

The Leaving Certificate 'leaves' too many people behind

As the drama of the CAO third-level places unfolded this week, I thought about what Burmese pro-democracy advocate, Aung San Suu Kyi, said in Strasbourg last year when accepting a prize for promoting freedom of thought: "I've always said there's no hope without endeavour. Hope has no meaning unless we are prepared to work to realise our hopes and dreams, but in order to do that we need friends."

To achieve our dreams we must not only work hard, but we must be surrounded by people who believe in us and can help us.

In Ireland, an individual's position in the workforce is strongly influenced by their qualifications, so the Leaving Certificate examination is an enormous hurdle to achieving one's dreams.

Even for people who want careers in farming or business, for which qualifications have historically been less important, access to grants and subsidies from State organisations is increasingly linked to academic qualifications.

I have taught third-level courses on social class in Ireland for the last 10 years, and I believe the Leaving Certificate is the most important social sorting mechanism we use. A good Leaving Certificate and a college place on a prestigious course can be a key moment of upward mobility for an adolescent from a modest or marginalised background. Likewise, the failure to negotiate these hurdles in adolescence can place an affluent teen on a downward social trajectory.

Prior to the 1960s, class position in Ireland was strongly determined by ownership of property. Having land, or owning a successful business, located families comfortably within class pecking orders. Those who went to university were those who could afford it, regardless of their Leaving Certificate results. The modernisation of the Irish economy, from the Sean Lemass era onwards, radically changed this model, with qualifications largely determining class position.

However, as a report from the



CAO college places are offered on the basis of academic performance, which is always better when pupils have the support of educated, moneyed, savvy parents

Higher Education Authority demonstrated this week, farmers have been remarkably successful in transitioning to this qualification-based model.

As part of its consultation paper on 'Equity of Access to Education', the HEA revealed that the children of farmers were three times more likely to go to college than the average Leaving Certificate student. This success is due not only to the capacity of farm families to access State funding, via the grants system, but also their commitment to the prestigious and secure occupations that require higher-level qualifications.

This astute approach to the Leaving Cert is nothing new.

In his review of Irish economic development during the 20th century, historian JJ Lee said that "the academically brighter children of medium- and smaller-sized farms in the south and west" were the original embodiment of what he called the "performer ethic".

While deploring the poor performance of leaders in business, he said that children from this class, particularly those who became religious and teachers, "sought to instil in their pupils the conviction that performance could lift them out of the ancestral rut".

Unfortunately, for the last six years we have lived with the consequences of the dark side of this performer ethic, which became dominant during the Celtic Tiger. The outstanding performance of Anglo-Irish Bank's 'relationship bankers' led to a disastrous game of follow-my-leader that has brought the Irish economy to its knees.

Teens who received their Leaving Certificate results this week started second-level in 2008, so they are amongst the groups in Irish society most profoundly affected by austerity. It would be easy to forgive them for being cynical about the State's evaluation of their performance, given the abysmal performance of their elders.

Yet, instead of cynicism the Leaving Certificate students I met this year were hopeful, and perhaps more realistic, than those who left school during the heady days of the Celtic Tiger. Their hard work in school is the founda-



We are again witnessing the slaughter of innocent children with entire families being wiped out. Manufacturing of arms is going on at a faster pace than ever. Sales are booming in strife-torn areas like the Middle East, Eastern Europe, parts of Africa, North Korea, and parts of Latin America.

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tion of their hopes. However, even allowing for differences in performance ethic across social groups, there is a profound difference in terms of where the Leaving Certificate is taking students from each of the social classes in Ireland.

The HEA report found that while 99% of students from affluent Dublin 6 go to third-level, only 15% of those in Dublin 17 do. Travellers, mature students and teens from marginalised families are under-represented in college.

The loss to the economy caused by this inequity is incalculable. The 84% of second-level students from Ballyfermot who do not go to college are much more likely to end up on social welfare or move between insecure, short-term and low-paid jobs that keep them hovering above the poverty trap.

There is a tendency to blame the families of these students for not transitioning to third-level. However, a report published by the ESRI's Dr Emer Smyth, last week, reinforces Aung Suu Kyi's point that achievement requires skilled support from those who can help us achieve our goals.

Smyth and her colleagues found that getting into college is a complex game that must be skilfully played. Middle-class parents, particularly mums, are effective at

this game because they have been through the process themselves.

The challenge for teens from marginalised and immigrant families is more complex. Some of these families may be coping with challenges so great that simply remaining in school to complete second-level is an enormous achievement. However, even parents from more stable, upwardly mobile families often have few skills to assist their children in the tricky transition to third-level, because it is a game they have not played.

These adolescents are heavily reliant on support from schools, through one-to-one career-guidance counselling. Unfortunately for them, these services have been cut by more than 50% since 2011. This is surely one of the most short-sighted education cuts, given the massive investments into early-years education during the Celtic Tiger, which has kept greater numbers of marginalised children in school.

Without this support, the 'academically bright' children from disadvantaged homes are falling by the wayside. In reacting to the statistics published in the HEA report, chief executive Tom Boland said that the Irish economy needs these young people who are being left behind. There are not enough students in Rathgar or Ballsbridge to drive an entire economic recovery.

Every year, at Leaving Certificate results time, we hear from those experts on Irish education, the American Chamber of Commerce in Ireland, about the successes and failures of the Irish examination system.

While they are an interest group and entitled to make their view known, the Irish education system needs a much bigger transformation than simply extra points for specific subjects.

The system must harness the talents and gifts of all our population and support them in transitioning to a hope-filled future.

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SITTING IT OUT: students who do not have the support of family do less well in the Leaving Certificate, and are more likely to be marginalised.