Cultural Capital and School Culture: A Critical Perspective on Irish Education.

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2318 words

Figure 1: Students working with plants in the Agriculture department (Friends' School Lisburn, no date).

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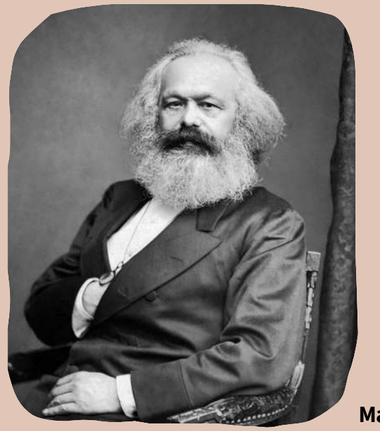
Introducation

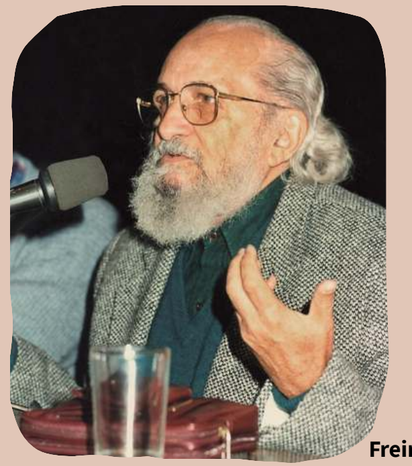
This presentation draws on my own experiences to explore how cultural capital shapes opportunities and inequalities within Irish post-primary education. Having worked in both DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) community school (Department of Education, 2022) and a middle class post primary school, I observed firsthand how differences in school culture and resources influenced student's confidence, participation, and future aspirations. These contrasts illustrate Bourdieu's argument that cultural capital operates unevenly across social groups and shapes how students engage with and succeed in school (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986). To demonstrate this visually, the presentation includes a decoding of two images from my placement schools which highlight the important differences in classroom space, facilities, and the overall atmosphere. Interpreting these images through Bourdieu's framework reinforces the idea that school environments are not neutral but reflect wider social inequalities.

The Irish post-primary system, which consists of the Junior Cycle, Transition Year, and Senior Cycle, forms an important institutional space where social norms and values are reproduced and negotiated (Central Statistics Office, 2024). Within this structure, school culture, including expectations, communication styles, organisation, and everyday practices, plays a central role in shaping who feels a sense of belonging, who is encouraged, and who is left at the margins. The work of Reay (2010) is particularly relevant as she shows that working class students can internalise feelings of inadequacy, which reflects what I observed in the DEIS classroom.

This presentation therefore examines how cultural capital functions within school environments and how it intersects with broader inequality in Irish education. Building on research by Freire (1970) and Giroux (2020), it considers whether schools primarily reproduce existing social structures or whether they can shift into improved systems. It also reflects on how these theoretical insights can shape my own teaching practice by recognising diverse student backgrounds, valuing different forms of cultural knowledge, and creating an equitable classroom environment that challenges rather than reinforces social advantage.

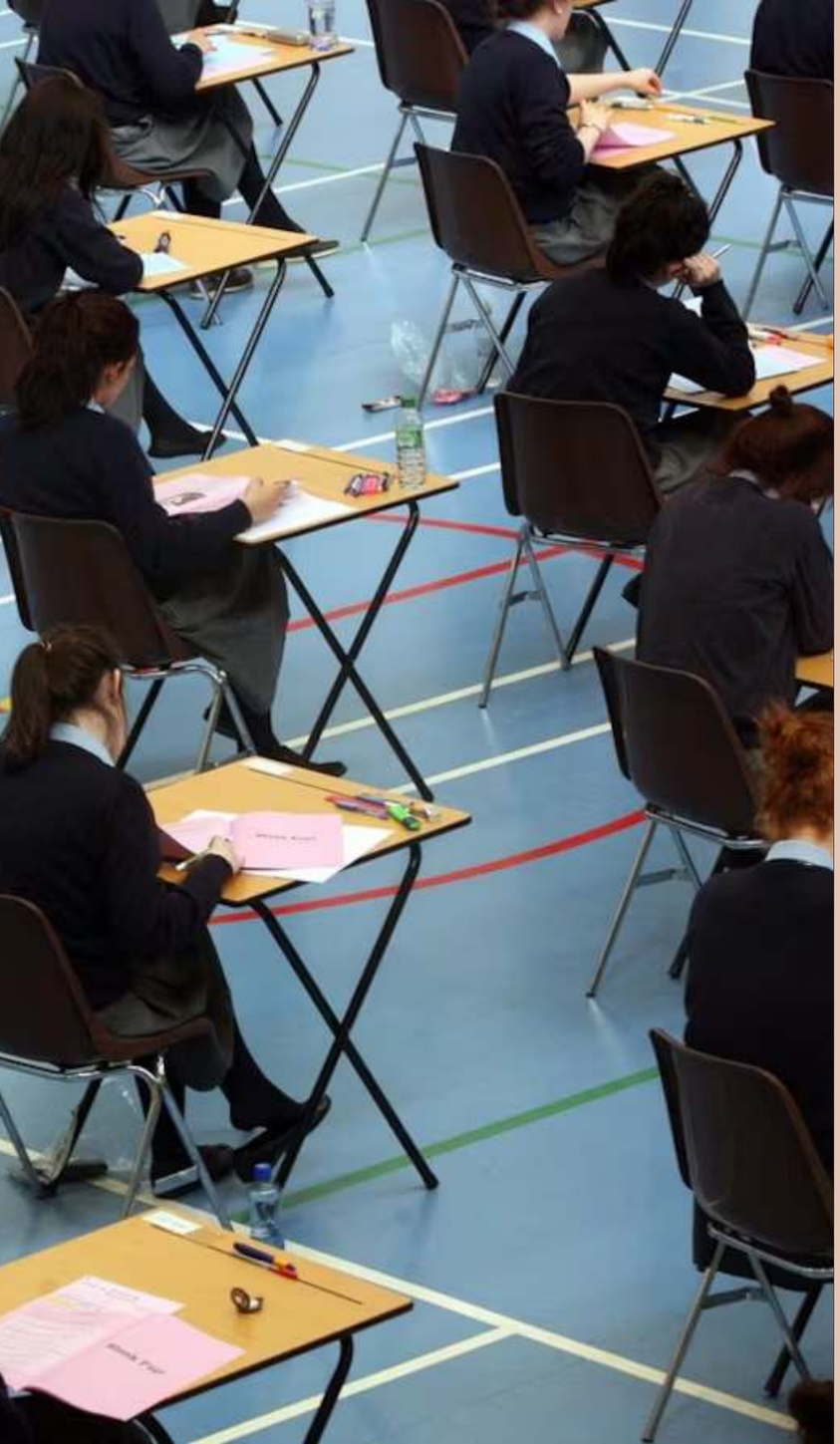


Marx (1867)



Freire (1970)

Giroux (2020)



Cultural Capital & How It Operates in Schools

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital refers to the symbolic skills, dispositions, tastes, and capabilities that individuals acquire through their social background (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986). These include language and expression, mannerisms, interests, and forms of cultural knowledge that are recognised and valued within educational institutions. Certain types of cultural capital align more closely with what schools reward, giving some students a significant advantage.

Habitus

Habitus describes the deeply ingrained mind-set and “feel for the game” that individuals develop through their lived experiences (Bourdieu, 1984). It shapes how students navigate school, how confident they feel, how they interact with teachers, and whether they see themselves as belonging. They should look up to teachers as role models not strict authortive figures. Habitus is often misread as natural ability, contributing to the belief that some students are “naturally academic” while others are not (Bourdieu, 1984).

Field

The school environment itself can be understood as a “field”, a structured social space with its own rules, hierarchies, and valued forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In this field, students and teachers manage power, recognition, and success, often reproducing wider social class dynamics.

Cultural Capital & How It Operates in Schools

School Culture

School culture refers to the shared norms, routines, values, expectations, and informal practices that shape the everyday experience of school life. It encompasses everything from behavioural disciplinary systems to communication styles, relationships, extra-curricular participation, and the overall ethos of the institution. In the Irish context, school culture interacts closely with the structure of the post-primary system (Central Statistics Office, 2024).

Critical Pedagogy

‘Critical pedagogy’ challenges traditional power dynamics within education and encourages teaching that actively resists inequality. Freire (1970) argues that education should develop critical awareness so that students can recognise and question the social structures shaping their lives, rather than simply absorbing information. Hooks (1994) similarly emphasises that education should be an empowering practice that supports students in thinking critically and participating more fully in their learning. Together, these ideas highlight how teaching can become more democratic and life-changing.

Decoding Images

Figure 2: Left, middle class post primary school, art classroom. Photographed by Heather Barker. School opened 2014.

Figure 3: Right, photograph set in a DEIS community school, art classroom. Photographed by Heather Barker. School opened 1981.

Inequality in Irish Education

Class remains one of the most significant factors shaping educational experience in Irish post primary schools. Bourdieu's work demonstrates that cultural capital is unevenly distributed and that schools often reward the cultural resources similar to middle class families (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). This means that many students enter school with a natural advantage, not because they possess greater ability, but because their ways of speaking, behaving, and understanding the world already align with what schools recognise as accepted knowledge.

Irish research reinforces this pattern. Sullivan (2002) notes that students from middle class backgrounds generally perform better on measures academically because the curriculum and assessment systems reflect their cultural capital. These students often have access to educational supports, stable study environments, and familiarity with the expectations of teachers. In contrast, working class students may possess valuable skills and forms of knowledge, yet these are rarely validated within school structures.

Reay (2010) highlights the emotional importance of inequality, arguing that working class students often interpret their struggles as personal failings rather than reflections of structural disadvantage. This can lead to reduced confidence, self doubt, and a belief that subjects such as higher level languages, advanced sciences, or university pathways are not available to them. These feelings develop long before examination results appear. Reay (2010) shows working class students may internalise feelings of inadequacy. My experience in the DEIS school reflects this as students were less confident in expressing ideas in class discussions.

Within the Irish context, these inequalities intersect with school culture. Schools with strong reputations for academic success often attract families with considerable cultural and institutional capital. These students then benefit from environments that reinforce expectations of achievement, while schools in lower income areas may face greater challenges with resources, teacher turnover, and student confidence. The result is a pattern in which social advantage and disadvantage become embedded in the school system itself.

Figure 3:Photograph set in a DEIS community school, art classroom. Photographed by Heather Barker. School opened 1981.

Inequality in Irish Education

School Culture and School Choice in Ireland

School choice is a significant way in which educational inequality in Ireland reflects and reinforces existing social class divisions. Cahill and Hall (2014) show that families in urban working class communities often navigate school choice within a restricted set of options, shaped by geography, economic constraints, and local reputation. In contrast, middle class parents can draw on stronger networks, knowledge, and institutional cultural capital to secure places in schools associated with high status and strong academic outcomes.

School culture plays a central role in these decisions. Schools with particular traditions, strong academic reputations, extensive extracurricular opportunities, or distinctive ethos create symbolic points of advantage. These markers signal belonging to families who recognise and value the associated cultural capital. Over time this process leads to concentrated patterns of advantage in some schools and concentrated disadvantage in others. Bourdieu's concept of field helps to explain this, since schools operate as competitive spaces where families with greater capital are more able to secure favourable positions (Bourdieu, 1986).

Reputation and perceived school identity also influence student self belief. Research shows that students in high status schools often internalise expectations of success, while those in lower status settings may develop limited academic aspirations even when they possess significant ability (Reay, 2010). This reflects a broader pattern of social cycles in which schools help maintain existing class structures rather than disrupt them.

Within the Irish post primary sector, these directions contribute to unequal access to subjects, different levels of guidance counselling, varied opportunities for cultural enrichment, and significant contrasts in student experience. School choice therefore does not function as a neutral system but rather as a process that holds advantages and disadvantages across the educational landscape.

Figure 2: middle class post primary school, art classroom. Photographed by Heather Barker. School opened 2014.

Figure 4: The photo was taken by photographer Bernard Hoffman for Life Magazine in Maine during the winter of 1942.

Critical Pedagogy as a Response

Critical pedagogy provides a powerful framework for addressing the inequalities produced through cultural capital and school culture. Marx (1867) argues that social institutions reflect the interests of more affluent groups, meaning that education often reinforces existing class structures. This perspective helps explain why schools reward particular forms of cultural capital and why advantage becomes normalised through everyday practices.

Freire (1970) develops this idea by challenging what he calls the ‘banking model’ of education, where students are treated as passive recipients rather than active thinkers. He argues that education should engage students in dialogue and support them in understanding the social forces shaping their lives. This approach encourages students to question inequality rather than accept it as enevitable or doomed.

Giroux (2020) expands Freire’s ideas and stresses that teachers must recognise the political importance of schooling. He argues that education is never neutral because school practices, curriculum, and assessment systems reflect particular cultural values. To challenge inequality, teachers must generate democratic or communal spaces where students feel able to express their questions, identities, and experiences. Morley and Ablett (2020) similarly emphasise that critical pedagogy prepares learners to participate actively in a more just and socially aware way.

Hooks (1994) also offers an important contribution by describing education as a practice of freedom. She highlights the importance of emotional intelligence, care, and relational teaching. Her focus on classroom atmosphere and student voice links directly to the issues of school culture raised earlier. When students see their personal or family narratives validated, their participation and confidence can grow.

Furthermore, these thinkers collectively suggest that critical pedagogy can disrupt the reproduction of class based inequalities. By valuing diverse forms of cultural capital and encouraging reflective dialogue, teachers can support students in developing agency, awareness, and a stronger sense of belonging.

Applying Critical Pedagogy in Irish Classrooms

Figure 5: Logo of The Culture Wheel (The Culture Wheel, 2025)

Critical pedagogy provides practical strategies for addressing inequality and fostering student engagement in Irish post primary schools. Teachers can create classroom environments that value the diverse cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences students bring, recognising that not all forms of cultural capital are traditionally rewarded (Sullivan, 2002). This involves actively questioning which skills and behaviours are privileged, and why.

"Dialogic teaching", inspired by Freire (1970), is about getting students talking so they can share their own ideas and actually feel like they're helping to shape what they're learning, rather than just being talked at. Discussions, collaborative projects, and reflective activities allow students to connect learning to their own lives and social contexts. This approach helps working class students see the relevance of education, builds confidence, and challenges the perception that schools are only for those who already have middle class cultural capital.

Teachers can also challenge these dominant aspects of the curriculum by incorporating multiple perspectives or bringing in speakers from their community to represent more of their culture.

Morley and Ablett (2020) emphasise that schools should address social inequality obviously, engaging students in critical analysis of society. This can include exploring 'difficult' themes of class, power, and access within literature, history, art, and social studies, as well as encouraging students to voice their own experiences and ideas. Normalising these issues and making students feel confident knowing what is going on in the world.

Hooks (1994) highlights the importance of care and relational teaching, creating emotionally safe spaces where students feel heard. Encouraging student voice and fostering mutual respect enhances engagement and counters feelings of marginalisation. When students feel their knowledge and cultural experiences are valued, they are more likely to participate fully and aspire to broader opportunities.

Finally, Freire's (1970) approach to critical pedagogy calls on teachers to reflect on their own assumptions and biases. Understanding how school culture and teacher expectations may unintentionally privilege some students over others allows for more inclusive and equitable practices. In combination, these strategies provide a pathway to disrupt the reproduction of social inequalities and to cultivate a post primary environment in Ireland that supports all students in reaching their potential (Hooks, 1994). Understanding cultural capital and inequality will inform my teaching practice by ensuring I recognise and value diverse student experiences, plan inclusive lessons, and encourage all students to participate and develop confidence. I will notice student's needs more by communicating with them individually instead of making assumptions.

Figure 6: Alamy Stock Photo.

Conclusion

Cultural capital shapes how students experience and succeed in Irish post primary education. Schools reward particular dispositions, knowledge, and behaviours, giving advantage to students whose cultural capital aligns with middle class norms (Bourdieu, 1984). Class inequality is evident in school culture, resources, school choice, and everyday experiences. Working class students may feel less confident and have fewer opportunities to access enrichment or develop institutional capital, while middle class students benefit from environments that reinforce their habitus and aspirations (Cahill and Hall, 2014). This aligns with Marx's view that education can function as a system for reproducing existing 'social hierarchies' rather than challenging them for better learning (Marx, 1867).

Critical pedagogy offers a response by encouraging teachers to question their assumptions, validate diverse forms of knowledge, and create democratic, inclusive classrooms (Freire, 1970). In my Art Craft and Design classroom, I can see many ways to apply these principles, for example by integrating student's personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and creative interests into projects and assessments. Although it is inherently impossible to completely eliminate bias, the more I understand and reflect on my own asumptions, the better I can create a classroom environment that celebrates diversity and supports all students. This is not only my responsibility as a teacher but also an essential part of fostering fairness and student agency (Morley and Ablett, 2020).

While this presentation has focused mainly on class and school culture, many other factors influence inequality in post primary education, including gender, ethnicity, special educational needs, and language background (Apple, 2013). Future research could explore these dimensions to deepen understanding and try to further improve educational equity in Irish schools.

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