WHAT IS IT THAT WE WANT TO EDUCATE YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT?

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Abstract

This paper considers, what is it exactly that we want to educate young people about, and the kind of society we want to create and live in? The performance culture within the formal education system can lead to only focusing on the end result, (exam grades) and not the learning, that is, the importance of outcomes over process. Young people also need to learn about resilience, problem solving and independence. The authors argue the need to construct an education system designed for humanity, which is socially just. They consider if a young person will ever reach true self-actualisation equipped only with the knowledge imparted to them based on the 'national curriculum' delivered in a formal institution. Whilst academic knowledge is important, so are moral beliefs and values, with skills of problem solving and critical thinking. Do we want future generations to be masters of algebra or have the ability to show compassion, understanding, empathy, be socially just with a sense of identity, ultimately becoming active citizens? The authors argue that youth and community development workers with their skills of informal education, values, principles and methods of working, also need to be part of the equation in educating young people, to bring about change at a personal, cultural and structural level. By bringing formal and informal education together we can create a model that uses alternative methods, such as drama, as tools to provoke 'youth action'.

Key words: *performance culture, resilience, self-actualisation, academic knowledge, moral beliefs, values, critical thinking, active citizens, youth action, informal education, social justice, anti-oppressive practice, ideology, youth and community development, empowerment*

This paper is predominantly a literature review relating to the UK education system. To provide new evidence would require ***new*** education reforms to take place; this paper highlights the evidence that already exists, to call for a ***humanised UK education system for every person in society***. The introduction of the Education Act of 1944 in the UK made education compulsory up until the age of 15, making young people primarily dependent on their parents. This was a clear indication that ***youth*** was a time for education, rather than independence and working. The dictionary definition of education as a noun is: *the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction,* it is also referred to as *an enlightening experience*; these two explanations do not necessarily equal the same thing (Stevenson and Waite, 2011). Indeed, a teacher can impart information to their students in a very dreary, dull fashion and this is education, however it may not been considered an enlightening experience. It is therefore the pedagogy of education that we need to address in 2017. Education is at the core of society and its values (Stronge et al, 2007), it is a key element, which will determine the next generation of our countries, of our world. It is the foundations laid down during education that influence how young people perceive and approach their adult life. Educators, facilitators and teachers must use a combination of pedagogic strategies and consider how these strategies are implemented (Stronge et al, 2007) to create an appropriate and balanced onset to young people's educational journey. First world countries operate a national system to educate youth; these systems vary as each country must shape its education to be relevant to its community, culture and language (BBC News, 2017). These educational systems are in the main functionalist in their approach, operating to uphold capitalism, creating people to 'fit' into roles to maintain the status quo (Trueman, 2017).

Our performance-led culture within education which focuses and places emphasis on examination grades, may well prepare young people for their careers or the world of work (this could be debateable). However, they lack any form of spiritual education. They know nothing about the perennial debates surrounding our existence and the meaning of life. Michael Oakeshott, a British Philosopher, referred to literary classics as being the backbone of Western civilisation. Yet within the UK's national curriculum there is no general platform to portray images and ideas, which could be

developed from the world's greatest works of literacy and philosophical imagination. Young people leaving education, with little or no spiritual understanding, may struggle to find or make meaning of their lives. We should pioneer a holistic education that covers all aspects of an individual's development into becoming an ***active citizen***.

Education should be about the development of young people rather than bombarding youth with facts and information. *Pedagogy is about being in a relationship with a child* (Max van Manen, 1991:76). To facilitate active student learning, as opposed to promoting passivity and rote memorisation, is a difficult paradigm for some education professionals. It needs to be understood and put into practice for learning outcomes to improve (UNICEF, 2000). Encouragement is essential for the development of young people. However, to only focus on performance may be detrimental. The framework for the national curriculum states that: *teachers should set high expectations for every pupil*; *set targets which are deliberately ambitious* (Department for Education, 2013). Government papers refer to a curriculum that *promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and society* (Department for Education, 2013). How are we able to assess that young people have developed in these areas? We should not only use standardised tests to evaluate education but other, less tangible areas such as citizenship and behaviour should also be taken into consideration (DeKetele, 2000). The content of the national curriculum is a sound and solid foundation for young people, this is not under question. The delivery of the content and subsequent analysis of success however is!

The educational historian Brian Simon considered educational practice in England in the early 1980's. He titled his work *Why no pedagogy in England?* (Simon, 1981). In 2004, Robin Alexander concurred that there was *still no pedagogy in England* (Alexander, 2004: 19). There is evidence available of improvements in education (Cleveland, 2017), such as Shanghai in China, Korea and Singapore; they have all improved their levels of performance although they already ranked best in the world according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The UK's education system has been subject to periodic government reform since its creation (Gillard, 2017), yet it appears to have failed to create a young person-centred system. Every young person is unique and there is no one size fits all, ***quality*** education is often an individual perspective as the aspirations people have for their children, community and country differ (Beeby, 1966). If young people are leaving the education system without the life-skills required, then they are likely to end up on the margins society.

> *Education is also about the practical business of ensuring that young people receive the preparation they need to secure a good job and a fulfilling career, and have the resilience and moral character to overcome challenges and succeed.*
>
> (Gibbs, 2015)

Most important of all, we must ensure that more people have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in a demanding economy (Gibbs, 2015). We need to agree and unite on the desired outcomes for young people's education before we can propose how to reach them effectively.

There are many institutions across the world that analyse the performance of different education systems. For example, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) PISA tests. Their findings are presented by rankings based on an amalgamation of international tests and educational data. A report commissioned by the OECD titled 'Universal Basic Skills: What Countries stand to gain' found that Asian countries proved to rate the highest. The report ranks 76 countries based on the performance of students in maths and science, Finland was the best performing country in Europe ranking 6th place. Despite education being relatively successful in Finland, they are still looking to make reforms to improve the system by 2020! Within the same report the UK was ranked as 20th, we are the 6th richest country in the world (Cpag.org.uk, 2017) yet our performance in education does not reflect this. It has been suggested that top-performing Asian countries reflect a culture of respect within education (OECD, 2017), whereby teachers, students and parents all take

responsibility for education as they each value the importance of education. Performance-led culture results are often based on tests where students have memorised and regurgitated facts. Considering this, what are the benefits of such rote learning? UNICEF define life-skills as psycho-social and interpersonal skills used in every day interactions…not specific to getting a job or earning an income, such as assertion and refusal skills, goal setting, decision making and coping skills (Defining Quality in Education, 2000). In this case we should move away from educational systems relying on traditional exams or tests of facts towards the recognition of higher order thinking skills (Colby, 2000). A report from the education and publishing firm Pearson, noted that skills such as creativity and problem solving are harder to measure and grade than normal tests. Chief Executive of Pearson, John Fallon has suggested that education systems around the world could learn more from each other, just as healthcare has benefited from a globalised approach. The UK education system should consider schooling as a partnership of agencies working for young people and the community, involving parents in decision-making groups (Redding, 2000). There are examples of parental involvement being successful around the world; student newspapers in china encouraged both parents and young people to take the opportunity to read (Carron and Chau, 1996). Literacy programmes in Sri Lanka aimed to develop the skills of low-income, undereducated parents to enable them to assist in developing their children's language skills, also proved successful (Dharmadasa, 1996). Although different countries face different challenges we must heed notice of successes across the globe. James and Pollard (2011) argue that examination results should not be the main focus of education, they ask:

> *(Are they) good indicators of enduring understanding and capability in important domains of learning? (Do) they lead to personal fulfilment and well being? (Do) they contribute to the economic prosperity of the nation or to greater social justice and inclusion?*
>
> (James and Pollard, 2011: 281)

We need to humanise education to make it relevant and fair for everyone. Freire (2016) argued that the banking system of education did not transform into any form of critical thinking, he stated:

> *The humanism of the banking approach masks the effort to turn women and men into automatons – the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human.*
>
> (Freire, 2016: 74)

How can we really humanise education? By *Involving students…in educational decision-making, and listening seriously to their stories of experience as learners (are) essential first steps in developing education* (Niemi, Heikkinen and Kannas, 2012: 139). Ferguson, Hanreddy and Draxton (2011) support the idea of engaging with pupil voice and encourage teachers *to involve students in meaningful decision-making and dialogue* (20011: 55). On the other hand, *tokenism and exclusion may undermine their effectiveness* (Gilljam, Esalsson and Lindholm, 2010: 74). When considering different perspectives around education we can take elements from each to develop an effective model for all young people. Dewey (1897) believed that ***we learn from doing***, this theory should be considered against the current learning undertaken across the key stage areas. Rather than just telling young people what they need to know or learn, show them and enable them to experience the information. As individuals, we can all acknowledge that we have a better understanding and recollection of things we have physically taken part in, over things or events that we have merely been told about by someone else. In the mid-20th century Piaget (1936) was a leading influence in the research around young people's learning and cognitive development; observing how individual children interact with objects and experiences. Following Piaget (1936), the approach to education followed constructivist theories of learning, mainly the work of Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning depended on social

and cultural interaction, and the role of the adult who will facilitate the structured learning. These theories still hold relevance and significance when considering education in the 21st century and should be the basis of education.

> *What a child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore, the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it… For a time, our schools favoured the 'complex' system of instruction, which was believed to be adapted to the child's way of thinking…In offering the child problems he could handle without help, this method failed to utilise the zone of proximal development and to lead the child to what he could not do yet.*
>
> (Vygotsky, cited in Alexander, 2000: 431)

Alexander explains the *'zone of proximal development'* more simply as the *'zone of potential development'*.

A review of research for the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority (QCDA), conducted by CUREE in 2009, highlighted the importance of real life contexts, out of school learning, collaborative opportunities and pupils existing understanding throughout the stages of development, when developing or improving an effectively designed curriculum. We are all familiar with the saying, move with the times. Being an important conduit for individuals and society, education must constantly reflect and adjust according to pupils, culture, and, now, technology. *Technology has rarely been employed to promote critical thinking or higher order problem solving in everyday classroom settings* (Kim and Hannafin, 2011: 257). *Effective pedagogy recognised the significance of informal learning* (TLRP principle 8)[1] to be *at least as significant as formal learning* (James and Pollard, 2011: 299). Although constructivist theories are prominent in research, it is only a minority of teachers who are adhering to this theoretical standpoint in practice (Van Kuyk, 2009). Where constructivist ideas have underpinned practice, it has provided positive results (Van Kuyk, 2009). The current levels of assessment that young people endure throughout their schooling simply require them to recall information in the form in which it has been presented to them. Classroom research conducted by Wragg and Brown (2001) suggested that up to 60 per cent of the questions a teacher will put to their class are procedural rather than learning based. From this we may conclude that young people are not necessarily learning important skills such as critical thinking or higher order thinking. Freire suggested that *if educational programming is dialogical, the teacher-students also have the right to participate by including themes not previously suggested* (Freire, 2016: 120).

The emotional changes young people experience during adolescence are influenced by society's expectations and educational demands, as well as the biological/physical changes (Child of Our Time, 2017). The experiences young people individually experience shape the brain, just as the brain shapes experience (Child of Our Time, 2017). Within recent years it has been suggested that emotional and behavioural problems have risen dramatically at home and in schools for young people (Office for National Statistics, 2014). A child who misses positive stimulation or experiences chronic stress during their early years may have difficulty with psychosocial development later in life (McCain and Mustard, 1999). If a child is not in tune with their emotional intelligence, then they will find it difficult to comprehend the academic learning the teachers are trying to implement. Kwek (2009) argues that to attribute poor performance to certain characteristics like race, class, culture and family background is *deficit thinking*. To be emotionally responsive, people need to be aware of their own individual needs and that of others. They must possess skills such as empathy, compassion and self-awareness, which are all prerequisites of 'citizenship'.

[1] The teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP, 2003) was the most extensive programme of educational research ever undertaken in the UK.

Developing attachments to adults and peers, having empathy, communication skills and building and maintaining relationships are all required in the initial stages of development, without these children are unable to progress on to the next stage of their development, according to Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* (Maslow and Frager, 1987). Maslow (1970a) believed that students with low self-esteem were unlikely to achieve their full academic potential until their self-esteem improved. When considering early years learning we need to understand conceptual development and child development so learning is approached constructively (Siraj-Blatchford, 2008). Bowlby (1965) argues that children are pre-programmed to form attachments, the main adult figure in the child's life acts as a secure base that allows the child to explore the world and develop further social relationships. However, if that relationship is fragmented in anyway it could have serious developmental consequences to the young person likelihood of reaching their full potential. This can be linked to Bowlby's (1965) maternal deprivation hypothesis, whereby cognitive, emotional and social adversity plays a crucial part in a child's development. This more than likely results in reduced intelligence, risk taking behaviours, anxiety, depression, lack of affection for others and a total disregard for their own actions (Weare, 2009). We argue it is the responsibility of the education system to ensure that social and emotional competence is at the forefront of planning and thinking.

> *Emotional intelligence is highly influential as it appears that those that do well academically are more in tune to their social and emotional responses.*
>
> (Gardner et al, 1996)

Young people must be given the tools to understand and manage their own emotions to be successful in the school-learning environment. For example, learning to form relationships, problem solving, and the basic life skills required to succeed once leaving school. If a child is unsuccessful in forming attachments with adults, they may not be able to absorb the academia that is being robotically taught to them from the front of the class. UK schools have a duty of care to protect, nurture and provide a safe learning environment for young people to learn (anon, 2017). Through creating a nurturing environment, barriers to learning can be reduced (Binnie and Allen, 2008). It is essential that we act, to encourage educational reform and that all children are given the opportunity to succeed. According to the Office of National Statistics (2014) those who have low levels of education are five times more likely to be in poverty now than that of those with a higher level of education. The Office for National Statistics (2014) suggests that schools that have accommodated children within a nurturing environment have demonstrated that young people who have experienced emotional and social difficulties are more likely to have improved their emotional intelligence.

To combine informal and formal education together will create a balance of learning, teaching, affection and structure within a safe environment. Relationships are essential in order for young people to learn and achieve. When considering self-actualisation Maslow (1970a) argues that physical, emotional, social and intellectual qualities in individuals were essential for effective learning. Children and adults require a sense of belonging and need to trust the adults that they may be working with. Through creating a safe base to work in, the relationship building process can begin to grow; with teachers providing a nurturing and supportive role that young people can begin to observe and reflect on how they wish to behave and be perceived. The intention being that as the child's social and emotional skills develop, they will become more reactive and personally aware, respecting themselves and others, growing in confidence and developing a sense of belonging (Bowlby, 1968). This can be explored through many mediums to reconstruct particular social situations to provoke thought and critical thinking; for example, drama can be used to challenge and explore certain behaviours a young person may be experiencing. For instance, a young person may have difficulties relating to a parent suffering with substance abuse, causing them to become withdrawn and unable to verbally communicate; through role play in a classroom which resembles a safe environment they should feel safe to express their concerns. The teachers are then able to identify the problems and begin to work with both parent and pupil to lay the foundations of support and beginning to try and resolve the issue.

It is only when a young person's full range of needs are fulfilled can they reach their potential, self-actualisation. Youth and Community workers already use tools such as drama to tackle social problems, it is our belief that teachers should also be utilising such methods to deliver the curriculum alongside addressing any personal or social issues young people may experience.

> *The specific form that these needs will take will of course vary greatly from person to person. In one individual it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions.*
>
> (Maslow, 1943: 382–383)

Vygotsky (1978) believed that education 'generates' and 'leads' development, resulting in social learning. Hugh William (2007), senior educational psychologist, argues that learning and behaviour are two expressions of the same thing. *We acknowledge learning has taken place when we witness a change in the child's behaviour. Therefore, teachers share the contribution to the behaviour of pupils* (William, 2007: 5). Considering this education and educators have a vital role to play, enabling young people to develop not just academic knowledge, but moral beliefs, values and critical thinking. Children's time is crucial to their development, Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1986), Maslow (1954) all believe that childhood is a period of time whereby young people experience many different stages of the developmental process. Within the current UK education system teaching staff are bound by legislation, statistics and figures of where the school sits in the league table. Therefore, children are taught based on learning for exams; testing children as young as four on phonics and numeracy on a weekly basis. When the individual learning style is catered for children are proven to shine (Department for Education, 2014), but instead young people that may be disadvantaged are less likely to reach self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970a).

We believe that the UK education system should have the theory of transformative learning embedded within its curriculum. Transformative learning leads to critical reflection that challenges assumptions, it requires a trusting, social context for reflective discourse (Mezirow, 2000), simply meaning ***open dialogue***. Transformative learning contributes towards a readiness for change for young people (Taylor, 2000), enabling them to develop into active citizens and to promote youth action for social change. Cranton argues that through transformative learning, *actions and behaviours will be changed based on the changed perspective* (Cranton, (1974: 730). Schools should be able to offer young people the opportunities to learn about all aspects of life and should have a variety of resources and areas for young people to approach learning, both on and off site. *Top-down versus bottom-up initiatives or levels of decentralisation, are too narrow to effectively address the rapidly evolving and sprawling ecosystems that are modern educational systems* (Synder, 2013: 6). The fundamentals of our education system are no longer relevant, they remain as they did when constructed with industrialisation in mind (Robinson, 1999). It should not be about who is academic and who is not, we all have a skill base to work from; we all have qualities that are necessary and beneficial to society. Education within the UK is currently divided, with many 'free' schools and academies performing well without the jurisdiction of Local Education Authorities. Our 'fair' education system is at risk of returning to the tier system of previous times.

Education is vital to society and future economic growth; it is unfair that money should buy you a better quality of education. The 2010 Coalition government introduced 'free schools' in the Academies Act 2010. These community run schools do not have to follow the national curriculum but are open to Ofsted inspections and examining boards. This new schooling initiative may widen the divide, as there are concerns they may become prevalent in more affluent areas of society, it could also be perceived as the government accepting that state education is not effective and moving towards privatisation. We believe the UK education system is on a route of privatisation, in that academies are now managed by trusts, companies limited by guarantee (Friedman, 1955), a concept put forward to the US government in a paper titled, 'The Role of Government in Education' (Friedman, 1955). The correlation between educational inequality and income is considered higher in the UK than other

countries; we need to consider 'human capacity'. Academies were introduced in the 1980's and many have proved to be successful, the best performing academies serve disadvantaged communities; high academic standards are not reserved just for the wealthy. A young person's education today is based on the English Baccalaureate whereby pupils are required to study and sit exams in: maths, English, science (minimum 2), a humanity and a language (Department for Education, 2016). This combination of subjects is thought to provide young people with the best possible chance of being admitted into higher education! Not every individual is able or even desires to be academic, nor does society or the economy require it. The motivation for self-actualisation often leads people in different directions (Kenrick et al, 2010). As we continually analyse exam results year on year, calculating percentage increases in performance; what comparable research is done in the case of the skill requirement for economic growth and prosperity? This evidence could not be found!

The Innovative learning environments (ILE) study commissioned by the OECD identified seven learning principles which are fundamental to school and other learning settings as the building blocks of design, improvement and innovation (OECD, 2017). Embedding these principles throughout education and educational settings may encourage young people to thrive and flourish, developing and achieving beyond the confines and constraints or a rote-based system.

Principle 1: *The learning environment recognises the learners as its core participants, encourages their active engagement and develops in them an understanding of their own activity as learners*. The environment must be learning focused not result driven.

Principle 2: *The learning environment is founded on the social nature of learning and actively encourages well-organised co-operative learning*. An open environment to create interaction between learners.

Principle 3: *The learning professionals within the learning environment are highly attuned to the learners' motivations and the key role of emotions in achievement*. Emotions are integral to the success of learning.

Principle 4: *The learning environment is acutely sensitive to the individual differences among the learners in it, including their prior knowledge.* Young people are individuals, there is no 'one size fits all', learning should be personalised.

Principle 5: *The learning environment devises programmes that demand hard work and challenge from all without excessive overload.* Encourage students without making targets too high.

Principle 6: *The learning environment operates with clarity of expectations and displays assessment strategies consistent with these expectations; there is a strong emphasis on formative feedback to support learning.* Young people need to be assessed to aid their development; they require feedback rather than a pass or fail.

Principle 7: *The learning environment strongly promotes 'horizontal connectedness' across areas of knowledge and subjects as well as to the community and wider world.*

With an abundance of research, information and examples of successful education systems in other countries that it seems absurd that the UK is not leading the way in education, given the many educational reforms the varying governments have implemented. We need a political consensus that regardless of whichever party holds power that they will consider education in equal importance. The UK has brought in serial numbers of 'disconnected' educational reforms, yet little has changed (Robinson, 2007). Education should be inclusive for all; high quality physical, psychosocial and service environments create the platform for effective learning to begin (UNICEF, 2000). If we consider the many perspectives and theories presented, i.e. Dewey, Vygotsky and Mezirow, they all lead us to the same conclusion; that education must take a more prominent and defined role in all aspects of a young people's lives. We suggest a holistic approach, bringing together many educators and professional in a 'community hub'. A community approach to education would encompass all areas of a young person's life, not only their academic abilities and performance. International advice for the UK demonstrates success is achieved when parents, school providers and academics work together in a thoughtful long process (The Daily Telegraph, 2013).

Constructive Education

Education should be delivered in a bright open environment and especially outside, rather than just a formal institution. Community projects, taking young people out of the classroom and into the community to learn was proven to be successful[2]. The young people were connected to their local histories, social relations and economic structures (McDonough and Wheeler, 1998). Learning environments should be open plan, vibrant areas that promote happiness and create a conducive platform for learning. This is currently perceived as informal learning. We should follow a similar approach to that already set for the early years foundation stage (EYFS), allowing time and facilities for young people to make their own choices regarding their learning rather than being presented with information. Class sizes should not exceed more than 15 young people per class (Willms, 2000), as learning should be individual to students. Nowadays is age the best way to stream or segregate young people? We are unique human beings that should not be defined by the date of our manufacture (Robinson, 1999). We suggest categorisation by young people's individual interests and types of learning such as: kinaesthetic, auditory and visual. This could mean having children of many different ages working together as opposed to year groups. Investing in teachers continued professional development, rather than inset days, reduce the actual teaching hours so teachers can enrich and update their knowledge on a more regular basis. Effective professional development does not have to be formal off-site training, dialogue and reflections with colleagues, peer and supervisor observations and teachers keeping journals are all effective ways for educators to advance their knowledge (Defining Quality in Education, 2000). As learning would take place in ***a community hub*** it would provide opportunities for intergenerational work with young people learning form older more experienced members of society. An initiative like this would improve relations between the younger and older generation, whist providing new genuine learning opportunities. There should be an equal balance of informal and formal education, this would allow for a more relaxed environment, reducing pressure on educators and young people.

The content of the curriculum should include literacy, numeracy, life-skills, peace education, science and social studies (UNICEF, 2000). The Arts Council England claim that research has shown that there are *disparities of opportunities* for young people and that this prevents many from experiencing the *pleasure* and *life-changing skills* that art and culture offer (Arts Council, 2017). The Arts Council aim is to make the arts available to all young people. This theme should run throughout our education programme, rather than being operated as an outreach project. We can combine informal education in the form of arts, culture, music and applied theatre alongside formal education in the form of essential skills such as literacy and mathematics. Incorporating applied theatre into the essential curriculum would engage young people emotionally and cognitively, and encourage them to consider the perspectives of others. *In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour, in play it is as though he were a head taller himself* (Vygotsky, 1978:102).

We draw on a case study of a piece of drama created by a small group of 'youth work and community development' students at De Montfort University. This work addressed the topic of domestic violence and told the story of abuse and how it can escalate. The 'skit' was performed through the art of mime and portrayed the story of a young woman suffering abuse and the barriers between the social help available. The piece of drama was extremely emotive and well received by both students and academics at De Montfort University. It is our hope through the performance being shown in youth and community groups, it can raise awareness of the plight of women. This provides us with the evidence that learning, particularly social learning that relates to young peoples' compassion, understanding, empathy and sense of identity, can be undertaken through the use of dramatic praxis to encourage critical consciousness (Boal et al 2008). Critical consciousness allows the individual and groups to withstand the oppression they might be facing. The development of forum theatre (Boal, 1970) is a way of reaching out to marginalised groups of disadvantaged young people who are experiencing social problems, to engage them to understand the issues that are impacting on their lives

[2] The Social Forestry, Education and Participation (SFEP) project in Thailand where community members became informal educators of the young people on a community project (Defining Quality in Education, 2017)

and their education. Empowering young people to take social action, through dramatic praxis (Freire, 2016) and to become aware of each other's individual plight. Physical theatre is informative and enhances the individual's ability to unpick political issues, which help them to identify with the oppressed and the oppressor, through storytelling and the dialogue process. This in turn, encourages a thought provoking process of conversations around current issues that people are experiencing.

Informal education and youth and community development work, an alternative approach

We see youth and community development work as being synonymous with informal education. We want to focus much more now on the ethos, nature and methods of informal education, as an alternative approach, and what it has to offer in educating young people and the kind of society we want to live in.

Historically in the UK, youth and community development has its roots in informal education (Davies, 1999a, 1999b). Jeffs and Smith (2011) define informal education as:

> *A spontaneous process of helping people to learn, through conversations and the exploration and enlargement of experience. Its purpose is to cultivate communities, associations and relationships that make for human flourishing…the purpose of informal education is no different to any other form of education. In one situation we may focus on, say, healthy eating, in another family relationships. However, running through all this is a concern to build the sorts of communities and relationships in which people can be happy and fulfilled. John Dewey once described this as educating so that people may share in a common life*.

They argue that informal educators work with and should be seen as natural companions who engage with and support other professionals, like teachers in schools. They will spend a lot of time observing and developing a detailed understanding of how teachers and other staff operate, their situation and 'where they are coming from'. They will understand the tremendous pressures on teachers to achieve targets, good test scores and results and high rankings in league tables. Such pressures on teachers achieving outcomes, limits their time to engage in a more student cantered approach and the important learning process involved in developing relationships. Working in an educational environment that is target driven is short-sighted and limits the broader educational needs required to understand and develop a more 'rounded' student, enabling them to flourish (Jeff and Smith, 2011).

Youth and community development workers start from the premise and understanding that the world that we live in is unjust and unequal. This is supported by a recent Oxfam report (2017, which highlights that just eight men own the same wealth as almost half (3.6 billion) of the world's poorest population. A philosophical cornerstone of youth and community development work and informal education, is the notion of anti-oppressive practice.

Anti-oppressive practice is a philosophical approach, which is very much about social justice, social action and social change, and is in tune with, and draws on, Marx's philosophy and the notion of praxis. Anti-oppressive practice is about being aware and analysing the power differentials that exist in society. Furthermore, with this understanding we need to demonstrate a commitment towards challenging the wider injustices in society and work towards a model of empowerment and liberation. A pre-requisite of anti-oppressive practice is critical analysis and there is a need for us to question and challenge societal norms and taken-for granted assumptions about the world that we live in.

For Chouhan (2009:61), Anti-oppressive practice is based on the understanding and belief that:

- *society creates divisions and people also divide themselves;*
- *some groups of people, whether consciously or unconsciously, believe that they are superior to other groups of people in society; and*
- *such beliefs are embedded deep within structures and institutions, in culture and in relationships with each other.*

Critical thinking and analysis (is a pre-requisite) and is essential for practitioners to work in an anti-oppressive way. They must explore their own value base and power position but also:

- *identify and challenge assumptions*
- *recognize the importance of the social, political and historical context of events, assumptions, interpretations and behavior*
- *imagine and explore alternatives*
- *constantly engage in reflective practice which questions and challenges reality, claiming universal explanations and truths.*

Indeed, working towards equality and social justice is critical in creating healthier people and society, enabling people to engage as active citizens and to flourish and reach their full potential. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Picket in their book: 'The Spirit Level' (2010), argue that societies which have a bigger gap between the rich and poor are generally more unhealthy and unhappy, compared with those with a more equal distribution of incomes. The latter societies have better health, fewer social problems such as murder, violence, imprisonment, drug abuse, teenage births, mental illness, obesity, and others. The Scandinavian countries and Japan, who have low income inequality, were at the top, compared to countries whose income inequality was much higher, which were at the bottom, such as Singapore, USA, Portugal and UK. Societies with low income inequality are generally more cohesive than ones in which the gap between the rich and poor is greater. It is a myth that making a country more equal also makes it poorer. Here, the common-sense belief is that by stopping money going to the rich, they cannot create wealth so that it can trickle down to help the poor. However, figures from Inequality Briefing (2015), shows that across the world, the major and leading economies who are more unequal, are no richer than the more equal ones. The report suggests that:

> *policies, which are designed to make a society more equal, will not make it poorer…instead, more equal countries are just as rich (as) total income are shared more evenly between rich and poor.*
>
> (Inequality Briefing, 2015)

The widening gap between the rich and poor, where groups feel they do not have a stake in society and are not listened to, feel socially excluded and disenfranchised, can result in negative consequences for society, with the extreme being that of rioting. This was evident in the riots that took place in some English cities in 2011.

Herriot (2012) argues that the English summer riots of 2011 were symptomatic of the historical widening gap of poverty, the government's social and economic programme of austerity and the continued demonisation of young people in the media. This was reflected in social policy, which was essentially about state control.

Young people are important, for any government and society, as they represent the future. The state wants them to flourish but at the same time there is also a tension here. The state also recognises that young people growing up are also going through a turbulent period of adolescence. This tension creates internal stresses for young people, in terms of changes taking place personally and also external pressures on them made by the demands of conforming to society, in terms of their behaviour and expectations. Such turbulence and upheavals in the lives of young people can manifest in negative ways in society, for example alcohol and substance misuse, homelessness, loneliness and isolation, mental health difficulties, bullying, unemployment, teenage pregnancy and suicide, (Gilchrist, Jeffs & Spence, 2001; Wood & Hine, 2009; Furlong, 2013).

A further tension exists for the state. The state recognises that young people play an important key role in the functioning of capitalist society, in terms of labour, but at the same time state policy has also been one of needing to control them because of a fear of young people, (Davies, 1999a; Davies, 1999b; Wood and Hine, 2009).

Anti-oppressive practice is at the core of youth and community development work and is very much in tune philosophically with working towards a more socially just and egalitarian society. So what are the skills, knowledge, understanding and values that youth and community development work practitioners bring in working with young people and communities?

The values and principles of working are also embedded in the National Occupational Standards of Youth Work (NYA 2004; Life Long Learning, 2008) and Community Development Work (FCDL, 2015). These standards are set out and agreed by UK national professional bodies and regularly reviewed. For the National Youth Agency, the professional values and principles are clearly stated in the 'Ethical Conduct in Youth Work' document (2004). The ethical principles include:

- *Treating young people with respect*
- *Respect & promote young people's rights to make their own decisions and choices*
- *Promote and ensure the welfare and safety of young people*
- *Contribute towards the promotion of social justice*

(Chouhan, 2014:391)

Similarly, if we look at the Community Development Work, National Occupational Standards (2015), we see a shared ethos, values and approach to work with adults and groups. This includes:

- *Equality and anti-discrimination*
- *Social justice*
- *Collective action*
- *Community empowerment*
- *Working and learning together*

(Chouhan, 2014:391)

We can see that social justice in mentioned in both policy documents and we want to explore and develop this further. We mentioned earlier that as educationalist and youth work practitioners, we start from the premise that the world that we live in is unjust and unequal and that inequalities therefore exist in our society. Working towards social justice is important because the process and impact of prejudice and discrimination can be extremely negative on the lives individuals and groups. Allport's

(1954) work on the nature of prejudice, reminds us of the shocking consequences that prejudice can have, in terms of our behaviour and actions towards other people, if left unchecked.

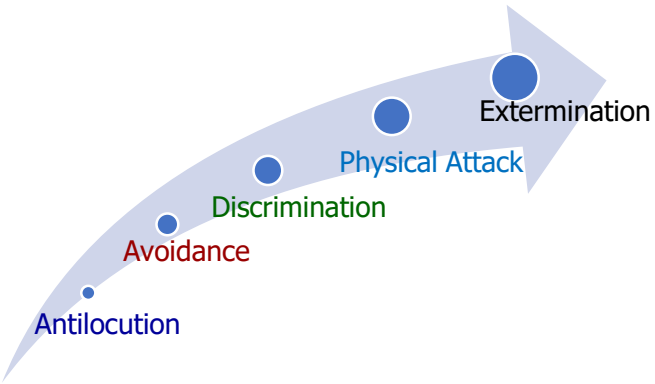


Figure 1. Allport, (1954): Prejudice into Discrimination, (cited in Chouhan, 2014:392)

Behaviour such as making disparaging comments about a person, or group of people, or a 'simple' joke, or talking negatively about a person or group of people, who are perceived as the 'other', can result in them being avoided by those in power. This can lead to the 'other' being discriminated against, with barriers being created and access to services being denied, or being prevented from fully participating in society. Finally, this can ultimately lead to the 'other' experiencing violence, being physically attacked and in extreme cases, exterminated by the powerful group. In the case of the latter, we have witnessed the 'ethnic cleansing' with the conflict in Eastern Europe, in the former Yugoslavia and the genocide of Serbians by the Bosnian army, between 1992-1995. (Holocaust Museum Houston, 2014)

We discussed earlier the need for practitioners to have an understanding of how oppression and power relations operate in society. Following the above, we want to examine and analyse oppression further by drawing on Thompson's (2016) PCS model of oppression and the interrelationship of oppression at the *Personal*, *Cultural* and *Structural* levels.

The P is the Personal Level and represents the individual's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour; how people regard and treat others. The C is the Cultural Level and represents the assumed consensus about what is 'true', 'right', 'good' and 'normal'; commonly accepted codes of conduct. The S is the Structural Level and represents the structures and institutions within society, which act to perpetuate divisions, prejudice and discrimination.

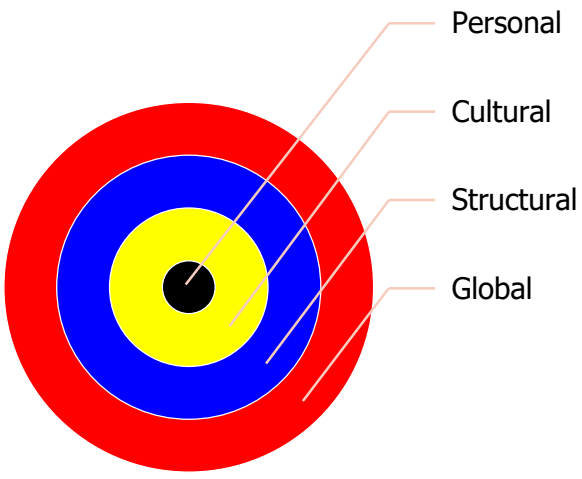


Figure 2. Thompson's (2016:36) PCS Model (adapted)

However, we also suggest there should be another outer level. The G Level is the *Global Level* and represents the how our actions and reactions are growingly influenced by events thousands of miles away. This is increasingly pivotal in a globalised world, as time and space have been conquered. (Hall et al, 1993)

Social learning theory, such as the powerful processes of internalisation and socialisation, help us to understand how beliefs and ideas become normalised and to be accepted as 'natural', 'normal' and 'true'. Marx's concept of ideology, together with his idea of false consciousness helps us to understand how the status quo is legitimised and maintained. Indeed for Thompson (2016), ideology is the 'glue' that binds the PCS model. Ideological oppression creates the illusion that this dominant capitalist worldview is the only one that exists. (Berger, 1966; Bilton et al, 1996) Having unconsciously assimilated and accepted the dominant values of society, we internally validate them as our own. These values are then used to guide and direct our behaviour and actions towards others. (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Chouhan, 2014)

There is also a parallel between Marx's notion of ideology and 'false-consciousness' and Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony'. The idea of hegemony enables the bourgeoisie to gain full from society of their actions. It is the relation of domination, by consent, rather than coercion, of one group over another through political and ideological leadership. By the bourgeoisie offering limited concessions to the proletariat, it softens their perceived exploitation and experience, thereby maintaining the status quo.

Freire (2016) argues that the institution of education, which operates at a structural level, is critical in the role it plays in the development of the child. The child's ideas and beliefs will be shaped through the processes of socialisation and the dominant worldview and curriculum presented, internalised. Education needs to move away from this 'banking concept', which he sees simply as a process of 'depositing' information into the minds of students, where they learn facts and figures, which are then regurgitated as and when required. He argues that the 'banking' concept is a 'functionalist' approach to education, which is very much about social control, Such an approach ensures that people are socialised within the dominant ideology of society; educated and trained to fit into the needs and roles required to maintain a capitalist society. (Parsons, 1964; Chouhan, 2009)

Freire (2016) argues that we should 'educate' students, engaging with them to also ask and understand the 'why'. Such a process in which students understand the world through questioning, or 'problem posing', and challenging the validity of information they are presented with, is critical in students achieving a level of critical consciousness. Similarly, Young (1999) argues that we should educate and engage young people to become 'philosophers', to question themselves and the world that they live in:

> *This makes youth work an exercise in moral philosophy insofar as it enables and supports young people to examine what they consider to be 'good or bad', 'right or wrong', 'desirable or undesirable' in relation to self and others – 'What sort of person am I?' 'What kind of relationships do I want?' 'What kind of community/society do I want to live in?' Fundamentally, youth work confronts Socrates' question, 'How should one live?' which is both singular and plural in the sense that it asks, 'How should I live?' as well as, 'How should anyone live?' (Williams, 1993). Such an activity demands young people's voluntary participation since moral philosophising cannot be absent minded or mechanistic, and neither can it be hidden or coerced. Participation in moral philosophising requires that: Youth work's purpose as well as its processes is made explicit to young people.*
>
> (Young, 1999:3)

Freire (2016) identifies three levels of consciousness in his work. 'Magical consciousness' describes those people who are passive and unaware of their situation. They believe their situation is static and will not change. The 'naive consciousness' are people that are aware of their problems and difficulties. However, they do not make the connection, (or perhaps even unwilling to), or able to relate their

circumstances to the outer world. Finally, there is 'critical consciousness', where people are aware of their situation and that the structures of society are unjust; the resulting discrimination produced, impacts on them negatively in terms of the way they think and feel about themselves and their lives. It is this awareness of their condition that will lead to a collective action for change. (Beck and Purcell, 2010)

As practitioners, we need to 'educate', engaging in a dialogue with young people, enabling and working with them to achieve this level of critical consciousness, so that they have the tools to transform their own world

For Freire (2016), understanding and identifying power relations is critical in guiding and supporting our interventions in working with young people, groups and communities. Equally as important for Freire (2016) are the participants we work with, their ideas, experiences, learning and agenda, should also be taken into account. Practitioners should not impose their values and worldview on the people they work with. He considered this as harmful to the participants and termed this 'cultural invasion'. Equally, practitioners should not be neutral in a society where oppression exits, as this would be seen as supporting the status quo and colluding indirectly with the oppressor.

Practitioners therefore need to have an understanding of themselves and their own values, constantly reflecting and engaging critically with the world. Only then can they be in a position to empower the individuals and groups they work with; by the collective voicing of universal need and the elimination of barriers, which obstruct social justice, respectful treatment and equal rights.

Conclusion

It is therefore our role as educational practitioners, whether as teachers in schools, or youth and community development workers, to act as agents of change, to 'educate', to support, advocate and empower the lives of young people and the groups we work with, to make a difference to their lives by educating them to reflect and question social reality and engage in critical thinking. As practitioners, we need to be honest, open and transparent, developing an 'education' which starts from where young people are at, identifying their needs, not imposing our value base and the needs of society. Such an education will enable young people to become more creative, critical and imaginative and flourish. Not only does such an education and approach create a more fully 'rounded' human being, but also one in which the education of the young person, also works toward creating a more equal and socially just society.

We therefore argue that informal education, as practiced by youth and community development workers, is the 'alternative' education that we need to develop and work with young people, alongside the formal school curriculum. Such an approach and process will not only transform the lives of young people and enable them to flourish, but also work towards making our society more socially just and equal. Ultimately, we will create a humanised education system that promotes equality.

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