

## **“I don’t want to learn”: Absenteeism and Socially Situated Cultural Capital**

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**Abstract:** Following a three-year embargo, this article represents the first in a series of publications stemming from long term ethnographic fieldwork. This paper explores how contrasting forms of cultural capital come to be valued, and considers how tension between them affects the way that children engage with schooling in a Southern Harbour town in Malta. I demonstrate how children are tasked with accumulating conflicting forms of capital, while navigating the rules of different games in co-existing fields of forces. Drawing upon 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation in 2011-2012, with 47 students aged 8-10 years old, I argue that the school becomes a battleground between opposing forms of cultural capital, all vying for the children’s appropriation, yet not within equal reach. Children’s disengagement from school, and occasional attempts at reintegration, must be located within a socially situated understanding of the compelling (though not determining) social forces at play, within which children find alternative and culturally accessible ways to construct themselves as persons of value.

**Keywords:** cultural capital, absenteeism, early school leaving, class habitus.

### **Introduction**

In 2014, the Government of Malta announced a social benefit fund aimed at alleviating child poverty by binding poorer families to certain conditions, one of which being an obligation for parents to ensure that their children attended compulsory schooling for at least 95% of the scholastic year (Malta Today, September 9, 2014). This was a precursor to school absenteeism taking centre

stage in education policy debates over the next year. Incentive strategies went hand in hand with more punitive measures of enforcing criminal proceedings upon parents who disregarded child truancy fines. By April 2015, the National Statistics Office reported that unauthorized absences from school had dropped by 25.9% (NSO, 2015), and a further decrease of 2.2% was reported in February 2016 (NSO, 2016). By July 2017, it was reported that inner harbour schools had seen a 60% drop in the number of truancy fines handed out over the past three scholastic years (Times of Malta, July 17, 2017). However, the Malta Union of Teachers reacted to these statistics with apprehension and criticism, declaring that previously absent and disruptive students had been forcibly returned to classrooms, with no strategy for their reintegration, substantial pressure on teachers, and a subsequent diminution in the quality of education (The Malta Independent Online, October 29, 2014). The Opposition agreed with this stance, adding that the necessary resources and preparations for student reintegration were lacking, given that “the majority of these children would have developed a certain attitude, therefore would require individual attention” (The Malta Independent Online, May 7, 2015).

The strategy which was adopted for enticing children back into schools, along with the unanticipated fallout which resulted, demonstrated a lack of a nuanced understanding of the socially situated ways in which children both engage and disengage with schooling, and might come to embody dispositions which are ultimately dismissed as ‘a certain attitude.’ Drawing upon my own ethnographic fieldwork among children within an industrial working class town in Malta, and Pierre Bourdieu’s work on class habitus and forms of capital, I demonstrate how contradictory dispositions were expected of these children, whereby the cultural capital which they had accumulated through their social positioning in the field directly opposed the cultural capital expected of them in school, thus necessitating a consideration of the negotiated and contextualized meanings of capital. The ‘field’ is here understood in terms of Bourdieu’s ‘field of forces’ (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 312) as the setting whereby agents struggle and compete for advantages by means of their habitus and appropriated capital, which are constantly in play, yet not equally accessible.

Lareau et al (2016) have argued for the need to take the situational meaning of capital into account, and in demonstrating precisely this, I illustrate how my child informants are part of different yet co-existing ‘fields of forces’, which

call on them to simultaneously engage with different, and at times contrasting, 'rules of the game'. I show that conflicting forms of internalized capital which children have to negotiate between often result in them being unequally valued, as their social trajectory leads them down alternative pathways away from formal schooling, where their embodied forms of cultural capital are not only granted legitimacy, but are actively desired.

### **The Context of the Study**

I illustrate my argument by drawing upon my own ethnographic fieldwork in the state primary school of Portu [1] within the Southern Harbour district of Malta, the district previously reported to suffer the highest average number of school absences (40.5 days per student) in Malta (NSO, 2015). Portu is a predominantly working class and inner harbour town in Malta, historically developed and exploited as a heavily industrialized area by virtue of its geographical location as a natural port. In the context of Malta's colonized past, the towns surrounding the harbour were characterized by years of socio-economic exploitation and working class alienation. A "fatalistic feeling of powerlessness" (Zammit, 1984, p.7) pervaded this geographical area, giving rise to the Maltese Worker's Movement, led for the first time into power by Sir Paul Boffa (1947) and, eventually, following a split in the Labour Party in 1949, by Dom Mintoff, who worked to eradicate inequalities, narrow differences in income, and raise the esteem and dignity of the working classes. Under Mintoff's leadership, many residents of the harbour towns came to proudly identify themselves as part of a down-to earth, humble, yet tough and resilient working class. Yet the middle and professional classes held strong contempt for the forceful and excessive way that Mintoff introduced socialist reforms to the Maltese islands. The workers' zealous support of their hero gave rise to a culture of intimidation and violence towards whoever opposed Mintoff's aims and ideology. A certain sense of 'roughness' and machismo is still prevalent amongst the people of Portu, who take pride in being tough and strong-willed. To this day, the vast majority of residents in Portu remain staunch Labour party supporters, recalling Mintoff with gratitude and reverence, and united in a shared historical sense of what it means to be working class. This bore a stark contrast to my own middle class upbringing, in which Mintoff's leadership was mostly remembered as a dark time in Maltese history, characterized by violence and fear. My own social experience of being raised in predominantly English-speaking towns in the Northern Harbour region during the 1980s necessitated constant self-reflection on my part during the fieldwork process; as I positioned myself in

the field and worked to interrogate any cultural baggage or taken-for-granted cultural assumptions I may have had, upon entering Portu as a fieldwork site (and thereafter).

Portu has an ageing and declining population. Malta's at-risk-of-poverty rate or social exclusion rate [2] has consistently shown to be the highest for persons living in the Southern Harbour district (of which Portu forms part), most recently at 26.9% (NSO, 2018). During my period of fieldwork (February 2011 – September 2012), some residents faced issues regarding sanitation, varying degrees of poverty, social and mental health difficulties, low levels of educational attainment, unemployment, and illiteracy. Their harsh circumstances were conducive to occasional participation in illegal and underclass black market activities, characterized by danger and risk, which some of my informants undertook in order to provide for their families and make ends meet.

Although a number of middle class professionals lived and worked in Portu, my own child informants mainly belonged to families where the breadwinners worked as builders, cleaners, drivers, petrol station attendants, bar keepers, dishwashers, shopkeepers, garbage collectors, clerks, prostitutes, and factory workers [3]. Their parents were often the sole breadwinners in relatively large families of three or more children. A number of them were in gainful employment, some were inactive and/or retired, whilst others did not declare their work to the State, and were registered as unemployed in order to receive social benefits in addition to their off-the-books employment. Some of my informants also earned money through gambling and participation in the black market. A few of my adult informants shared that they regularly struggled in terms of their mental health.

I undertook ethnographic fieldwork amongst 47 students aged between 8 to 10 years old at the Portu Primary School for thirteen months over 2011 and 2012. During my time in the classroom, I primarily employed the method of participant observation. Outside of the school, I nurtured friendships with around four families. I allowed informal conversations to unfold, and gave informants the space to reflect on whatever topics they wished. Overall, I aimed for “ethnographic openness” (Okely, 1994, p. 22), in being open to whatever was presented during the course of fieldwork without restricting the analytical focus.

The staff at the primary school often referred to Portu as 'a depressed area' with 'many social problems.' As the School Development Plan 2011-2012 acknowledged, "the catchment area of Portu Primary consists mostly of the lower classes of the town. Almost all students come from the poorer families with very low income because of poorly paid jobs or because of dependence on state social assistance." A strong sense of 'roughness' through tacit hostility and an implicit air of violence manifested itself as a strong feature of local life, as taken-for-granted qualities which came to bear upon some children's relationship with schooling.

### **'Class habitus'**

Bourdieu's habitus is a useful framework in understanding how objective social structures and individual agency are effectively mediated, and act upon one another. Here, the structural properties of the social world as 'rough' are incorporated within the habitus, and are thus embedded in subconscious everyday taken-for-granted practices, whilst the habitus in turn has a constitutive power that acts upon the social world of which it is part, thus often having a reproductive effect. The process is a dynamic one in which various potentialities exist within the social field, and where social agents struggle for positions within it. They do so by accumulating capital, which 'as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, [and] is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible' (Bourdieu, 1997, p.46). The habitus and forms of capital that an individual comes to possess over others ultimately determines that individual's position within the field, paving the way for social class stratification which takes unequal possession of legitimized capital as its cue.

Although various forms of capital exist, I am primarily interested in the idea of cultural capital in an embodied state, as "external wealth converted into an integral part of the person" (1997, p. 48). The profit implicit in this form of capital is inextricably tied with the person, deeply and meaningfully internalized, and existing only in relation to the person who possesses it. The value of embodied cultural capital is determined within the social field, co-created dynamically, and collectively shared and recognized. This in fact underpins Bourdieu's (1985) notion of class, in that classes are "sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings, have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interests and therefore of producing similar practices

and adopting similar stances” (p.725). With the emergence of what Bourdieu (1984) terms ‘class habitus’, meanings are actively created in a way that allows individuals within a social class to collectively know the value of certain practices and objects within the field. Being able to carry yourself with a sense of fearlessness, and showing dominance in the face of inevitable conflict (or the threat thereof) - all skills inscribed and indistinguishable from the person - have come to be valuable skills to the children of Portu, within the dynamic process of socially positioning themselves as the sort of person their social world imbues with value, and requires them to be. As with Evans’ informants in Bermondsey (2006), what becomes evident is that “becoming a working class person is a lot to do with learning how to become a particular kind of person by learning how to belong to a particular place” (p.158). This learning takes place in a socially situated manner, as children become skilled practitioners gradually and through meaningful social co-participation, in a process embedded within a wider community of practice which ultimately and inadvertently comes to be reproduced (Lave and Wenger, 1991). These skills become deeply incorporated into the child’s whole person, forming part of their taken-for-granted knowledge of the world, and of their own place within it.

However, when carried over into the school space, this embodied knowledge was interpreted as a child’s tendency to be aggressive, disruptive, inattentive, dismissive, or involved in confrontations with other children. These were often labelled as individual character traits, as opposed to typical behaviour generated by a particular ‘class habitus’. The value implicit in the children’s accumulated and embodied cultural capital was not shared by the school, which in itself is an institutionalized manifestation of the dominant habitus. With the power to attribute unequal value to different forms of cultural capital, the groups in possession of the dominant habitus often set the agenda in terms of what is appropriate capital for people to possess, which subsequently plays a part in the reproduction of social disadvantages. Bourdieu (1973) describes this process as ‘symbolic violence’, whereby the dominant group holds (and implicitly imposes on others) “the power to represent commonsense and above all the power to create the ‘official version of the social world’” (Mahar et al, 1990, p. 13). To understand how some children in Portu thus gradually disengage from the process of becoming the kind of person the school would like them to be, it is necessary to consider what kind of persons the school is tasked with producing, and the narratives

and understandings it prioritises in this process, to then grasp how some children subsequently position themselves in opposition to this.

### **The purpose of schooling**

Schools have long been held as “sites for the production of educated persons across cultural and social space” (Levinson and Holland, 1996, p. 3). The concept of the ‘educated person’ refers to “a fully ‘knowledgeable’ person, a person endowed with maximum ‘cultural capital’” (Levinson and Holland 1996, p. 21) as legitimized by the school. Within the school itself, the term ‘educated person’ was actually employed as a way of describing people as polite and well-mannered – in other words, being respectful in conversation, soft-spoken, and responding to (specifically adult) authority with deference. As Ms Degiorgio explained to her class, “Jekk ha ngħix ta’ persuna edukata, nirrispetta l-awtorità, tobdu” (Translation: “if I am going to live like an educated person, I respect authority and obey” [Field notes, Friday 11<sup>th</sup> March 2011]). This understanding of the ‘educated person’ was applied to the children both in terms of their comportment at school, as well as in relation to their future employability, inadvertently revealing the teacher’s implicit assumption that the children will ultimately join the working force in positions which will require them to practice subservience. A prominent sign in the Year 4 classroom informed children that:

L-iskola għandna: Niġu fil-ħin  
u bl-uniformi kompluta;  
Nirrispettaw l-awtorità;  
Nitkellmu bl-edukazzjoni u  
b’rispett ma’ kulhadd;  
Noqogħdu attenti waqt il-  
lezzjonijiet; Nagħmlu xogħolna  
kollu u pulit; Ingibu magħna  
dak kollu li hu meħtieġ;  
Niehdu ħsieb il-klassi tagħna u  
l-kotba; Ingibu ruħna sew fil-  
klassijiet, fit-*toilets* u fil-bitha;  
nisimġhu lil xulxin;  
Nirrappurtaw każijiet ta’  
bullying; Naħsbu fil-bżonnijiet  
tal-oħrajn.

‘At school we must: Arrive on  
time, and in complete school  
uniform; respect authority; speak  
to everyone with manners and  
respect; pay attention during  
lessons; do all work, and neatly;  
bring everything that is needed;  
look after our classroom and our  
books; behave ourselves in the  
classrooms, toilets, and  
playground; listen to each other;  
report cases of bullying; think of  
the needs of others’

(Field notes, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2011).

These dispositions were implicitly put forward as preconditions for the 'educated person' to be culturally produced, allowing for the transmission of cultural capital which the school possesses, and that the children may later transform and objectify into academic qualifications, and later into economic advantages. This is not to say that children in possession of this capital were automatically poised to do well, but rather that the odds of doing well in school were better stacked in their favour, as their internalized and embodied states of being in the world were better prepared for what schooling asks of them. Lacking this, children often found themselves part of a "process of disengagement from school initiated in the very first years due to a failure in internalizing the ways of formal schooling" (Camilleri and De Giovanni 2018, p. 253). The dominant habitus, in effect, becomes an important form of cultural capital, particularly once the latter is acknowledged as "the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment" (Bourdieu 1997, p. 48).

### **So what cultural capital is valued in Portu, by contrast?**

Qualities of intense sociability with one another, and highly charged (and occasionally dangerous) masculinity and toughness, all structured the children's experiences in such a way that the children internalized these conditions accordingly, whilst generating appropriate cultural responses to them. Children were largely expected to be independent in handling their own affairs with one another, with excessive adult interference to an extent communicating that they were incapable of standing up for themselves - thereby diminishing their qualities of toughness. The skills involved in navigating their social worlds were learnt in a socially situated manner, and were subsequently valued as a form of cultural capital facilitating their engagement with a social world pervaded by roughness. In parallel, these forms of capital were incongruous with what the school demanded of them, in requesting children to be docile and submissive to the authority of the school staff, and the adults around them:

*Some of the children were running up the stairs at the back of the corridor (which is a forbidden area), slamming doors, and almost dropping the plastic slide while laughing. Josette, one of the parents, told them off and called them all rude. Some children were swearing, and Josette singled out Billy and Felicia, telling them that they were naughty. Billy crossly answered 'Hekk irrid u hekk jogħgobni' ('That's how I want it and that's how I like it'). Josette feigned being shocked by the response, but laughed throughout.*

[Fieldnotes; Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2011]



Josette, a parent who regularly helped out at school, displayed her understanding of the official version of the world as manifested in the school setting, to the extent that she reprimanded the children for acting contrary to it in their treatment of school property, while venturing to places which were out of bounds, and swearing. Billy immediately posited his actions as both intentional and of value to him – a reaction that Josette did not refute or openly challenge, as a parent who was raising her own children within this same space, fully knowledgeable that Billy's brusqueness held merit in another field. What becomes evident is that growing up in Portu while participating in formal schooling may come to require very different and contrasting things from the children.

Elsewhere, Rita, a key informant who often pondered the reasons behind children's lack of engagement with schooling in Portu, was frequently concerned about her youngest child Ronald's progress in school, as one of the weaker students in his class. Although willing to help her son, she was often frustrated at not knowing how, partly since she self-admittedly grew impatient rather easily, and would often yell at Ronald for getting the answers wrong. Yet, her worry about her son's academic performance was outweighed by another, which Rita considered to be far more pressing:

*"Rita told me that she worried about Ronald, because he wasn't 'rough' like the rest of the family, and was different to the rest of them. She described him as a wimp, adding that he would make a fuss if a fly was on him, or if a ball was thrown to him. Her elder son Richard shared his prediction that Ronald would grow up to be gay. Rita said that she would love her son regardless, however she still seemed bothered by this eventual possibility. She worried specifically about when her son would go to secondary school, since she didn't want him to get bullied. I asked Rita if that was why she tells him to hit people back, and she said yes. Rita stressed that no one else in the family is like that. Richard proudly said that when he was at school, someone would barely have to touch a hair on his head before he would throw a punch and start fighting."*

*[Field notes; Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> November 2011]*

Rita frequently shared the above concern with me. As the owner of a local bar which was a predominantly male domain, and where drugs and contraband items were often exchanged and consumed, she was a significantly burly woman who showed much kindness, and yet joked vulgarly with her patrons

and swore profusely in almost every discussion and argument. She frequently showed me her built and muscular arms and hands, proudly telling me that they looked as though they belonged to a man. Her harsh upbringing and the demanding physical labour required of her was inscribed on her body and incorporated within her habitus, as she internalized and embodied masculine dispositions which were necessary in order for her to prevail in such a male-dominated environment. Her eldest son Richard, having also understood this necessity, was quick to assert his male dominance over others in ways which had thus far eluded his younger brother, much to their mother's dismay. Not only did they jointly fear that Ronald lacked the necessary skills to navigate circumstances they knew him to be likely come across in Portu, but they feared that his gentle manner and tendency to be fussy, weak, and effeminate would render him a likely target for other children to accumulate their own embodied capital, through violent encounters with him.

A hardening of the self was a necessary prerequisite in living within such a boisterous and macho climate, and in this respect, "bodies would have every likelihood of receiving a value strictly corresponding to the positions of their owners in the distribution of the other fundamental properties" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 191). Most of the mothers I met during fieldwork instructed their children not to hit or punch anyone, but added that upon receiving a punch themselves, they should then reciprocate and deal ten blows for every one hit they would have received. Children in Portu lived in a social world where the potential for physical and emotional violence permeated the social sphere, in an environment which was highly charged with masculine features, and where discussions were quick to become heated and incendiary. Possession of a quick wit and a sharp tongue, coupled with a general demeanour of toughness, was highly prized. The internalized ability to effectively address this potential for danger and ward off possible attacks or counter-attacks with an effective rebuttal was a coveted quality which commanded respect, although it jarred with the dispositions of comportment and self-discipline which the children were expected to possess at school. It was embodied in internalized dispositions of 'roughness', which implicitly communicated that a person was more than capable of defending themselves against the harsh realities of their social world.

### **Schools as sites of conflicting capital**

These harsh dispositions were often brought to the fore within the school setting, where tensions between different forms of cultural capital often

emerged. In the process of constructing themselves as valuable persons in Portu, and struggling for the specific capital which enables this (and which they are perhaps called upon to access more frequently), some children came to position themselves contrary to ideas of the educated person. The taken-for-granted dispositions of toughness which granted them advantages outside of school conversely worked to their detriment while inside the school. Children were thus expected to negotiate consistently and continuously between being the kind of persons that the school is engaged in trying to produce, and the kind of person that their potentially harsh social environment requires them to be.

This inherently tense and conflicting process meant that classrooms at Portu Primary school were prone to a number of disruptions on any given day, whereby children would break the ideal social order of the classroom in which the children are expected to be obedient and submissive to the staff. Some children not only refused to give their attention, but made it increasingly difficult for other children to do so. This battle of wits and struggle for the control and submission of children's bodies occasionally extended to a broader struggle for the control of the classroom:

*"Felicia had been answering back all morning, and she had her sweater over her head in trying to make other children in class laugh. The teacher phoned the Head in his office, and the Head told the teacher to send Felicia downstairs. Felicia did not want to go, and the teacher said that the rest of the class would not begin their lunch break until she left. The other children urged Felicia to leave, telling her that she would get into more trouble if she didn't go, but she just laughed and said that she didn't want to. Eventually she conceded, and her peers cheered at her departure.*

*[Field notes; Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2011]*

Some teachers were more able to secure control in the classroom than others, and children quickly picked up on this and used it to their advantage with specific teachers, attempting to achieve supremacy within the situation and project a particular tough and hard image of themselves to an available audience. Although in the previous vignette, the teacher achieved control by temporarily removing Felicia from the classroom space, this accomplishment was relatively short-lived. Upon her return to the classroom, Felicia addressed the teacher with renewed and intensified aggression:

*When I walked in I found Felicia threatening the teacher, pointing her finger inches away from his face and shouting "LILEK qed nkellem" ("I'm talking to YOU!") She*

*was being very confrontational, and was hitting some of the other children as well. During break, the classroom was rather chaotic, and a few other children joined Felicia in messing about. Later in the day, the teacher told me that Felicia had approached him and told him that her father would soon find him in the street, and run him over with his car, and give him a black eye. She turned physically violent after that, and began to hit him. Felicia was eventually excluded from school for one day the following week as a punishment, however many teachers felt as though this was not an appropriate punishment for her, since she was likely to treat it as a vacation from school.*

*[Fieldnotes, Tuesday 25th October 2011]*

Felicia's response was partly driven by a need to recover from the slight of having her peers align with their teacher rather than herself, by joining the call for her to leave the classroom. The fact that her departure ultimately prompted celebration in the room was another blow, for which she had to atone. Compelled to later reassert her dominance in the classroom space after having felt her grasp of it loosened, she achieved this by injecting the exchange with an intimidating threat of violence – something she was not unfamiliar with in a social world marked by 'roughness'. In doing so, Felicia sought to accumulate her own embodied capital in relation to her teacher's position in the field, but did so at the expense of her own positioning as an educated person. She was ultimately chastised for her actions through a temporary removal from the classroom situation, with the cultural capital associated with becoming an 'educated person' further eluding her in the process, and leaving her to socially construct herself as a valuable person in the way which is the most meaningful to her, and by accumulating the cultural capital which is most accessible to her. Different forms of cultural capital thus become conflicted. Similarly, Chircop (1997) noted that students attending a girls trade school in the south of Malta were "unwilling to take up the 'cultural capital' which is particularly middle class", and instead moved to "draw from working class values which emphasize toughness, sexuality, and a subversive attitude towards authority" (p.360).

### **Absenteeism and disengagement from school**

During fieldwork, a number of children attended school in a rather sporadic manner. Teachers were aware of which students were more likely to attend class, and those which were not. Like Willis (1981) and Chircop (1997), I considered how children absented themselves from schooling more broadly,

including when they impulsively left the classroom, or when they defied the staff and engaged in other activities during lesson time. Occasionally, children would simply turn up to school hours late, offering little explanation, and often having failed to do their homework. Cases of regular and unjustified absenteeism were left for the attention of the school social workers, and fines were often administered to parents who regularly failed to send their children to school. Teachers did not seem to hold much faith in the formal procedures for tackling absenteeism at the time, and when I asked if there was likely to be any follow up, it became clear that teachers considered the fines to have no real tangible effect. The social benefit fund introduced in 2014 was decidedly more effective in incentivizing families to send their children to school. However, the initiative ultimately failed to socially situate the children within an understanding of the wider and compelling social processes fuelling their disengagement from school.

Although some parents insisted that their children attend school regularly and study hard to achieve high marks in their exams, a large number of parents seemed to somehow facilitate (or at the very least, not create a major obstacle to) their children's lack of presence in school, on occasion neglecting to send them to school if it posed an inconvenience to their day, reasoning that one day would not make a grand difference. Children themselves also demonstrated a significant degree of agency within this decision-making process of school attendance. Some confidently stated their intentions in advance, such as Ruben blatantly telling the Learning Support Assistant that he would not be at school on Monday, because he had a barbecue to go to. A number of children tended to miss school on days where they would have a test scheduled, and teachers took note of this and structured their plans for tests accordingly, at times purposely neglecting to directly inform children when a test was coming up, or attempting to underline how crucial it was for the children to be at school on a particular day. The staff seemed to be appealing to the children for their co-operation in recognizing the importance of attending school, acknowledging the agency they feel the children to have in formulating a decision about their attendance and participation.

At times, children took it upon themselves to decide whether or not they would turn up at school, and on these occasions their decisions appeared to be met with minimal resistance from their parents, who claimed that the choice belonged to their children. This echoes Chircop's (1997) observations of a girls trade school in the south of Malta, where students were similarly

granted responsibility of choice over their own attendance. Likewise, in Portu, even where parents expressed disagreement with their children's behaviour or lack of engagement with school, this was often done with a sense of resignation, insinuating that there was very little that they could do if their children chose to behave that way. Parents did attempt to guide their children's behaviour, however the final choice often seemed to fall on the child. Study sessions planned with a few of my child informants were frequently cancelled at the last minute, and at times simply depended on whether they felt like coming to the lesson or not. When I attempted to confirm whether her children would be turning up for an English lesson a few hours beforehand, Polly would often tell me that she would let me know once she had asked them, again nodding to the agency she considered her own children to possess. While frustrating, these practices tacitly underlined the importance of children not being unquestioningly submissive, as a way of ensuring that they become the kind of people which this particular place requires.

While parents were inclined to allow children to choose their own course of action, they were more likely to intervene on occasions when this action impinged on other children's ability to do the very same thing. Josette, mother of Daniela, one of the Year 5 girls who was regularly responsible for classroom disruptions, had particular words of advice for teachers in dealing with students such as her daughter:

*The classroom assistant told me that she has four naughty children in her class, and that she could not cope with them. Josette, who at this point was sweeping the hallway, told the assistant that those who wanted to learn should be taught in class, and the others should just be left alone to do what they wanted to. She told the assistant that she should only teach the children who wanted to learn.*

*[Field notes; Friday 6th May 2011]*

The impetus for children to succeed in education was thus largely expected to come from the children themselves in their capacity as social agents, and where this was not present, it was advised that teachers focus their energies on children who are indeed eager to learn, or at the very least are willing to co-operate by not disrupting the class. Children learned and somewhat accepted that the classroom space may be subject to a number of disruptions. Within this space, they come to negotiate who they are, fully engaging themselves with their surrounding environment and locating themselves within this space, using their encounters with others to do so, whilst

constructing themselves as valuable persons through the accumulation of particular embodied forms of cultural capital. Failing to occupy the specific space of the classroom at the time designated by the institution, and in the manner which the institution deems proper, is communicated as a rejection of the educational institution in itself, allowing them to construct themselves as individuals who both recognize and understand the concept of the 'educated person' which the school is attempting to produce, and who consequently position themselves in relation to it. I spoke to Daniela, one of the girls who often initiated classroom disruptions in Year 5, as she explained her choice to rebel within the classroom:

*Daniela: Jiena meta kelli 5 fil-pushchair kienet teħodni l-mummy. Ġħax ġħadni niġtakar. Ġħandi l-memorja tiegħi tajba, imma jiena kattivva ġħax ma nkunx irrid naħdem l-iskola, imma li ġħandi moħħi jaħdem.*

*Daniela: When I was 5 my mum would walk with me in the pushchair. Because I still remember it. My memory is good, but I am mean because I don't want to work at school, but my brain works.*

*Interviewer: Int qed tgħid li inti kattivva?*

*Interviewer: You say that you are mean?*

*Daniela: Ma nkunx irrid nitgħallem imma ġħandi waħda tagħmilli privaat il-pjazza.*

*Daniela: I don't want to learn, but I go to private lessons at one woman in the square.*

*Interviewer: Ġħalfejn ma tkunx trid titgħallem?*

*Interviewer: Why don't you want to learn?*

*Daniela: Ġħax is-ser jgħidli oqgħod ħdejn dik jew dik, u ma niġgħilidx... U ngħidlu rrid post hemm jew hemm jew hemm. Jgħidli le, u t-tfal oħrajn iħallihom, ġħalhekk nirvolla jien.*

*Daniela: Because the teacher tells me to sit next to this one or that one, and not to fight... I tell him that I want a place here or there or there. He tells me no, and he lets the other children do it, and that's why I rebel.*

*[Interview with Daniela and Theresa; 12<sup>th</sup> January 2012]*

In her explanation, Daniela expresses resentment and feels that the teacher impedes the degree of freedom which she thinks she should be granted within the classroom, and which many children in Portu may have grown

accustomed to as a taken-for-granted element of their social world, particularly one which holds potential danger in being submissive. Daniela also seems to recognize that her decision to reject the primary activity associated with the classroom, i.e. learning and the transfer of knowledge from teacher to students, is one that ascribes to her the status of being 'mean' (*kattiva*) in actively choosing not to fulfil her end of the implicit reciprocal agreement. Daniela has not only demonstrated her understanding of what constitutes appropriate classroom participation, but she has located herself within that understanding in referring to herself as mean for failing to abide by it. Daniela also chooses to emphasize that although she does not want to learn in class, her mind still works. In other words, her decision to refrain from concentrating in class should not be taken as a sign of her inability to do so. Rather, she communicates that it is a conscious choice and exercise of free will, in spite of her inherent capacity to follow the lesson in the manner that is expected of her by the school authorities. One is completely independent from the other, as Daniela negotiates who she is, partly in relation to the person that the school would like her to be and become, appropriating the forms of cultural capital which are most meaningful and familiar to her.

### **What does this mean for children later on?**

A number of my adult informants had left formal schooling early, their premature departure preceded by frequent absenteeism, as they ultimately chose to go down alternative money-earning pathways instead. Shania left school at 13 after skipping regularly, although she was made to return to school very briefly when she moved to live with her father. The shame involved in being placed within the same class as a younger cohort of students (since she had missed so much school) soon caused her to act up and cause trouble in the school. She got excluded from school on a regular basis again, until she eventually quit altogether. Shania explained to me how she came to the decision to quit school in the first place:

*Shania told me that she was "brava hafna" ("very clever") at school. She admitted that she had become a bit of a show off, and used to constantly get excluded from school. When she lived with her mother and had gotten excluded from school for three weeks, she would go down to the bar where her mother worked. She said that over there, "in-nies jithawdu" (the people mess around), telling me that they have a lot of money to throw around. A lot of drugs would exchange hands over there, and patrons would often take drugs in the bathroom. Men would buy a round of drinks worth around €30, pay with a €50 note, and tell Shania to keep the change. Shania told me*



*that suddenly, she had money for manicures and blow dries and things like that. Once her exclusion period was over, Shania went back to school and started being a kiesha ("show off") again, dropping balloons filled with water from the roof of the school amongst other things. She got excluded for another two weeks, and then she went back to the bar again. Shania seemed to have gotten a taste of this other life where money was quickly acquired, and she didn't want to give it up.*

*[Field notes; Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> December 2011]*

In a later interview, Shania also added that her mother had been struggling financially and was unable to cope on her own. Therefore, she partly took the decision to leave school early in order to help her mother run the household and make ends meet (despite her mother's insistence that Shania stay in school). It is safe to assume that eventually, some children in Portu similarly and indirectly learn that their schooling is not the only avenue which allows them access to money in the future, and it is certainly not the quickest route to earning much-needed cash. Indeed, some children already appeared to see little relevance in what they learnt at school, reasoning that they could still earn money as the adults around them had. Teachers often tried to stress the importance of paying attention in class by linking this to the children's future employment, and a sense of shame was at times loaded on to occupations which were held by people who the children intensely loved, such as when a member of staff encouraged Felicia "to do better" ("*biex tagħmel aħjar*") than her father who worked in a factory (Fieldnotes, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2011).

Children in Portu became aware of means by which they could eventually access money with more immediacy, and without all of the skills that formal schooling was said to impart, rather, utilizing socially situated skills and practices which they have already come to internalize deeply through social co-participation. In the eyes of some children, there seemed to be little reason or incentive to pay attention in school, given that the ultimate end result of earning money could still be reached, whilst the means did not particularly matter, particularly if they rang more true to the children's socially positioned sense of self.

Shania's brother Richard, who was 15 years old at the time of fieldwork, had also dropped out of school at a young age, and he worked in his mother Rita's bar along with Shania. When tensions ran high at home, Richard decided to leave his mother's house and move back in with his father, who sent him back to school for the last four months of compulsory education after an absence of over a year. Rita did not seem to hold high hopes of her

son succeeding in his O levels, telling me that since he has started working with companies, all he wants is money in his pocket. In the end, Richard began to abscond from school again in order to take on odd jobs to make some extra cash, and he did not pass his O levels. Clashes between the conflicting forms of capital in play, not equally obtainable for Richard, became even more pronounced once he tried to reintegrate back into school. The requirements of formal schooling were even more alien to him once he returned to school after such a long absence. The skills that he had mastered in Portu in his time working at the bar served him very little at a school desk, and the promise of quick money remained as attractive as ever. He eventually returned to the path in life which was most familiar to him – the one that his parents had also gone down, and that they had unknowingly also made available to him despite emphasizing the importance of schooling. Richard had acquired a particular set of dispositions in adjusting to particular positions within his social field in the course of his own personal history, granting him a particular knowledge and understanding of the world which lent itself to the mastery of some skills over others. As Bourdieu observes, “some of the properties associated with social class which may remain without efficacy or value in a given field, such as ease and familiarity with culture in an area strictly controlled by the educational system, can take on their full force in another field” (1984, 106).

## **Conclusion**

In addressing absenteeism and early school leaving, obliging access to education and schooling is not enough. As Froerer (2011, p. 697) indicates, “marginalised people’s successful engagement with the ‘substantive benefits’ associated with education are mediated by their access to powerful forms of...capital.” Some forms of capital are bestowed more power and legitimacy than others, increasing the risk that some children may not be in possession of the *right* forms of cultural capital to mediate their experience of schooling. A child growing up in Portu must know how to be rough and how to stand up for themselves, responding to threats or intimidation with amplified violence, and asserting their dominance in the process. Although creatively-produced cultural responses, they are contextualized within a potentially hard environment, which demands quite particular things from children, and for which children develop particular (though not identical) dispositions. In failing to socially situate children’s lived experiences of schooling, children are ultimately left to carry the full weight of their subsequent disengagement with school later on down the road.

Underlying the local political debates on absenteeism in Malta, which have placed blame on children's adoption of 'a certain attitude' in school, is ultimately a failure to appreciate the subtle and unconscious demands placed on children to negotiate conflicting forms of capital within different fields of forces. This arises from an overarching class classification which unequally values people, and which posits the children's socially situated skills – emerging through potentially harsh circumstances that derive from social inequalities – as less legitimate. When children feel torn between two ways of being in the world, they are likely to lean towards generating dispositions which are the most familiar to them, and that allow them to construct themselves as valuable persons where the school may inadvertently deny this opportunity. Thus, in focusing policy attention on enforcing school attendance, without socially situating this in relation to the wider social forces of inequality which are powerfully at play, and which frame the children's lived experience, it becomes difficult to address tensions which are likely to arise when children are forcibly reintroduced to school settings requiring dispositions which jar so greatly with their own.

### **Endnotes**

1. The name of the town is fictitious. The same applies to all the names of informants/participants mentioned in the text.
2. The National Statistics Office (Malta) defines the at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate as corresponding to the proportion of persons who fall within at least one of these three categories: (i) persons whose equivalised income falls below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold; (ii) persons who live in severely materially deprived private households; and (iii) persons aged 0-59 who live in private households with very low work intensity (i.e. the adults aged 18-59 have worked less than 20 per cent of their total work potential during the past year).
3. My fieldwork observations should not be considered to encompass all children and adults living in Portu as one static and homogeneous group.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr Nicolas Argenti and Dr Peggy Froerer for their constant support and insightful guidance throughout this research. I am also grateful for feedback shared by participants of the Senior Research Seminar

Series organized by the Department of Anthropological Sciences at the University of Malta, where an earlier draft of this paper was presented. The research work disclosed in this publication is funded by the Strategic Educational Pathways Scholarship (Malta). The scholarship is part-financed by the European Union - European Social Fund (ESF) under Operational Programme II - Cohesion Policy 2007-2013, "Empowering People for More Jobs and a Better Quality of Life".

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