

“What’s worth knowing? A Critical Realist case study on what constitutes “knowledge”
amidst lower secondary educational reform in Ireland”

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The concept of knowledge, what it is, who decides, and how it has come to be, is a pressing global issue as neoliberalism reshapes education systems, whereby Ireland’s lower secondary education has undergone a paradigmatic shift, framed by ambitions for a “knowledge-based economy”. While research has examined neoliberal influences on education policy and policy enactment in Ireland, little work explores what this means epistemologically or links it to ontology, particularly in the context of a Catholic voluntary secondary school.

My PhD addresses this gap using Critical Realism to investigate the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of this reform. Methodologically, I first used a Critical Realist Discourse Analysis of the national policy document, revealing the dominance of rational empiricism and instrumental reasoning, where constructivist pedagogies are reframed as performative and data-driven. This reflects a neoliberal epistemology that presents students and teachers as individualistic rational agents, at the expense of relationality and interconnectedness.

The second phase uses Archer’s M/M framework in a case study of a Catholic voluntary secondary school, acknowledging the historical and cultural trajectory of Irish education. From colonial national schools of the 1800s, through post-independence Catholic-nationalist education shaped by the “Ratio Studiorum” and British grammar school humanism, to today’s neoliberal human capital logic, a consistent thread emerges: what counts as knowledge has narrowed, rooted in a dualistic ontology, originating in colonial and Enlightenment thought.

However, preliminary findings here suggest the persistence of care and relationality even within neoliberal frameworks and amidst the historical cultural influence, hinting at a potential metaReality. I tentatively argue this may offer a resource for decolonising Irish education epistemologically and ontologically.

Keywords: critical realism; epistemology; ontology; education reform; neoliberalism; Ireland; Archer; metaReality