ manner indicates that teachers are not interested in the young person’s wellbeing no matter how well motivated that referral might be. Young people craved acknowledgement, validation and being understood. Mental health support and support for young people with additional needs, or the lack of it, was a key tool for the oppression of young people and a challenge for teachers.

### **Positioning of Self**

The entire range of reactions were visible in the young peoples’ narratives. Some clearly complied with what they were told, either positively or negatively. Others rebelled and decided to prove someone wrong who had underestimated them. Some chose a position of vulnerability in the face of pressure to succeed. The range of positions adopted was not static, but situational and dynamic. Often responding to the position they are placed in; ‘he said .... And so i....’ was a common refrain. Much of the young people’s reflections on education seemed to be a figuring out of how to respond to the range of positions and structures they were exposed to. A key concern here is the extent to which young people’s compliance with such messages is fundamental to processes of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1999).



**Impact and Trajectory**

Many of the young people we spoke to were certain of positive outcomes, whilst others felt helpless, certain of failure. Many were also completely overwhelmed by the scale of the task ahead of them – the planetary and humanitarian global crisis. Most of them expressed the view that working hard, digging in, sticking with it would enable them to secure a better outcome from schooling, a clear manifestation of the meritocratic culture of the day (Clycq, Ward Nouwen, Vandenbroucke, 2014, p.812; Smith and Skrbis, 2017, p.441). Three young people, however, had seen below the surface and felt this meritocracy was a myth, and that school favoured a privileged few.

Much literature shows that if a young person leaves school early they experience a range of further negative outcomes (European Union Education and Culture DG, 2013). Symonds, Schoon, and Salmela-Aro (2016), however, have disrupted this theory. Their analysis of the 1989/90 Longitudinal Study of Young People in England compared disengaged students to engaged students trajectories in terms of behavioural engagement, psychological wellbeing, substance use, careers and achievement. Whilst disengaged students initially were more likely to be unemployed and had lower levels of psychological wellbeing, the differences dissipated over time and both students’ groups had similar life satisfaction after 20 years of age (2016, p.993). This research alone reinforces the fluid nature of trajectories and the dangers of drawing ‘truth’ from time and sample limited data.

Whilst the direct impact of early school leaving is under dispute, economic and epidemiological studies illustrate the correlation between income deprivation and a higher prevalence of negative outcomes (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Sen, 1999). This further highlights the importance of this study examining educational privilege and disadvantage rather than fetishising and essentialising the phenomenon of ‘early school leaving’. Indeed, this research reinforces Smeyers and Depaepe’s view that early school leaving is; “an indication and origin of fundamental inequities” (2006; 8-9).

**Overview of the Findings**

The Equalities Literacy Framework has been developed and underpinned by the young people’s narratives from year one as shown in the table below.

**TABLE 2  
THE RESEARCH FINDINGS: KEY FACTORS IN EDUCATIONAL PRIVILEGE AND  
DISADVANTAGE AND ITS MANIFESTATION IN ESL**

Element of EQL	Individual	Family	Community	School	Society
Context and Lived Experience	Mental health Physical health Attitude to education and schooling	No. of home moves Wealth Stability Parental stability State of home Parental educational experiences	Socio economic status Opportunities for volunteering and work Community cohesion Community educational experiences	Size Quality Curriculae Pedagogy Inclusion policy Behaviour policy Results focus Strength of relationships with teachers Degree of support for learners needs Degree of bullying	Societal view of youth, education and schooling

				School's agency	
Positioning by others	N/A	Parental, sibling and wider family views of individual, education and school	Community and peer view of individual, family, education and school	Teacher and peer view of individual, family and community	Societal view of youth, education and schooling.
Technologies	Personal agency	Stereotypes, labelling, silencing, wilful blindness, social abjection, fear mongering, precarity, degree of attention and recognition given, rewards given, consequences to actions.			
Self-position	Victim Compliant Rebel Personal motivation, engagement, interest	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Trajectory	Degree of school enjoyment / completion / success / employment	Degree of mobility achieved for family / social reproduction of prior family status	Degree of mobility achieved for community / social reproduction of prior family status	Degree of success for school – graduations / grades achieved	Degree of social change or reproduction

This interplay of personal, family, community, school and social factors across the five elements of the Equalities Literacy Framework is resonant with the bioecological systems, life course stress processes and push / pull factorial analysis used by

McDermot, Donlan, and Zeffirelli in the USA (2019, p.270). Like them, we too find that these may provide a road map for explaining why students drop out, but cannot be used to create a heterogeneous understanding of 'a drop out' as no such cardboard cut out exists. This analysis also demonstrates the futility of 'blaming' one particular person or agency. It is not the young person's fault, nor the teachers', or parents'. Each and every aspect of society has some responsibility, and like all wicked issues (Grint, 2008) this is exactly what makes it so hard to tackle.

As a result of these narratives, we now understand a range of factors interplay in complex ways to affect the choices young people make about education. Whilst they can be understood as risk and protective factors, they cannot be used as a simple 'tick list' to deter young people from school leaving. Each young person will experience a different blend of privileges and disadvantages across the elements of the Equalities Literacy Framework, making each unique. As the young people seem to be telling us, a relational approach is the only way in which we can know them, their contexts, motivations and interests and the only way in which we can make education and learning meaningful for them again.

What has also become clear from this project is the macro context in which each group of young people is situated. It was striking that Norway as the most liberal of the three countries had no tolerance of early school leaving and strong welfare systems in place to ameliorate its impact. This contrasted with the UK as the most neo-liberal of the three countries, which does not measure Early School Leaving, and sends out community officers to find and return pupils to the very schools they have left. This spectrum of welfarism and its impact of Early School Leaving is shown in the table below.

**TABLE 3**  
**WELFARISM AND ITS IMPACT ON ESL**

<b>Political spectrum</b>	<b>Liberal</b>		<b>Neo-liberal</b>
<b>Country</b>	Norway	Denmark	UK
<b>Welfare approach</b>	Highly welfarist – all social issues addressed	Strong welfarism – principled but funding eroded	Weak welfarism – funding and empathy diminished
<b>Impact on ESL</b>	ESL considered impossible and all ESL pupils picked up by the welfare system	Unusual and unacceptable and support to reintegrate	Hidden issues, undocumented, ‘just deserts’ approach.

Educational disadvantage, as manifested in early school leaving is a ‘problem without passport’, affecting many countries and becoming a focus of policy measures across the Western World. Yet approaches to ‘prevent’ ESL remain individual, deficit and meritocratic (Clycq, Ward Nouwen, Vandembroucke, 2014 p.812; Smith and Skrbis, 2017). Further resources vary across countries depending on public tolerance of support for ‘drop outs’. This creates a global challenge that needs to be overcome through international dialogue with young people.

This Equalities Literacy Framework enabled the co-researchers to understand their own educational privileges and disadvantages, to holistically consider those of the young people they conversed with, and to conceptualise the systemic nature of changes needed to interrupt such inequity. We suggest the framework enables this to happen without blame, individualising, stereotyping and avoiding hegemonic neoliberal discourses. Further, the young people’s narratives have given clear indications of what they think we can do as a result of this nuanced understanding of their lives.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The themes that arose from the young peoples’ narratives show that a range of individual factors blend with home circumstances, parenting, schooling and community and societal factors to lead to a final trajectory. Each of these groups therefore has responsibility for addressing the issues raised. Taking each element of the framework in turn, the paper now explores the implications of these findings.

In terms of the context and lived experience, a range of issues were identified that challenge young people’s educational success from a very young age. Society has a responsibility to distribute resources appropriately in order to ameliorate the impacts of poverty and poor housing. Communities and parents have a responsibility to provide safe and nurturing environments for children to thrive in. These will both take large scale ideological and policy change to achieve.

When considering the positioning by others through technologies of oppression and liberation, a second ideological and behavioural shift becomes clear. The narratives showed that negative positions injure people and may result in negative psychological and behavioural responses. It is clear therefore that parents, teachers, communities and society at large needs to provide challenge and support to young people without negative positioning. A culture of mutual respect needs to be fostered in homes, communities and schools.

The findings from the self-positioning show just how important young people’s psycho-social responses are. They attitudes, choices and behaviours arise in response to the positions bestowed on them, for better or worse. Young people need support to make sense of the contexts and positions they experience, and their active choices in how to respond. This maybe a part of parenting or part of schooling. Arguably everyone is responsible for enabling young people to be aware of themselves and others, to make constructive choices, and to act on them more decisively.

Finally, the nuanced and complex interplay of factors that lead to outcomes for young people need further research and understanding. The extent to which they are determined by life circumstances is emerging from the field of epidemiology, qualitative research can help to reveal why such causality may

exist. This cannot, however, be removed from individual case study research showing how and when these trends are bucked. Young people, parents, teachers, communities and society need an understanding of what impacts on educational outcomes or we risk unconsciously perpetuating inequity, compliant through our ignorance.

Throughout the research process young people directly suggested improvements they thought would leverage equitable education and the co-researchers also drew out the implicit improvements possible from between the lines of the students' narratives. These relate mostly to changes that need to happen in schools, as young people often focus on those as sites of inequality, whereas this paper has taken a broader systemic and societal view. We do, however, advocate these recommendations to governments, policy makers, leaders, managers and practitioners who support young people. These fall into four areas:

### **Student-centred Learning Environments**

Young people want to experience asset based, meaningful, relevant, co-created, participative and flexible learning environments in formal and informal educational spaces. This would demand a loosening of curricular and pedagogical requirements, a focus on learning to learn rather than learning 'knowledge'. It would also demand a departure from standardised testing as the assumption shifts to uniqueness rather than uniformity.

### **Relational Approach**

Young people need and demand relationships with the people they live with and learn with. They want positive relationships with peers, families, educators and communities. Networks of people who respect them, value them for who they are, take an interest in them. Whilst a simple request, implementing this recommendation would involve a reinvestment in time and resources in educational settings.

### **A Critical Pedagogy**

The student-centred and relational approaches already identified are encapsulated within and extended through the notion of critical pedagogy. Working in a critically pedagogical way would require a fundamental power shift. Learning would occur with young people, grounded in their lives, enabling a critical, practical, experiential, dialogical, culturally sensitive, process of learning (Giroux, 2011; Smyth, 2011). This would require a fundamental disruption to the assumptions of the existing educational system.

### **Governance**

Facilitating these changes requires a revised governance of education. This would include a reduction in new public management and neo-liberalism and its manifestations in; measurement, control and centralism. Instead, there should be a reinvestment in professional autonomy, localism and practice-based evidence. Curriculum constraints could be loosened and teachers trusted to teach pupils appropriately according to their interests and needs in a critically pedagogical manner. Schools would adopt ways of working which resonated with and for the local community and drew them into the learning process. Teachers would demonstrate what they do works through practice based evidence rather than evidence based practice.

Along with these fundamental shifts, an economic reinvestment would be required in order appropriately resource schools. There would be enough space, furniture, books, teachers, support staff. Perhaps more fundamentally, cultural change would need to occur in order to create respectful community schools. Blaming discourses would be stopped and the community would hold itself accountable rather than teachers being held responsible for standardised results. A cooperative school council rather than a board of governors may help in shifting to a shared ownership of young people's educational outcomes.

Whilst extensive in their own right, these four changes are not enough. Consideration needs to be given to how everyone in society is given equitable access to resources, how all parents are supported to parent well, how communities become thriving places who care for one another and where people in society respect and care for one another. Whilst this maybe dismissed as a utopian dream it is a common sense and practical suggestion. The fact it seems utopian perhaps suggests how far we have slipped societally.

In addition to these advocations to the field of practice, the Equalities Literacy Framework can be used in a variety of forms by teachers, nurses, social workers and youth workers and others who support young people. As such we recommend four practical applications of this tool alone.

Firstly, practitioners and researchers need to understand the unique contexts and lives of the people they support. This is akin to cultural competence (Rathje, 2007; Like, 2011) and includes having an inequalities imagination (Hart, Hall, Henwood, 2002). We suggest this Equalities Literacy Framework is a useful tool around which to structure an implicit understanding of other people's lives. Secondly, practitioners need to understand the ways in which their life experiences and professional enculturation impacts on their choices and actions in practice (Bourdieu, 1999). We suggest the Equalities Literacy Framework is such a tool. In this project each researcher found the framework useful in understanding their personal educational biographies from a structure and agency perspective.

Thirdly, practitioners need to ensure they do not inadvertently create further marginalisation by treating people as the locus of the problem (Illich, 1971). Taking a broader view of the socio-cultural structures acting on individuals avoids this. Practitioners often talk about supporting others 'empowerment' (Illich, 1971; Friere, 1970; Maynard and Stuart, 2018) and of working in a 'critical pedagogical' way (Giroux, 2011; Smyth, 2011). The Equalities Literacy Framework supports these very approaches directly and indirectly.

Not only is 'Equalities Literacy' a key skill for practitioners, the concept has potential for direct work with people, particularly young people. The author has used the model within four different undergraduate teaching settings and found it a potent tool to develop self-awareness and collective understanding of in/equality. We suggest young people could benefit from using this tool in school settings in a process akin to 'conscientization' (Freire, 1974; Andrade and Morrell, 2008). The Equalities Literacy Framework has potential to increase their awareness, choices and action, to empower them to contribute to social justice within the classrooms and beyond, and perhaps even social change in the school system (Maynard and Stuart, 2019).

From a research perspective the Equalities Literacy Framework highlights the need for researchers to reflexively acknowledge their privileged position and understand how that interplays with the position of their participants. Methods such as the Indirect Approach, and Participatory Action Research may be used to co-create solutions to 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 herself, using youth narratives to successfully prosecute New York state for inadequate education of black youth (2017). Researchers have a moral obligation to lift their work to the macro level to support social justice at a systemic level.

This iteration of the Equalities Literacy Framework has reinforced the dynamic nature of educational success applicable to schools, further and higher education. It is a combination of contextual factors, lived experience, positioning and psycho-social response. Everyone in society is implicit; young people, parents, communities, teachers, other professionals and governments. They are also all implicit in the process, through policy, practice and personal beliefs and actions. There is therefore no single simple solution, rearranging classrooms will not work. This requires fundamental shifts in thinking and acting, manifest in multiple different small actions.

One further action research cycle remains where 30 co-researchers will work with 50-100 more young people. At the end of the project the team will have co-created a set of open access peer reviewed papers, teaching materials, research method materials and a book. We aspire for these young people's narratives to disrupt the dominant discourses and associated practices. We hope you will assist by considering the findings and their applicability to your own setting and its implications for your future research.

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