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# *Inside Education*

*Exploring the art of good learning*

**Stephen O'Brien**





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# INTRODUCTION

## About this book

It's something we all do. We do it both in and out of school. We do it formally and informally. We do it naturally. Yet we seldom reflect on this thing that we do the most – *learning*. This book is a response to our inattentive attitude. With a particular focus on schooling, it reveals, in the most ordinary of circumstances, how learning appears. Stories from different educational settings tell of its more subtle, covert, creative qualities. And research observations expose how learning works in diverse ways, along cultural, historical, social, personal, political and economic lines.

To learn more about learning – *what it is* and *how it works* – it is necessary to look *inside* education. Too often school and classroom practices are overlooked by capricious *outside* 'interests'. While these dominate the production and circulation of education symbols and practices, 'lived' learning becomes increasingly misplaced. This is particularly true in the case of education projects that 'stand for something different', that seek to secure 'other' representations. These stories take centre stage in this book. In themselves, the projects are worthy of storytelling and their unique 'messages' offer us valuable learning lessons. Collectively, as empirical and conceptual elements gradually unfold and envelop, they tell a more complete *learning* story. This emergent learning journey informs the structure of the book. Each chapter corresponds to a different education project that speaks to a particular learning theme: *Learning identity, personal learning, learning success* and *learning power*.<sup>1</sup> The reader is taken on a journey of 4 'live' education projects: the first all Irish-speaking, mixed-gendered, multi-faith primary school on the island of Ireland (based in Cork, Ireland; ideally suited to exploring *learning identity*); an alternative post-primary school for those who leave (or are left behind by) the formal education system (based in Waterford, Ireland; ideally suited to exploring *personal learning*);

an early college school that enables students to simultaneously sit their high diploma and college exams (based in Queens, New York; ideally suited to exploring *learning success*) and an adult education training centre that works with 'landless' movement members (based in Pernambuco state, Brazil; ideally suited to exploring *learning power*). As the reader partakes in this learning tour and reaches some fleeting endpoints, he/she learns more about learning. This challenges what we already know. Almost every one of us has experienced some form of formal education that continues to shape, in some significant way, our views. But, in truth, we remain disengaged from learning; we rarely appreciate its uniqueness or contemplate its meaningful existence. Experience and knowledge gaps lead to incomplete accounts of education, misrepresentations and an associated lack of common public understanding. Much of what we know needs to be 'unlearned'. This book attempts to recast education's image, to remind public consciousness (as achieved in the promotion of some science, for example) of its human stories, as well as its curious, intricate and powerful qualities.

### **For whom is this book written?**

*Inside Education* is a collection of short learning stories. Its motivation is twofold: to elevate our knowledge of learning from the inside-out, and to critically support those 'on the ground' – especially educators, educational researchers and parents/guardians. The more we learn about learning, it is advanced, the better learners (and teachers) we may become. The very success of learning, then, depends on our knowledge of it. And the best way we may come to know good learning is through exploring, and putting into effect, its practice. The book's title is thus inspired by a journey metaphor and by an elevated learning purpose.<sup>2</sup> In setting out on 4 different paths, the journey is valued more than any destination. This, in itself, is an important learning lesson.<sup>3</sup> It was always envisaged that the book's main readers would be *teachers*. As one of the most important learner groups (charged with a duty to share learning), this book naturally appeals to them. Student teachers, teacher professionals, support practitioners and educational leaders will be particularly interested readers. The book bears testimony to their work and demonstrates how certain individuals can make extraordinary things happen in the most ordinary of ways. But it also challenges them. Taken-for-granted school practices, cultural norms, pedagogical values and approaches are seriously critiqued. The learning journey naturally involves self-questioning, developed understanding and renewed personal/professional positioning. Teachers change who they are, as much as what they do. So this book speaks to teachers across primary, post-primary and adult education divides. It seeks to inspire them with new learning ideas, values and goals. And it seeks to help them find new ways to resolve very practical learning problems in their work.

Educators may be particularly attracted by critical insights into project activities. And their professional development needs may be well-served by punctuated (theoretical) commentary and (conceptual) critique. *Educational researchers* too may





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be interested in this study's critical narratives and the different research methods employed, while other social scientists may appreciate the messy, multifarious and unsettled features of educational milieus. Many questions are posed for the reader throughout the book. Their purpose is to enlighten – to raise/generate hypotheses in line with informed theoretical perspectives and understandings. Questions are intended to move away from theoretical 'certainties' or 'theory-driven' approaches that merely assign their own labels to 'findings'. Instead, in promoting theory-practice connections, questions help the reader move between the 'big picture' (often 'invisible' to the eye) and the 'specific' (which appears immediately 'obvious'). Indeed, prominence is given to bottom-up analysis – where the reader moves more from the 'concrete' to the 'abstract'. Above all, questions facilitate reader-communication and self-dialogue; we make sense together, and make sense for ourselves,<sup>4</sup> as and when learning appears.

In addition to professional roles, it takes significant others to raise a scholar. *Parents and guardians* routinely escort their children along affective, social and learning journeys. As important learning models, their ideas, values and goals greatly influence their children's learning path. But beyond surface indicators (see Chapter 3), how much do they really know about their child's learning in school? In this book parents/guardians may find the projects' events, activities and commentaries most valuable. They offer them (and adult learners generally) an opportunity to learn more about learning, to communicate good learning habits to their children. They offer an opportunity too for adults to reciprocate modelling relations, to learn as much from their children. Parents/guardians are often left out of *critical* debates on education. Many find educational jargon forbidding and critical ideas impenetrable. In playing its (inclusive) part, this book differs from conventional academic texts. It hopes to present as more 'user-friendly', its material may read as more 'accessible', its writing 'lighter'. In this fashion, the book seeks to appeal to a *wider reader base*. At the same time, it's important to stress that some learning struggle is necessary. The reader may experience this progressively throughout the book. Thus, while the learning journey is made 'easier', this doesn't mean that it is easy.

## Why this book?

Learning thrives on challenge, especially if it's interesting, worthwhile and enjoyable. But 'learning about learning' doesn't always inspire or challenge. Why do discussions on education fail to stimulate more debate? Why do they not advance greater knowledge and practice? Why are they not aired more regularly? The media, it seems, is saturated with trivial coverage. 'Big' educational ideas and debates give way to talk of 'crisis', latest 'reforms', expediency 'measures' and 'success' stories. Statisticians clamour over the latest test results; policymakers and managers rush to direct new bureaucratic tasks; private 'interests' grind out their competitive position; politicians take credit for 'improvements' and, simultaneously, impose strict 'value for money' rulings. While these groups drive the 'education-economy' relation,

there's little room for disturbance. 'Human capital' values abound. Education is seen as something to be captured (objectified/commodified in tightly prescribed curricula), to be measured (by learning outcomes and standardised tests), to be desired and transferred (via 'upskilling' and 'accreditation'). The disconnect between wider social structures and practice places inordinate pressure on teachers to 'bridge the gap'. Together with their students, they are subjected to more normative measures of performance (student against student, teacher against teacher, school against school, country against country). We are in the throes of learning intensification, in the business of 'product' ('end-game') education. There's less and less freedom to explore learning as a contested science, to faithfully question *what it is* and *how it works*. And as education as a 'process' is downgraded, there are fewer 'learning about learning' moments. This book is written within this context. Ultimately, it is a written testimony against this context.<sup>5</sup> This volume takes the time to tell some new stories. It consciously recites against the clamour of quantitative noise, against the rush of managerial directives, 'innovations', political intrusions and economic rules. It consciously makes space to energise, animate and authenticate real learning practices. And it consciously re-presents the *inherent value* of education.

We need 'other' stories in education – ones that focus on the here-and-now, not ones fixed on some limited future state that speak of predictive targets, learning outcomes or 'products'. This book has this existential thrust. Its stories focus on human experiences, authentic learning events and cognitive, perceptual and affective responses. In everyday schooling, learning is 'lived'. Teachers and students exercise learning freedoms, limits, responsibilities and contradictions that effectively (and affectively) channel new learning paths. There is a depth and richness to learning that is worked out in ways that are contextual, personal, social, creative and powerful. But there is an ordinariness to learning too. As John McGahern (2005) guides, much of life's journey is 'lived quietly', unnoticed, as a matter of course.<sup>6</sup> This is where 'precious life' resides; this is where we find, in the words of Michel de Certeau (1984), 'the practice of everyday life'. We need to explore and understand everyday practice, not least because this brings to light people's repetitive, 'tactical' activities (much of which remains unseen, unpredictable and unconscious). In this regard, de Certeau's plunging view from the 110th floor down to Manhattan's streets is a powerful illustration of how:<sup>7</sup> Strategists (like city planners or educational policy-makers) are elevated, distanced viewers ('voyeurs' of practice) focused on generating and regulating simulacrum ('fictional') representations; while practitioners (like walkers or teachers) make different use of the spaces designed ('tactically' speaking) and hurriedly navigate hidden, 'plural' pathways (e.g. by taking alternative routes, creative short-cuts and qualitative journeys that leave no real trace).<sup>8</sup> de Certeau's commanding perspective embodies the current educational landscape – functional organisation appears to be the order of the day, but it's rarely ordered in practice. A parallel case is now made for the unseen world of learning to be revealed. We need to relocate our viewpoint. We need to take a closer look at the world of learning from *tactical* as well as strategic perspectives.



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## About this research

Analogous to de Certeau's (1984, 98) idea of 'walking as a space of enunciation', this book makes room for teachers, students and school parents to articulate *their* learning views. This 'grounded' position opposes a rigid, dominant, panoptic structure that orders learning 'from above' and produces normalised meanings everywhere. And it challenges us to find a fitting methodology to capture (as far as possible) actors' *qualitative* locations. *Ethnography* is chosen for this purpose.<sup>9</sup> This is a particular research approach that traces what people *do* in their 'familiar' cultural settings. Everyday life in schools is captured (as far as possible) by paying close attention to individuals' thoughts, feelings and actions and connecting these to specific cultural historical contexts.<sup>10</sup> The focus, therefore, is on becoming familiar with teachers', students' and parents' practices at a particular time, within a particular cultural site. In order to 'know' cultural actors in their site (and vice versa), we need to read beyond their stories. Specifically, for the purpose of inductive analysis, we must learn to interpret observed rituals and behaviours. We are obliged, therefore, to *make the familiar unfamiliar*. This is not an easy task, especially if one is already 'immersed' as an actor and/or reader. Thus, teachers are challenged to make teaching unfamiliar, researchers have to detach themselves from familiar participants and settings and parents/guardians have to 'unlearn' much of their own learning experiences.

While this learning journey is certainly challenging, it doesn't have to be daunting, less still dull. I have long admired the work of cultural theorists whose real-life studies exude a stimulating, attentive quality, and whose links between the cultural, social, political and economic are communicated more plainly and imaginatively. I'm thinking here of the work of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Paul Willis,<sup>11</sup> amongst others. Narrative enquiry<sup>12</sup> is also an inspirational guide. Narratives focus on meaningful ways in which we can learn from others' life histories, characteristics, thoughts, values and patterns of practice. In the course of engaging others' stories, we can begin to create our own. We can self-learn. Of course narratives are unencumbered by academic mores. We are more likely to encounter learning, including philosophical kinds, in simple everyday stories. These can be unassuming in tone, yet beautifully composed; they can describe routines, which echo with rhythmic power; they can proclaim, yet still question; and they can provide portals to the past, which speak to future revival. People relate to stories, such as those handed down by 'common' histories. This book draws on these. It draws too on the visual arts, poetry, literature, music and film to communicate culturally and connect with the more sensory features of learning. In this way, an 'aesthetic sensibility' (Willis, 2000) helps illuminate more complex, concealed elements of the human condition (Heidegger, 1927/1996). While (expressive) art plays on all the senses (and not just the intellect), it can still motivate deeper thoughts and change actions. Through the arts we can announce, question, critique, resist and renew everyday practices.



The stories in this book help us to see that learning is historically, socio-culturally situated. Learning rituals and practices are interpreted from a number of critical perspectives, namely from political, economic, class, gender, racial and ability standpoints. As new critical understandings emerge, we are faced with changing our learning ways. In setting out this transformative journey, this book consciously draws upon the traditions of critical theory and critical social research. ‘Big’ critical theorists feature in the book, such as Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, Friedrich Nietzsche, Lev Vygotsky, amongst others. Of course each thinker has different ideas, but all may find common purpose in their questioning of power relations, ‘normalised’ language and signs, and oppressive practices. These critical theorists help us to ‘see’ research findings as being connected to hidden political and ideological power structures. In this way, they caution against education being seen as an isolated field of social and cultural production. And they challenge *scholars* of education (scholar teachers, scholar researchers, learner scholars) to critically empower themselves by refusing passivity, embracing complexity, developing power literacies, advancing new practices and being self-critical and open to further change. Ethnographic research that applies critical theory or takes on a ‘political purpose’ (Thomas, 1993) may be more accurately described as *critical ethnography*.<sup>13</sup> This critical ethnography study focuses on education and so it naturally draws upon *critical pedagogy* theories.<sup>14</sup> The work of Paulo Freire is particularly influential here (see Chapter 4), but other critical educators and social theorists are drawn upon.<sup>15</sup> These theorists make us think seriously (reflexively) about the ‘bigger’ education connections that may be gleaned from seemingly ordinary rehearsal. They present new learning insights in opposition to dominant status quo meanings. And they sustain scholarly dialogue and offer up new possibilities. The *critical narratives* presented in this book, then, describe not just what is, but what can (gradually) be.<sup>16</sup> Reciprocally, critical pedagogy is enacted *through* critical narratives. We learn more about ourselves and learning as we revise (‘re-story’) our lives and gradually identify as learner scholars, scholar teachers (see Goodson *et al*, 2010; Goodson and Gill, 2011, 2014).

The critical narratives in this book perform as learning stories. By organically revealing themselves, these stories ease intellectual struggle and relieve creative expression. In stories, we look for ‘sense’ (perceptiveness, reasoning, evidence) and ‘sensibility’ (responsiveness, feelings, emotions). Critical ethnography captures much of the latter but so too does it shape the former. Specifically, critical ethnography informs the range and types of research methods chosen to tell a more complete learning story. In this study, the research methods chosen vary according to each cultural site and each learning theme addressed. Thus, in Chapter 1 (*learning identity*), visual (photographic) methods are employed to facilitate pupils’ self-expressions of ‘who we are’; in Chapter 2, we are given access to the teacher’s autobiographical writings and poetry in order to enrich this *personal learning* story; in Chapter 3, a focus group enquiry with parents/guardians is employed to investigate their understandings of *learning success*; and in Chapter 4 (*learning power*), historical documentary sources are reviewed to contextualise and elucidate Brazil’s





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complex relationship with the land. Furthermore, a range of interviews, focus groups and conversations are employed with different groups of teachers, students and parents/guardians. In all cases, classroom and school observations were conducted, field notes were recorded, a research diary/journal was kept and, once each story was written, participants were given an opportunity to review it. These research methods were used throughout the course of site visits;<sup>17</sup> they were not entirely 'pre-planned', nor did they present as merely 'procedural'. In keeping with the fluid, organic nature of storytelling, these methods emerged: In part through iterative analysis and a developing 'sense' of evidence, and in other part through moment-by-moment observation and 'sensibility'.

### On reading this book

In storytelling, there is a unique bond between *writer-researcher and reader*. Roland Barthes (1968/1977) claims that a book's purpose is realised in its moment of being read,<sup>18</sup> and that the 'birth of the reader' is delivered at the precise moment of the book being written (Barthes refers to this instant as the 'Death of the author', *La mort de l'auteur*).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Barthes queries any real authorial presence, reasserting that "it is language which speaks, not the author" – that the author's 'voice' really consists "of several indiscernible voices" (Barthes 1968/1977, 2, 3). I think it's right to authenticate ideas at the point of their reading: Readers make sense of learning for themselves and there can be no written 'conclusion'. I think it's also right to destabilise the 'expertise' and 'authority' of the writer-researcher: 'My own' voice merely echoes many others' re-citing. But this is not to deny 'the author function', as Michel Foucault puts it (Foucault, 1969/1977). While the sovereign author doesn't exist, he/she still performs a (necessary) creative purpose (*ibid.*). The author puts (back) in the public domain language and ideas that are rarely used. He/she helps bring a distorted picture, which may otherwise be unobserved, (back) into focus.<sup>20</sup> And he/she exercises an ethical purpose that (once more) says something about our time, however disagreeable. In doing critical ethnography, the writer-researcher performs certain challenging tasks, including co-constructing learning stories with/for 'others'; telling people's stories, whilst being immersed; making meaning (gradually) from new information and critical ideas; and demonstrating (not overstating) hidden power relations. *Writing* critical ethnography is particularly challenging.<sup>21</sup> But it's also very rewarding. Intuitively, I always felt that readers might benefit more from an accessible text<sup>22</sup> – one that is no less 'deep', no less 'political' and no less 'contentious'. At the same time, there was always the danger that the book would 'fall between 2 stools', that it would be seen as neither popular nor academic. In truth, I'm not sure if either seat is secure. I'd like to think that *scholarly* work is more stable. In any case, readers (lay and academic) have the final say.<sup>23</sup>

Readers will have their 'own' thoughts on these learning stories. By encountering 'others', they can encounter *themselves*. And they can begin to inspect their own *learning* outlook. *Guiding research* notes are liberally provided at the end of each

# 1

## LEARNING IDENTITY

It's a wet May Monday morning in Cork. Despite the artificial allure of its southernmost location, Cork city is no stranger to bad weather – and that Irish summer of 2012 would be heralded as the worst in 50 years. People were to be heard recording their own views on the weather, drawing on their rich store of familiar experience and language inventory. It is said that the Irish have as many words to portray 'rain' as the Inuit have to describe 'snow'. Thus, not accounting for particular forms of jargon, the day may be 'soft', 'misty', 'showery', 'heavy' or 'torrential'. This particular Monday morning is 'lashing' [very heavy rain] and I am stationed in my car outside *Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn*, north of the city. Ireland has two official languages – English and Irish ('Gaeilge') – both of which are uniquely spoken by its populace.<sup>1</sup> While 'Hiberno-English' may arguably be more accessible (e.g. rain descriptors), Gaeilge (the indigenous language of Ireland) may not be so. Thus, a brief interlude for 'translation': *Gaelscoil* means 'Irish (speaking) school' and *an Ghoirt Álainn* literally means 'the beautiful field' (or colloquially, 'Mayfield'). On this very wet morning, then, I am waiting outside Mayfield's (Irish-speaking) primary school. I have come to visit with an open mind; though what has been written about this particular school, and *Gaelscoileanna* (the plural of *Gaelscoil*, denoting 'Irish language schools') in general, commonly presupposes the research scene. Mindful of this supposed narrative, which I hope to share with you shortly, my primary desire is to learn more about this school. What, I ask myself, is the identity of this place and how is learning so connected to this identity? Officially, *Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn* is the first mixed-gendered, all-Irish-speaking, multi-faith school on the island of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> My thoughts drift to how a child that attends this school might identify differently, that is, become a different person and a different learner than he/she would if attending a single-sex, all-English-speaking, Catholic school (for example). While I do not wish to compare school-type identities,

## 2 Learning identity

I start to speculate how *this* particular community shapes (and is shaped by) of identity. I also begin to wonder how a child learns an identity and how this might influence his/her learning character. My thoughts, as heavy as the rain, find relief in the stirring of people from all directions.

The school is set back from an open public green area, known locally as the 'tank field', so named because a water tower once stood on its grounds. This common area is used by Brian Dillon's GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association<sup>3</sup>) sports club, which has permanently erected goalposts for hurling and Gaelic football matches and regularly organises training sessions for its young male and female members. The field is also used by local people of all ages for jogging, strolling, 'hanging out' and walking their dogs, as well as by local schools for matches, fêtes and sports days. There is always some activity in the tank field. On school mornings just before 8.45 AM, it is the turn of the pupils and guardians of Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn to provide the bustle. The vast majority are headed towards the narrow road behind the far-end goalpost that leads to the gates of Brian Dillon's sports pavilion. The school is housed on the right-hand side of the club within its gated arena. At busy times of the school day, parents and guardians are asked to keep the roadway clear and desist from entering the grounds by car. Many park on the main road alongside the walled perimeter of the field and make their way by foot towards the gated entrance. They form a long column. A few brave souls choose to hurdle the walled border and forge their path across the sodden pitch towards a side entrance further up. The bravest few choose to walk the fullest length of the pitch from the southern (old 'tank') position. It is strangely touching to see so many youngsters struggle in their efforts to come to school. An hour or so ago they had been tucked up in their beds, cosily protected from the elements. Now, as they make their way towards the school gates, some stop to greet their friends, while others jockey and jostle in the rain. The parents and guardians are less enthusiastic about the prospect of a journey delay. I sympathise and eventually make my own brisk way – not via pasture.

The children's uniforms, barely visible beneath the layers of weather proof clothing, mark community membership. But wider impressions of Gaelscoil membership presuppose this assembly. The media has been instrumental in generating these. Writing in *The Irish Times*, Louise Holden (2007) asks if the rise of the Gaelscoil owes much to "real engagement with the Irish language and culture", or if it constitutes "old fashioned snobbery and elitism." The impression given is that Gáelscoileanna confer unfair 'advantage' on its members. Kate Holmquist (2008) is more assertive in her article in *The Irish Times*, which is provocatively (regrettably) entitled 'Language of Educational Apartheid':<sup>4</sup>

Not only will your [Gaelscoil] child be surrounded by mostly middle-class children and get 10 per cent bonus,<sup>5</sup> but he or she will also be likely to have smaller classes, aiding performance in other subjects.



Sarah Carey (2008) goes further in another *Irish Times* article entitled 'Gaelscoil parents want to have their cake and eat it':

In practice, it's a class issue. Whether the motivating force is middle-class liberalism or heartfelt nationalist ideology, you won't find too many immigrants and local ruffians at the Gaelscoil. Parents are entitled to make every effort to improve their children's chances in this world and Gaelscoileanna with their smaller class sizes and self-selecting participants are a good mechanism for that. But do me two favours: Stop pretending that this is all about the Irish language and don't expect the rest of us to pay for it.

In counter argument, proponents of Gaelscoileanna, such as Foras na Gaeilge (the Irish Language Organisation) and Gaelscoileanna Teoranta (a national voluntary organisation that supports the development of Irish-medium schools), point to the important role such schools play in celebrating national culture, identity and language. While they would certainly argue that the 'elitist' tag is unfair, they might concede that some of their schools are 'advantaged', particularly those that are predominantly white, Irish and middle class and are deemed to intellectually perform. Overall, and by design, they argue an *inclusive* case, highlighting a network of primary and secondary Gaelscoileanna in disadvantaged areas of Ireland, a non-fee paying school structure and a universal 'open' enrolment policy. Moreover, they point to widespread parental support for their schools.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly influenced by market and state support for 'school choice' (see Chapter 4), this has translated to a rapid rise in Gaelscoileanna in Ireland over the past 3 decades: From a total of 16 schools in 1972, to 175 Irish-medium primary schools and 41 post-primary schools in 2012.<sup>7</sup>

The Gaelscoil I'm about to visit has made its own impression. It is aesthetically displeasing with adjoining prefabs shaping its higgledy-piggledy structure. The latest supplement bears down on earlier prototypes that once housed younger tenants. Such aesthetics tell a bigger story. These 'temporary' prefabs have been home to the Gaelscoil since 1998. Up to this time, the school community had been searching for a permanent residence, a pursuit that's still ongoing and not without controversy. In 2006, Cork City Council, which had acquired the 'tank field' by statutory powers in 2001, offered to sell the land to the Department of Education to build a new Gaelscoil. In response, representatives of the local residential community formed a 'Save Our Tank Field' campaign. A bitter battle ensued, with both sides ('for' and 'against' the school) claiming legitimacy. Why, asked opponents, were there proposals to build a school on a designated green field site in a district that is already well served by primary schools? Why, asked proponents, were there objections to build a school that planned to maintain large parts of the green field site and ameliorate the substandard accommodation of its pupils and teachers? Oft heated and emotionally charged, such arguments (among others) regularly appeared on blog sites that debated the future of Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn.

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These blog sites frequently underscored irreconcilable differences and int positions. Associated slogans accommodated political attachment, with little room for elasticity. It appeared that you were either for ‘Save Our Tank Field’ or ‘All We Want Is a School’.

Around the time of this school dispute, David McWilliams (2006) – celebrity economist, broadcaster and author – had just written a bestselling book entitled *The Pope’s children: Ireland’s new elite*. Written at a time when the country appeared to prosper economically,<sup>8</sup> it presents itself as an entertaining and informative description of Ireland and its people. Replete with populist discourse, caricature descriptors and essentialising arguments, the book sets out to ‘capture’ what it means to be Irish. In one such depiction, McWilliams offers a profile of ‘Hibernian Cosmopolitans’ (or ‘HiCos’):

They want to be both special and rich, they want the Gaelscoil and the fancy double-doored fridge, they want Kila [an Irish band that fuses Irish and world music] and the Killers [an American rock band], they want the connectedness of spirituality and the freedom of liberty, they want to belong and yet lose themselves. They are Hibernians but they want cosmopolitan goodies.

(McWilliams, 2006, 146)

Such unproblematic ‘blending’ of capital and culture is perhaps unsurprising from an economist’s standpoint; nevertheless, identity labelling is eagerly advanced. Hence, the typification of Gaelscoil parents:

The aim of the HiCos is not to turn themselves into Gaeilgeoirí [Irish speakers] but to get the best for their family. As with everything they do, Gaelscoileanna [sic] allows them to pick the best bit from what the Hibernian menu has to offer and move on. It is an economic free lunch, spiced with the virtue of authenticity [. . .] People who send their children to Gaelscoileanna display great taste. They are erudite, refined and concerned. Twenty first Century Gaelscoil parents are in a class of their own. They are both cosmopolitan and Hibernian.

(McWilliams, 2006, 236)

I wondered if parents of Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn identified with this description of themselves – if they saw their school as “the breeding ground for the new sophisticated elite” (McWilliams, 2006, 240). Undoubtedly, impressions had been made of them by an author whose Gaelscoil research appears to have been conducted *outside* a certain school’s gates.<sup>9</sup> However artificial/overstated, impressions have real effects, whether these emerge/coalesce via celebrity writing, newspaper articles or select oppositional claims to a Gaelscoil’s establishment. I am very mindful of these now, not least because they form a key context to the identity of Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn. Here is a school literally fighting for its identity. And I am about to step *inside*.





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*'Inside Education is a thought-provoking, challenging and revealing journey inside the world of education and learning. Its exploration of school and classroom practices in a range of different settings provides important insights into how we learn – a central aspect of our education system which remains overlooked and understudied. In doing so, it lays down a challenge to policy-makers and educators everywhere to think differently about the way we learn and, ultimately, help students fulfil their real potential.'*

— **Carl O'Brien**, *Chief Reporter for The Irish Times*

*'Inside Education is a stunning example of passionate scholarship that nonetheless refuses a redemptionist stance. The ethnography captures people and contexts and draws the reader into the four sites of learning in fluent and lyrical prose. This is facilitated by the extensive use of research notes deploying historical, comparative, literary, artistic and scholarly sources.'*

— **Denis O'Sullivan**, *Emeritus Professor of Education, University College Cork, Republic of Ireland*

To learn more about learning – *what it is and how it works* – it is necessary to look inside education. *Inside Education* takes the reader on a journey of four 'live' education projects: the first all-Irish speaking, mixed-gendered, multi-faith primary school in Ireland ideally suited to exploring learning identity; an alternative post-primary school for those who leave (or are left behind by) the formal education system based in Ireland and ideally suited to exploring personal learning; an early college school that enables students to simultaneously sit their high school diploma and college exams based in Queens, New York and ideally suited to exploring learning success; and an adult education training centre that works with 'landless' movement members based in Brazil and ideally suited to exploring learning power.

Using a critical ethnography approach, each research narrative naturally unfolds/enfolds to tell a more complete learning story. By (re-)viewing their own learning outlook, they may begin to advance deeper critical ideas and debates in education. They may come to (re-)represent education, reminding public consciousness of its human stories, as well as its curious, intricate and powerful qualities. And they may (re-)discover 'other' roads to raise a scholar. Teachers, educational researchers, parents and guardians will be particularly interested readers.

**Stephen O'Brien** is a lecturer in the School of Education, University College Cork, Republic of Ireland.

EDUCATION

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