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ARTICLE

Refusing the Gift? Curriculum, Pedagogy and Early School Leaving in Ireland

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Introduction

This paper explores students' resistance to schooling and attempts to identify some of the factors contributing to that resistance and the efficacy of attempts to overcome it. It draws on Bourdieu's theoretical framework to locate that resistance within the *habitus* of the student concerned. The concept of *habitus* is analysed below, but the paper is founded on the premise that *habitus* cannot be fully described in quantitative terms and that an effort of social imagination is required to interact with it. The device chosen here for this work is that of metaphor. The paper estimates the value of a metaphor to provide a new lens for analysing a problem of practice. The metaphor is that of education as a gift and the problem is the rejection of that gift by a significant number of young people to the extent that some of them break all connection with the formal education system at an early age.

The Metaphor of the Gift

A gift is a product of generosity. It does not require payment or reciprocation. It enriches both donor and recipient. It symbolises love and care. This is the colloquial understanding of the term *gift*. This simple description is challenged, however, by the work of anthropologists and sociologists as discussed below. On a certain view, education can seem to fit quite well with this simple conceptualisation of *gift*. Education is regarded as a good. It increases a student's store of knowledge, facilitates development, and increases the agency of the recipient. It is offered to students by dedicated teachers who express their care and concern for them and are rewarded by student interest and commitment. This is an idealised view, however, which is not always reflected in reality. Why do some students, in a manner that appears contrary to their own self-interest, reject the gift of education by removing themselves from the formal educational process, either physically or by withholding attention, involvement, or effort? Willis (2000, p. 41) describes those who leave early as "tumbling out of school"; others "hang in" simply marking time or engaging in the constant skirmishes with authority implied by membership in school counter-culture (Willis, 1977).

Newberg (2006) offers us a more complex and nuanced version of the process involved in offering, accepting or rejecting the gift of education. He draws on the work of Marcel Mauss, who theorised the process of gift exchange from a sociological point of view. Mauss suggests that giving a gift is never a purely philanthropic process but involves an expectation of reciprocation and establishes a relationship of obligation. Newberg documented the process whereby scholarships to secondary and higher education were offered by a philanthropic benefactor to disadvantaged and disaffected young people in Baltimore. He explored the reasons why some of the beneficiaries were better able, while others were unable, to take advantage of this gift and, in turn, to pay it back in terms of making a difference to their communities. The Maussian analysis of gift giving envisaged it as a process that always involved exchange. Accepting a gift carries with it the implication of subsequent reciprocation, implicating the recipient in a complex process of obligation and expectation. Newberg notes that

Gift-giving engenders an asymmetrical relationship between the giver and the recipients of the benefactor's magnanimity. The scales are out of balance and and, from the recipient's perspective, the debt may seem unpayable. (p. 30)

Newberg demonstrates that a wide range of factors comes into play in determining whether intended recipients can accept gifts and use them advantageously. Most starkly, he notes that, of the original 112 students in the programme, five were murdered in drug-related incidents. This is an unusually graphic example of education's role as *superstructure*, subordinate in importance to socio-economic conditions. However, as Gramsci (1971) reminds us, *superstructure* is critically important in maintaining hegemony or persistence of unjust situations by making these situations appear natural and inevitable. The notion of education as hegemonic appears at odds with a view of education as a gift. Newberg argues that philanthropy should not be seen as the giving of alms, but as "doing the right thing to make a difference" (p. 198).

The Study

This paper explores whether the concept of education as gift is robust enough to extend to state provision of education to

secondary-level (high school) students, usually catering for students in the 12-18 age range. It reports on an empirical study which compared the effectiveness of four Irish secondary schools in retaining students for the full six-year secondary-school programme. The study was carried out during session 2004-2005 and was supported by a scholarship grant from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Each of the schools was designated *disadvantaged* by the Irish government's Department of Education and Science (DES). Retention data for the schools were compared with national statistics (DES, 2005) and with locally based studies (Fleming and Murphy, 2000; Duffy and Regan, 2003), and an attempt was made to identify those factors which enabled some schools to be more successful in retaining students for the full programme.

The study involved qualitative analysis of small-group interviews with students in the 14-15 age range (second year secondary school) and in the 17-18 age range (fifth year). These interviews were contextualised by reference to interviews with teachers and principals (head teachers) in the same schools and to quantitative data regarding curricular options, school size and facilities, parental employment and parental education. The focus group interviews sought to explore students' experience of curriculum, the factors which had facilitated or prevented their engagement with learning and the curricular features which had motivated their persistence within the school system. The principal concern of this paper is with the process of accepting or rejecting the gift. The structure follows the pattern of Newberg's analysis but uses a somewhat different theoretical framework, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and, in particular, on his concept of *habitus*.

The Nature of the Gift

The process of gift-giving is conceptualised here using a framework derived from the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu 1990) and extended by critical commentators on his work (Bohman, 1999). Bourdieu asserts that gift-giving and receiving are not simply rule-bound, ritualistic processes and notes the relationship between gift-giving and asymmetrical power relations. Bohman phrases it thus: "For a better endowed giver, an exchange can be a means to impose a strict relation of hierarchy and debt upon the receiver" (p. 131).

In the case discussed by Newberg, the giver was a philanthropist, but in the case analysed here, the giver can be regarded as the State (the provider and funder of public education) or as the school and the individual teachers who mediate the actual educative process. Education plays a central role in the bourgeoisie's ability to present its domination as natural and to persuade the dominated groups that the interests of the bourgeoisie are those of society as a whole. The State can either *tame* the influence of the bourgeoisie or collude with it in advancing its agenda. Education can be considered an instrument of hegemony when the values and culture of the dominant class are presented as disinterested knowledge and embedded in consciousness as national or universal values. Such a gift is more akin to a poisoned chalice. Bourdieu (1990, p. 140) points out that "institutionally organized and guaranteed misrecognition" is the basis of gift exchange, and this appears to apply with particular poignancy to the State's gift of education.

Apple describes how a coalition of apparently disparate interests acts to achieve what he calls a "new hegemonic accord" (Apple, 2000, p.30). This hegemonic accord "combines dominant economic and political elites intent on 'modernizing' the economy, white working-class and middle-class groups concerned with security, the family and traditional knowledge and values, and economic conservatives" (p. 30). This is achieved by an emphasis on markets (including educational markets), free competition, private ownership and profitability through which the citizen is constructed as a "free" consumer, rather than as "situated in structurally generated relations of domination" (p. 30). In an earlier work, Apple (1990) develops the argument that hegemony is perpetrated specifically through curriculum, since reproduction of inequalities is accomplished through the role of schools as preservers and distributors of symbolic property, or cultural capital (pp. 3-13). The most highly-valued form of symbolic property distributed through the education system is the abstract, de-contextualised knowledge represented by the subject-based elite curriculum. Elite curricula world-wide appear to have remarkably similar characteristics and an epistemological base which can be described as academic rationalist. This is the gift which is offered to all, and failure to do so would be seen as discriminatory if a less-valued gift were to be offered to less advantaged students.

Giving the Gift

There was a realisation by schools where the interviews for this research were carried out, involved in "the sincere fiction of a disinterested exchange" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 104) that the academic curriculum did not constitute a complete education, and the terms *balance* and *holistic* were frequently used;

The aim of the curriculum in Rivermount is not merely to teach the subjects on the curriculum well, but also to be concerned with the holistic development of each and every pupil, the preparation of pupils for life and with the transmission of culture, heritage and values. ... One of our major curricular aims is to empower and enable students to be adaptable, flexible and creative. We will also, as part of our curriculum, aim to empower pupils to learn, to think critically, to become autonomous self-confident people, and to respect others. (New Teachers' Handbook, p. 3, Rivermount^[1]).

Most of the school personnel interviewed spoke of the importance and motivating power of including practical subjects in the programme, although this was frequently qualified by the phrase, "for the weaker students."

It is not just the possession of resources that confers power on the gift-giver, but also the timing of the gift and the manner of its giving. Bourdieu (1977) states it thus:

We know, for example, how much advantage the holder of a transmissible power can derive from the art of delaying transmission and keeping others in the dark as to his ultimate intentions. (p. 188)

If education is considered as a "transmissible power," a particular sort of pedagogy is implied, different from what might be implied by considering education as transaction or as transformation.

The manner in which teachers and principals spoke of the educational programmes on offer in their schools was an indication of their recognition of a mismatch between gift and recipients. In an attempt to rectify this, all of the schools in the study offered at least one alternative curricular programme in addition to the mainstream Junior and Leaving Certificate (Established). Whitefields^[2] was constrained by reasons of size and offered only one alternative programme, as the official programme, to all senior students. The alternative programmes were characterised by greater emphasis on practical and active learning and, usually, by the use of a greater range of assessment modes and techniques. The alternative programmes were, however, of lower status within the schools and sometimes provided diminished progression opportunities. For example, students following the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme cannot proceed directly to higher education but may go into employment or go on to higher education via a more circuitous route through vocational programmes.

When schools offer alternatives to students, they appear to be providing choice. The alternatives may be offered, however, in such a way as to constrain the choices of students and their families to the extent that they do not recognise the existence of alternatives. When asked about their decisions to follow the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), some students seemed to feel that it was the only programme available to them:

Amber: Yeah, it's normal, it's just like being in a normal class (3rd year JCSP student, Castle^[3], Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

Sean: Well, what other courses is there? (3rd JCSP student, Monastery^[4], Voluntary secondary school, boys, suburban.)

[Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) students] take advice from the Guidance Counsellor which I would disagree with. ... because I find that I am getting the weaker students and I have a big problem with that ... the students are telling me that they are not able for it. (Teacher, Tower, community college, rural town)

The better students do LCVP, the remainder do ordinary Leaving Cert., the less academic do LCA. (Principal, Monastery, Voluntary secondary school, boys, suburban)

There is evidence from other studies (e.g., Nolan, 2005) that parents are seldom involved in decisions to opt for the newer senior-cycle programmes, especially Leaving Certificate Applied.

Studies by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (Smyth, 1999) suggest that the timing of decisions regarding higher- or lower-level courses is important and that delaying the process can encourage greater uptake of higher-level courses.

The Nature of the Gift, Cultural Capital and Social Capital

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides us with an important tool of analysis for investigating the process of offering, accepting, or rejecting gifts. Cultural capital in its tangible form is represented by books and other means of accessing knowledge. Its intangible forms also include *dispositions*--attitudes and ways of thinking which predispose one to act in particular ways. In particular, it includes those attitudes and dispositions which enable a learner to believe in the importance of the *game* of education to the extent of being taken in by it and therefore "do studentship" (Bloomer, 1997, p. 137) in such a way as to fit in with the expectations of the school and the curriculum makers. Education is an intangible, abstract good and can only be accepted and utilised if the potential recipients first possess the necessary resources, or cultural capital, to recognise the nature and value of the gift and to put it to use for their benefit. Education is not a product that can be transferred *holus-bolus*, as it were. It is an invitation to take part in a transactional or transformational process whose outcome at the individual level is as yet undefined. One's *habitus*, that is one's way of thinking, acting and seeing the world, limits one's ability to recognise and utilise the gift and, at the same time, is modified in some way by accepting it. Reay (1998) notes that, while middle-class mothers' involvement in their children's education is concerned with preserving *habitus*, working-class mothers are involved in the much more difficult task of transforming *habitus*. Similarly, schools catering for large numbers of working-class and poor children are challenged by the task of providing education in a form which allows for the transformation of *habitus*. Viewed from this perspective, equality in education involves a great deal more than equity of access or equality of provision. Reay (2004, p. 432) argues that *habitus* is strongly *classed*, that is, one's *habitus* contains a significant number of features which are shared with others from a similar class position. While noting the existence of features unique to individual and family *habitus*, she notes that we can speak of "classes of *habitus*" as well as "the *habitus* of classes" *Habitus* is multi-faceted and perhaps impossible to describe completely. The shared features of students' *habitus* and the strength of the sharing may be at variance with the assumed values and qualities that underpin centrally defined curricula. The implications of this are considered further below.

***Illusio* and Being Taken in by the Game**

Rather than conceptualising education as a gift in itself, it is more useful to view education as an invitation to participate in a game. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 117) use game theory to analyse how actors interact within a field. Each brings a distinctive combination of capitals to the table and each correspondingly has the opportunity to position oneself or be positioned by the game. In order to play to one's maximum benefit, one has to believe in the importance of the game and its strategies. They use the term *illusio* to refer to this process. The gift of education is an invitation and only those with the necessary combination of capitals can be sufficiently *taken in* as to play the game to their own advantage.

Accepting the Gift

Some students who had continued their education by remaining within the high-status Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme up to age seventeen demonstrated their acceptance of the received wisdom of the school and consequent sense of investment in the game:

Alan: Yeah, in the traditional, like, you are doing something the way you learned, you have a load of classes ... so you need to get your opinions, you know what I mean, and you have to argue how to put your points, and you have to explain to the examiner what this is for and ... and with the traditional one we just ... like, it's just like in class here(5th year LCE students, Rivermount, Community school, co-ed, suburban)

The *backwash* effect of assessment on curriculum appeared to be well-established in teaching practices, and this was accepted and approved by students, with, in at least one instance, approval for high levels of pressure:

Mia: I miss Ms Farren because we had her for history and English and she was brilliant even if you didn't study for her, you would be frightened into knowing things, you had to do well, but since she went my nerves are gone, I am terrified of doing badly

Anne: Last year we had no worries because I thought I was going to do well in history and English this year I am terrified I am going to fail, terrified.

Sarah: And she used to make us learn, you have to learn, ... not in a bad way, she was always fair as well and she was a great teacher but she is gone now and we are all terrified. (6th year LCE students, Castle, Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

The references to stress and terror demonstrate the cost of *illusio* for these young women.

Continued involvement was also motivated by an interest in the practical aspect of a subject. This perceived practicality could relate to a relevance to everyday life:

I enjoy Home Economics because it is all about - like it's about everyday general things like how the body works and what ... and your family and all that, that is all everyday things that you would be interested in because really the interest is because they are all around you and you see them every day. Whereas the likes of history or maths, like, you wouldn't have an interest in because you don't see it every day and it doesn't affect your life. (Leaving Certificate student, Castle, Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

It could also relate to the satisfaction of actual involvement in doing and making:

RM: And what's good about those subjects [Woodwork and Physical Education]?

Mike: They keep you doing stuff, like you know, in the normal [class], it's just writing, you just [inaudible]

It was part of ... we got the designs for the Junior Cert and we had to pick one [project] out of three, so I picked the table. So I've started already, it is just going to be a small table with a drawer on the top. (Junior Cert. student, male, Whitefields, Community college, co-ed, rural).

Satisfaction with the curriculum could also derive from a sense of competency, as in the following examples:

RM: And what do you like about accounts?

Dawn: Just when they work out. (3rd year Junior Certificate student, Castle, VSGU)

I like most type of maths, it's just that I get them easier. (3rd year Junior Certificate student, female, Castle, VSGU)

I am just good at [Maths] (3rd year JCSP student, Monastery, voluntary secondary school, boys, suburban.)

This sense of competency was closely related to a perception of what constituted effective teaching, as shown in this extended extract:

RM: So what do you think makes a good teacher.?

Una: Someone that listens, that just doesn't only tell you what to do.

Cliona: Someone who isn't cranky

Dawn: That ... [they] have to be able to control a class

Una: Some teachers that give out to you

Dawn: Yeah ... yeah, that you have to learn but someone ... you just don't learn anything, you

just don't want to concentrate because you know they won't say anything.

RM: So you like a bit of strictness?

Students: Yes. Yes

Cliona: And someone that listens to you as well

Dawn: And someone that just doesn't write on the board ...

Una: And someone that will tell you something, they don't just say you have to do it yourself.
(3rd year JC students, Castle, Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

Similar opinions were voiced by other students in other age groups within Castle school:

Someone who teaches like ... they would go through everything and teach you properly and then give you an assignment to do and give you a date to have it up and then come down hard on you if you haven't got it done, that's the sort of teacher I like. (6th year LCE student, Castle)

Yeah, because an old teacher left last year and ... we learned everything, we learned everything, but this year the teacher is really soft and we don't learn anything off her. Because she doesn't give out or anything. She just keeps on reading our note book ... and it's boring. (3rd year JC students, Castle)

Refusing the Gift

The obstacles in the way of whole-hearted engagement learning implied by acceptance of the gift of education include the formidable stumbling block of economic condition. The continuing relevance of socio-economic factors in education is demonstrated in the following extract:

Amber: Yeah, like it's very expensive going to school when you have to pay for your uniform, your books and during the year for crisps, your books, more pens, computers - photocopying.
(3rd year JCSP class, Castle, Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

The direct relevance of structural economic factors is demonstrated by the changed attitudes observable in responses following change in the economy. An interview carried out in 2001 as part of an earlier piece of research (Malone and McCoy, 2004) contained the following with a teacher, attributing early school leaving to an expectation of unemployment:

... it reflects very much back to the social nature of [local town]. It was a bleak black spot with high unemployment for a long time and we're now seeing the effects of students who were going to school during the black spots – “sure we're not going to get a job anyway” etc., and the whole employment assistance thing...It's just bred into them...I have 6th year students here at the moment...who have told me openly “I don't care about work, I'm leaving this school to go on the dole and that's that”.

Interviews carried out in 2004 at a time of strong economic growth showed no such intentions, and working-class students of both genders and of a variety of educational achievements and expectations expressed confident hope that they would be employed in a good job. These young people were focused on the future in a way previously expected for middle-class males. In the context of a buoyant economy and youth labour market, working-class girls in this study showed an equivalent focus on the future.

The students in the study also referred to schooling as work but seemed to regard it as an anomalous form of work because it did not involve payment.

RM: So what would make you stay or what would make you leave?

Kevin: Get paid

RM: If you got paid obviously you would stay?

Justin: You need to [inaudible]. Why don't we get paid to go to school? (2nd year JCSP students, Rivermount, community school, co-ed, suburban)

Part-time Work

Many of the older students surveyed were involved in part-time work after school, and this was an important generator of economic capital. However, this sometimes brought them into conflict with school authorities, who sought to discourage such involvement as it was seen to distract students from school work. The interview below was carried out with final-examination-year students

RM: Do you still do part-time jobs?

All: We have to, to be able to cope

RM: How do you mean, cope?

Mia: Like ... they [the school] are saying you have to give up your part-time job but ... at the end of the day you need your money...

Sarah: Like we are all 18 and 19, we did TY [Transition Year]- it's dear enough out there, we need to be bringing in a few bob as well. (Interview with 6th year LCE group, Castle, Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

The significance of part-time work was more than economic. Students were sometimes treated as adults in the workplace but felt that they had to revert to childhood during the school day:

Yeah, the teachers think we are all kids, that we don't know how to do anything they don't realise like we are all 18 or 19 now, no I am serious they don't realise that - they talk down to you as if you are a child and they don't realise we are an adult, just because we are still in school doesn't mean we are kids. (6th year LCE student, Castle, Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

This assumption of adult roles was valued in students' homes and communities and, as such, was a generator of social capital. It was, however, a form of social capital which the school was not well-placed to recognise.

Curriculum Problems

While young people appear to be refusing the gift of education, the lack of congruence between the form of its delivery (the *gift wrapping*) and the form and volume of the cultural capital they possess may effectively mean that the gift is denied to them. The design of the curriculum and way in which it is delivered in schools can also create obstacles that for some young people are close to insuperable. Students are simultaneously excluded from full participation in the curriculum, particularly in high-status versions, and blamed for their lack of commitment. The epistemological base of the national curriculum continues to be that of academic rationalism and alternative approaches to curriculum,

which, while they offer real opportunities of success to students, also offer limited progression routes. In addition to that, the structuring of the school day and the assumptions of the centrality of school concerns can constitute a packaging that render the gift inaccessible. Among these are curriculum overload and the role of homework.

Research by O'Sullivan (1999) among Youthreach (a vocationally-oriented programme) students who had left the formal system early suggested that the number of subjects and the choice of subjects on offer were issues for students. Similar findings emerged from the current research where a large number of respondents expressed a preference for doing fewer subjects. The following is a typical extract:

RM: Right, what would make school better in terms of subjects, would you like to have more subjects or less subjects?

Justin: Less subjects.

RM: Did you get a choice in the subjects that you did or did you just have to take what was there?

Justin: You got a choice but we didn't get to pick good subjects. (JCSP students, Rivermount)

Some students were happy with the curriculum on offer but no one expressed a preference for more subjects.

The impact of homework on families has been studied by a variety of researchers, and the research of Lynch (1987), and Lareau (2003) would suggest that this impact is particularly severe for working-class families. There is some indication from the transcripts in this study that families sometimes experience conflict of interest between supporting educational effort and fostering the health and well-being of children as well as the interactions of family life:

Dawn: I am always in my room

Una: My Ma thinks it is good because she knows at the end of it, like, you are going to do well in your Junior Cert., so she doesn't mind.

Cliona: My Ma doesn't like me carrying home loads of books as well. She says it's bad for my back. (Junior Cert. students, Castle, Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

A heavy load of subjects combined with the demands of homework place significant pressure on students:

Mia: Yeah, and they expect you to study every subject every night, like, each teacher goes "what did you do last night?" - they don't realise you have seven other teachers to answer the same question to. Do you know? And then you do the seven or eight hours at school as it is, and then you have to come home and do seven or eight subjects at home

The memory load of subjects was also a problem for some students:

Yes, definitely, I can't remember all the dates. (6th year LCE student, Castle, Voluntary Secondary School, girls, urban)

[I don't like English because] I just think there is all these poems to go through and all that kind of stuff, kind of write all these long articles and ... (5th year LCVP student, male, Whitefields)

The semi-quantitative dimension of this study explored the extent to which students held positive or negative attitudes towards various aspects of pedagogy. A high percentage of respondents in all streams expressed a preference for project work, discussion, and working in groups. These preferences

were more marked in the lower streams (non-academic tracks). This may to some extent reflect greater exposure to these pedagogies in streams engaged in adapted curriculum tracks.

Paying Back

Since this study was limited in timespan, it is not possible to draw conclusions from it as to whether and in what form students who benefit from the gift of education can or intend to pay back that gift. It is clear, however, that many of the teachers in the schools studied were motivated by a desire to pay back the benefits of their own education and to make a difference to the lives of young people. A teacher interviewed in an earlier study (Malone and McCoy, 2004) expressed it thus:

Also we have some teachers with a view that “Well the student is so badly behaved, has given so much hardship and caused that much disruption, why pour more resources into them?”... But I will also say that even teachers who feel that it is pouring energy into a black hole will also put energy into working with those students, to keep them. (Teacher, Tower, community college, rural town, interview with S. Mc C.)

Noddings (1992) and Hargreaves (1994) discuss the importance of completing the cycle of care and the destructive consequences which follow for teachers and students when this does not happen. The process of gift-giving, accepting, and paying back appears more as a spiral process than as the completion of a simple loop.

Conclusion

While it is by no means a perfect analogy, the metaphor of *gift* and *giving* provides a useful means of challenging some of our assumptions regarding education as a universal good and the conditions under which its intended recipients can benefit from it. It provides a means of engaging the imagination with concepts such as *habitus* in ways that assist us in understanding the lack of congruence between student *habitus* and formal education. While accepting the gift of education does not necessarily bind an individual into a “strict relation of hierarchy and debt” (Bohman, p. 131) at a personal level, it nevertheless imposes its own inexorable consequences. The pervasive and classed nature of *habitus*, referred to by Reay (2004), means that, in order to change individual and community *habitus* and to accommodate students’ practices and attitudes to the norms of school, students must also change or adapt their identities. Social change is thus implicated in personal change at a very deep and sometimes painful level. Students must feel that this is somehow worthwhile: that “the game is worth the candle.” This is the process of *illusio*, of putting the *game* ahead of day-to-day realities. To underestimate the difficulty involved is to misrecognise the nature of educational inequality and, in particular, its economic base.

This difficulty is further compounded when educational initiatives, valuable and progressive in themselves, are offered selectively and exclusively to those students considered to be at risk. If the gift requires one to commit to a game whose rewards are themselves perceived to be of a lower standard, it is surely a rational decision to avoid this version of *illusio*.

In his poem “Among School Children,” the poet W. B. Yeats (1928) says,

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

Addressing educational inequalities implies giving the gift of education in such a way that the labour of learning “blossoms and dances.”

Notes on the Irish Education System

School Types

Secondary schooling in Ireland typically involves students from age 12 to age 18. A centrally prescribed national curriculum is on offer to all students. The main difference between school types inheres in ownership and management structures. All the schools in this study catered for a majority of working-class and poor students. *Voluntary secondary* schools are owned and managed by trustees and a Board of Management who is the employer of the teachers. The two schools in this category in this study are operated by Roman Catholic religious orders. *Vocational schools* (also referred to as *Community Colleges*) are managed by local authorities and are the historical descendants of schools intended to prepare students for apprenticeship. They now offer a comprehensive curriculum. *Community schools* are managed by Boards of Management on which both religious orders and local authorities are represented. They offer a comprehensive curriculum.

Curriculum

The curriculum in Ireland is centrally prescribed, and common syllabi are taught in all school types, although the range of subjects can vary with the school type. Secondary education is divided into two cycles, Junior Certificate and Senior cycle. Junior Certificate is part of the compulsory period of education and culminates in the Junior Certificate examination, a written examination administered by the State Examination Commissioners, at age 15. The Junior Certificate School Programme is an approach to Junior Certificate offered to students considered to be at risk of early leaving. It is partly certificated by the school. The most prestigious Senior cycle programme is the Leaving Certificate Established, which is the most usual route to college courses. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) combines Leaving Certificate academic subjects with some vocational experience and also allows for college entry. The Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA) is an integrated vocational programme which does not allow for direct college entry.

Note

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Notes

[\[1\]](#) Rivermount is the pseudonym for a co-educational 12-18 community school situated in a newly developed suburb

[\[2\]](#) Whitefields is the pseudonym for a co-educational vocational school located in a rural village

[\[3\]](#) Castle is the pseudonym for an inner city voluntary secondary girls' school.

[\[4\]](#) Monastery is the pseudonym for a suburban voluntary secondary school for boys