


MEETING IN LIMINAL SPACES: EDUCATIONAL ENCOUNTERS, CREATIVITY, AND POSSIBILITY IN POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION

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A surreal landscape with a dark blue sky, a crescent moon, and a person falling through a gap in a golden-yellow ground. The person is in silhouette, falling through a gap in the ground. The ground is a bright, golden-yellow color, and the sky is a deep blue with a crescent moon and several stars. The overall scene is dreamlike and evocative of a liminal space.

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per
una selva oscura che la diritta via era smarrita..*

*Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark, For the
straightforward pathway had been lost.*

(Dante – Inferno: Canto I)

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN - FIGHTING WORDS - A CREATIVE AND LIMINAL SPACE

Building on our previous research:

- The development of a model of creative space and its potential for transfer from non-formal to formal education (White & Lorenzi, 2016)
- Lorenzi & White, 2014; <http://www.fightingwords.ie/dcu-report-fighting-words-model>



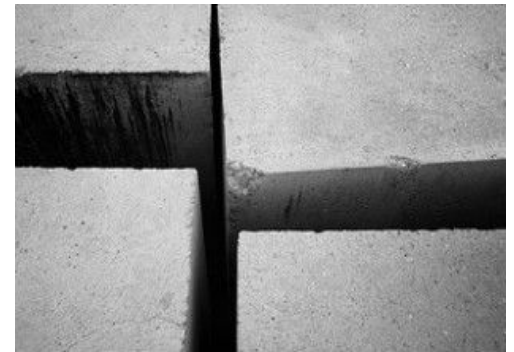
EVALUATION OF
THE FIGHTING
WORDS CREATIVE
WRITING MODEL

OUR RATIONALE

- This paper puts forward that ***authentic relations between students and teachers*** – which may result from rich pedagogical encounters- are at the ***core of education as human development*** .
- We follow Conroy (2004) and Todd (2014) in their discussion of human existence and we suggest that ***rich pedagogical encounters are more likely to occur in liminal spaces*** .
- We argue that ***creativity in education has a value that needs to be recognised and promoted*** through the encouragement of a principled and decentralised pedagogy (Burnard and White, 2008). Therefore we suggest that ***curricula –as educational structures- need to make room for the emergence of liminal spaces as spaces of genuine educational encounter*** .



Threshold – Dingle Peninsula, W. Ireland © Belinda Allen



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Can spaces of genuine encounter between students and teacher occur in a climate of standardisation and quantification in education?
2. Are such encounters more likely to happen in liminal spaces?
3. Can the promotion of creativity in formal educational contexts and curricula generate liminal spaces and in turn create space for genuine educational encounters?

METHODOLOGY

A combination of:

- **Documentary analysis** (Bailey, 1994) - critical analysis of selected policy documents and literature in relation to creativity and education systems (OECD PISA report, 2015; NACCCE *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* Report, 1999)
- Building on our **previous research** (Lorenzi & White, 2014; White & Lorenzi, 2016)
- **Conceptual analysis** (Wild et al, 2013) - analysis of the key concepts that underpin the theoretical framework of the research study.
- **Qualitative data analysis** - interviews with 10 post-primary school managers and questionnaire responses from teachers from 5 post-primary schools

LIMINALITY

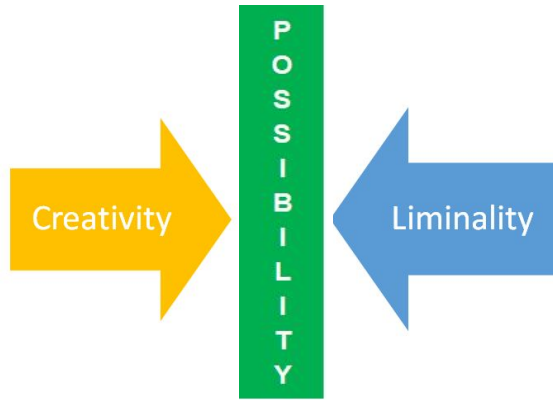
- Hybrid identities - interchangeable roles
- Dissolution of fixed identities
- Flexibility and decentralisation
- Non-standardised
- Room for unexpected
- Agency versus structure



ndembu tribe



WHEN CREATIVITY MEETS LIMINALITY



- Creativity fluidifies educational structures as it is premised upon the unexpected and the divergent.
- Creativity generates liminal spaces where liminality itself is experienced as possibility, encounter and ultimately empowerment.
- Creativity ensures that liminal experiences focus on generative potential rather than simply on the troublesome and unsettling confrontation with thresholds

PERPETUAL/PERMANENT LIMINALITY

Permanent liminality as fluidity within structures allowing for the emergence of:

- Teachable moments (Noddings, 2013)
- *Small C* creativity (Craft, 2001)
- Ordinariness of the extraordinary event of becoming (Todd, 2014, p. 238)

LIMINAL ENCOUNTERS IN POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION

Adolescence
Teacher-Student Relations
Teacher Dispositions



THE LIMINAL EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION

Tensions involving:

Subject :

Agency versus Structure; 'Heteropia' (Baillie et al (2012);
Internal tension (troublesome reformulation of self)

Time:

Individual versus curricular pace

Space :

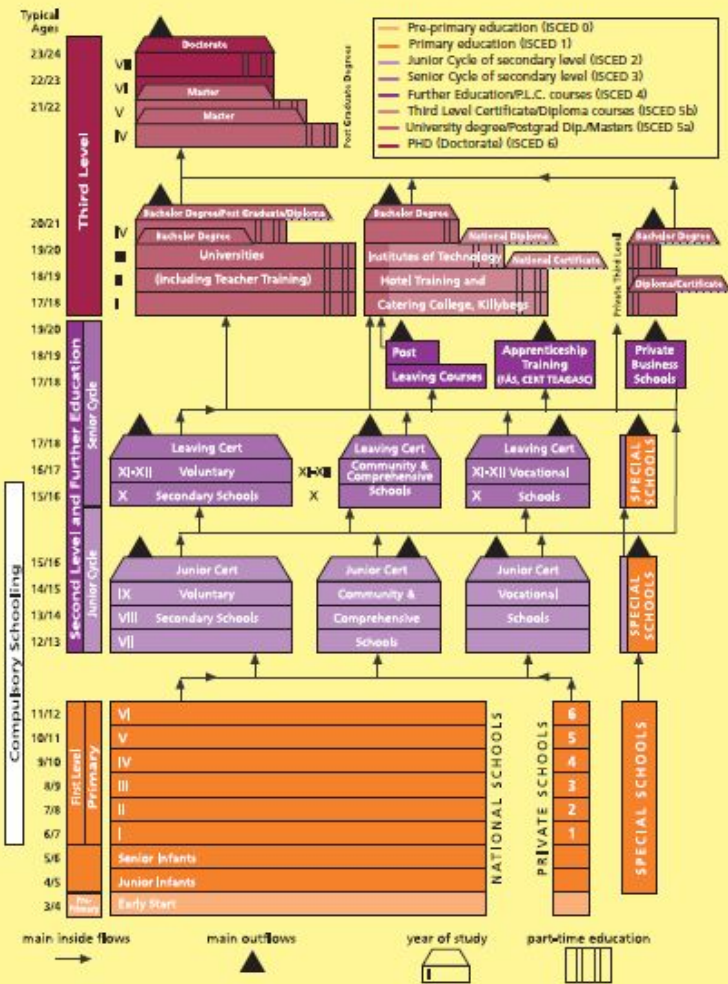
Within yet at the margin; Liquid space within structured
physical environments.



Source:

<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pimg.com/736x/13/b4/fb/13b4fb27bbde2cb667009b1b2871978-nlce-photos-beautiful-pictures.jpg>

Education System in Ireland



RECENT CURRICULAR CHANGES IN POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN IRELAND

- **Curricular developments** in second level education in Ireland
- October 2012, the Irish government launched ***A Framework for Junior Cycle***
 - emphasising a broad and balanced approach to learning
 - better use of assessment
 - greater school autonomy



Framework for Junior Cycle
2015



Key Principles

Quality

Wellbeing

Creativity and
Innovation

Choice and
flexibility

Engagement
and
participation

Inclusive
education

Continuity
and
development

Learning to
Learn

Key Skills



ncca.ie

Innovation
& Identity

NCCA AN tSúmáire Náisiúnta Coimisiúnaí na n-Éireann
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

‘At the heart of the reform is a devolution of greater autonomy to school, class and student level. It links with the learning at primary level while developing knowledge and skills for senior cycle.’

OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY SHORT COURSES

- New and creative learning opportunities that were not heretofore readily available in our schools
- Learning opportunities that are more reflective of the needs of the community and of the unique student cohort attending the school.
- Opportunities for partnership with other educational and community organisations

SMALL FOLLOW UP EMPIRICAL STUDY

Qualitative study focusing on room for creativity in the revised JC curriculum

Data collected through questionnaires and interviews

5 Schools; 115 questionnaire respondents (32.8%); 10 principals/deputy principals interviewed

Outcomes of this research:

- Reflection on the increasing **dichotomy between creativity and standardisation** . Consistently with Noddings (2013, p.210) we are concerned that a 'preoccupation with curriculum standards that are overly prescriptive' has resulted in a loss of creativity.
- **Potential of creativity** to build and enhance **teaching and learning relationships** of value
- **Potential of creativity** to bring about **curricular changes** in terms of policy and practice

OUR EMPIRICAL STUDY: THE JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM AND CREATIVITY

Q: Do you think the second level curriculum encourages creativity?

Responses from School Managers:

- “Absolutely not! It is too exam focussed. That stifles people, it puts fear into people. There is a lack of security for people because at the end of the day they have to be able to be good at passing exams in order for the school system to reward them.”
- “I think that the new Junior Cert has obviously gone to encourage creativity amongst our younger students. Unfortunately, we haven't had much of a chance to engage with that, as of yet. I think we have got into a situation where creativity is sometimes the last thing on our mind when it comes to preparing for exams.”
- “The new Junior Cert encourages creativity unlike the Leaving Cert which is very regimented as it is teaching to the book and you have to follow a course outline. Students are rewarded by a points system by learning of essay and notes and then on one particular day hoping that all falls into place. So yes, the Leaving Cert has a long way to go before it can be seen as curriculum that is creative.”
- “The Leaving Cert is still very driven by the points system but I think every curriculum allows for creativity.. it is just how it is imparted to others or how it evolves within your teaching. I think the new Junior Cert gives a lot more room for creativity because it gives opportunities for cross fertilisation.”
- “We're in a very difficult time with the ASTI strikes and so on. I would like to convince people that there are actually sometimes better ways to do things and that there are new ideas that they don't need to be scared of and that actually if they were to allow themselves the freedom to try things out they might actually find that their own practice as a teacher would benefit rather than add to the burden but I don't know if I'll convince them or not.”

OUR EMPIRICAL STUDY: THE JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM AND CREATIVITY

Responses from Teachers:

- “Too much content for students.” / “Curriculum too intense.” / “Large curriculum limits creativity.” / “Curriculum is very restrictive in terms of creativity.”
- “A final 100% exam does not encourage creativity.” / “The reform is putting a priority on creativity which is positive but still too much teaching towards the exam. I would like to see more projects like at third level.”
- “On paper yes, but in practice it is up to each teacher. Highly idealistic. It is a positive and welcome aspect but the coursework over the three years hinders this - where will the time come from?”
- “Yes but length of course has not been reduced to support this.”
- “Yes the reformed Junior Cert does but Leaving Cert should be changed also.”
- “Yes but at the discretion of the teacher.”
- “I don’t believe a subject encourages a student to be creative. I believe the teacher must be creative for the student to be creative.”
- “I think it depends on the teacher. A language teacher could teach the class and have them do well in the Junior Cert without allowing them any creativity.”
- “There is a (relatively) smooth transition from the creativity in the primary classroom to the secondary classroom in subjects in the new Junior Cycle. However, the move of focus and apparent abandonment of creative strategies from Junior to Senior Cycle is far more problematic and jarring - it’s like a whole shift in focus and approach to learning.”
- “All teachers need to willingly use creative strategies, it cannot be an instruction from management!”

DIFFICULTIES WITH CURRICULAR CHANGES IN IRELAND

- Phased change over a 7 year period
- Top down approach to curricular changes
- Negative perceptions associated with economic downturn and political maneuvering
- Weak continuity with Senior Cycle
- Accountability pressures - teachers as civil servants

**JUNIOR
CYCLE
REFORM
NOT HARM**

We're fighting for your child's best education and future.

Changes that will undermine your child's potential; that will degrade our world-leading education system, and that will damage the delicate but crucial relationship between student and teacher.

It's also a time when a young student can begin to see their teachers as allies in learning – not bureaucrats there to assess, evaluate or judge.

Flawed changes will damage our world-class schools

Our 15-year-olds score 3rd out of 34 countries in reading literacy – 2nd in the EU – and significantly above average in Science and Maths. Your child's teachers are now educated to Master's level. So why is the Government devaluing your child's education by downgrading the Junior Cycle? Why are they driving a wedge between teachers and students? Parents and teachers want what's best for students.

Embrace positive, needed reforms. Reject flawed changes that lower standards and undermine your child's learning.





TEACHERS' VOICE

Report of ASTI Consultation with Teachers on the Junior Cycle Reform Document
"A Framework for Junior Cycle"

ASTI
A century of service

Impact on student: teacher relationships

"This will lead to a "distancing" of teachers from their students. This distancing and decoupling of the teacher-as-advocate relationship traditionally enjoyed by teachers and students may have a dramatic effect on the school environment." (13a)

"Students may claim favouritism." (242a)

"(Will) change dynamic between parents, students and teachers. We cannot be advocate and judge. Very difficult to fail your own students." (206)

Challenges for teachers

"Teachers are first and foremost human beings who in their daily dealings with students cannot possibly be objective with even the best will in the world."(11a)

"Difficult to satisfy students and parents whilst retaining integrity. Teachers (will be) vulnerable." (120)

"Perceptions of bias – will be very difficult for teachers to grade their own students, especially if living in local community. This perception of bias would be very difficult to counter, especially if only one teacher teaching that subject in the school." (19)

"Different teachers have different marking standards: would low marks mean you are a bad teacher or that your course is too hard? Would high marks mean that your course is too easy or you are marking papers too soft? Teachers are capable of assessing our own students but there is a fear of accusation and hearsay. It will create a poor (school) community environment." (126)

Impact on progression to Senior Cycle

"Pupils (will) lose out on skills for the Leaving Certificate; only two years to prepare." (112a)

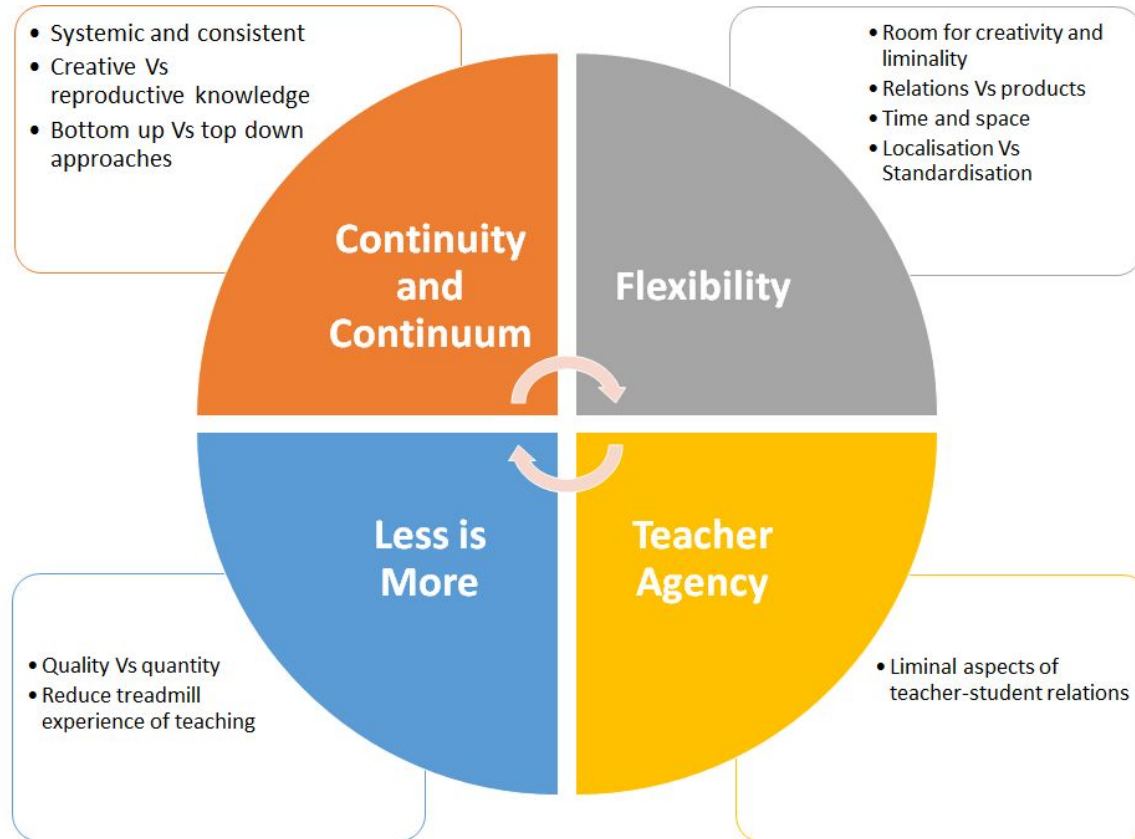
"Less preparation for Leaving Certificate – (especially) with common paper in most subjects." (71)

"Will not prepare students for Leaving Certificate academic subjects; results may be artificial." (60)

"(Students will) lack of motivation to prepare for Leaving Certificate." (69)

"Students have to do exams at Leaving Certificate and in third level. Why take away the opportunity to learn how to do exams?" (B23)

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN IRELAND: FROM LIMINALITY AS UNCERTAINTY TO LIMINALITY AS POSSIBILITY



FINAL THOUGHTS

- The JC reform attempted to introduce flexibility and make room for teacher agency and closer and informal interaction between teachers and students. Despite the educational value of these intents it has elicited a strong negative response from teachers.
- The JC reform has explicitly brought creativity into the curriculum and therefore liminality is also implicitly present however... Liminality was not chosen by teachers. Liminal spaces are loci of encounter only if those who enter are willing participants.

Liminal experiences arising from flexibility within the curriculum but created by teachers are more likely to result in a living curriculum of possibility, in authentic pedagogical encounters and may resolve the tension between teacher agency and educational structures.

KEY POINTS FROM OUR REFLECTION

- Rather than advocating the permanentization or institutionalisation of liminality, we put forward that the creation of spaces and interstices within educational curricula is necessary for liminality to occur.
- The promotion of creativity within curricula may encourage and result in valuing divergence, difference and voice which favour the occurring of genuine educational encounters between students and teachers.
- Creativity and its power to generate genuine educational encounters may help young people -who, as adolescents, find themselves in a liminal state of being- to move beyond 'being stuck' in liminality and to instead embrace liminality (as a space pregnant with possibility) and the rich potential and generativity it offers.

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