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**Towards a living theory of caring pedagogy:  
interrogating my practice to nurture a critical,  
emancipatory and just community of enquiry.**

by  
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**For the award of PhD from the University of Limerick**

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## ABSTRACT

In this narrative of my self-study action research into my practice I describe and explain my living theory of caring pedagogical practice as I claim to know my own educational development (Whitehead 1989a) in relation to teaching children to realise their capacity to think critically, within a context of a new scholarship of educational practice (Boyer 1990). I claim that as I researched dialogical pedagogies that would support my aims of encouraging children to be critical thinkers, I also reconceptualised my own identity as a critical thinker and began to challenge dominant orthodoxies that have traditionally determined who is seen as a knower in a primary classroom and who is seen as an educational researcher.

I articulate how my ontological values of care, freedom and justice in relation to others were transformed through their emergence into the living standards of judgment by which I evaluated the educational influence in learning of my developing dialogical practice.

I claim that I have generated a personal living educational theory about teaching children to be critical thinkers that is grounded in the idea of 'being' rather than 'having' (Fromm 1979), and this stands as my original contribution to knowledge in my field. I explain how I experienced a dissonance between my values and my practice that led me to critique dominant didactic norms as located in an abstract concept of a generalised 'Other', whereas my dialogical practice was located in the idea of relationships with real, concrete others (Benhabib 1987). I explain the significance of my research, grounded in my multimedia evidence base, for my own educational development, for my institution, and for the wider educational research community, as I clarify the developmental processes of my capacity to theorise my practice.

## **Introduction and Overview**

### ***Outlining the main ideas of my thesis***

This thesis is my research story. It is the narrative account of my self-study action research as I deliberately transformed myself from being a propositional thinker into a critical thinker. It is therefore a story of my own epistemological journey, and tells of what I now know and how I came to know it (Whitehead and McNiff 2006). My claim throughout is that I have come to know how I think and why I think as I do. Furthermore, as a teacher who teaches children to be critical thinkers, I am saying that I now understand my pedagogical practice at a new level, in ways that I did not appreciate before. I can offer descriptions and explanations for my work with young children, and these descriptions and explanations constitute my living theory of critical practice. I am claiming that I am offering my living theory of practice as a critical pedagogue as my original contribution to knowledge in my field. Throughout I will aim to demonstrate the validity of this claim by producing authenticated evidence in relation to identified criteria and standards of judgement, and I will explain how I have sought critical and informed feedback to test the robustness of my claims.

My understanding of self-study action research is that it is a form of enquiry that is committed to action, and to improvement of practice. My thesis is grounded in my understanding of how I took action to improve my critical awareness as the grounds for developing new pedagogies to encourage my students to realise their infinite capacity to know and to think for themselves. My study therefore becomes an account of an emerging praxis – that is, moral, informed, committed action. I undertook my study with a view to improving my practice, and to contributing to the development of a good social order (McNiff 2005a, McNiff *et al.*1992), and I will explain throughout how I have come to the point where I believe I am succeeding in my educational goals, and can produce authenticated evidence to test the validity of these claims.

In this report you will read about my efforts to create and sustain a critical community of enquiry in my classroom and in my institution. I will explain my struggle to come to

the understanding that, in order to help my students to think critically and exercise their intellectual freedom, I first had to learn to be more critical myself.

Becoming more critical for me meant that, as I engaged in systematic processes of cyclical inquiry and reflection in order to make informed choices about courses of action in my practice and, as I worked my way through both the research process and the writing process, I found that I gradually became better able to document both my professional and personal world. I became more critically aware of the many socio-cultural and historical narratives and discourses that have contributed to my ontological, epistemological and educational values, and that have shaped me personally and professionally, and to which I in turn also contribute. As the document progresses, my deepening understanding about the processes of education can be seen evolving from chapter to chapter. By problematising some of the many complexities of the taken-for-granted concepts about knowledge and knowing in educational settings, I believe that I have come to a richer and more critical understanding of why I do what I do.

To provide a context for these issues, I outline some key concepts that have informed the writing of this thesis. These ideas will be more fully developed later. The key concepts include issues of ontology, methodology and epistemology, and I explain the relationships between them in the generation of my living educational theory, and its potential significance for transforming the existing social order.

I begin with my values.

### **My values**

My research is grounded in the values I hold about research, education, and my relationships with others. I explain how my ontological, epistemological and methodological values have come to act as the explanatory principles for my work and for the writing of this thesis (Whitehead 2005, McNiff and Whitehead 2005). In offering this account of my exploration into my practice I show how I hold myself morally accountable for the actions I take within my practice by explaining the reasons and purposes for those actions.

My living theory of practice is drawn, therefore, from the values that inform my life. I explain how my practice is shaped by who I am, and how my identity is rooted in the

values I hold. At the same time, I appreciate that my living theory is informed by the specific influences of my life history and living contexts – my age, race, class, gender and sexuality (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, Kincheloe and Berry 2004). This means that my theory is both an explanation of my practice and an explanation of my living relation to the world of my practice (Kincheloe and Berry 2004).

This scrutiny of my values as the grounds for practice enabled me to understand and justify my choice of research methodology. I deliberately chose a self-study action research methodology for my enquiry because I believed it to be one in which my educational commitments and my educational values would be in harmony. Whitehead and McNiff (2006) suggest that

We understand our ontological values as the deeply spiritual connections between ourselves and others. These are embodied values, which we make external and explicit through our practices and theories.

(Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.86)

Whitehead and McNiff (op cit) describe how, in a living approach to educational action research, the researcher's ontological values can transform into an educational commitment. Similarly, Bullough and Pinnegar (2004) suggest that issues of ontology, that is, 'one's being in and towards the world should be a central feature of any discussion of the value of self-study research' (p.319). My educational commitments are grounded in my sense of integrity towards others, and in my values of care, freedom and justice for others. They are also grounded in my capacity to think and generate knowledge for myself, as I endeavour to bring my values to a living form in my everyday dealings with others.

Furthermore, I have come to understand how values can transform into action. Raz (2001, cited in Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.85) explains how values remain as abstract concepts until they are transformed into living practices and thus have the potential for creating meaning. I am aware of how my abstract values took on meaning throughout my living practices as they transformed into the living critical standards I identified for my practice. As I seek ways of bringing my embodied values into a living form in my everyday practice, I present myself with general questions of the form:

- How do I live my values of care, freedom and justice in my practice?

I also ask more specific practice-based questions of the form:

- Why do I form a circle with my students and provide opportunities for dialogue? ([Video link: Dialogue in a circle](#))
- How do I encourage my students to exercise their critical faculties and think for themselves?
- Why do I resist being prescriptive or didactic and instead seek to provide opportunities for my students to learn about their world through their own capacity for enquiry?
- Why do I endeavour to encourage my students' aesthetic responses to music and art through providing them with opportunities to respond in ways that honour their different intelligences?
- Why do I view worksheets as occasions for dialogue? ([Video link: Worksheet dialogue](#))

This list is not exhaustive: it provides examples of the kinds of questions I ask of my practice. In addressing these kinds of issues, I aim to show how my descriptions and explanations of my critical and dialogical pedagogies demonstrate how I am living in the direction of my values as the grounds for my original claim to research-based knowledge.

### **My epistemological values**

Through my study I have come to new understandings about the nature and acquisition of knowledge. I have come to see knowledge as provisional and in a constant state of evolution. While I accept that much valuable knowledge appears in a propositional form, I have come to see how propositional knowledge needs also to be contextualised within the living process of an enquirer's attempts to come to know. Throughout I critique traditional views of knowledge as existing separate from the knower, a view that appears to be dominant in Irish education, and I will look at the potential significance of my action enquiry for contributing to and possibly transforming the existing knowledge base of educational enquiry in Ireland.

More importantly, I have learned to problematise. To explain my use of the term 'problematise', I draw on the literatures of critical pedagogy (for example, Darder *et al.*,

2003, Freire 1972, 1973; Kincheloe 2004). I understand problematising to mean looking at a situation from all sides. Rather than accepting normative understandings, one draws back from a situation in order to look at it again from a more critical perspective. Drawing on Freire (1976) I now see problematising as a question posing or 'dialectic process' (p. 151) that seeks to 'reveal and apprehend reality' (p. 150) and very different to a technical rational 'problem-solving' stance. Yet for Freire (op cit) 'problematisation is not only inseparable from the act of knowing but also inseparable from concrete situations' (p. 151). A developing capacity for problematising or deconstructing has led me to important new insights about the nature of my work. I have learned that 'being a critical thinker' is not the same as 'doing critical thinking' or 'having critical thinking skills'. My examination of the processes of becoming a more critically aware person has informed and transformed how I thought and taught, and now influences my approach to encouraging my students to be critically aware.

### **Issues of validity and values**

I have also deepened my understanding of the need to test my claims against the critical insights of others, in order to establish their validity. Testing my claims has involved identifying the criteria and standards of judgement I use to make judgements about the potential worth of my practice and the validity of my claims. Both are linked, in that both are grounded in my values. In describing my practice, I show how my values of care, freedom and justice, in relation to the integrity of my practice, and care for my students as significant others, coalesce as the living standards of judgement by which I assess the quality of my practice. I then explain how I test my claims against the same values of care, freedom and justice. I explain how I am therefore transforming the abstract linguistic articulation of my values into my critical living standards of judgement (McNiff and Whitehead 2005 p.1) whereby I assess the quality of my work and 'judge the authenticity of my claim to knowledge and my ontological and social integrity' (ibid).

I further explain how I have tested my claims in the social sphere. I have tested them against existing views in the literatures of education and educational research; against the critique of peers and students; and against the critique of others in the wider educational domain (Roche 2001a, 2002a-c, 2003a-h, 2004a-b, 2005). I test my claim by asking you, my reader, to judge if my claims to knowledge may be accepted as

valid in terms of their methodological and epistemological rigour, and whether my account, in the form of the communication of my emergent living theory, may be legitimised through establishing that it is comprehensible, sincere, truthful and appropriate in that it demonstrates awareness of the normative assumptions of my contexts (Habermas 1987, see also Hartog 2004, McNiff and Whitehead 2005).

I now consider the potential significance of my study, and some of the potential implications arising from my findings.

### **The potential significance of my study**

A firm belief in the capacity of people for critical and creative and independent thought, and a steadfast commitment to developing pedagogies that would sustain those values and allow them to emerge in a living form in my practice influenced me to begin this study. By adopting a self-study action research methodology, I have found an approach that enables practitioners like me to offer their living educational theories as they seek to account for their professional practices. This approach is well documented in the literatures (for example in McNiff 2002, Whitehead 2004a, 2004b; Whitehead and McNiff 2006), and has had influence for the transformation of existing social and cultural practices (see Church 2004, Lohr 2006, Naidoo 2005, Pound 2003). The development of this approach in Ireland is especially significant (Farren 2005, Glenn 2006, McDonagh 2007, Sullivan 2006). I hope that my thesis can contribute to this growing body of knowledge.

This methodology endorses the idea of ‘teacher as theorist’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2005), an evolution from the idea of teacher as ‘reflective practitioner’ (Schön 1983) and ‘teacher as researcher’ (Stenhouse 1975). Efron (2005), writing about the educator Janusz Korczak, says that Korczak, too, questioned the traditional positioning of teacher as transmitter of knowledge and implementer of others’ theories. For example, Efron states that Korczak was

... suspicious of the theorists’ presumption to guide educators in their practice, and he resented the view of teachers as passive transmitters of knowledge, authorized from above. He mocked the pretentious “expert” whose theoretical principles have limited value for the daily struggles of teachers

(Efron 2005 p.146)

She also suggests that Korczak appreciated the need for practitioners to investigate their own practice and interrogate their values:

...[He] appreciated that the uniqueness and mysterious nature of the human soul requires subjective, context-related, and intuitive perspective ... Korczak's ideas are still relevant to the current educational discourse and may stimulate new insights into the role of the educator as a researcher and knowledge producer who is an active advocate of change and reform

(Efron 2005 p.146)

Whitehead (1989) explains how educational theory as a living form can be generated by a teacher from within her lived practice in the classroom. I found this approach attractive, because I have always seen the potential of my classroom based work for personal and social transformation. Now, by placing my thesis in the public domain, I hope that I am contributing to the development of a growing body of scholarship of educational enquiry that enables teachers and other practitioners to come to see how they can do this for themselves.

The appreciation of the need for teachers to be seen as educational researchers and theorists is especially important in contemporary debates in Ireland and elsewhere about the significance of practice-based research. Kincheloe and Berry (2004) appear to agree, when they explain how important it is to

... abandon the quest for some naïve concept of realism, focusing instead on the clarification of [one's] position in the web of reality and the social locations of other researchers and the ways they shape the production and interpretation of knowledge.

(Kincheloe and Berry 2004 p.2)

As a full time teacher as well as a researcher, I am concerned to have my practitioner voice heard and to have my experience as a practitioner researcher investigating her educational practice contribute to academic discourses. Traditionally the voices of primary teachers have not been heard in the academy except, perhaps, as units of enquiry for external researchers. I did not have an awareness of these issues when I began my research. I was unaware of how practitioners can come to be used as data in others' enquiries, and how their voices can be systematically marginalised in the process. However, by pursuing my study, my critical awareness developed as I encountered and began to problematise issues to do with the dominance of propositional forms of knowledge over the knowledge of experience.



I have become involved in debates about these issues. I now understand that the dominance of western Enlightenment principles about knowledge has led to the traditional valuing of objective, neutral and value-free scientific research. Enquiry into why this is so has been a feature of the work of many postmodern researchers. Suresh Canagarajah (2002), for example, argues that, although scientific research would claim to be apolitical, it both complements and benefits from a favourable set of sociopolitical, material and historical conditions and thus 'promotes the hegemony of Western civilization and its knowledge tradition' (p.58). In a paradoxical sense, he says, 'disinterested positivism serves ideological interests' (p.59). These issues have become central for me, and permeate this thesis, because I have come to understand how the same hegemonic grip over what counts as valid knowledge and who constitutes a knower, has traditionally served to silence the voices of teachers and children by relegating them as 'units of enquiry' to the margins of educational and social scientific research. They have also been relegated to the periphery of public discourses, and this public marginalisation has thus denied them the right to be seen as theorists and knowers in their own right. My work, in the sense of challenging such silencing, and in the sense that I encourage my students also to challenge norms, could be understood as counter-hegemonic.

These insights have developed through the frequently problematic process of my research. I show the progression of my learning from a point where, as I began my study, I was supremely confident of my ability to carry out a self-study action enquiry (without having any grounds for that confidence), and convinced of the 'rightness' of my choice of topic, to a point, now, where I realise that I am less likely to say that I am confident or convinced, because I realise now that my theory and understanding of my practice are provisional, still emerging and developing in a dialectical relationship with my values, which themselves are constantly evolving in my practice and in my life.

The significance of my research therefore, lies in my capacity for critical engagement with my own learning for cultural transformation, as this is grounded in my emergent practice. I explain first what led me to question my practice. I describe how I felt that my values of care, freedom and justice were being denied in my practice. I felt that the form of education that I, as part of the wider institution of education in Ireland, offered to children in my classroom was a potential denial of those values. I was concerned

about the dearth of opportunities for children to develop their capacity for originality of mind and critical engagement, and their right to a voice to demonstrate that capacity. I show how I attempted to change this situation, first by improving my learning about such issues, and then bringing this new learning into my field of practice to inform and improve new learning and practice.

My study is about transforming values of oppression into values of a caring and just form of freedom as I teach in ways that encourage children to think independently, to avoid fundamentalist thinking, and to critique rather than accept passively the stories they are handed through the media. I do this in the interests of making my contribution to an open society. By developing my own theory of practice and encouraging my children to do the same, I am contributing to a form of practical and theoretical practice that is itself emancipatory and contributes to forms of open thinking.

I can now begin to examine the transformative potentials of how I teach in ways that honour children as original and critical thinkers, and throughout I attempt to explain the significance of my study for my own learning and that of my institution. I show how, as I grew into my research, I slowly acquired my theorist's voice and gradually came to see that, in order to encourage my children to think critically, I first had to understand my own practice as a critical thinker. I then look at some of the wider potential social and educational implications of this study.

### **My claim to knowledge**

I present my claim to knowledge in terms of my possible contribution to new educational practice and to new educational theory:

- In relation to practice, I indicate how my living theory of the practice of freedom as a form of caring justice values the capacity of children for independence of mind and critical engagement, as well as their entitlement to opportunities to exercise this capacity in school. My living theory therefore has potential significance for other practitioners. I offer my living theory to other practitioners through this account as well as through making my work public in several other ways (at education conferences; through professional development in-service provision and workshops for teachers; through the publication of papers; and through communication with other researchers). In all cases I invite

others to see if my work has relevance for them. I do not prescribe: I respect each practitioner's right to think for themselves. (Appendix B.)

- In the domain of educational theory I demonstrate the significance of my living theory of the practice of freedom as commensurable with my values of justice and care and I explain how my theory builds on and differs from traditional propositional theories of care, freedom and justice in the literatures as I engage with these literatures in a critical way.

My research is located in the notion of a new scholarship, which emerged from ideas developed by Boyer (1990), Schön (1983, 1987); Whitehead (1993), Zeichner (1999). In testing my claim to knowledge I focus on standards of judgement that are grounded in my ontological values of justice and freedom. By drawing on my values as living standards of judgement I engage with the work of Whitehead (1989a) whose idea of a scholarly practice of educational enquiry (Whitehead 2000) encompasses a new living form of epistemology that grounds standards of judgement in living values.

In testing the validity of my claims I ask myself questions of the kind:

- Have I taught in ways that acknowledge my students as creative independent knowers, capable of original and critical engagement?
- Is there evidence for my claim that I have developed my own learning along with my students?
- Have I made a difference for good in my institution through the exercise of my educational influence?
- Have I contributed to the learning of others through living towards my values of justice and freedom in my educative relationships?

The broad aims of my research therefore became:

- a reconceptualisation of my understanding of what 'teaching critical thinking' means, and a reconceptualisation of my identity as a more critically aware person

- an improvement in my educational practice and the realisation in my practice of my values of care, freedom and justice, along with the development of my own critical awareness
- a realisation of some of the stated aims of the Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999)
- the promotion of a culture of respectful dialogue in my classroom: a development of my students' confidence in their ability to speak to a group of their peers and the development of their capacity to critique
- a contribution towards the development of a critical community of enquiry in my institution as I assist colleagues in their efforts to establish an environment for critical dialogue in their classrooms.

### **Organisation of the thesis**

The organisation of the ideas in this thesis loosely follows the steps involved in an action enquiry as outlined in McNiff and Whitehead (2006), as follows:

- I identify a concern when my educational values are denied in my practice
- I offer examples of situations to show how these educational values are denied in my practice
- I imagine and implement a solution to the situation
- I evaluate the outcomes of the implemented solution
- I modify my practice in light of the outcomes of the implemented solution

The thesis document is organised into three main sections each comprising two or three chapters. Section 1, which comprises three chapters, is concerned with the background to my research and with methodological issues; Section 2 includes two chapters in which I explore my conceptual and contextual literature frameworks and Section 3 contains three chapters which provide my meta-reflections on my action reflection cycles. This is followed by my concluding chapter which explores the significance of my study.

Each chapter addresses identified issues, and shows the systematic process of my enquiry (Stenhouse 1983). In each chapter I engage with appropriate literatures, and I articulate for my reader my understanding of the significance of my research as I tell it. The thesis itself can be seen as a continuation of my action-reflection, as I interrogate the significance of producing the thesis in my attempts to have my claims to knowledge validated by the Academy and legitimised as worthy of acceptance in the public domain.

## **Section 1**

### ***Setting out on my epistemological journey***

This section provides the background to my studies. I explain how I came to identify a research question. I explain how I articulated a concern about my practice and how the focus of my research then shifted to a consideration of the possible reasons for my concern, and how this became the beginning of my capacity to theorise my practice. In order to look at how and why my journey into critical thinking began in the first place, I outline my personal professional history, and show how my early experiences had a direct influence on later pedagogical practices. I explain and justify why I chose a self-study action research methodology and I outline some of the practical details of conducting my enquiry. I organise this section into three chapters which segue into and inform each other.

I now begin my story.

## Chapter 1

### ***Background to my research***

Inevitably, my thesis is a retrospective account. I explain the past in light of current understandings. Often those understandings were achieved with difficulty, and are therefore possibly more worthwhile than if they had come easily. In this chapter I explain how I came to identify a research question, and how the question itself evolved in light of new insights that emerged through the processes of studying my own practice.

#### **How and why my research question evolved**

My research question as it has evolved is in two parts:

- How can I improve my practice and develop my critical awareness so as to live in the direction of my values of care, freedom and justice?
- While endeavouring to live my practice in the direction of those values, how do I develop pedagogies that provide my students, colleagues and myself with authentic opportunities to work in ways that demonstrate our capacities to think critically and to co-create knowledge for ourselves?

This was not the research question I identified at the beginning of my study. Following completion of my master's study programme (Roche 2000b) in which I had begun to investigate my practice as a primary school teacher who was trying to teach children to philosophise, I decided to undertake a doctoral studies programme in order further to develop my understandings. I have maintained this focus in my work, but have now deepened my understanding of what I am doing as contributing to children's capacity to think critically. However, back in 2001, I began an action enquiry into 'improving the higher-order thinking of my pupils through classroom discussion' (see Appendix A.2. and Roche 2002a). That title tells me now that, as I began my study, I positioned myself within propositional epistemologies and logics, and adopted the ontological perspective of one who is separate from the action and outside the study. By propositional logics I

mean a form of logic grounded in the idea that knowledge exists separate from the knower, and is reified and abstracted.

I would probably have argued back then, that my study was insider research, grounded in a dialectical form of knowing, an understanding located in the idea that knowledge is created in the to-and-fro of question and answer, and in conversational relationships. I appreciate now that I had not fully explored my epistemological stance. I was clearly confused about the assumptions underpinning my research, thinking that, because I was both a practitioner and a researcher, I was de facto 'doing self-study'. I now see that in order fully to understand what I was doing, I first had to enter into a double dialectic of meaning-making about my practice (Lomax 1999). This meant that I had also to engage in a deep and systematic way with a reflective writing process both as a sense-making activity for myself, and as a way of communicating my ideas to others.

I began by studying what happened as I engaged my students in a weekly process of classroom discussion called Thinking Time (see below for an explanation of 'Thinking Time'). I planned to foreground this aspect of my practice and faithfully record what took place during these discrete discussions over a period of years. I did not see that in relegating it to the background I was making an assumption that the 'rest' of my practice was not in need of improvement. When I began researching I was not fully aware of the dialectical nature of the relationship between the knowledge I create and myself, or between my practice and my theory, or even between my teaching and my learning, partly because I had not yet begun the task of trying to internalise and then explicate my ideas through the writing process. When I reflect on my early field notes and diary, I can see that I thought in logics that were more technical-rational than I realised. For example, in the data excerpts below, following some Thinking Time activities, I transcribed what the children had said in the discussions and then wrote in my journal:

The discussion lasted 35 minutes. Most children became engaged in discussion. Only C, S and R failed to contribute. C. tended to get up and walk around at times, but it did not seem to distract the others. There were no interruptions, and no noise from next door. (RD 16-01-02)
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The children are getting used to the idea of Thinking Time and are now able to prepare the room for the circle ([Video link: Preparation for circle](#)). CD insisted on holding her teddy for the duration of the discussion. (RD 05-02-02)

The sun shone ... I took the circle out of doors. The topic worked well: I'll recommend that colleagues try it. I'll need to check on R's participation in future discussions. Not sure if K understood concept: perhaps I should have him assessed for language processing difficulty. (RD 12-02-02)

(To note: I place excerpts from my research diary into this kind of textbox and refer to them as RD.)

Many entries in my reflective diary are similar: they are concerned with case study type analyses, dates and times, and what my students did or said. They contain observations of what others and I were doing but few reflections on what I thought, and they offer my suggestions as to what 'ought' to be done. There is virtually no problematising or critique, and little or no theorising. My 'I' is distant and abstract, and communicated in the voice of one who is observing and describing the actions of others.

I now see that I could have learned far more from these episodes of practice had I reflected on my learning from them and theorised my practice by offering explanations as well as descriptions, and without then using those descriptions as prescriptions for the practices of others. Instead, my initial focus was to gather data about the children's behaviour, rather than any accounting for my practice. In looking for ways of improving what the children might do better, rather than what I might do differently, I failed to ask myself important critical questions because I was not thinking critically at that time. I was not, for example, asking critical questions about why I believed that an intervention in my practice was necessary – why I was doing Thinking Time in the first place, or why, for instance, I felt that C's wandering (data excerpt above) was acceptable. In the same way that I can now appreciate that my values about care, freedom and justice influenced my decision to adopt pedagogical strategies (such as Thinking Time) that would provide my children with greater opportunities for dialogue, I can now see that the same values informed my decision to accept C's roving, and not to insist that he

conformed. Those values also possibly influenced my decisions to take the children out of doors frequently (data excerpt above). At the beginning of my research, however, I had only superficially articulated my values: I had not carried out any deep inquiry into why I held them or how they might synthesise into living practices and standards for judging my practice (McNiff and Whitehead 2005). I neither recognised the link between ontological and epistemological values, nor critically analysed them as living standards by which I could judge my practice.

I have also become aware that, when I began my study, I did not engage critically with literatures: I accepted underlying assumptions as givens, and reported the thinking of others in my writing, rather than think for myself. I now understand that engagement with literatures means that I must demonstrate that as I read, I can critique, and arrive at my own conclusions.

I shall shortly outline how and why my critical capacities began to emerge, but here, I will show why they had not, including the experience of being lulled into a sense of complacency about my thinking and my pedagogies. I begin with my experiences as a student teacher.

### **My experiences as a student and student teacher**

Perhaps my personal experience of education contributed to my being an uncritical thinker. I was schooled as a student and trained as a teacher to rely on propositional knowledge. When I read the prescribed educational literatures, I read for information, which I automatically accepted as valid knowledge, and I believed most of what I read. I felt that academic books were recommended by experts (my college professors), written by experts, and, being ‘only a teacher’, I had not enough academic status or knowledge to critique them. I can now explain how this stance needs to be challenged, as follows.

I now understand how teachers have until recently been positioned as objects of educational research carried out by academic researchers, rather than as theorists (see McNiff and Whitehead 2005). Thérèse Day (2005) for example clearly delineates between practitioner-researchers and academic researchers:

... the teacher-as-researcher movement makes the case for grounding research collaboratively with teachers in their own practice through methodologies such

as action research and ensuring that there is sustained interactivity between both teachers and researchers ... This sort of work offers promising possibilities for collaborative research between practicing teachers, teacher educators and educational researchers.

(T. Day 2005 pp. 27-8)

From my more critical reading of contemporary educational literatures, it would appear that Day's assumptions are far from unusual. I have developed the capacity to critique such perspectives. My ontological and epistemological values are such that I value individuals as unique knowers, and I believe that teachers have the capacity for researching and theorising their own practices. However, many teachers are often reluctant to accept the responsibility of researching and theorising their practices, as explained by McNiff and Whitehead (2005 p.2), who also argue that many teachers adopt discourses of derision to explain away their reluctance to engage with theory.

Without wishing to portray myself as a victim of repressive educational cultures, I believe that my reliance on propositional thought could be perceived as a form of internalised oppression. Internalised oppression is a concept widely used across a variety of disciplines and critical projects, including contemporary critical pedagogy. Tappan (2001) suggests that the concept is used

... to describe and explain the experience of those who are members of subordinated, marginalized, or minority groups, those who are powerless and (often) victimized (both intentionally and unintentionally) by members of dominant groups.

(Tappan 2001 p.3)

The word 'unintentionally' is important in this quotation. My teachers were hardworking and conscientious nuns who wanted the best for us. My personal form of 'internalised oppression' relates more to my dependency since my schooldays on absorbing the ideas of others, rather than working out my own ideas and theory, and I carried this legacy into my practice as a teacher. From conversations with colleagues, and from my experience of presenting teacher workshops and in-service courses (see Appendices B. 4. and B. 5.), I consider that I was far from unusual in denigrating my own knowledge as inferior 'practical' knowledge, while believing that all abstract theoretical knowledge was superior to any knowledge I might have.

Despite these initial ontological and epistemological confusions, though, I felt justified in arguing that I was engaged in a self-study action enquiry simply because my data

were concerned with me and with my practice, my students, and my classroom. This begs the questions as to why I had adopted a methodology with which I obviously was not initially fully conversant.

### **The evolution of my methodological stance**

I initially chose a self-study action research methodology because 'it felt right'. I could not say why I knew it was right for me: I 'just knew' (McNiff 2000 p.41). This kind of intuitive personal knowing finds resonance in the work of Polanyi (1958, 1967). Polanyi argued that hunches, guesses, and imaginings (all investigative acts) are motivated by what he suggests are passions, and are not always easily articulated in formal terms. The evolving understanding about my methodological stance was accompanied by a similar evolving understanding of the nature of my research question.

Two factors were key to enabling me to become critical: the first was working with my study group at the University of Limerick; the second was a change of school. I explain here how these two factors came together and started me on my journey of becoming critical. At the same time, I explain how my research question emerged from a concern with my existing practice. This involves a consideration of the idea of Thinking Time, and how that informed my emergent understanding.

### **The evolution of my research question**

My research question began with a concern that there was something amiss in my practice, and that discovering it would help me understand the reasons for why I feel compelled to work in the way I do. As my study evolved I wanted to know the nature of the passion that drives me to seek to involve my students in dialogue as I encourage them to search for meaning in their world and their lives; and to understand why I could not accept the status quo and simply let things be. I needed to know what it was about the Irish education system that troubled me to an extent where I was willing to engage in a systematic research programme. Eventually, I also wanted to find ways of contributing to public debates about education, and teachers' capacity for thinking critically about education, and teaching in ways that respect and honour children's capacity to think for themselves. I wanted to try to improve the educational experiences of my students and help them to become more critical thinkers than I had been.

So my research question began initially in my examination and articulation of my educational and epistemological values. The encouragement to begin to interrogate my values began in the experience of being involved with others in the study group that convened as part of a guided doctorate programme at the University of Limerick, as well as systematically engaging with literatures that adopted a focused critical stance. Through reflecting on and interrogating my values, in the company of others who were doing the same, I came to understand that I greatly value care, freedom and justice. Furthermore, through the experience of studying together with others who were also developing their critical capacities, and responding to their critical feedback to my accounts of practice, I came to see that those qualities were often lacking in my practice. I was troubled that I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction in that my values were denied in my practice (Whitehead 1989a). Having experience of using an action research approach for my MA studies, I felt that the methodology would enable me to investigate and improve my practice so that my values could be realised.

I therefore began to introduce a range of interventions in my practice, as follows.

### **Thinking Time**

One of my first interventions entailed introducing my students to a process of classroom discussion called Thinking Time. I had heard about this process in the early 1990s and felt drawn to it. Thinking Time was developed by Donnelly (1994), an Irish primary school teacher who adapted the work on Philosophy for Children of Matthew Lipman, an American analytical philosopher (see Lipman 1982, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1996).

In my classroom, a Thinking Time session is a discrete time for class discussion on a topic of interest to the children. The children and I sit in a circle, and I participate both as facilitator and ordinary member of the circle (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).



**Figure 1-1: Photo of a Thinking Time circle in my infant classroom**



**Figure 1-2: Video still from a Thinking Time with 3rd Class**

Many claims about the efficacy of Thinking Time as a dialogical pedagogical strategy have been made by Irish teachers who have adopted it in their classroom practices (Campbell 2001, Donnelly 1994, 2005; Hegarty 2000, Murnane 2000, J. Russell 2005).

Russell comments:

[Thinking Time] becomes a community of enquiry or community of persons-in-relation, speakers and hearers, who communicate with each other under conditions of equality and reciprocity and with a willingness on the part of the participants to reconstruct what they hear from one another and to submit their views to the self-correcting process of further enquiry.

(J. Russell 2005 p.5)

Lipman and Sharp (1994) likewise assert that communities of enquiry that are encouraged by programmes that promote philosophical enquiry with children, such as Thinking Time does, are grounded in values of reciprocal care and respect for others' views. Throughout my research, I gathered data that demonstrate how I live my values of care, freedom and justice in my practice and my data also show the development of similar values in my students as they listen with interest and respect to each other in our classroom discussions. The excerpt below, for example, shows children reflecting on

important issues such as imagination and the influence teachers can have on children, as they examine and analyse their conceptual understandings from multiple perspectives.

During a discussion on ‘school’, based on the story ‘Once upon an ordinary school day’ (McNaughton 2004) some children made insightful comments that displayed critical awareness about the importance of children being free to imagine possibilities.

M: Everybody should get the chance to let their imagination go free ... get the thoughts out of your head instead of having them just stuck ...

A: ... That teacher was fun. Every child should have a teacher like that. That boy really needed to have a teacher like that for at least one year of his life.

M: I think that imagination is like water. It’s like water because it can be frozen and the only time it freezes up is when it’s not running and being used. It freezes up if you don’t use it.

B: I think he did have an imagination all along. The teacher didn’t give him an imagination, he just allowed him to use it by playing the exciting music...

S: ... sometimes I start off with no ideas in my head when we begin our talking, but afterwards I often have loads, because I hear all the different thoughts from all different kids

Along with my pleasure at the richness of the children’s thinking in general, S’s comment struck me as interesting. (RD 04-10-05, full transcript in Appendix C.7.)

S’s response enabled me to understand why I persisted in carrying on with Thinking Time despite often being stressed by the time constraints of the curriculum and tempted to forego allocating time for discussion. Her response reinforced my commitment to living my values in my practice, and throughout this document I show how I attribute importance to giving children space to reflect silently as well as opportunities to talk. My students appeared to enjoy discussions. They often expressed their delight, as in the interchange here:

P: It’s fun ... we’re thinking about solutions for all kinds of [problems] and for all kinds of reasons and that’s school work!

CO: It actually gives your brain energy in it.

CF: One it’s fun – children like it: and two, it brightens up your mind.

CM: I think sometimes it's a bit of a challenge, because there could be yappers in our class and they have to be quiet as well. But it's also ... good for the teachers because they sit down and listen to what the kids have to think and they could have been learning something earlier in the day that they could be mentioning now and you'd notice that they'd been listening in. (RD 21-04-06) ([Video Link: A bit of a challenge](#))

W, however, insisted that Thinking Time was only fun because it 'wasted school time':

W: I love [it] cos it's a bit of fun ... and it's wasting time in school.  
Me: I'm interested in that word 'wasting'. Is 'waste' the word you wanted to use there?  
W: Yeah. (RD 21-04-06) ([Video Link: Wasting time in school](#))

Other children disagreed with W's perspectives (as in the earlier video link above):

Then A said

A: Well OK, you're not working – not like in Maths – you're not doing anything, just talking and thinking. (RD 21-04-06)

This comment later made me reflect on how I could develop dialogic pedagogies to make Maths more interesting.

### **No 'right' answer**

Perhaps for W, areas such as Thinking Time, PE, art and music, which he also liked, differed from 'ordinary' school work because they allowed for self-expression and were less likely than 'regular' classwork to involve a child being requested to provide 'right answers'. Discussing issues in a circle format presents many children, perhaps for the first time, with the opportunity to reach an understanding that for some questions there are no 'right' answers and that in fact, many answers can be right. It provides a freedom of expression that may not be available in didactic classwork. The same dialogue transcript contains the following interaction:

DH: When someone talks you can have a new thought ...when you're thinking in Maths, still, that doesn't happen.  
Me: I'm interested in what D said about Maths .... that it's a different kind of thinking. I agree, because in Maths you're expected to get a right answer, and there's only one right answer, whereas in Thinking Time there's ...  
CF: (Interrupts) – 'no right answer!'



Me: (handing over the microphone) Yes? What do you think?

Laughter from group

CF (smiling broadly): Well there's no right answer, and it's great! Cos you're allowed to think freely and no one else is allowed to boss you around and it's just ... great! (RD 21-04-06) ([Video Link: No right answer](#)).

Another example of the awareness of there being 'more than one right answer' occurred in a discussion following the reading of 'The Whale's Song' (Sheldon 1997), in which conflicting views of whaling are presented:

Em: Well I've got a bit of a problem here: see, I agree with Lily's Granny that whales are splendid beautiful creatures and they must be protected, but I can also see Uncle Frederick's point of view that whalers have to make their living too. It's terrible hard trying to decide who is right ... Maybe they are both right! ... Maybe more than one thing can be right at a time! I never thought about that before! (RD 06-12-06)

Participating in a discussion with peers can also offer children the opportunity to reconsider their opinions in light of the beliefs and experiences shared by others.

H: ...when other people say something your ideas change and you actually start thinking more ... when you read a story by yourself and you don't do any thinking about it then you don't get the point sometimes, unless they tell it to you, but in Thinking Time you get the point and other people's points as well.

J: Thinking Time reveals thoughts. You might have a thought at the start, but by every person speaking you might change it slightly each time and you might end up with something totally different at the end. (RD 21-04-06) ([Video Link: Listening to others' thoughts](#)).

There is an echo here of Bruner's (1960, 1986, 1990) ideas about communication and learning and Vygotsky's (1962) ideas about scaffolding learners and about how learning occurs in social situations. Observers of discussions in my classrooms have frequently expressed surprise at the ease with which children change their views as they assimilate others' ideas. For example, P, an 8-year-old child, announced in a discussion

I actually completely disagree with myself now! (RD 15-10-05)

In the dialogue from 21-04-06, featured above, W eventually said

W: I've actually changed my mind, I disagree with myself: Thinking Time is fun but it isn't *wasting* time, it's *using* time in a fun way.' (RD 21-04-06)

When I ran a series of workshops for teachers between 2002 and 2004 (Roche 2002b, 2002c, 2003a, 2003d, 2003f, 2003h, 2004a) this particular aspect of my videos – children disagreeing with themselves in the light of perhaps, new critical understanding that had been influenced by others' thinking – often appeared to be one of the most remarked upon aspects. A teacher with thirty years experience said:

Hearing those children change their minds so honestly and matter-of-factly is a humbling experience. I think many adults, [*laughing*] especially politicians, could learn from them in that respect. I wish I'd seen these videos when I began teaching. It would have changed my style completely. (RD comment by MR 27-08-04)

My data show children engaging critically with and developing each other's ideas. This resonates with Bohm's (1998) ideas of how he understands a 'spirit of dialogue' or 'a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us' (p.2). He describes how it is possible for new understandings to emerge from the dialogue, which can enable people to create and share meanings together. I like his analogy of these shared meanings acting as a sort of social 'glue' or 'cement'...

Even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of the dialogue is present. The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge new understanding. It's something new, which may or may not have been the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the 'glue' or 'cement' that holds people and societies together.

(Bohm 1998 p.2)

While I agree largely with Bohm's ideas, I am not so sure about the importance he places on distinguishing between discussion and dialogue:

Contrast [dialogue] with the word discussion ... It really means to break things up. It emphasizes the idea of analysis ... where the object ... is to win and get points for yourself ... but a dialogue is something more of a common participation in which we are not playing a game against each other but *with* each other.

(Bohm 1998 p.2 my emphasis)

From my research, I am beginning to think it impossible to label interaction like this. Ironically such labelling also 'emphasises the idea of analysis'. When my students and

I am engaged in lively verbal interaction I cannot say: “This constitutes dialogue here, and this is discussion, and this is only conversation.” I do value informal or ‘ordinary conversation’ (Noddings 2002 p.126) for its role in developing relational knowledge (McNiff 2000) (see also Chapter 7 this document), but I suggest that when my students and I talk together, all these elements are often present, interweaving through each other. However an overall ‘spirit of dialogue’ remains throughout. In our Thinking Time circles we are not about trying to ‘get points’ or make ‘any particular view prevail’ (Bohm 1998 p.2), but are rather, intent on sharing thoughts and making meaning with each other.

So, back to my account of how and why I began to develop my capacity for critical thinking: initially, developing the idea of the value of classroom discussion became the focus of my research, so, in 2001, I began to think about how I could use Thinking Time as a means of improving my students’ thinking. It took me until 2005 to realise that by focusing solely on what my students thought I was engaged in outsider research, in a traditional spectator stance. Then I began to see that in order to generate my own living theory of practice (as opposed to a traditional propositional theory about practice) I would have to re-evaluate my ontological assumptions and begin to research my own thinking also.

I became aware of anomalies. In my MA dissertation, I had failed to see the irony in stating that ‘This kind of work is now given a slot in my weekly timetable and I value it hugely’ (Roche 2000b p.78). Reflecting now on the evidence I generated at the start of my doctoral studies to test my claim that, by providing my students with time for Thinking Time sessions, I was encouraging the children to think for themselves, it eventually became clear to me that I was still the dominant talker and controller of interchanges in my classroom. My early data appear to suggest that I would ‘allow’ my students the freedom to think in a critical manner during discrete weekly discussion sessions.

<p>I have scheduled my Thinking Times to take place on a Wednesday straight after mid-morning break. Wednesdays suit because the children have settled down after the weekend, there are no extra-curricular events like speech and drama classes to work around. I will recommend Wednesdays to colleagues - from 11.30 to 12.15p.m. (RD 06-02-02)</p>
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I never asked myself the question: What about my students' thinking (or my practice) during the rest of the week? I also failed to examine the nature of the power relationships in my classroom whereby I would control classroom discourses and would make decisions about when to 'grant' my pupils the freedom to speak or the prescriptive nature of choosing a day for colleagues to 'do' Thinking Time also.

I believe that the reason it took me so long to see the contradictions in my thinking at that time may have had something to do with my own school experiences of being taught to think about knowledge as information 'out there' rather than something that I can generate for myself. Perhaps too, the form of pre-service teacher-education I received led me to see myself as an implementer of others' theory. It also probably had to do with my lack of critical development to the extent whereby I had accepted both of these situations for so many years.

Whatever the case may be, as my research developed, and as I became aware of the existence of critical pedagogy literatures, I began to raise questions. I wondered why, for example, student teachers seemed not to be encouraged to read critical literatures. While I had no personal experience of being exposed to any critical literatures of education when I was in college in the early 1970s, perhaps things had changed in the intervening period. I decided to talk with some newly trained colleagues in my school. I found that they were unaware of these issues. I wrote:

They did not even recognise the term 'critical pedagogy'. I then presented them with some names – Apple, Freire, Giroux, Kincheloe, McLaren – of which only the name Freire seemed vaguely familiar. (Informal interviews with OD; DOS; KOC; DM; DW, SB; RL. RD 22-05-05)

I asked the same questions when I presented my work to final year teacher education students in a college of education and wrote later in my diary:

Once again my query regarding critical pedagogy was met by blank stares and only Freire's name seemed to ring any bells. (RD 15-05-05)

I began to wonder if student teachers are discouraged from studying literatures that might encourage them to ask critical questions, or if pressures of study mean they have no time for reflection and critique. This has relevance for my study because I believe that if people are to become critical thinkers then beginning the process of thinking

critically should take place early in a child's education, encouraged by critically aware teachers.

I can demonstrate that I have now begun to think more critically through engaging in my research. As outlined here, the first factor that began my transformation, started during my MA studies, and developed into my doctoral programme, when I experienced some of the transformative potentials of action research for improving both practice and understanding of practice. A second factor was the introduction of the Revised Primary School Curriculum in 1999 (Government of Ireland 1999) and my attempts to grapple with its underlying philosophy as I endeavoured to realise some of its stated aims in my practice. Another factor was moving, in 2001, from an institution in which I had felt silenced, to a new school in which professional development was encouraged, as I now explain.

### **New school, new practice: beginning my action reflection cycles**

I will deal in more detail with the context of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum in Chapter 5 and in Chapter 2 I will examine the influence that changing workplaces had on my studies. Here now I will describe and explain how initially I set about researching my practice.

When I changed schools in 2001 I concurrently began my research programme. Over the course of my research I organised the different phases as three Action Reflection cycles (Chapters 6, 7 and 8). On changing schools, I focused on the first cycle, in which I monitored my weekly continuing programme of Thinking Time, while working mainly with Junior Infants. This phase lasted from 2001 to 2003 (Action Reflection Cycle 1, Chapter 6). As this cycle developed, I came to realise that I was encouraging the children to perceive themselves as competent critical thinkers ([Video Link: Interesting questions](#)). The video clip shows the children suggesting what they consider to be 'good' topics for discussion. One little girl, C, proposes that we might discuss 'what lives and what doesn't' (RD 12-11-03). I call the children's attention to her question: two other children immediately interrupt with 'That's a good question by C!' and 'That's an interesting question by C!' These children appear to demonstrate critical awareness in recognising the discursive potentials in the topic. The rules of Thinking Time – respectful listening and turn-taking – were negotiated by the children. The video clip also shows how I gave each child plenty of time to speak.

A second video clip from the same research cycle shows children arguing about why Jack should be considered a hero in the story of Jack and the Beanstalk (see Shermis 1999):

M: but it was his Dad's; and ... since the giant stole the hen and Jack got it back, well that's what made him good!' (RD 12-11-03) ([Video Link: Jack and the Beanstalk](#))

In this clip the children can also be seen interrupting in their eagerness to make their point. However, when I said, 'Hang on C: it's not your turn,' the child whose turn it was, is 'tipped' by the speaker before him ('tipping' means a tap on the shoulder that passes on the opportunity to speak from child to child), and the children can be seen listening to him intently. This demonstrates that the children are becoming familiar with the format of the circle and they recognise and accept the fairness of taking turns. In Thinking Time, the 'tip-around' continues generally for two or three full circles (depending on the level of engagement and the size of the group) with each child deciding whether to speak or pass when her turn came. Another rule negotiated with the children was that after two or three rounds, if the children wished to continue, there would be an 'open floor' with priority being given to children who had 'passed' earlier. (In the same video clip, sounds from the classroom next door can clearly be heard, yet it does not seem to impinge on the children's participation – a measure perhaps of their engagement). However my data from this phase of my study shows that I adopted a largely propositional outsider researcher stance.

In the second phase of the study, Action Reflection Cycle 2 (Chapter 7), I can show from my journal entries that my research moved to a point where I began to interrogate my practice more critically. During this cycle, from 2003 to 2004, I worked with a class of Senior Infants. Now I began to appreciate that I needed to make serious changes to my practice in light of my realisation that my students were beginning to generate general classroom discussions outside of discrete Thinking Time sessions.

Y, a Special Needs Assistant who was present in my class daily and who had been with these children the previous year also, remarked one day: I never knew children so young could get so involved in discussing. They're ready to discuss anything! (RD 14-01-03)

Because the children were talking so actively now throughout the school day, I wondered if I could abandon Thinking Time, but decided not to, resolving however to

investigate how I could incorporate more opportunities for critical thinking and discussion into my everyday work. This led me to problematise the specific processes of Thinking Time and my practice generally, too, because now that my students had begun to assert themselves as critical thinkers, they were also demonstrating their independence of mind by challenging established school norms and practices. For instance when lining up during a fire drill one day, the children were asked to form straight lines and Eo, aged 5, asked

Eo: What's so good about straight lines anyway?

On another occasion, following a classroom discussion, he said:

Eo: I am going home today with just so many questions in my head.

Ao: If you go home with a question and if you get an answer to your question you can always question the answer! (RD 27-02-04; Appendix C.5.)

It was this kind of episode that led me to believe that I was beginning to realise my values in my practice, and how this could be achieved through developing specifically dialogic classroom pedagogies. During this cycle also I had to re-evaluate my assumption that the Thinking Time format suited all children and I had to critically examine my practice so as to justify my decision to make allowances for a child for whom participation in the circle was difficult (Chapter 7).

The final Action Reflection Cycle 3 (Chapter 8) lasted from September 2004 to December 2006, (although I am continuing both the practice of keeping my diary and filming the discussions, which demonstrates that I consider my research as an on-going living process and that I believe my practice can still evolve and improve). During this last Action Reflection Cycle I worked with three older groups of children, aged 8–10 years. This cycle became a synthesis of the two previous cycles and my emerging living theory of critical practice began to evolve mainly from the practice of writing during this time. As I wrote my draft thesis with increasing critical awareness, I could see that, despite all my rhetoric about freedom, for example, my initial classroom pedagogies were linked with issues of control. I came to see that I had wanted to dominate and manage the discussion and 'contain' the children's thinking. I then had to re-evaluate my values in relation to issues of care, freedom and justice. This thesis communicates the deep learning from this experience.

There is a significant shift in the kinds of data I gathered as the action-reflection cycles developed. The data became more video-based in the last cycle, because my competency with digital media developed rapidly. I now frequently used a digital video camera and had mastered the technology I needed to create CDs from digital data. This point is important for my later discussion on the forms of representation I have used to communicate and validate my claims to knowledge. Videoing the discussions also became a strategy for inclusion and enabled me to live my value of care and justice as I accommodated the phenomenon of having non-English speaking children in my classroom within the process of discussion. By inviting children who were initially struggling with English language competency to be the technicians and camera operators, they were included as participants in the process. This pleased them and gave them status amongst their classmates, whereas staying out of the circle completely, or staying in and not participating, could have undermined their self-esteem. However, as their communicative competency increased they frequently began to decline the invitation and opted into the discussions (Chapter 8 and [Video Link: communicative competency](#)).

So by reflecting on how and why I was living my values in my practice, I was able to begin to articulate and communicate my emergent living theory of practice. I also began to test my ideas against the critical feedback of peers and other professionals. I began to present my work at conferences, workshops and in-service professional development courses, both in my own school and in the wider local educational domain (Roche 2001a, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003a-h, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). As I submitted my emergent theorisations to stringent public scrutiny and critique, I gradually became more confident in explaining how I was holding myself accountable for my epistemological and pedagogical stance.

I then moved into a position where I felt I needed critically to explore whether my interrogation of what I do in the micro context of a classroom in an Irish school might hold any significance for the macro world of a better social order, a more educated and open society. I explore these issues in later chapters.

### **Key issues of my thesis**

I am making substantive claims in this thesis. I am saying that I have learned how to become a critical thinker, and that I can give reasons how and why I have done this.



How I have done this has been to enquire into my practice. This has involved a robust and vigorous exercise in self-reflection akin to what Polanyi (1967) suggests is ‘the knowledge of approaching discovery’ (p.24). Such knowledge, he suggested, is personal, in the sense of ‘involving the personality of him [sic] who holds it’ (ibid).

The discoverer is filled with a compelling sense of responsibility for the pursuit of a hidden truth, which demands his services for revealing it. His act of knowing exercises a personal judgement in relating evidence to an external reality...

(Polanyi 1967 p.25)

The ‘something that needed to be discovered’, and the ‘compelling sense of responsibility’ I felt for making an improvement in my practice, gradually evolved into questions that began to lead me towards the generation of my living educational theory (Whitehead 1989a). These questions included the following, which I systematically address in this thesis:

- How do I improve what I do, so as to help my students to improve what they do?
- How do I know I am justified in doing so? Is what I am doing living to my values of care, freedom and justice?
- Why is ‘critical thinking’ in many literatures largely presented as a reified concept about the teaching of skills and strategies and the development of dispositions? (De Bono 1985, 1993; Ennis 1962, 1992; Paul 1993, Paul *et al.* 1986, 1987, 1990)
- Is what I am doing in my classroom about a concept called ‘critical thinking’ or is it more about ‘becoming critical?’ How do I become a critical thinker?

And so, several years after my initial question about improving my students, I now claim that I have come to my current provisional understanding that the best interests of my students are served if I focus on researching my own practice in order to understand how, by developing my critical capacities, I can develop powerful pedagogies that encourage my students to be critical thinkers also.

In doing so, I have come to understand how issues about knowledge generation have shaped, and continue to shape, my research and my identity as a researcher, and how

my understanding of education will continue to evolve as I continue to investigate my practice. My current understanding is that education is about people learning to become free to think for themselves and to make informed choices about their lives. I use the term ‘current understanding’ because I believe that my knowledge is temporary and evolving.

I understand now that knowledge is about more than the kind of standardised propositional school knowledge that predominates in Irish primary school classrooms (Murphy 2004), that the teacher is not the only knower in a classroom, and that there are as many ways of knowing and kinds of intelligences (Gardner 1983) as there are people in my classroom. I began by investigating whether I could teach in ways that honour my educational values and that acknowledge my children as unique, active thinkers and participants in classroom discourses. I now also want to contribute to the knowledge base of educational enquiry (Snow 2001), and towards the development of a good social order (McNiff *et al.* 1992), through disseminating my new learning in the public domain. By ‘a good social order’, I mean the kind of society in which people think for themselves and submit their thinking to the critical scrutiny of others. I suggest that a good social order can be achieved through the establishment of an educated public that thinks for itself (see also A. McIntyre 1987, Popper 1966, Russell 1922, 1934, 1941, 1988, 1997). Yet in my personal experience, both as a student and as a teacher, dominant forms of education in Ireland seem to be less about freedom or openness and more about control, management and the delivery of large amounts of propositional knowledge: concepts that one would not link readily with justice or care. My developing understanding is that the transmission of knowledge, primarily through didactic pedagogies (Murphy 2004, Government of Ireland 2005b) in a standardised national curriculum can serve to discourage critical engagement and deny opportunities for dialogue.

For me, dialogue, including dialogue with the self through reflection, is crucial to the development of critical awareness, because dialogue, as I understand it, honours the other as an equal knower who can think and speak for herself. I can see now that for many years I contributed to an oppressive model of education through my lack of critical understanding of these issues. Now, as my living educational theory evolves, I understand that a didactic model of schooling values neither justice nor freedom.

Through engaging with a large body of literatures of critical theory and critical pedagogies (such as Apple 1979, Bowles and Gintis 1976, Darder *et al.* 2003, Freire 1972, Giroux 1988, Illich 1973, Kincheloe 2006, McLaren 1995) I now understand that instead of acknowledging the child as a knower, didactic pedagogies in many post-industrial western educational contexts seem to objectify the child as a commodity to which discrete packets of knowledge are delivered, and then assessed through standardised examinations to see how much of the knowledge has ‘stuck’. Hymer (2002) says this obsession with assessment ‘betrays our twentieth-century fixation with ranking and measuring the unrankable and unmeasurable’ (p.7). It seems to me, based on my thirty years’ experience in Irish schools, that often, what is measurable is more highly valued than what is not (Tomlinson 2005): parents frequently request results of standardised tests in Maths and English, yet I have never been asked how a child is performing in Art or Music, for example. The current ‘fixation’ of neo-liberal policy agendas around the idea of establishing a managerial culture of performativity in education (Bernstein 1996, Brown 2002, McNess *et al.* 2003, Pollard *et al.* 1994) means that schools and teachers are now judged on how well children perform in standardised assessments. Apple (2001b) states that standardisation is part of a move towards growing state control. Citing Ball *et al.* (1994 p.14) he suggests that educational principles and values are often compromised such that commercial issues become more important in issues such as curriculum design:

This represents a subtle but crucial shift in emphasis – one that is not openly discussed as often as it should be – from student needs to student performance and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school.

(Apple 2001b p.185)

He goes on to suggest that the standardisation of education is essentially:

a mechanism ... to specify which knowledge, values, and behaviors should be standardized and officially defined as legitimate. This is seen in the attempts ... to specify, often in distressing detail, what students, teachers, and future teachers should be able to know, say, and do (op cit p 188).

As I challenge the orthodoxies of standardised curricula and assessment methodologies I realise also that they can serve to deny the different ways of knowing of children (Gardner 1983) and can be disrespectful of their uniqueness as thinking human beings. Through my research I have now become convinced of the need for critiquing the premises upon which the measurement of learning is based.

I argue that an educational philosophy, such as that indicated by the principles of the Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999), is based upon an idealised ‘other’ (Mead 1934, Benhabib 1987), and as such, cannot exhibit adequate care and freedom. By ‘adequate’ here I mean a form of care and freedom that respects the humanity and uniqueness of each child. For example, I understand a standardised ‘one-size-fits-all’ (Reyes 1992) approach to curriculum and pedagogy, as a model predicated on control and domination. I also now appreciate that, with the proposed introduction of national testing for seven and eleven year olds in the Irish primary education context (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2005), a curriculum that is coming to be more dominated by traditional models of testing needs to have the assumptions about teaching and learning that lie behind them interrogated.

As reported earlier, my theory of education is premised upon a concrete personal ‘other’ (Benhabib 1987), and is grounded in the dialogical relationships between people, including my students and me, and in the dialectical interplay between us as we generate knowledge together. In this sense my educational theory is living and evolving from my ontological stance. In the same way that my methodological approach to this study draws on and incorporates other traditions of research, so my philosophy of education accepts the value of some instructional and training approaches, but accepts neither their uncritical assumptions nor their position of dominance in Irish education (Conway 2000, 2002; Martin and Morgan 1994, Morgan 1998, OECD 1991).

These understandings differ from the seemingly dominant idea that ‘critical thinking’ in classroom situations is about prescriptive instructional strategies and skills development (DeBono 1985, Ennis 1962, 1992; Paul *et al.* 1990, Pithers and Soden 2000, McGuinness 1999, McGregor 2006). I do not understand now how one can talk about ‘critical thinking’ as though it were a ‘thing’, although I used to do this. It begs the question ‘critical thinking about what?’ I believe that thinking critically about what constitutes critical thinking must be grounded in the idea that

- people think and have infinite capacity to be critical thinkers
- people bring their own backgrounds and ontology to the process
- people generate new knowledge for themselves in the process

- thinking needs to be understood as a dialogical and relational process, not a product

I have come to understand that when a person enters into a dialectical relationship with thoughts and ideas, with others and themselves, thinking then becomes a practice of dialogue, a way of having a dialogic imagination (Bakhtin 1981) a way of being in a dialogical relationship with knowledge, and a way of being in a living relationship with other people. Thus it is not predicated exclusively on a culture of ‘having’: the having of skills, knowledge or dispositions although these can be important components. I locate these ideas in the work of Fromm (1979) who discussed the cultural and social significances between an ethos of being and an ethos of having.

### **Preliminary findings of my study**

In this thesis, I present evidence for my claim to have generated a living theory of critical pedagogical practice from my several years of problematising my educational values and conceptual frameworks of critical thinking, care, freedom and justice. The articulation of such problematising can be seen as evidence of my claim to have acquired a more critical voice and stance, especially when compared with some of my earlier writing (Roche 2000b). I can now recognise my deepened critical understanding of the multifaceted socio-historical and political issues that influence education. One of my preliminary findings, for example, is my understanding, again drawing on Fromm (1979) that my theory is a theory of being rather than one of acquiring or having. This means that I realise that I cannot teach a subject called ‘critical thinking’ as the acquisition of a set of skills or techniques, but that I must develop my own capacity to be critical enough so that I encourage others to be critical. Instead, in my classroom I try to embody my values about people being together and thinking together as a community of enquiry through dialogue such as Bohm (2004) advocated. I believe that thinking together in a community of enquiry such as I experience with my students in both Thinking Time and in informal discussion, is an exercise of freedom where each person’s ideas are listened to and responded to with respect.

Bohm’s (2004) idea of people ‘thinking together’ is completely different to the picture Fromm (1979) painted of collective ‘herd’ thinking. Fromm (op cit) worried that people had lost the ability to think for themselves and had become used to collective ‘herd’ thinking. He argued that people must exercise their freedom in thinking for themselves

– with the main kind of freedom being a ‘freedom of being’ which involved the courage ‘to let go [of deeply entrenched habits of non-thinking] and respond’ (p.24). I explain in this account how I found the letting go of years of habit and training to be very difficult. Despite nearly five years of my study and more than ten years of doing philosophical enquiry with children, I was so used to imposing my views on children through traditional instructional practices that I frequently failed to see how deeply ingrained my didacticism was. This leads me to another preliminary finding of my study: I now understand that didactic pedagogies are rooted in ‘othering’ children, whereas my pedagogies are grounded in inclusion and respect for the humanity I share with my students.

I hope that this report will demonstrate that I have developed my critical voice as I reflected on my practice and engaged with educational issues as I struggled to articulate my living educational theory (Whitehead 1989a). Throughout I will show how I have tested my claims against existing theories in the literatures, and against the critique of colleagues, critical friends and peer professionals. This has enabled me to claim with authority that I now know what I am doing better than I did before.

Furthermore, I am claiming that I have brought my critical understanding to bear on how I can influence educational cultures. Through my research I have generated relational knowledge, which, McNiff (2000) says, ‘helps us to understand the nature of our humanity and our interconnectedness with others across a network of dimensions’ (p.138). I believe that this kind of relational knowledge finds embodiment in an ethic of care (Noddings 1992). I will show how I try to establish caring relationships with my students that dissolve traditional power relationships between teachers and students. I now can see the interconnectedness of my students’ lives with mine, and our connectedness to others in society, through our dialectical and dialogical engagement.

Over the past five years I believe that I have learned more about teaching than I did during my previous thirty years of practice. I have now begun a process of teaching myself to think and work in ways that honour my educational values more fully, and my understanding of myself as an educator has developed as I have carried out this study. My research has helped me improve my practice as an educator, be accountable for my actions, and has shaped my professional identity (Connelly and Clandinin 1999).

Significantly, my study will probably never be complete: it can always develop as I continue to ask myself questions such as:

- What is going on here now?
- Why did I think that/do that?
- What is the significance of what I am doing?

In summary, between 2001 and 2006 I transformed my research stance from that of observer of my students to observer of myself-in-relationship-with-my-students. In 2001 I did not understand that I was an ‘I’ sharing my classroom space with other ‘I’s’ (McNiff 2005a). Instead, I was very much in my own space as ‘teacher’, observing what my students did and maintaining boundaries between my life and theirs, and between teaching and learning. Even when I thought I had overcome that division by investigating my own practice, I was still somehow detached from it, seeing it as an entity ‘out there’, something to be researched and observed. In self-study one moves seamlessly between the world of actor and spectator (Coulter and Wiens 2002) in a dialectic between oneself and one’s practice. I stayed for a long time on the spectator side, talking about my practice and about education. This thesis is the narrative account of how I changed my mind, literally, so that I came to see myself as a participant in my own and other people’s lives, and not a bystander.

Having outlined the beginnings of my research programme, and identified my research issue and my research question, I now move to an explanation of why I was concerned.

## Chapter 2

### ***Problematic Contexts: Why was I concerned?***

The focus of my research now shifted to a consideration of the possible reasons for my concern, so this was in effect the beginning stage of my capacity to theorise my practice, that is, offer explanations for what I was doing. This leads me, in this chapter, to think about how and why my journey into critical thinking began in the first place. What led me to become critical was no single event, but a whole series of critical moments and episodes that began to accumulate and have a cumulative effect. I outline the story here.

First, it may be helpful to outline my personal professional history, and show how these early experiences had a direct influence on later pedagogical practices.

#### **My training to be a teacher in a women's training college**

These young men and women ... went to a residential training college [run mainly by religious orders of priests and nuns] which was conducted on remarkably authoritarian lines.

(McCarthy 1968 p.21)

The teacher training I received in the early 1970s was conducted on what McCarthy describes above as 'remarkably authoritarian lines'. The training of Irish females differed, however, from the training of Irish males. In my college, up to a hundred women slept in tiny cubicles in dormitories. Attendance at breakfast and at lectures was compulsory. Meanwhile, across the city in the male teacher training college, each student had his own room and could choose whether to attend lectures, not to mention breakfast. The stories of some teachers in my study group bear out my experience, which was that the training received by the young women was 'formation' rather than education.

There were so many rules ... For example, compulsory daily Mass, except that there wasn't room in the chapel for everyone, so a rota was established and everyone had to go on five out of seven mornings. You were told which ones and it was a punishable offence not to attend – if you stayed in bed or didn't go, you were reported and sent to the office. That was serious and could affect your chances of employment later. (RD conversation with C and B 10-04-06)



We had two veils for wearing in church: a white one and a black one. ... The black one was for ordinary days and the white one for feast days and Sundays. You got in trouble for wearing the wrong one ... you were expected to know the feast days. I didn't, because I hadn't gone to a convent school. I was always terrified rushing to the chapel in case I was wearing the wrong one. (RD 10-04-06: conversation with B)

My experience of training college appears to resonate with the collective 'herd' thinking to which Fromm (1979) alluded. Teachers, especially female teachers, were socialised into passivity. We did what we were told, fearing to question the status quo and be considered 'devious'. Any breach of discipline would have made it difficult to gain a teaching position because, as was common knowledge, the sisters who ran the training college had great influence over the allocation of initial teaching jobs.

It was a dreadful experience. I was almost totally unable to think for myself when I came out. It took me years to break through that barrier. (RD: 22-10-04 conversation with FW)

During my studies, I came to understand this situation in terms of what Ken Brown (2002) refers to as the 'intimate connections [that] exist between the nature of education in a society and the configurations of power authority and subordination that define its political constitution' (p.29). Interwoven with the state education power in the Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s, was the power inherent in the social mores of a paternalistic church-controlled and dominated society (McCarthy 1968, Drudy and Lynch 1993). Terence Brown (2004) refers to the Irish primary school system as 'a peculiarly resonant symbol of a society where authoritarian control enforced ideals of nationalism, religion, and language' (p.237).

Mine was an educational experience that discouraged freedom of thought, originality or creativity and was, I believe, dependent for its efficacy on a passive and pliable population. Drawing again on Fromm (1979) I see now that it was premised on the acquisition of skills and strategies of teaching rather than on becoming or being an educator. This type of education was also premised on a paternalistic model of childhood (Corsaro 2005, Devine 2000a, Devine 2000b) that viewed children as 'other' to adults. Children were perceived as embryonic citizens who would at some time be 'the people' or 'citizens-in waiting' rather than 'citizens now' (Maitles and Gilchrist

2005 n/p). I believe that the primary school system incorporated and reproduced the values of a repressed society, and ensured that people learned ‘their place’, so that society would continue to function smoothly without any major challenges to the status quo. However, despite such experiences, I retained a sense of vision that supported my commitment to working with integrity within the system by

- educating myself and reflecting on my learning so that I could develop my critical awareness, thus keeping a healthy scepticism
- using this learning to teach in a way that fosters a similar critical awareness in my students and acknowledges their freedom to think for themselves.

In the early 1980s, I took an appointment in an urban school. This experience was to prove disabling, in that here I was persuaded not to think for myself. The school could be defined in Rosenholtz’s (1989 p.107) terms as a ‘stuck’ school, one that was not supportive of change or improvement. One of the main causes of ‘stuckness’ in schools, Rosenholtz found, was the absence of positive feedback:

Most teachers ... become so professionally estranged in their workplace isolation that they ...do not often compliment, support or acknowledge each other’s positive efforts...strong norms of self-reliance may even provoke adverse reaction to a teacher’s successful performance.

(Rosenholtz 1989 p.107)

I was happy in school only when in my classroom. I did not try to analyse why this was so, nor could I articulate my feelings. I started to become more critical, however, as I researched the education literatures for my MA, and began to recognise myself in some of them. For example, I perceived my similarity to Fullan and Hargreaves’ (1992 p.55) description of a teacher who was ‘afraid to share [my] ideas and successes’ (an indication of my fear of ‘adverse’ reactions) and I gradually began to problematise why that status quo existed. By the time I had completed my MA I realised that what I was fighting against was not my inability to work towards my values but an institutionalised culture of domination towards students or staff who failed to fit an unnamed ‘norm’ that was decided upon by some staff members who seemed to hold different values to mine. When I finally did change schools in 2001 I was uplifted to find that my educational values and vision seemed to be shared by my new colleagues.

Today at a staff meeting I was thanked for 'keeping our academic flame alive'. Going from a situation where I was ridiculed for being 'academic' to a school where I am publicly thanked 'for keeping our academic flame alive' has been a major step in developing the confidence to examine my practice for a doctoral degree. (RD 20-12-01)

In this new context I experienced what McDermott and Richardson (2005) call 'the valuable social satisfaction of having your practice sanctioned by a colleague' (p.34). Increased happiness and self-confidence, greater work satisfaction and the knowledge that I was now a valued and respected member of staff in a school in which I loved working, meant that I became more ready to take risks, including the risks of thinking more critically.

Changing schools then was significant to the process of how I developed as a critical thinker. In both schools I learned from being, as well as doing: in one I learned to keep silent through the rejection of my practices as worthwhile; in the other I gained the confidence to learn to think critically through the acceptance of my practices as worthwhile. My experiences resonate with what Freire (1972) said, when he talked about the inseparability of learning from being, and the need to understand the complexity of reality as a living process rather than a static entity. Learning, examined from Freire's perspective, is grounded in the learner's own being: 'their interaction with the world, their concerns, and their vision of what they can become' (Kincheloe 2004 p.73). He also argued for this examination of why things are as they are to be accompanied by the development of a consciousness that refuses to be normalised.

As I have explained above, being 'normalised' into acceptable ways of being was part of the cultural, education and socialisation processes of my formative years. My learning from reflecting on my past has shown me how my historical context has influenced my ontological values and my identity. As one who grew up in a culture that was steeped in a positivistic way of viewing reality, education and intelligence, I was late in becoming aware of my need to be a critical thinker. I accepted things very much as they were and I didn't see that I had agency (Giddens 1984) that could change situations for myself or even realise that it was within the capabilities (Sen 1999) of each person, including me, to make changes in their own lives.

For the naïve thinker, education involves moulding oneself and others to the normalized past. For the critically conscious thinker, education involves engaging in the conscious improvement and transformation of self and reality.  
(Kincheloe 2004 p.72)

From reading critical pedagogy literatures (Apple 1979, 2001b; Bernstein 1975; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Freire 1972, Kincheloe 2004, Steinberg and Kincheloe 2006) I now realise that, in many western contexts, from the day people enter the education system, unwritten but nonetheless powerful, meritocratic social norms dictate that they are selected and streamed into certain categories. Engaging with such ideas during my studies has been a significant learning experience for me. It meant that for the first time in my teaching career I questioned many hitherto accepted norms about teaching and learning; what constitutes intelligence, and why I should strive to enable my students to recognise why they should challenge these norms too.

### **Early misgivings**

My sense of a need to take stock of what I was doing arose from a sense of dissonance between my normal daily practices and what I believed education to be about, albeit tacitly. This dissonance began to develop as early as the early 1970s, when I began teaching, and became pressing by the 1990s. I could not name the source of the dissonance, nor could I change what I was doing because I did not know what to change. This was partly because, at that time, I was working in the institution I have already referred to, whose organisational values were grounded in logics of domination (Marcuse 1964), and I felt required to abide by its norms, so I never broke out sufficiently to question what was happening. Instead I was silenced: I felt I was somehow to blame, but the experience led me to seek innovative coping strategies.

For example as my concerns intensified as the years went by I sought several practical solutions to them. I tried out new classroom management strategies; I changed the furniture around; I facilitated classroom projects; I took themed approaches to aspects of the curriculum. I attended professional development courses and I read educational literatures widely, in the hope of arriving at some solutions that would solve my unarticulated ‘problem’. It never occurred to me to question whether I should be concerned about my institution, the education system, society, or the bigger picture of why things were the way they were. I was ‘schooled’, in the sense articulated by Illich (1973), of the school as formation and training, to look to others for solutions.

However, like Berlin (1969), I gradually began to look inwards into my own practice for solutions.

I wish[ed] my life and decisions to depend upon myself ... to be the instrument of my own, not other acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object...  
(Berlin 1969 p.131)

### **An initial concern about silence**

A concern that emerged early in my teaching career was why children were expected to remain silent in class, except for answering the teacher's questions (Murphy 2004, Norman 1992). Ironically, I was positioning myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989a) in that I often felt that didactic forms of pedagogy that silenced children were unfair, yet I continued to teach in a didactic manner. I did not appreciate how complex these issues were, until some years later when I undertook my research and I began reading the literatures of critical pedagogy (as listed earlier). When I did, I began to see that education is a highly contested domain and that knowledge and power are closely entwined and deeply embedded in socio-historical issues about what kinds of knowledge are valid and valuable. I also began to see that, as well as engaging with the critical literatures, I should also become critical of my own practice.

This was, however, easier said than done. As noted, and like many others, I had also been encouraged to look outside myself for solutions to my pedagogical dilemmas (Whitehead and McNiff 2006). Beginning my self-study encouraged me to look within. This, I came to learn later, was dangerous territory. I could relate to Pusey's (1987) comment about Habermas:

Habermas offers a comprehensive new social theory that is avowedly critical inasmuch as it challenges both the criteria on which the reader expects to judge this and every other social theory and the standards we use to accept, reject, or simply to interpret the everyday social world we inhabit.  
(Pusey 1987 p.14)

At the time, however, I was developing my capacity to be a researcher as well as a practitioner. This was a new experience for me and I must confess to some feelings of isolation from my peers, none of whom seemed to share my lack of ease. This led to an even greater emphasis on trying to make sense of my practice, especially through my critical engagement with the critical literatures. This was my saving grace, because I began to see that perhaps there was a problem in education generally and that I was part of it. Articulating this problem enabled me to identify my first concern, which was to do

with the silencing of children, and of me, their teacher, as I came later to understand. In fact, the articulation of the problem was an initial step in finding my voice. I gradually came to the point where I saw that, if I wanted to be able to articulate the unarticulated worry about my practice, I would have to have to bring the assumptions that underpinned that practice into fuller consciousness.

### **My next concern: beginning to question my own logics**

These realisations led me to question my own logics. I was still stuck in contradiction. Even as I was putting in place strategies such as Thinking Time to increase opportunities for more dialogue in my classroom, I was becoming increasingly frustrated, but again could not say why (Chapters 7 and 8). In retrospect I can see that I was beginning to question, perhaps for the first time, how I thought, and to see that I was moving from propositional to dialectical forms of thinking. I realised that I was teaching within an education system which relies heavily on propositional forms of knowledge, and which requires its participants also to give priority to propositional forms of knowledge. As I search my data archives for evidence of where this awareness began to manifest itself, I see that in February 2003, when rehearsing for a seminar in the University of Limerick in June 2003, I presented my thinking on these issues to my colleagues and supervisor (Roche 2003d). The presentation shows a distinct shift away from the propositional stance of my MA dissertation (Roche 2000b) towards a newer, critical stance that became a feature of my doctoral studies.

At this point I began seriously to interrogate the education system of which I was a part. As well as emphasising propositional knowledge, the Irish educational system seems not to encourage critical engagement. The structure of the school day requires teachers to provide coverage of the curriculum, so a culture of what Dadds (2001 p.49) calls ‘the hurry-along curriculum’ begins to emerge, in which teachers’ concerns are more about teaching to ‘get through’ the subject area requirements of the curriculum than teaching for understanding or critique. This view is echoed by Brandt (1993):

The greatest enemy of understanding is coverage. As long as you are determined to cover everything, you actually ensure that most kids are not going to understand.

(Brandt 1993 p.3)

Apple (2001b) suggests that subject divisions provide more constraint than scope for discretion. He argues that (in the US) standard attainment targets that have been

mandated cement these constraints in place (p.191). The 1999 curriculum for Irish primary schools divides what is to be taught into discrete subject areas or clusters of subject areas. ‘Language’ is divided into L1 and L2 (English and Irish). Social, environmental and scientific education (SESE) incorporates Science, History and Geography. Arts education encompasses the subject areas of Visual Art, Drama and Music; the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) cluster includes Physical Education, and Relationship and Sexuality Education. Mathematics stands alone as a subject.

Each subject area is divided into discrete ‘strands’ and ‘strand units’. Curriculum handbooks contain exemplars to show how these subjects should be taught. The school week is divided into specific times allocated to each subject.

For example, as in Figure 2.1 below, the English curriculum is allocated 4 hours per week in senior classes and 3 hours per week in Infant classes. The strands in English are:

1. Receptiveness to language	2. Competence and confidence in using language	3. Developing cognitive abilities through language	4. Emotional and imaginative development through language
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**Figure 2-1: Table: Strands of English Language Curriculum**

Each strand is then subdivided into strand units, which are further divided into the three areas of oral, reading and writing. In the first strand ‘receptiveness to language’, the strand units for infant classes are:

- Oral: developing receptiveness to oral language
- Reading: developing concepts of language and print
- Writing: creating and fostering the impulse to write

The curriculum documents outline targets and objectives for each strand and strand unit. The example of the Infant programme (English section) in oral language reveals that Strand 1 comprises six aims and objectives in a bulleted list which are largely skills based.

The child should be enabled to:

- Experience, recognise and observe simple commands
- Listen to a story or description and respond to it
- Hear, repeat and elaborate words, phrases and sentences modelled by the teacher
- Use and interpret tone of voice expressing various emotions
- Learn to adopt appropriate verbal behaviour to secure and maintain the attention of a partner
- Mime and interpret gesture, movement and attitude conveying various emotions

(Government of Ireland 1999, English pp.15-21)

Strands 2 and 3 of the English curriculum have six bulleted aims and Strand 4 has ten. The lists above refer only to Oral language, and the lists for Reading and Writing are equally detailed, so this gives an idea of the workload facing teachers in one subject area. Furthermore, these objectives are to be met in an infant classroom within a time allocation of 3 hours per week. Bearing in mind that the curriculum contains twelve subjects, each divided into many strands and strand units, and that many classrooms have one teacher and thirty or more children, one gets a sense of the often frantic pace of the ‘hurry-along-ness’ to which Dadds (2001 p.49) refers.

I colluded in this hurried and fragmented curriculum. In order to devise short-term schemes of work for each fortnight, and fit in my data gathering for my study, I had to timetable Thinking Time initially under the strand unit ‘developing cognitive abilities through oral language’. By doing so, I could satisfy the obligations of curricular planning. There was no strand in any curricular area that matched ‘teaching children to think for themselves’ or ‘enquiring into one’s practice’. Through developing such strategies, however, I was accepting the underlying curricular propositional logics and assumptions about the reification of knowledge, and trying to fit my dialogical educational values into a technical rationality that negated them. I was holding values but acting in ways that denied them, but had not made that knowledge explicit by



articulating it as such to myself. I was oblivious to the fact at this point that my values were embodied in my practice and could be manifested through my practice, because, at first sight, this manifestation could not be slotted and timetabled. I was still unaware that living out my educational values would have to permeate every moment of my teaching life.

This awareness did develop, however, as my study progressed. I began to question the compartmentalisation of the school day into discrete parcels of information transmission. I began to challenge and question the need for standardised curricula and methods of assessment, and to examine my growing resistance to the technical rationality of education as I was experiencing it. This feeling of growing resistance, I now see, was the beginning of my becoming critical (Carr and Kemmis 1986). I saw that instead of fitting my values to an existing educational situation I would have to take an alternative stance and try to make the situation fit better with my values.

This required me to develop the capacity for critical engagement, confidence and courage. I am more confident now but, for many years, even after embarking on my doctoral studies, I remained compliant with the norms of the system. Gradually, however, the process of researching my practice of encouraging others to be critical thinkers shifted the focus from my students to me. I began to see the need for a shift from problem-solving to problematising.

### **From problem-solving to problematising**

Initially I perceived my efforts as ‘problem-solving’. I saw my identified concerns as problems for which solutions had to be found. Part of the process of becoming critical for me was to shift from this bipolar problem/solution stance to a more reflective and critically conscious stance of problematising my practice. The process of problematising is grounded in several assumptions: that I must examine my concerns in a critical way, and look at underlying assumptions and norms; that there may be no ‘right answer’; and that I must develop ways forward through developing dialogical practices. The answers, if there were any, were unlikely to reside in the set of twenty three Irish Primary Curriculum handbooks (Government of Ireland 1999).

By problematising though, I was finally beginning to transform myself into a critical thinker, and was in turn helping my students to become critical thinkers.

This focus on my own learning enabled me then to problematise why my educational practice appeared to deny my values of freedom and justice. From a position where I had naively assumed that teacher-talk dominated in classrooms because large classes necessitated didactic forms of pedagogy, I now began to be aware of deeper layers of meaning. I found support for my views in a large body of research. In Britain, The National Oracy Project (Norman 1992) examined teacher-talk in classrooms. The relationships between talk and learning, patterns of classroom interaction were explored (Edwards 1992, Edwards and Mercer 1987, Galton *et al.* 1999) as were the differential oracy experiences of home and school (Tough 1977, Wells 1999). Edwards and Mercer (1987 p.20) assert that talk is both ‘a medium for teaching and learning’ and say it is ‘one of the materials from which a child constructs meaning’. This finding spoke to my conviction of the importance of classroom dialogue and the significant role of the quality of the interpersonal relationships in classrooms between teacher and students and between students and their peers.

Alongside my growing awareness of the importance of pupil talk and shared classroom discourse, I began too, to recognise that pedagogy can be seen as a highly contested political arena that demanded critical awareness (Alexander 2000, Dadds 2001). I came to question my simplistic notion that didacticism had to do with ‘classroom management strategies’ and I saw instead that the exercise of technical rational forms of management and assessment of teachers and students has to do with issues of power and control (Apple 1995, 2001a, 2001b; Darder *et al.* 2003, Kincheloe 2004). For the first time I looked at theories of education from the critical perspective of whether they were founded on notions of care, freedom and justice. I realised that while the rhetoric of the Irish Primary School Curriculum supports principles of social justice and care for the other, the reality is that education is largely about school and classroom management as teachers struggle to implement syllabi premised on propositional ‘know that’ and ‘know how’ knowledge (Ryle 1949).

### **Developing conceptual frameworks**

These realisations enabled me to formalise my values of care, freedom and justice as broad conceptual frameworks, and I can trace how these frameworks are associated with the writing of key theorists (see Chapters 4 and 5). In relation to my value of care, I have been influenced especially by the work of Noddings (1984a, 1984b, 1988, 1998,

2006) and Buber (1965). In particular I have been influenced by Buber's ideas about 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' relationships. These ideas have helped me to interrogate my own ontological stance in relation to others. My evidence throughout this thesis shows that I engage with others in my classroom in a way that includes and respects them as 'Thou'. I show that in talking 'with' rather than 'at' my students, I value them as equal knowers and significant others ([Video Link: Talking with ...](#)). The work of Benhabib (1987) also helped me to examine how I view the 'concrete' and 'particular' children in my classroom. This stance is reflected too, in my choice of action research as a methodology. I understand action research as research in relation with others rather than on others. In this I have been significantly influenced by the work of McNiff (2000, 2004, 2005a, 2005b).

Reading Bourdieu (1990) and Foucault (1980) influenced my developing insights into how schools can operate as instruments of social control. From Foucault I learned about how power and knowledge are interwoven, and how institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons can become instruments of social control through processes of objectification that transform the body into an object of scientific investigation. I had never before considered school in this light, but as I reflected on the literatures I saw how children are often powerless and objectified in classroom situations (Devine 2000a, 2000b, 2003). Bourdieu (1990) argued that mechanisms of social domination and reproduction, as evident in many schools, were focused on bodily know-how and competent practices, which came to act as symbolic capital in the social world. Such practices can be inculcated through what he terms 'symbolic violence' (p.27). I could see a relationship between Bourdieu's ideas and the way in which dominant institutional epistemologies and practices formed and moulded children's identities as passive thinkers. In my own context, for example, I had often reproduced my early experiences as a silent learner in my practice as a didactic teacher.

Bourdieu's and Foucault's ideas made me think deeply about how I had complied with a concept of the school as a context for social control. I now saw that by delivering the reified knowledge of the curriculum in an uncritical way, I had unconsciously contributed to a form of symbolic violence as understood by Bourdieu, and I had used the power of my 'superior' teacher knowledge to dominate and control the children in my classrooms in Foucault's sense of the institution as a form of social discipline.

Bourdieu's and Foucault's ideas had therefore a part to play in the reconceptualisation of my practice. Because I consciously develop humane and respectful relationships with my children I decided to seek pedagogies that would allow us to seek knowledge together, and accept each other as 'other'. To that end I began to create and develop dialogical pedagogies that would respect the open-ended nature of knowledge, the capacity of people to be creative and critical knowers and the humanity of interrelating with my students through pedagogies that have care, freedom and justice as guiding principles (Chapters 8 and 9).

I develop my themes of engaging critically with the literatures in Chapters 4 and 5, and I show how my values informed my choice of conceptual frameworks. At this point, however, I conclude this chapter by saying that I will provide evidence to show that the focus on my practice, and the focus on my learning from my practice, are not separate spheres of enquiry but are incorporated within, and grounded in one another. I draw on the work of McNiff (2000, 2005a, 2005b) and McNiff and Whitehead (2005, 2006) and on Bohm's (1998) ideas about how creativity can be encouraged through dialogue. My focus shifted to a concern to improve the quality of opportunities for children to exercise their independence of mind as well as the development of my own capacity to exercise critical engagement.

I now turn to a discussion of the methodology I used that enabled me to do this.

## **Chapter 3**

### ***Methodological issues: How could I address my concerns?***

In this chapter I set out the methodology I used to conduct my enquiry. The chapter is in two parts. I first give an explanation and justification for why I chose this methodology. Second, I outline some of the practical details of conducting my enquiry. Articulating these issues enables me to claim that my research has been conducted with methodological rigour (Winter 1989), and paves the way to my efforts to show its validity.

### ***Chapter 3 Part 1***

#### **Explanations and justifications**

As recorded I set out several years ago to ‘improve’ my students’ thinking. I now know that my attitudes of that time reflected not only an ontological perspective in which I saw myself as separate from and superior to my students, but also how my logics took a propositional form. I valued certainty and knowing the ‘right’ way to do things, and, while I believe I had a strong sense of justice and was outraged by any form of injustice, I rarely questioned ‘the way things were’ in the world, why they should be so in the first place, and, most importantly from a critical perspective, how I might be contributing to the perpetuation of the existing situation.

I took as normative a view that schoolchildren needed to be ‘taught’ the ‘content of the curriculum’, and my pedagogies relied heavily on and reproduced the ways in which I had been taught and trained. I did not critique the assumptions inherent in educational discourses about what constitutes education or knowledge generation. I did not ask whose interests were being served by having a standardised national curriculum and what might be the possible injustices in such a policy. Yet at the same time I kept abreast of innovative educational practices: I attended professional development courses, and read widely. However, I did not question why, for example, I am expected

to absorb passively the abstract theory presented in an in-service lecture. I accepted such normative practices unquestioningly.

Neither did I question the assumption that it was my responsibility to implement others' theories. I did not question the logic that suggests that, because an educational theory 'worked' in one school or classroom, it should 'work' in another. When I tried out others' theories and could not replicate their findings, I attributed my failure to the fact that perhaps I was 'only a teacher' or, because my students (at that time) were considered 'disadvantaged', they could not be as 'good' as the people in the study.

An example of my efforts to implement one such theory occurred when I first tried doing 'Thinking Time' (Donnelly 1994) in 1996. I had seen videos of children in discussion and I was eager to do the same in my own classroom. I chose a topic that had 'worked well' in Donnelly's context. When the discussion began, I was nervous and unsure: my students sat uncomfortably in the circle and most 'passed' without speaking.

One child, a compassionate boy, asked: 'Teacher, what do you want me to say?' I don't remember what answer I gave, but I remember that I wanted him to 'say' something that I hoped would be clever, similar to what children had said on the 'Socrates for 6 year olds' video (BBC TV 1990) and on Donnelly's videos. I wanted a specific outcome: I knew in advance what it was to be. When the children failed to produce it, I was devastated. I desperately wanted to 'improve' my children, however, and continued looking for ways to help them become 'better' thinkers. It did not occur to me back then to consider studying *my* practice in order to improve it: I was 'just' a teacher, not a researcher. I later reasoned that I had fallen into the trap of intellectual elitism, where I positioned recognised theorists and myself in hierarchically-organised categories.

### **Intellectual elitism and the exclusion of practitioners**

McNiff and Whitehead (2006 p.65) refer to the way in which academic elitism has traditionally discouraged practitioner research, largely through presenting theory as an abstract discipline (Pring 2000) and through communicating messages that practitioners are unequipped to do research (D. McIntyre 1997). I agree with what McNiff and Whitehead suggest, and I also believe that self-styled elitist academic groups can create within practitioners what I earlier referred to as 'internalised oppression' (Tappan 2001).

Furthermore, the development of internalised oppression by practitioners can also lead to their exclusion. I now understand how teachers have traditionally been positioned by the academy as Other, as practitioners upon whom studies can be carried out in the interests of developing propositional theory. It is possible that teachers have contributed to their own exclusion through their failure to claim their voice and by allowing others to speak for them. When they allow others to theorise on their behalf, by interpreting their words and actions for them, they are effectively colluding in the widespread understanding that they have no voice or theory worth listening to.

Suresh Canagarajah's (2002) arguments are also relevant for me as a primary teacher, when he speaks about how texts construct and constitute knowledge and how the values of the Western intellectual traditions are reflected in the conventions and practices of academic communities:

... mainstream journals and their publishing practices are congenial to the interests of center knowledge while proving recalcitrant to periphery discourses; ... academic writing/publishing functions as an important means of legitimating and reproducing center knowledge.

(Suresh Canagarajah 2002 p.60)

Academic journals and publications are not easily accessed by 'ordinary' teachers. Unless a teacher has access to a university library, she is obliged to purchase journal articles at a prohibitive cost. However, unless a teacher knows about the journals in the first place, and has some familiarity with the system, she will find the process difficult. Teachers are effectively barred from academic discourses through such exclusion strategies. Their voices, if heard at all, are generally mediated through the voice of a researcher who has carried out a study 'on' them.

Without access to opportunities for carrying out insider research that could potentially influence education policy-framing, teachers risk losing their autonomy and identity. Education policy is formed without recourse to practitioner-research into what really happens in living classrooms (see Apple 2001b). Several literatures exist in Britain, for example, that point out the risks attached to the loss of teachers' autonomy and the expansion of a pervasive performative culture for teachers as well as for children. Concern has been articulated over the increasingly managerial approach to education. McNess *et al.* (2003) suggest that there is a 'disjunction between policy and preferred practice' (p.256). Bernstein (1996) also suggests that performance models are

dependent upon external regulation so that pedagogic practice is subordinated to an 'external curriculum of selection, sequence, pacing and criteria of the transmission' (Bernstein, 1996, p.62). According to Sultana (1994, cited in McNess *et al.* 2003 p.257) the call for the raising of school standards and pupil attainment in predefined ways has increasingly applied pressures for 'performativity' within teaching and learning. This contrasts with a previous, more holistic model of teachers' work by restricting their ability to 'creatively mediate' external demands with regard to curriculum content and pedagogic practice (p.256). In Ireland too, there is a growing push towards a performance-oriented, transmission model of learning (Lynch 2006).

The view that education is simply another market commodity has become normalised in policy and public discourses. Schools run purely as businesses are a growing phenomenon.

(Lynch K. 2006 p.1)

The research that has influenced managerial-style education policy directives has most likely been carried out with outsider and 'objective' researchers with no practitioner-researcher involvement in or ownership of the research. Teachers, in this sense, are powerless. This is borne out by Lynch and O'Neill (1994) who suggest that professional researchers in the social sciences often exacerbate the powerlessness of those they study (p.244). They argue that, without intent, researchers

... become colonizers.... [They] know and own part of people's world about which people themselves know very little. ... It means that there are now people who can claim to know you and understand you better than you understand yourself: there are experts there to interpret your world and to speak on your behalf. They take away your voice by speaking about you and for you.

(Lynch and O'Neill 1994, in Lynch 2001 pp.243-4)

I am not sure however, that I agree with the phrase 'about which people themselves know very little': Lynch and O'Neill also appear to be positioning themselves here as belonging to an elite who understand 'what people know' differently to how the knowers understand it. From my perspective I would claim to know only what *I* know, and even this is often incomplete and inchoate. I do not believe I have the right to claim knowledge of what others know.

There is a paradox inherent within the Irish system, I believe, that places the current performance-oriented, transmission model of education (Morgan 1998; Murphy 2004; Government of Ireland 2005a) at odds with the aspirations of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999). The curriculum recommends a sociocultural



model of education that claims to recognise and include the emotional and social aspects necessary for learner-centred pedagogies (Introduction, Government of Ireland 1999 p.8). It emphasises activity and discovery with ‘the child as an active agent in his or her own learning’ and promotes ‘celebrating the uniqueness of the child; ensuring the development of each child’s potential (ibid). However, evidence exists that didacticism is still a prevalent methodology in Irish schools (Conway 2000, 2002; Murphy 2004, Government of Ireland 2005a, Government of Ireland 2005b). Through examining my practice from the vantage point of over thirty years of experience within the Irish system, along with almost ten years of action research since undertaking my MA studies, I have now generated my own living theory of dialogic practice that has significance for my practice and may have significance for teachers struggling to marry these opposing education models.

### **Holding myself accountable for my practice**

As reported, when I finally began my current research programme, I began to reconceptualise my identity as ‘researcher’, but with a focus on studying my students which meant that I was also adopting an outsider stance. I also failed to see the irony in the fact that not only did I begin to research my students, I actually did so with a view to ‘improving’ them (Roche 2002a).

I have now come to hold a more inclusional perspective, and I can see that ‘improving others’ is an outsider researcher stance, based on ontological values that position the researcher as separate from her object of study. Over the course of this study I have come to realise that, at best, all I can do is to examine my own values, and ground my practice in them, so as to make an improvement in how I work, with the understanding that my actions have the potential to influence others. This means that I have tried as far as possible to hold myself accountable for my actions in relation with others to ensure that I act with integrity in the interests of all in working towards sustainable educational practices.

### **Separating the knower from the known**

The traditional separation of the researcher from the object of study harks back to a Cartesian perspective that attempts to ensure objectivity and value-free enquiry. Descartes explained mind and body as separate entities and developed a form of

analytic thinking, which splits complex phenomena into separate parts so as to understand the behaviour of the whole from the property of its components (Capra 1997).

Social science researchers traditionally operate from such a spectator perspective. People, especially children, are often perceived as Other, and from a frequently patriarchal perspective.

... existing research gatekeeping systems tended to construct children as dependent, in need of protection and as ‘human becomings.’

(Balen et al. 2006 p.29)

Seen from such a perspective children are often viewed as ‘potential’ citizens, or as ‘human becomings’ (Balen *ibid*), rather than human ‘beings’. For me, processes of ‘becoming’ seem to take the form of a dialectical relationship between ‘being’ and ‘non-being’. Childhood is assumed to be a stage on the way to being a finished and complete person. Like Freire (1972), I believe that people are always ‘unfinished, uncompleted beings, in and with a likewise unfinished reality’ (pp.56-7). My ontological commitments hold within themselves the idea of improving myself as a person, and my educational values are about inviting others to help themselves to become better persons also. This is not the same as ‘improving other people’, the stance I initially adopted.

I no longer view my students as components in a homogenous group who belong to a state named ‘childhood’. Like Moss (2002), I raise critical questions about the meaning of the term ‘childhood’:

What is our image or understanding of the child? What is our image or understanding of institutions for young children?

(Moss 2002 p.439)

These understandings would appear to resonate also with Korczak:

... the teacher-researcher should not treat the child as a research object or as a means in what Buber (1947) called an “I-it” relationship. The purpose of research should not serve any interest except that of the child, who should be treated as a unique human being that deserves full respect. “Children . . . are people – not people to be, not people of the future, not people of tomorrow, but people now . . . right now . . . today”

(Korczak, 1914/1967b, p. 254, cited in Efron 2005 p.148)

For me, each child in my classroom is a unique individual with whom I am in relation. The quality of that relationship is influenced by many factors including my ontological stance which positions me as in relation with others. I have puzzled over the concepts of 'Other' and 'other' for a long time, and I have now arrived at the understanding that I try to see my students not as 'Other', a term that I understand to mean 'not like me, different from me', but as 'other', which I understand as 'people who are like me but who are themselves unique individuals in relationship with other unique individuals'. I acknowledge the influence of McNiff with Whitehead (2006) on my thinking.

Prevailing social policy discourses, on the other hand, appear to see children as Other. Haavind (2005) suggests that such discourses ignore the idea that children may have any ability to speak for themselves. Like me she feels that methods must be developed to enable children's voices to be heard.

When children are seen one-sidedly as dependent, vulnerable and malleable, the idea that they may have perspectives beyond their immediate existence is simply ruled out. The same holds for any notion of the child as in a preparatory stage since such a conceptualization would frame their present subjectivity as oriented to a not-yet-existing future.

(Haavind 2005 p.149)

Haavind (2005) also suggests that children will in all cases be better served if they are able to voice their opinion (p.144).

Emphasis on the child as an individual should not be interpreted as disconnection from the child. Rather, relational qualities help constitute individual performance. When children are equipped with the abilities to represent themselves and to explore options, figure out plans and make decisions on behalf of themselves, these capacities have been confirmed through a web of interrelation.

(Haavind 2005 p.144)

Insights such as these now inform how I work and how I perceive the purpose of the institution in which I work, which should be to provide opportunities for children and staff to realise their capacity to think critically and interpret their world for themselves.

### **Towards a living theory of practice**

I have recounted so far how, for much of my life, I thought in propositional ways, and have come only recently, through my improving capacity to reflect critically, to take action on my own processes of thinking and thereby critique my previous propositional stance. 'Critical reflection is also action,' according to Freire (1972 p.99). I learned that

it was not sufficient to ask only operational and procedural questions around improving my practice. I also had to interrogate my ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. In this respect, the work of Freire (1972) also resonates with both the ontological perspectives of action research, which became my preferred methodology, and with my educational values.

Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man [sic] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from men. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without men, but men in their relations with the world.

(Freire 1972 p.54)

Having moved away from a propositional to a more critical stance, in which I was beginning to see the need for a critical self-perspective, I seriously considered the idea of first-person enquiry (Marshall 2004), or self-study action research (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). For me, self-study action research makes moral and ethical sense, because it enables me to see my 'I' in relation with many other 'I's' who are also in company with many others – 'a community of "I's"' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006 p. 25). Epistemologically, self-study makes sense for me because I have come to see knowledge as something inseparable from me as a knower.

The idea of a living theory of practice is premised on the idea that the 'I' is the centre of educational enquiry, and that all individuals are capable of offering their own account of practice, comprising their descriptions and explanations, to show how they address the question, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989a), and so hold themselves morally accountable for their practice. Such accounts come to stand as their living educational theories (McNiff 2007). This idea challenges traditional orthodoxies and power structures about knowledge and knowers, and places the practitioner-researcher at the centre of the research process. Consequently, living theories generated from practice-based research can now be seen to be located in the researchers themselves as they go about their practice in workplace contexts.

McNiff (2007) sees knowledge as relational in that, while the practitioner-researcher is the centre of the enquiry, they are always in company with others. The processes of learning, according to McNiff, have the potential to transform and evolve into new knowledge. These ideas about the generative transformational and relational aspects of living theory have implications for my practice as I seek ways of working that are

inclusional, invitational and respectful of the other. Because living theory places moral responsibility on practitioners to hold themselves accountable for their practices, the ideas of relational knowledge and generative transformational processes have moral and ethical connotations that weave issues of social justice through the fabric of my living theory.

Bakhtin, as reported by Holquist, also acknowledges the existence of the 'living I':

Much as Peter Pan's shadow is sewn to his body, 'I' is the needle that stitches the abstraction of language to the particularity of lived experience. And much the same structure insures that in all aspects of life dialogue can take place between the chaotic and particular centrifugal forces of subjectivity and the rule-driven, generalizing centripetal forces of the extra-personal system.  
(Holquist 2002 p.28)

Holquist (2002) also suggests that Bakhtin's dialogism is 'relentlessly relational' and 'is a way of looking at things that always insists on the presence of the other' (p.195). However, according to Holquist (op cit) Bakhtin located his work in the idea of 'the inescapable necessity of outsideness and unfinalizability' (Holquist 2002 p.195). While I would agree with the idea of 'unfinalizability', because living theory is about continuity in evolutionary processes, I would also argue that living theory is firmly located in the idea of insideness. The living theory I generate is ongoing and is worked out dialogically from within my practice through processes of communication with my own critical reflection on action, and with others who have been invited to participate in the process.

Reaching these understandings has enabled me to appreciate my own capacity for personal and social transformation. I have become aware of my own transformational power. Power is frequently construed negatively. It can be used to control and shape behaviour (Foucault 1980), or to gain dominance over others. Power can also be used productively to improve the human condition (Kincheloe and Berry 2004). I now understand how I can use the power of my deeper critical awareness to generate explanations for my actions, and in turn use that power to influence the education of social formations (Whitehead 2004a).

Therefore, in constructing explanations for my professional practice I have found it necessary to clarify for myself the meanings of my ontological and epistemological values by showing their emergence in action (Whitehead 1989a p.6), and I have done

this by immersing myself in the process of taking action grounded in critical self-reflection. I have found, like Mellor (1998) that the methodology is the process and the process is the methodology.

### **A vignette from practice**

Aware, always, of the need to produce validated evidence to test and hopefully support my claims to knowledge, I now offer one vignette from my archive to illustrate how I learned about my practice from reflection-on-action (Schön 1983) and from dialectical engagement with both a piece of data (a videoed excerpt of practice), and with the critique of others.

On 23-07-04 I showed a videoed classroom discussion to a group of critical friends from my study-group. I hoped to show them that my students were adept talkers and thinkers. I knew what I wanted the group to see. I thought it would be unambiguous. However, I later wrote in my journal:

When the tape ended P said, 'First off what strikes me is the way you take this so much for granted – little 5 and 6 year olds discussing and thinking and listening. It's amazing! You are so used to it you don't even see how amazing that is in itself!' (RD 23-07-04)

This was significant for my learning. I realized I had been so busy looking at tapes and transcripts for specific data, that I often ignored the larger potential significance of my practice. I wrote:

The questions that strike me now that I didn't think of asking P are:

- a) Why should the idea of little children in dialogue be 'amazing?' What assumptions are being made here about the idea of children engaging in dialogue?
- b) What is considered to be 'normal' classroom practice so that my practice looks 'amazing'? (RD 23-07-04)

Reflecting on these issues afterwards led me to research literatures around issues of how teacher talk can silence children, and to critical pedagogues like Apple (1979), Kincheloe (2004), and McLaren (1986) who aim to challenge injustices in traditional forms of pedagogy.

C said that she thought, and the others agreed, that even though video can be a very powerful visual medium for demonstrating what the written word can't – facial expression, body language, voice timbre – it was not until I provided explanations for my actions that the picture became more complete. (RD 23-07-04)

On reflection, I realised that this has implications for my methodology because an outsider observing my practice might not have interpreted my actions accurately. (This episode had significance for my later examination of appropriate forms of representation of my data).

M commented that I seemed to allow two children in particular a lot of speaking time. She wondered if this was unfair to the other children.

I explained how both children Sh and Eo, were struggling 'academically'. While they were obviously articulate and intelligent and showed this in the video, I explained that I knew from their performance in traditional workbook activities, and from my thirty years of classroom experience, that when standardised test time came around they would 'fail'.

I explained how I felt that such technically rational assessment procedures were unjust because they failed to recognise the whole intelligence of a child, while marginalising those whose learning strengths did not match those valued by the assessment. (RD 23-07-04)

When I reflected on this episode I realised that I was beginning to develop my living theory of practice. I had offered a description of what was happening, by means of a visual narrative. Now I was offering an explanation for my practice in relation to my decisions. However, closer reflection shows me now what I failed to see then, that I had been acting out of my values of justice and care and that these values may have been embodied in my practice longer than I realized but had not been made explicit until now.

In another section of the video a child struggled to articulate a thought and took some time to speak. C asked me why I hadn't intervened to help him.

I replied that I felt he would get there by himself and I wanted to let him try at least.

C asked me why I felt that this was important.

I explained that I have made a conscious effort to give children time to think. In the past I didn't always wait long enough for children to answer. I have tried to improve my practice in this respect. (RD 23-07-04)

I found evidence in the literatures to support the view that teachers often do not wait for children to answer (Galton *et al.* 1980, 1999; Goodlad 1984, Walker and Adelman 1975, Wragg and Brown 2001). In this way, teachers use their power as the authority figure in the classroom to control and dominate classroom discourse. However, some children invoke their own power and choose to use this to their advantage (Devine 2003, Holt 1964). As reported earlier, recent studies of Irish primary schools show that didacticism remains sufficiently dominant to cause concern for the ‘active learning’ recommendations of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (Conway 2000, 2002; Murphy 2004, Government of Ireland 2005a, 2005b). This, I maintain, is an area of my research that could have significant implications for policy and practice in Irish education.

When I later reflected on the process of showing the video to my critical friends in July 2004, I realised that the video could be described as a visual narrative of the transformation of my learning (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). Here was visual evidence of me embodying values of justice and care in practice, as I offer this research-based account to show how caring pedagogical practices can improve the quality of learning experience for children.

I am aware, however, that the kinds of claims I am making here need to be tested against the critical responses of others. I have already recounted how I invited the critical responses of my study group to my claims, and I have also come to see this process of dialogically-grounded critique as a form of knowledge creation in itself. New learning emerged for myself and my colleagues. One subsequently wrote:

I learned a lot from the conversation regarding your video. I realised that sometimes, I don't always appreciate the significance of what I am doing in my practice until I hear it from others ... When we all engaged together in that validation exercise, I took a lot of notes and have since looked at episodes of my own practice with new eyes. (RD email from BL 03-09-04) (Further examples of such critical responses can be found in Appendix B.3.)

My living theory is explicitly rooted in my embodied values of care, freedom and justice. Rather than excluding others or dominating others through prescriptive practices I aim to develop a form of critical practice that is grounded in logics of inclusion and



freedom. This, I felt, was well exemplified in my response to my colleague's earlier comment in relation to my providing space for a child to think before speaking.

C said that she felt that this was an extremely important explanation because it provided an insight into how I work towards including all children democratically as active and equal co-participants with me.

The others agreed that the episode shown certainly tested my claim that in my classroom children have freedom to speak, freedom from coercion, freedom to be silent and that I provided adequate description and explanation for my actions. (RD 23-07-04)

This episode is significant also because previously I had not theorised how my actions could be a realisation of my values. Now I could see that these values inform my practical professional decisions. I began then to look with new critical eyes at other data and I began to appreciate Geertz's (1973) emphasis on the need for 'thick' descriptions of data. I saw that it is important not only to describe episodes and support them with case study material but also to locate my arguments within my conceptual frameworks, such as why I believed I should adopt caring and nurturing practices and the nature of the relationships between my ideas of care and nurturing and critical thinking.

The dialectic between making sense of my practice and my growing critical awareness meant that I began to see myself as an integral part of the practice I am studying. I became a living participant in my own knowledge creation process (Bohm 2004). This dialectic also enables new problem-posing forms of practice (Freire 1972).

I have come to see how dialogue plays an essential role in the development of my living theory of education. I now understand education to be about learning how to live a moral life and how to make choices that value the inclusion of the other. I believe too that education is about learning to learn, and about learning to think for oneself through dialogic processes. Because my educational values are premised upon democratic practices and dialogue, I now understand more fully that education should be about non-coercive practices. Thus I now have begun to see my role as a teacher much as Freire (1972) described, as one of inviting others to share in knowledge generation through dialogue. In this account I attempt to explain how my values have inspired and provoked me to change the way I was working so as to become what I consider to be a 'better' teacher by employing dialogical pedagogies. The focus of the research is on me, as I deliberately reconceptualised my identity and transformed myself into a more

critically aware thinker, through the dialogical process of helping my children also to become critical thinkers.

I now turn to the more practical elements of my research design and its implementation.

## **Chapter 3 Part 2**

### **Practical issues**

Mellor (1998) speaks of the search for a methodology as a most confusing process:

I have toyed with the metaphors of a journey, a garden, 'buying the thingamygig' and 'hunting the snark', but that which most closely embodies the development of this undertaking, with its dead ends, confusions, shifts in focus and occasional fruits of publication, is the unusual, but nonetheless extremely successful growth of the banyan tree.

(Mellor 1998 p.467)

Similarly, for much of my study, I had 'no research question and no clear method' (Mellor 2001 p.465). I was 'working without rules in order to find out the rules of what [I]ve done' (ibid). Initially I found the situation destabilising because no definitive 'method' exists for self-study action research. I wanted definition, clear answers, and a 'right' procedure to follow. I floundered in the methodological freedom I had, and, as Freire (1972 p.23) described, I preferred the security of conformity with [my] state of unfreedom to the creative communion produced by and even the very pursuit of freedom.

Guidelines to the methodological process of action research enquiry exist, particularly in the works of McNiff and Whitehead (McNiff 1988, 2002; McNiff et al. 1996, McNiff and Whitehead 2006, McNiff with Whitehead 2002) but like Mellor (1998) I hunted several 'snarks' before realising that I was researching myself and my practice, and finally understanding that the process of the methodology itself was in its practise.

The finding of the questions was itself more important than the questions themselves. ... I eventually came to accept that my struggle in the swamp was the method, not a path to find a better method ... I was struggling to find a methodology ... which I could 'own' – which did not fragment the complex whole of my own lived experience and my values.

(Mellor 1998 p.462)

Mellor's (2001) look at the 'untidy realities of research' was also consoling as I gradually came to a new understanding of what theory and evidence and claims to knowledge meant, as I struggled to write up my research account. I had to free myself from the 'tyranny of method' (Thomas 1998 p.151) and the internalised oppression of feeling unequipped as a researcher, because I could find no clear path to enquiry.

I began to see myself as constantly changing and recreating my identity as I investigate what I do. An initial focus on why I was uneasy about the dilemmas of practice now refocused into how I could improve my practice in relation to how I might improve the current situation for the benefit of myself and others who share my institutional context.

I began by identifying my values. I took these as the guiding explanatory principles for my research. The core values I identified were those of care, freedom and justice. I wondered whether I was living these values in my practice. I decided that I would gather data in relation to these values. Could I show episodes of practice that demonstrated me living in the direction of these values, and transform those data into a strong evidence base against which I would test the validity of my claims to knowledge? Because I was developing my critical capacity, I found myself asking questions such as, 'Why am I telling this story from my data and not another story? What have I learned from this incident? What am I learning now as I critique it and what can I learn from other critical incidents of practice?' For example, as I examined a videoed classroom discussion to note incidents of where children disagreed or agreed with me or with peers, I saw that initially, I had been looking at superficial aspects of practice rather than providing critical explanations.

I notice that I seem to be taking it for granted that it is significant and important to show that children have the freedom to agree or disagree. I need to explain *why* it is important to me to show that a child has disagreed with me. Critical questions might include:

Who is traditionally allowed to disagree in a classroom? Why do I feel that the idea of a child disagreeing with a teacher is so noteworthy? Why do I think that this is significant? What does this tell me about perhaps, inherent assumptions around power in the classroom? (RD 25-05-06)

This is a very different approach to general social science methodologies. The data gathering methods may be similar, but the approach is different in that I am the one who

interprets my practice and theorises it to generate my own living theory of practice. I therefore ask questions of my data such as: Why do I feel that a child disagreeing with me is noteworthy? Why do I feel that the idea of children disagreeing with a teacher is so noteworthy? ([Video Link: Disagreeing with teacher](#)).

As I researched my practice I systematically gathered data about how I gradually deepened my own critical awareness. My data gathering techniques involved the use of a reflective diary, audio and videotape recordings of myself in interaction with the children, and records from, and email correspondence with critical friends and validation groups. I was therefore able to capture the rich complexity of the different stages of my research. For example, I was able to reflect critically on this diary entry drawn from early draft writing.

Choosing action research self-study as a methodology within which to frame an enquiry into my practice emerges first of all from my ontological stance, which is the way in which I perceive myself in the world. This standpoint influences how I relate to others as well as informing how my epistemological values have evolved. (RD 15-01-06)

The sentence rankled with me each time I read over it. I felt it was too glib in that it did not represent the struggle to come to an understanding of these concepts. My research diary became a rich source of evidence.

Email correspondence also enabled me to record my own processes of coming to know. For example, here is an email record of correspondence with my supervisor that clearly communicates this process of struggle and confusion.

Think about the patterns you are communicating here. You seem to be focusing on the general patterns of other people's thinking, without acknowledging that you are a core piece of that pattern.  
Where are you in this? (RD email from J 10-07-05)

It seems that I was so deeply embedded in propositional logics that I could not see for myself where I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989). I tried repeatedly to articulate my ontological stance as I understood it. My reply shows my emerging new understanding although I still seem to reify the concept of critical thinking:

Let's see if I've made it a little clearer for myself: I knew I ought to be writing about my practice and I knew I wanted to write about critical thinking but what was happening was that I was trying to link them artificially...

I now see that I ought to be writing about my practice in relation to issues about critical thinking and I ought to be writing about critical thinking insofar as it relates to my practice – not in isolation from each other. (RD email to J 16-07-05)

Gradually I saw why I had been so inarticulate: methodologically, I had been researching my practice as though it were 'out there' separate from me. I had failed to see that I was part of the situation that I was investigating.

It took a long time for me to understand that the knowledge I generate for myself is always going to be temporary and uncertain, and even longer before I saw my reflections, problem-posing, difficulties and tentative solutions as 'knowledge'. I considered that what I produced was less than 'knowledge' and certainly less than 'theory'. It took me several years to understand that the 'answer' to 'how can I improve my practice?' lies in the way I live through my practice in relation to my educational values.

By carefully monitoring and recording my process of enquiry, I have a clear record of my emergent understandings about the politics of knowledge, as well as my own capacity for knowledge generation. As reported earlier, traditionally, ownership of theory resided in the academy. I can now claim ownership of my own capacity for theory generation because I am explaining how I became competent as a researcher who can provide a valid evidence base against which to test my emergent living theories of practice. I can explain the process through which I have reconceptualised my identity as both researcher and practitioner. I have established my epistemological voice as I realise my capacity to know my own educational development. I have also grown into my methodological voice because I have had to adapt and innovate, as I have created my own methodology, and because I am an active agent in the process of enquiry into my practice. There are no 'models' for this process because every process of self-study enquiry is distinctive to the unique enquirer. Each person has to work it out for herself.

As my research progressed, I began to use other data gathering methods such as case study, narrative in the form of vignettes from practice, photography, video and audio recording, transcripts of dialogues with children, research diary and field notes, informal interviews and written validations by observers of classroom practice, critical friends, parents, students and colleagues. When I came to generating evidence from my data, I identified specific criteria and standards of judgement in relation to my values, and I showed how the values themselves transformed into those criteria and standards of judgement.

### **Research design**

When I speak about my research design, I mean it in the sense of how I have organised my research process to pursue a systematic enquiry. The thesis follows the form of this research design, in that the various chapters offer a narrative account of what happened as the research process unfolded. Of special note is the idea that I came to see how my research was not just about taking action within a social situation, but also about reflecting on the reasons and purposes of that action. I try to communicate this through the written form of this thesis.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I offer a narrative account of the processes of action, and also show how these processes were informed by a range of factors, including my critical engagement with the literatures. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I offer a narrative account of how I reflected on the action, and came to see that I had organized my research in terms of three action reflection cycles.

Therefore, although at the beginning of my research, I had a notion of how it might develop, my research process unfolded through taking action and reflecting on the action, and then using my reflections to inform new action.

However, I needed to start somewhere, so I took as my starting point the action plan outlined in McNiff and Whitehead (2006 p.8). This action plan now acts as a retrospective checklist of whether or not my research process has been systematic and has achieved methodological rigour, for the purposes of testing the validity of my claims to knowledge, as follows:

- **Had I taken stock of what was going on in my practice and identified a concern?**

Yes. I examined my context and I recognised that the education process for my students was largely grounded in didactic pedagogies that sought to deliver propositional knowledge into the allegedly empty heads of students. A concern emerged that children were frequently being denied opportunities to demonstrate their capacity to think and generate knowledge for themselves. The concern was to do with my emergent understanding that, as well as denying children freedom, such an educational model meant that social justice and care for the other were being denied. My concern was that I was colluding in this unjust situation despite holding values that espoused a different and more democratic kind of education for children, and that I was therefore experiencing myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989a). I also began to perceive that teachers also were often silenced by curricula and syllabi that were prescriptive and propositional. I saw then that through doing this study I was changing that situation for myself and possibly for others. I came to see that the micro practice in my classroom had potential for change at a larger macro societal level.

- **Did I identify my concerns?**

Yes. I articulated my values of care, freedom and justice, and saw how I was not living in the direction of these values and how, despite rhetoric to the contrary, what was demanded by the curriculum and syllabi of the primary school also contributed to this denial of my values. I examined my personal context to identify where these values came from and I saw how I had been denied freedom to think and learn in ways that were appropriate for me when I was a student. I recognised that systematising the education process through managing and controlling it has resulted largely in a technical rational approach to the assessment of children, the inspection of teachers and schools and the potential overcoming of educational values by industrial commercial values (Lynch 2006, McNess *et al.* 2003, Whitehead 1989a p.3). I saw that within bureaucratic systems, people can become units to be controlled and managed. Learning to think for oneself, I realised, is a key initial step towards nurturing a more open and humane society where social systems such as education can be interrogated and challenged.

- **Did I try to think of a possible way forward?**

Yes. Initially I decided to look for ways of introducing more opportunities for dialogue in my classroom. I researched and implemented classroom discussion through Thinking Time (Donnelly 1994). I looked at what I was learning about my practice and I asked myself, 'How do I do it better?'

- **Did I monitor the action by gathering data to show what was happening?**

Yes. I kept transcripts of all discussions. I kept field notes and a reflective diary and I recorded conversations with students, parents, colleagues and observers. I made tape and video recordings, and I transcribed considerable amounts. These data can be found in my appendices and data archive.

- **Did I evaluate progress by establishing procedures for making judgements about what was happening?**

Yes. After doing Thinking Time for a few years I saw that while it certainly helped to encourage dialogue and thinking as well as engendering a sense of cohesion and trust in my classroom, I began to develop my practice by asking more critical questions and pushing for higher-order thinking without taking away control from the children. I saw too that I was changing my pedagogical style within the classroom generally and outside of 'Thinking Time' sessions to allow for a more dialogical practice.

I believe that I am showing here how my enquiry was systematic and methodologically rigorous (Winter 1989). As noted earlier, this was never a tidy process and involved considerable anxiety and frustration. Given that I began writing parts of my research report in 2002, correspondence with my supervisor and early writing attempts demonstrate that coming to a clear understanding of what my research was about took three years. Despite having collected large amounts of data, and having sent many thousands of words in written drafts to my supervisor, it is clear that the rigorous process I have outlined above took time to conceptualise and take living form. At different times I thought I was researching classroom dialogue, educational policy, institutional change, technical rationality, issues of domination and control, and feminist ideas. These conceptual frameworks all had relevance for my study in relation to its values base, yet, while I had read copiously and widely and tried to engage critically



with what the various writers had to say, it took a long time to see where my practice could be incorporated. It took considerable struggle to move from writing *about* these issues and *about* my practice. To give a flavour of the struggle, here is an episode of email and telephone correspondence that communicates my frequent bouts of despair.

Following yet another unsuccessful attempt at theorising my practice, I received this email from my supervisor.

I do appreciate what you are saying and I think you are on the right track. But, rather than talk about your practice and about critical thinking, can you show how you came to be a critical thinker? (RD email from J.16-07-05)

After this exchange I spoke with a critical friend on the phone and explained how frustrated I felt, because, while I was certain that I was offering an account of my practice from an insider perspective, my supervisor saw that I was still adopting a propositional stance.

Me: Isn't my practice reflected in what the children are doing and saying? So why is talking *about* my practice somehow wrong?

B: look at what you're doing now in relation to Thinking Time etc...what's different? Why not write about *that*?

Me: But I've been *doing* that...I've written about all the new learning I've had since I started to think more critically...in fact J says I now sound angry and polemical! But that's probably because I feel I've been hoodwinked for years – I never realised any of this stuff before.

B: Well that's new then...so is that new learning changing any part of your practice?

Me: ... Yes, I am more critical of the curriculum and I see how I need to somehow encourage the children to begin to ask those questions too. It's not enough to just do Thinking Time... that's so obvious to me now.

B: What is *so obvious*?

Me: I can show that I do things differently because *I'm* different now... ....I am thinking more critically about curriculum, education – that's what's different! Me! (RD conversation with BL 16-07-05)

At this point I felt I had at last begun to capture a sense of what was at the heart of my research. However, still lacking confidence, I needed to be sure that I was correct in thinking that I could study my growing critical awareness of what I was doing as a

teacher in relation with my students, as well as studying my students in relation to my teaching. The next email exchange went as follows:

... I would appreciate your advice about a piece of writing, some of which you saw during our tutorial in UL. It's the piece where I talk about teaching children to be critical thinkers as opposed to teaching critical thinking. (RD email 17-07-05)

'My particular area of interest for this thesis is in the area of teaching young children to do critical thinking or, more correctly, encouraging them to *be* critical thinkers. ... 'teaching critical thinking' has overtones of a transmission pedagogical model whereas 'encouraging students to be critical thinkers' is more in line with my values because I do not seek to indoctrinate but to invite children to think for themselves. ... Throughout I show how I have now transformed my own thinking and have become more critical in that I have developed from being an unquestioning follower of rules into a more critical stance.' (RD excerpt from work emailed to J. 17-07-05)

My supervisor's reply confirmed for me that I was at last moving closer to the issues that were core to my study:

I think you are moving to the heart of the matter. Your study has evolved into how you have made yourself into a critical thinker, how you have created your own identity as a critical thinker, rather than only teach your children how to do something. ... Your study is about your own education, your own growth in understanding, as you contributed to your children's education, their growth in understanding. (RD email reply from J. 17-07-05)

Given that I began my studies in 2001, it can be seen that I had been slow in grasping that what I was really researching was my capacity to know my own educational development (Whitehead 1989). Now it was becoming clearer.

### **Developing the capacity to articulate the potential significance of my research**

One of the issues I grappled with when beginning to write this section, was justifying why I felt that action research self-study was the most appropriate framework to describe and explain my personal living theory of education (Whitehead 1989a). Self-reflection and the possible confrontation of negative or problematic aspects of one's practice can be deeply destabilizing, as I have explained. Facing the 'experiencing [of] oneself as a living contradiction' (Whitehead 1989a) requires courage and honesty, if one is improve one's practice. Balaban (1995) states that 'possibly the most

treacherous aspect of teaching occurs when teachers face themselves' (in Ayers 1995 p.49)

Despite being involved in education for over thirty years, I have only now come to understand that forms of educational practice can be influenced by the forms of theory they engage (McNiff 2005a). My form of educational practice has been influenced by the understanding that my epistemology has been informed by my ontological stance. However, relinquishing my dependence on the certainty of propositional forms of logic for the more unbounded and fluid nature of dialectical logics took courage and struggle, because there had been security in relying on others' thinking. A traditional research study would have provided security in the form of clear structure. The freedom to develop my own methodology felt destabilising for about three years of my study. For almost fifty years of life I had become used to the safety net of prescription: I had been told what to think as a child and as a student and even as a teacher. 'Teacher-proof' manuals and programmes ensured that I had little autonomy about the syllabus of my daily schedule. Timetables and bells order my school day. The curriculum and the textbooks prescribe what is to be taught. However, I now recognise that there can be more tyranny than security in prescription. Freire (1972) describes prescription as 'one of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed' (pp.23-4). The methodology of self-study represents freedom in that there is no prescribed 'method' or design. But for a long time I was reluctant or unable to grasp or celebrate that freedom.

Yet the reluctance was mainly in relation to learning how to develop an explanatory framework for my practice, not to developing the practice itself. I paid considerable attention to improving my capacity for awareness of my own critical pedagogies. To provide data for this improvement in pedagogical practice I refer to the fact that I frequently received letters from parents, and evaluations from observers in my classroom, that suggest I have an invitational rather than coercive pedagogic style.

... We have seen a huge improvement in [P]'s self-confidence, in particular, and his Maths (and attitude to same) has come on in leaps and bounds. You also opened his eyes to new areas of interest – history, science and even politics spring to mind! (RD extract from end-of-year card dated 'June 2006'; Appendix B.8.c.)

Over the years I had often received testimonies from parents that I had ‘seen their child as a person’ and ‘brought out the best in them’ (see Roche 2000b; Appendices B.8.a.–e.). I had never given these comments and letters much thought, other than to feel pleased that I had perhaps touched someone’s life in a positive way. It is only now that I see how these testimonies can act as strong evidence, in that they reflect the living demonstration of my embodied ontological and pedagogical values.

This is the first time in five years that E. has actually been happy going to school each day.... You brought out the best in him and saw him as a person in his own right. (Extract from letter from parent 25-06-05)

You share experience. During my first year out of college I learned more and gained more valuable insights into what education is all about from working in a partnership with you than I did in my four and a half years in college ... and the things I learned could not be written down in a text book. (Extract from letter from colleague D 22-02-05)

Thank you for being a very kind teacher. You are not bossy. You make school fun. I liked being in your class. (Extract from end-of-year card 30-06-06)

The data I have offered here would seem to indicate that I may have tacitly held embodied ontological values of seeing myself in relationship with others, while not fully understanding that I did so. I have now deliberately developed dialogical pedagogies because, through researching theories of the Other (Buber 1965, Benhabib 1987, Bohm 1987, 1998, 2004; Derrida 1964, 1978; Habermas 2001), I see now that dialogical practices are more harmonious with my ontological stance. For example when I relate to my students socially in ordinary conversation, which Noddings (2002) deems as essential to educative practice, ‘the very heart of moral education’ (p.126), I believe I am engaging in a form of practice that recognises the other as an equal, as one-in-relation with me.

From my rigorous methodological processes, I am now claiming that I have developed a deeper understanding of my practice as grounded in educative relationships. This idea is drawn from several sources, (e.g. Dewey 1934, Freire 1972, McNiff 2000, 2005b), as well as from my own reflections on practice. I view educative relationships as processes in which people help each other to grow in terms of their own capacity for independent thinking and personal growth, and in which they allow each other to do the same. My influence could be seen as being oriented towards helping myself and others, including my students and my colleagues, to understand that each of us has the capacity for

independence of mind and creativity of spirit. As such the influence that I exercise is ultimately aimed at enabling others to be free. My practice of encouraging children to exercise their capacity to think for themselves involves helping my students to become free of me. An episode that illustrates this emerging freedom occurred as my Senior Infant class was about to go home following a discussion on ‘rainbows and reality’ that had lasted for more than an hour and that had amazed me (and two observers) in its intensity and depth.

As he put on his coat 5 year old Eo said ‘Guess what, Teacher, I am going home with just **so** many questions in my head!’ I said that I thought that was good: after all, ‘That’s what school is for – asking questions and thinking about possible answers.’ Ao, also 5, then said, ‘and if you go home with a question and you get an answer to your question, you can always question the answer.’ (RD 27-02-04; full transcript in Appendix C.5.)

This last comment is, perhaps, the most significant piece of data in my research. Questioning the answer has become a normal practice in my classrooms. I question answers and the children question answers. In the course of our discussions the children frequently disagree with me and explain why. My data excerpts (below) bear this out.

‘I think that willpower is just something that you need to do and you’re trying to do it, so Teacher, you could be right or you could be wrong.’ (P) (RD from video of Frog and Toad’s ‘Willpower’ 26-04-06).

‘I disagree with Teacher because it mightn’t look funny on someone else: it might only look funny on him.’ (D)

‘I disagree with Teacher because the story said “*you* look funny in the swimsuit”, not “the swimsuit looks funny on *you*”.’ (DB) (RD from video of The Swimsuit (Lobel 1992) 22-05-06) ([Video Link: I disagree with Teacher...](#)).

I want to return to the idea of testing my claims to knowledge, to establish their validity.

I agree with Whitehead that

Questions of validity are fundamentally important in all research which is concerned with the generation and testing of theory.

(Whitehead 1989b p.47)

A number of writers indicate the importance of establishing the validity of research claims. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) state that producing evidence is ‘a rigorous process which involves making a claim to knowledge, establishing criteria and

standards of judgement, selecting data and generating evidence' (p.148). According to Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), increasing the quality and validity of self-study means paying attention to and making public the ways that one constructs representations of research and the processes by which one aims to establish its validity. Lomax (1994) suggested that validity in action research is about being able to make a reasonable case for one's research claims before an educated audience of peers. She identifies nine criteria that she considers to be necessary qualities of educational research (p.14):

- It is always tentative
- It has an ethical dimension
- It is self-developing
- It is practical
- It is authentic
- It is democratic
- It has rigour
- It is holistic
- It is influential

Hartog (2004) used these nine criteria as a framework for the development of standards of judgement against which she tested her claim to knowledge (pp.81-2). When Whitehead (1989a) argued the case for practitioners to study the development of their own learning he said that 'researchers need to know what to use as the unit of appraisal and the standards of judgement in order to test a claim to educational knowledge' and he suggested that 'the unit of appraisal is the individual's claim to know his or her educational development' (p.3). In more recent work (Whitehead 2004a) he has clarified the nature of living standards of judgement for testing the quality of practice-based research.

To test the rigour of my methodology and the validity of my claim to knowledge I have chosen the two overarching questions below as my principal organising framework in

systematising the process of how I have come to know my own educational development:

- In relation to my claim, have I identified the standards of judgement I use to establish what counts as evidence for my claim to knowledge and how did I arrive at them?
- In relation to my methodology, can I demonstrate that my work is authentic, just and trustworthy, and have I made my enquiry methods transparent and subjected my claims to my own critique as well as to the critique of others?

Traditional normative criteria for judging the validity of research methodologies suggest that research must, among other qualities, display replicability and generalisability. My study is concerned with the deepening of my understanding and the improvement in my learning as well as in my practice: it would be impossible to try to generalise from the particularity of my context to a wider general domain. I agree with Lomax when she says,

Generalisation in the sense that an experiment replicated in exactly the same controlled conditions will have the same results a second time round seems a nonsensical construct in the hurly burly of social interaction. However, I do believe it important that action research projects have an application elsewhere, and that action researchers are able to communicate their insights to others with a useful result.

(Lomax 1994 p.118)

Winter (1989) also suggests that developing criteria from the research process itself might be an appropriate strategy for assessing its quality. Whitehead (1989b) makes the case for a living theory approach as a form of generalisability when he says that he believes that 'educational theory is being created through the theorising of individuals about their own professional practice as they attempt to improve the quality of their own and their pupils' learning' (p.6) and then demonstrates through the website for his work at Bath University (<http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/>) the extent to which a living theory approach has been incorporated into the professional enquiries of many practitioners.

To the extent that a community can be shown to be sharing a form of life in their research activities I would say that the approach was generalisable.

(Whitehead 1989b p.7)

While the methodology of generating a living theory of practice will be generalisable to the extent that through making my account public all can share in the approach to enquiry, my particular area of enquiry, which involves the deepening of my own critical understanding of my practice, cannot be generalisable. Neither will my findings be replicable because, from year to year I will have changed, and the children I work with will be different. I cannot replicate exactly what I do because my actions are never taken in isolation from others and need always to be understood in the context of my relation with others. Replicability has overtones of prescription. I try not to be prescriptive now. My research offers an invitation to others to critique and to test some of my ideas for themselves. Thus a possibility can be created for each new practitioner to bring something potentially new and unique to the process. Similarly my practice in relation to Thinking Time is offered to others as a form of practice they can shape for themselves. For example a colleague who was influenced by my practice now does what he calls 'free-thinking time' with his class:

Mary has influenced me educationally in a number of ways but especially through thinking time. I've observed thinking time in her classroom ... There was no rigid structure and children participate in 'free-thinking' [with] no pressure to give a right answer ... they were very at ease. The child's opinion on a topic was given equal status to that of the teacher ...

... The best example of free thinking I experienced in my class was when a child who was a cardiac baby [sic] was asked who she thought invented time. She said 'I think doctors invented time. They gave me more time to live when I was a baby.' (RD extract from JM's letter 24-02-05; full letter in Appendix B.1.a.)

In testing my claim against the standards of judgement I have drawn from my values, I do not rely just on my own interpretation of what is taking place, but through relating my practice and emerging theory to the literatures I also test my ideas against the ideas of others in the field as well as against the critique of colleagues. I therefore make these kinds of claims:

- I claim that I have reconceptualised my practice and come to a deeper understanding of the processes of education in which my practice is conceptualised



- I claim that I now know that I cannot teach ‘critical thinking’ but rather have to develop my capacity for thinking critically so as to encourage others to think for themselves
- I claim that I ground this understanding and my practice in my ontological values of care, freedom and justice
- I claim that I have improved my practice and transformed my pedagogies so that my practice is now more commensurate with my values

I have generated this knowledge as I have studied my practice in order to improve it. It is new knowledge and ‘is being put into the public domain for the first time and is adding to the public body of knowledge’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2006 p.149). This is my original and scholarly contribution to knowledge in my field.

This leads me to consider the nature of the standards of judgement I used to assess the quality of my practice and my research. Included in the living standards of judgement by which I evaluate my claims are:

- Have I adequately articulated my values?
- Is there evidence that I am attempting to live my articulated values in my practice? Does my practice evidence values of freedom, care and justice in action?
- Is there evidence that I have improved my understanding of the educational contexts in which my practice is located?
- Have I problematised and reconceptualised my practice in line with my ontological commitments?
- Is there evidence of change in my logics and in my practice over the period of the study?
- Is there evidence of an enquiring and critical approach to an educational problem?
- Was my enquiry carried out systematically, in an ethical way?

- Does my account show originality of mind and critical engagement?

This list may well evolve as I learn more through writing my accounts of practice.

### **Ethical considerations: Negotiating permissions and access**

I now need to explain how my research can be understood as ethically sound.

Prior to commencing my actual research process, I sought and obtained permission from all participants to involve them in the research. I issued my ethical statements, and I obtained written permission from all parties. (Appendix A.)

My research focuses on establishing whether I am improving my practice, in terms of developing my own capacity for critical thinking, for the purposes of enabling my children to develop their capacity for critical thinking. The focus is on me, and involves my children as reflectors of my practice. The children's actions could reflect how my practice may have been improving, in relation to the improvement in their own critical capacities. Consequently, I monitored both myself and my children, and traced the concurrent development of critical thinking in myself and in them.

The first group of children who became research participants was a Junior Infant class. I explained to them what I was studying and enlisted their help. I asked them to help me to study how I could make myself a better teacher and, especially, how together we could investigate how to make our discussions better. I also wrote to each child's parents explaining what I was doing and asked for their permission to allow their children to be co-participants in the study (see below). Subsequently with older children I negotiated parental permission in writing and requested my students to be active participants by inviting them to critique my practice as I tried to improve classroom dialogue. I invited them to evaluate transcripts, the methodology of Thinking Time practice, and video recordings of discussions (the last both as a class group and in conjunction with their parents; Chapter 9 and Appendix B.7.).

In requesting the consent of parents it was necessary to ensure that all parents saw the consent form. This entailed an 'active parental response' whereby the parent had to sign that they were actually conferring on me the right to carry out research with their child. (Appendix A.4.) I considered but rejected as a possible strategy the idea of 'passive parental consent' (Balén *et al.* 2006), a strategy sometimes used in school studies where

parents receive a notice describing the research and are asked to sign and return the form only if they objected to having their child participate (op cit), since I would have had no way of knowing if parents had actually seen the forms. Children sometimes go to after-school clubs or to a child-minder's house and do their homework there: parents might not always see letters from teachers.

I also felt that it was critical to my study that my students did not feel coerced either by me or by their parents into participating in the research so I went to some pains to explain my processes of enquiry to each group of children and to negotiate their consent also.

I sought and was given permission from the Principal and the Board of Management to carry out the study in the school. I also negotiated with my school colleagues that they would act as critical friends, observers and evaluators. (Appendix A.6.)

I negotiated with the school authorities, the children and their parents that I would from time to time invite observers into my classroom. These observers would at times be asked to evaluate my practice (Appendices B and H), but they would also be colleagues who wanted to learn about doing classroom discussion. This latter is because I have a special post of responsibility in relation to developing a culture of critical thinking in the school and therefore I have to provide professional development for colleagues. The opportunity to share and disseminate my work and the potential for influencing the education of the social formation of my school as well as my classroom is a welcome one, and I have found it more commensurate with my epistemological and ontological values to invite others to see for themselves what I do rather than provide prescriptive lectures about my work (Appendix B). I sought and was given permission by both children and parents from third classes to include examples of the children's work (Appendix A.12).

Because I wanted to have the opportunity to video tape our classroom discussions from time to time, I negotiated permission from the school authorities, the children and their parents to record the discussions and also subsequently to show the videos in teaching situations. I promised that I would not let the videos out of my possession. This presented problems for me subsequently at a conference when a colleague requested to video my presentation. I had to refuse on the grounds that I had not negotiated

permission for such a scenario from the parents of my students. I have since negotiated new permissions which allow for the judicious dissemination of recordings and for CD ROMs of classroom discussions to be included with my thesis (Appendices A.4., A.11).

I have at all times promised to act responsibly and with integrity in relation to the protection and the rights to privacy of my students. For this reason I have not named my institution and concealed the names of all students and colleagues by referring to them by initials.

I have endeavoured at all stages of the study to ensure that my actions embody an ethic of caring. I have kept others abreast with the process of the study and shared drafts of written work with colleagues, especially where their voices or influences were included. Where I have included conversations with others I have sought their permission to use their words. Likewise I have established with all those who have given written evaluations that I have their permission to include these in my account. All written permissions are contained in my data archive (Appendices A.1. to A.12.).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have made the case for adopting self-study action research as an organising framework for enquiring into my educational development, as I generate my living educational theory. In the next two chapters I offer an account of how I began to take action to improve what I perceived as a problematic situation. I indicated earlier that these chapters offer a narrative account of how I was beginning to develop a critical pedagogical practice, as inspired by the literatures I was reading, yet I had still not moved into a form of critical practice whereby I actively reflected on what I was doing. The next two chapters reveal this focus on action, linked with appropriate literatures. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I explain how I came to transform this stance by theorising my practice as cycles of action-reflection, and really began to develop the capacity for critical reflection.

## Section 2

### ***Explaining my conceptual and literature frameworks***

Here I outline my early interventions in my practice. I show how I came to ground my conceptual frameworks in my educational values and how these values led me to research relevant literatures. I explain how I identified care, freedom and justice as core conditions for the development of critical thinking in my practice. I explore ideas and literatures around these values and show how I began to appreciate that my values can transform into my living practices. I show how I began to deconstruct concepts and my own mental models, and started to frame an understanding that, although I was teaching children to think critically, I needed first to engage in the idea of what critique meant. This section is organised into two chapters.

## Chapter 4

### ***Taking action, engaging with the literature, developing conceptual frameworks***

In this chapter I outline how I began to intervene in my practice, both by taking action in my classroom, and also by engaging with literatures that informed the development of the conceptual frameworks of my research. I explain how I grounded my choice of conceptual frameworks in my educational values, and how these values led me to a range of literatures that were relevant for my study. As reported, the key values I identified as informing my practice were care, freedom and justice. I recognised them as core conditions for the development of pedagogies to explore and support critical thinking. I explore ideas around these values, and I show how they later led to my further critical engagement with the literatures of critical pedagogy (Chapter 5) and with my subsequent interrogation of my propositional stance in reifying the concept of critical thinking.

I further explore what became for me an important issue, in that I began to appreciate how values do not remain only as abstract linguistic phenomena, but transform into living practices (Raz 2001). This, I believe, is a significant understanding to emerge from my study. I also link this understanding with a deeper appreciation of the relationship between my values and the development of my critical pedagogies, because I began to see how values can be reconceptualised as living practices only when critical pedagogies themselves become real as living practices.

In this chapter, therefore, I focus on how I began to engage with the literatures that came to form my main conceptual frameworks and also how these values began to emerge as living practices through my developing capacity for critical engagement.

#### **Values and my early practice**

I think I always grounded my practice in the values of care, freedom and justice, and see them as intimately linked with what it means to be human although for a long time I did not articulate this. Noddings (1992) also made a somewhat similar link, when she

drew on Heidegger's (1962) idea that care is inevitable for all aware humans. Caring has been described as a fundamental human capacity that translates into a coherent pattern of behaviours in life affirming interpersonal interactions (Iaani 1996, Lin 2001, Noddings 1992). Caring sees the creation of trusting relationships as the foundation for building an effective academic and social climate for schooling (Chaskin and Rauner 1995, Erickson 1993). Lin (2001), citing Noblit, Rogers and McCadden (1995), suggests that caring may not be visible or explicit in an educational environment 'yet it guides the interactions and organization of schools and classrooms' (p.2). Noddings argues throughout her work that authentic human liberation and social justice can be achieved by 'caring people in caring communities' (Bergman 2004, p.151). Noddings (1992) also suggests that the need to be cared for is a universal human need, if we are to grow and arrive at some level of acceptability in our culture and community.

The value of care has frequently been linked with the values of freedom and justice. Held (1995), for example, states that an ethic of care is based on a view of persons as interdependent. She suggests that morality should address issues of the caring and empathetic nature of human interrelationships. She argues against Rawls's (1971) theory of justice that sees people as solitary rational agents and suggests that a possible way of linking care and justice is to

... think of justice as setting moral minimums beneath which we ought not to fall, or absolute constraints within which we may pursue our different goals, whereas care deals with questions of the good life or of human values over and above the obligatory minimums of justice.

(Held 1995 p.3)

At this point, however, I will discuss the values of care, freedom and justice as separate though interlinked, for purposes of analysis. I will later synthesise them within stories of my living practice.

### **My value of care**

As well as arguing for the need for caring practices, Noddings also introduces the idea of obligation (1984b) as a feature of a caring practice, an idea with which I agree. My understanding of care then is not only one of 'I ought', which has its roots in duty towards the other, but also one of 'I care' in which one encounters (Buber 1965) the humanity of the other. Noddings (1984b) goes on to say that our inclination towards morality derives from caring.

In caring we accept the natural impulse to act on behalf of the present other. We are engrossed in the other. We have received him and feel his pain or happiness, but we are not compelled by this impulse. We have a choice; we may accept what we feel, or we may reject it.

(Noddings 1984b, cited in Held 1995 p.13)

Bergman (2004) also maintains that because the self is in relation, all acts of caring are characterised by give and take. He uses the example of a teacher suggesting a new approach to solving a maths problem to a frustrated student, who entertains and tries out the new ideas. 'The need is met, the caring offered by the carer is completed in the cared-for, and the caring relationship is established, maintained or enhanced' (Bergman 2004 p.152).

Noddings further suggests that dialogue plays an important role in caring educational contexts, 'in a common search for understanding, empathy or appreciation' and that it 'builds up a substantial knowledge of one another that serves to guide our caring responses' (Noddings 1992 p.23).

So the idea of linking variously the values of care, freedom and justice appears to be well established in the literatures. It has been especially developed in the work of Baier (1995), Gilligan (1982, 1995); Held (1993, 1995); Noddings (1984a, 1984b, 1991, 1992); Ruddick (1995) etc.

What's new, then, in my study? Quite early in my studies, and especially inspired by the critical conversations I enjoyed with my study group, I began to question the idea of how the dominant literatures communicated values as abstract linguistic phenomena rather than as living practices. My understanding is that values need to transform into lived practices if they are to have meaning in the social world (Raz 2001). They need to be examined from the perspective of seeing others as 'concrete others' (Benhabib 1987). I understand 'care for others' as 'care for real others'. Similarly I relate the term 'justice' to concrete rather than generalised others. I do not see justice as embodied in abstract principles so much as in embodied practices. Consequently, the form of justice that I try to practise is a caring form in which I endeavour to see others, such as my students, as real concrete beings with whom I am in relation.

I believe I always practised in a manner that could be described as a caring form of justice, so that my practice becomes an embodiment of my ontological values. I offer some vignettes from practice here to show why I believe I am justified in saying so.



### **Demonstrating caring justice and freedom in practice – C’s story**

In November 2001 I began teaching a class of 27 mixed gender Junior Infants. The children were well-behaved, and, apart from one child, C, they sat attentively at their tables. Generally they were adept at ‘writing’ activities. C, however, seemed not able to sit still. He appeared to hate fine motor activities and whenever they began, he would walk about, open cupboards, and act in a mildly disruptive way.

I felt that all he needed was more time to settle down, probably from a sense of compassion and care for the little boy who I felt was not being deliberately wilful or naughty. I introduced the class to Thinking Time, and, following a story from Fisher (1996) about a bonny baby contest in the jungle, I asked the children for their thoughts about beauty.

Each child said beauty was something visual. C prowled about as usual, but was obviously listening to what the others said, because he suddenly sat into the circle and said, ‘I actually know what the most beautiful <i>sound</i> in the world is’ and he proceeded to tell me that it was the sound of a Mummy’s voice if a child were lost in a forest. (RD 19-12-01)
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I was moved by what he said and by his earnestness, and I believe I communicated that to him without making any overt value judgement. In Thinking Time, I try to refrain from passing any comments that place me in too much of a teacher or authority role, preferring to participate at the level of person-in-the-circle. I felt that he knew I was moved and that I was pleased he had joined the group. This episode marked a kind of watershed for C, because after that he regularly joined in. He showed that he had considerable verbal reasoning skills and became a consistent contributor to discussions.

### **Demonstrating caring justice and freedom in practice – A’s story**

In my next Junior Infant class (September 2002 to June 2003), I had a similar student, A. A was also restless, but unlike C he showed it in noisy and assertive ways. He too seemed to hate pencil activities. He disrupted other children’s work causing them to complain. I began to suspect that he had some attention disorder. As before, I introduced Thinking Time. The topic, ‘What would happen if you left your teddy out in the rain?’, was based on an activity suggested by oral language development cards, which, as part of the English syllabus, had the aim of developing the children’s

competency to use words to describe ‘wetness’. However the dialogue went far beyond.

R: Your teddy might get robbed if you left it out all night.

A: Well anyway, I *know* how to catch a robber. See, you dig a hole, right? And you put a blanket over it and then put some dirt on the blanket and the robber won’t see it and he’ll step on it and fall into the hole. That way you’ll get your teddy back and then you could call the police and they’d take him away.

C: Yes and while the robber is down the hole the foot cutter might come along and cut off his feet and stop him from running away!

E: The foot cutter? Don’t you mean the woodcutter?

C: No! This is a new guy that I’ve just invented and he’s called the footcutter. (RD 16-02-03)

A contributed several more times to the discussion and clearly enjoyed himself. At the end he asked, ‘When can we do that again?’ Over the next few sessions A spoke frequently and articulately and became fully engaged in the discussion circle. As I grew to know him better, I realised that school regimes simply had not suited A. He was intelligent and proud, and possibly felt a sense of failure because of his lack of fine motor skills. His coping strategy appeared to take the form of developing avoidance strategies. Thinking Time gave him the opportunity to demonstrate his excellence in talking and thinking.

I deliberately developed strategies that would encourage caring and just behaviours. I introduced the children gradually to the language of ‘I agree with X because ... and I disagree with X because ...’. This seemed to pay off in A’s case. Children began to affirm him with comments such as ‘A, I think you’re really good at talking’ (RD 05-03-03), and he began to settle down even more. Meanwhile with a larger triangular pencil and rubber grip, and plenty of opportunities to scribble, gradually his fine-motor skills improved.

### **C’s and A’s stories as reflective learning opportunities**

I have selected these two episodes because I believe that they were significant learning experiences for me. In C’s situation, I realised that the conventions of a junior infant classroom seemed to place extraordinary emphasis on conforming and compliant behaviour. Children who exhibit these qualities are often deemed to be ‘good’ children.

The comments left by the teacher previous to me showed that. C had been described as ‘messy’ and disruptive. In my research diary (21-11-01) I wrote:

There was no reference to him being intelligent, articulate, logical, and witty or a good listener. ... He exhibited keen critical thinking abilities and he questioned a lot. At four and a half years of age, and the youngest child in the class he wanted answers to several critical questions: why we had to do homework; why children had to go to school at all after they learned to read; why we couldn't do more stuff outdoors; why we couldn't do harder science; why we had to spend so long at rhymes, why everybody in the school had to wear blue except the grownups. If I gave him an answer that made sense to him he accepted it; if not he stared at me and said ‘Yeah. OK’ and walked away, clearly disgruntled. (RD 21-11-01)

I found myself questioning systemic norms even more because of him and I found myself critiquing my own practice. I was by now looked for pedagogies to support the kind of enquiring mind that C had. I had a computer in the class and I found some software that gave him an opportunity to think critically about science and maths. I gave the children opportunities to develop ways of learning through enquiry. A video clip shows children working collaboratively in groups enjoying activities such as bridge building, dressing up, working out Maths problems with construction toys, playing with water and with a parachute. I devised strategies that had them out of their seats and out of doors as much as possible ([Video Link: Early school activities](#)).

C's critical questions led me not only to examine my teaching practice, but also to examine how I understood my values of care, freedom and justice, in relation to the literatures that I was now accessing. I saw that in order to prioritise these values in my practice, relationships involving trust, good cheer, equality, peace and compatibility (Noddings 2002) mattered. Noddings (op cit) suggests that those kinds of human and caring qualities matter in a community such as the community of a classroom. I also began to see that I could not continue to conceptualise values only as abstract linguistic phenomena, and needed to make the critical shift to seeing values as concrete practices, conducted with concrete others.

Consequently, my living practice took a turn, for the better I think. One of the aims of my study was to establish a critical community of enquiry. A sense of community, I reasoned, was built on trust and mutual respect, and would include Bohm's (1998, 2004) ‘spirit of dialogue’. Through C's persistent challenges to ‘the way things were’ I

was able to transcend my earlier prescriptive self and begin this process. I began to differentiate the curriculum so as to give him access to a computer to work on science software, extra non-fiction reading material appropriate to his age and plenty of opportunities to display and develop his verbal reasoning abilities. His parents confirmed that he was happy:

We really appreciate the way you have tried so hard to help C fit in. We are grateful that you looked beyond his prickly exterior and saw the fine little fellow inside. (RD excerpt from letter from AON 22-05-02)

When I think about my actions, I realise that it was my regard for C and my values of care that influenced me. I did not force him to conform: I respected him and he responded well to that care and respect. In recognising the inevitable otherness of each person (Derrida 1978, Levinas 1989) I put a lot of emphasis on what Noddings (2002) calls ‘receptive attention’, to signify what she calls the act of attention to the other that results in being engrossed by them. For Noddings (1984a), a call to care for others involves an act of transcendence. It means, for me, that I must transcend my own needs for, perhaps, order and quiet, in order to meet the needs of those for whom I care; it means that I must learn to accommodate children who do not wish to speak, or who cannot participate in the circle (Chapters 7 and 8): it means that I step out of myself towards others. In the state of care, Noddings says, there is invariably a ‘displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other’ (Noddings 1984a p.14). In this displacement of self-interest, there is also a displacement of being. We become ‘engrossed’, larger than our ordinary selves:

I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other. I become a duality . . . The seeing and feeling are mine, but only partly and temporarily mine, as on loan to me.

(Noddings 1984a p.30)

Care, according to Noddings is a gift in two senses. It is something one gives to another. Yet, in another sense, it entails something far more than this. It involves the gift of being able to see the infinite beauty and uniqueness of the other as a complete human being equal to ourselves.

From reflecting on my own reconceptualisation of my values, and their transformation into living practices, I am now able to show how I can incorporate propositional forms

within living forms (Whitehead and McNiff 2006), in the development of my own inclusional practices.

### **My value of freedom**

The value of freedom is usually presented as an abstract concept in the dominant literatures: I have now begun to appreciate it as a living practice that incorporates insights from the abstract conceptualisations. My study is about how, in my classroom, and drawing on the ideas of Berlin (1969), I try to exercise my positive freedom to teach in ways that are caring, supportive, and encouraging of my students' efforts to become critically aware. For example, I have encouraged my students to think for themselves in regard to their aesthetic responses to art. As well as providing opportunities for creative self-expression through a variety of art media, I use a data projector connected to a computer that is linked to the internet and the children can explore the biographical facts of artists' lives while also appreciating their work. They can visit 'virtual' galleries. I also introduce them to living artists and bring them to real galleries, where they can look at and respond to art in ways that are appropriate for themselves. I have encouraged children to respond to music through drawing, painting, acting, dancing writing, as well as verbally (see Figure 4.1 below; Appendices E.1.–E.4.).

R's mother wanted to know what the name of the piece of music was that made him want to dance and roar like a monster. (It was Grieg's 'Hall of the Mountain King'.)

J said 'that music feels like it needs a bit of ballet attached to it.' (The music she referred to was Saint-Saëns' 'Swan' from Carnival of the Animals.)

I played Gasparyan's (2005) 'A cool wind is blowing' and asked the children to respond by drawing and writing what they felt:

A said 'this music reminds me of Pirates of the Caribbean: the curse of the Black Pearl'. In my head I think of the devastation and the dead people in it'.

CaD said it reminded her of 'swans on a lake and birds flying for the winter.'

CD said it reminded her of 'a scene after a battle when there's all smoke and people are going around looking for dead bodies'.

J said it reminded her of ostriches sweating in a very hot desert. (RD 05-12-06; Appendix E.1.) ([Video Link: responding to music](#)).



**Figure 4-1: Video still of J's 'sweating ostriches' picture**

When I presented this particular 'responding to music' activity, I did not tell the children what to think or what the music reminded me of. My students' freedom to learn in their own way contrasts strongly with the way I was educated, when I was told what to think, even in secondary school. We had Cole's Notes (e.g.1968) on Shakespeare, which analysed and interpreted the plays for us. We had a book of pieces of prose with comprehension exercises, and the English teacher wrote interpretations of poetry for us which we copied and learned off. Similarly, in Thinking Time I encourage my students to exercise their freedom to think for themselves. When I showed some Thinking Time videos to parents of my students, K's father was reminded of his own schooldays:

I am so heartened to see my daughter thinking her way through literature, albeit only a children's story. I wish we had been allowed to do that in school: we were told the way we should think about stuff.

We had those stripy Shakespeare notes and we had to learn the stuff off by heart. What a waste! (RD evaluation by PL 05-05-06; Appendix B.7.b.)

By exercising my positive freedom and critical faculties in providing dialogical pedagogies that support my educational values, I understand that my students will benefit from their negative freedom – freedom from prescriptive pedagogies that may close down opportunities to critique. Because I believe that freedom of thought and speech are among the basic goods of humanity, then the denial of such freedom is, to me, a denial of justice and a negation of care; and this situation again represents my

concern about myself as a living contradiction when my values are denied in my practice.

I believe my research to be important within the context of dominant forms of abstract conceptualisations and prescriptive pedagogies. The 1999 Primary School Curriculum Introduction states, on p 15 that:

The ability to think critically, to apply learning and to develop flexibility and creativity are also important factors in the success of the child's life. The curriculum places a particular emphasis on promoting these skills and abilities so that children may cope successfully with change.

(Government of Ireland 1999 Introduction p.15)

It also states that one of its specific aims is:

To enable children to come to an understanding of the world through the acquisition of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes and the ability to think critically.

(op cit p.34)

There are several references throughout the documents to the importance of children thinking critically (see for example SPHE documents for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> classes under the strand unit 'media education'). I will show in Chapter 8 how my students demonstrate their critical capacities – as they critique, for example, the hegemony of globalised fast-food industries.

[the child should be enabled to] become increasingly critical and discerning in his/her own attitude to advertising and the techniques used to promote products, life-styles and ideas.

(Government of Ireland 1999 SPHE curriculum p.66)

Exemplar 19 in the SPHE curriculum teacher guidelines (Government of Ireland 1999 p.83) advocates seating the children in a circle for discussions. However, I was unable to find in the curriculum documents any recognition of the need for teachers to be critically aware as they seek to fulfil the aims and objectives relating to teaching children to be critical. While there is no overt denial of the right to freedom of thought in Irish primary schools, I believe that there is a dearth of opportunities to develop the skills of critical engagement, and a corresponding lack of opportunities for freedom of speech, because of an emphasis on traditional epistemologies and didactic pedagogies. This is borne out in a range of research reports including Murphy (2004), Greaney and Close (1989), and the Chief Inspector's Report (Government of Ireland 2005b). From these studies, it would appear that whole class instruction, involving dominant teacher

talk, is still prevalent in many Irish classrooms. There is nothing new here. Wragg (1973) observed student teachers talking for 73% – 81% of the time in their secondary school classrooms; Galton *et al.* (1980) found that in primary classrooms teachers spoke for 60% or more of the time – three quarters of it in propositional statements and the rest in follow-up questioning. Walker and Adelman (1975), and Edwards and Furlong (1978) found that many classrooms follow the general rule of teachers talking for two thirds of the time and, furthermore, that not all the pupils hear what teachers have to say. Goodlad (1984) found that not even 1% of the instruction time in American high schools was devoted to discussion that required ‘some kind of open response involving reasoning or perhaps an opinion from students’ and he noted that ‘an extraordinary degree of student passivity stands out’ (p.229).

Reid (1978) suggests that

Teachers not only monopolise classroom talk, they also control it in ways that from others in school would be regarded as rude and unacceptable. They typically ask questions to which they already have the answers and check up on and interrogate pupils almost constantly. They consistently state and impose on their pupils their definitions of order, discipline, knowledge, and ability.

(Reid 1978 p.112)

My practice is not like this now. Instead I endeavour to realise my values as my living practice, as illustrated in Figures 4.2, 4.3 below.



**Figure 4-2: Photo of student in dialogue with self**





**Figure 4-3: Photos of students in dialogue with others**

By providing my students with opportunities to engage others in dialogue or to stand in dialogue with themselves as they ponder, for example, which colours to put into a picture (as in Figure 4.2 above), I believe I am providing them with what Von Glasersfeld (1996) said was the means to undermine a part of the traditional view of the world. He maintained that our knowledge can never be interpreted as a representation of that real world, but only as a key that unlocks possible paths for us. Von Glasersfeld (op cit) believed that individual knowledge is in a state of constant re-evaluation through adapting and evolving. To me this is a closer match to what I am trying to do in my classroom. ‘Unlocking possible paths’ is to me a freer, fairer and more caring form of education than lecturing students about someone else’s knowledge and reinforcing the lecture with repetition and consolidation.

### **My value of justice**

I outline how I believe justice also needs to be understood as a living practice, and I relate my understanding to the contexts of Irish education.

The focus on propositional forms has led to some interesting contradictions. Although the language of the 1971 and 1999 Irish Primary School curricular documents (Government of Ireland 1971, 1999) stress a child-centred and hermeneutic approach to education, reports such as Eivers *et al.* (2005) express concern about ‘prescriptive pedagogies’ and recommend ‘greater emphasis on oral language activities’ (p.28). Dominant didacticism is not only inconsistent with the principles of the curriculum, but is also unjust in that it is a denial of children’s capacity to think for themselves and a negation of their right to express themselves. This right is enshrined in the United

Nations Charter of Children's Rights and was ratified in 1992 by the Irish Government (Ireland 2000). Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (cited in National Children's Strategy document, Government of Ireland 2000 p.30), emphasises that

State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

(Government of Ireland 2000 p.30)

The document also states that a 'national goal' will be that 'children will have a voice' (op cit p.29) and continues:

Giving children a voice means: Encouraging them to express their views and demonstrating a willingness to take those views seriously.

(op cit p.30)

I suggest that much of what passes for 'giving children a voice' is tokenism and decoration (Hart 1992). There is no evidence in the National Children's Strategy of any research that shows the living practice of giving children a voice. Instead there are propositional statements such as 'children appreciate and rise to challenges which stretch their capabilities and enable them to feel valued and appreciated' (Government of Ireland 2000 p.30) or rhetoric such as 'experience has shown that giving children a voice helps to protect them from abuse' (ibid).

The National Children's Strategy document can therefore be seen as an example of what Benhabib (1987) holds as the concept of generalising others. I do not adopt this stance. My practice is located in the reality of my relations with concrete others, with real children like A and C and E (see below). It is easy to advocate theoretically and aspirationally for justice for generalised others; it is more problematic when there are real concrete others involved in real concrete situations. That is when one's ontological values are called upon in order to decide how to act. This is why I have sought to provide opportunities for my students to engage in dialogue and to learn in ways that are appropriate for different learners' styles. It also influenced my decision to include several pictures and a CD of videoed discussions and classroom episodes with this document. I did so in order to allow something of the concreteness and 'realness' of the individual children to shine through.

There is no question but that the values that inform the National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland 2000) are based in an acceptance of the rights of children; however, there is less urgency to implement these rights, I believe, when they are founded on rights for children as abstract generalised others. My values of freedom and justice are centred on my concern that an education that denies the capacity of children such as A and C in Junior Infants (see Chapter 6), Er in Senior Infants (see Chapter 7), and E in 3<sup>rd</sup> class (see Chapter 9), to think for themselves and to demonstrate their abundant gifts and abilities, is unjust and uncaring. An element of 'I ought' (Noddings 1984a) is present therefore. Because I am their teacher, with what I believe is a moral obligation to try to provide the children with the best education possible, then I have a moral responsibility to examine my values keenly and seek to live towards them. Thus my practice of providing dialogical learning opportunities for my students, such as I recount in this thesis, is informed by my values.

Furthermore, I believe that, by transforming my values into my living practices, I have succeeded in rendering the incommensurable commensurable, as Berlin has maintained (Berlin 1969, Gray 1996). Berlin regarded values as human creations (see Cherniss and Hardy 2005) and, from his explorations of the idea of value pluralism, he saw that within values as well as between values there could be conflicts or even incommensurables. Gray (1996) states that what Berlin meant by value pluralism was that ultimately human values are objective but irreducibly diverse, that 'they are conflicting and often uncombinable, and that sometimes when they come into conflict with one another they are incommensurable' (p.2). However, I believe that values such as justice and freedom are not necessarily mutually exclusive within the context of my efforts to establish a living practice of a just and caring critical community of enquiry in my classroom and institution.

Thus I show that, when I intervened in my practice of teaching Junior Infants in order to develop opportunities for children like A and C to demonstrate their innate capacities for critique, I understand that I was living to my value of care and justice. I do not see care, freedom and justice as separate substantive issues, but as integrated within a caring practice that focuses on enabling all to be freely involved in their own learning. When I provided opportunities for creative learning experiences for E (see Chapter 9) I understand my practice as showing care. When I facilitate weekly classroom

discussions where my students are encouraged to think critically and creatively and dialogue with their peers I am opening up possibilities for children to be more than they are. I said earlier that the notion of obligation as outlined in the work of Noddings (1984a) is linked with my idea of caring. Because I felt that I ‘must do something’ in response to my concern about the dearth of opportunities for children to exercise their voice and their capacity for original thought, I am placing a value on the obligation I feel to help my students. When I made changes to my classroom management and to my teaching to accommodate the different styles of learning and conforming for children like A and C, I believe that I demonstrated that I was trying to meet the emotional as well as the academic needs of my students and that they responded well in turn to feeling cared for. I have evidence for this claim, both in my own research journal and also in the form of letters from observers and from the children’s parents.

You greet each child and have a word with each mother. How democratic! (RD 09-06-03 comment by RH visiting educationalist)

You speak very kindly to the children... you seem to be able to make them feel that what they have to say matters. (RD 02-11-05: comment by CO’C following the viewing of videoed classroom discussion.)

In such seemingly simple and everyday acts of caring, says Bergman (2004 p.152), much is at stake besides the immediate need being addressed – the carer’s sense of herself as a caring person, the cared-for’s sense of trust in the world as a safe and reliable place, and of herself as a centre of value worthy to be cared for. In the act of giving and receiving care, the self of each person is confirmed.

Teacher, you’re a very kind woman. (A comment by D RD 12-12-06)

Thank you for a wonderful day (CT’s parting comment as she leaves each day Sept-Dec 2006)

I drew this picture for you because I think you’re a very kind teacher. (KT and I in conversation about his picture) (Figure 4.4 below and [Video Link: Talking with...](#)) (repeat)



**Figure 4-4: Video still KT shows me his picture**

Selves are not born, Noddings argues (2002 p.98); they are continuously being constructed through encounters of all kinds. It was through care and respect that I saw that C and A needed a different kind of syllabus. Ultimately, it was through dialogue that the children were able to demonstrate their capacity for independent thinking, and it was through what Fine and Weis (2003) call ‘extraordinary conversations’ that I got to know the children.

Other teachers have also attested to this aspect of classroom discussion. On 02-10-06 a colleague from another school who does classroom discussions weekly with her class of 11 and 12 year old girls told me of how she felt that, because of her discussions with her students, not only did she learn to see them as individuals, but they also began to recognise and ‘encounter’ her. She wrote:

The empathy engendered by Mary’s version of classroom discussion permeates the children’s way of being with others and colours their inter-personal relationships at class and whole-school level ... I feel the girls learn self-respect and respect for others, and learn to see me as a human being, capable of feelings, as opposed to just a ‘teacher’. (RD excerpt from written evaluation by MO’S 02-10-06; Appendix B.2.)

In C’s case I felt I got to know him when he said that he ‘actually knew’ what the most beautiful sound in the world is and proceeded to tell me that it was

... when ‘you’re all alone in the deep dark forest and there’s all noises around and suddenly you hear a voice saying “C: it’s Mummy: I’m over here”....That’s the most beautiful sound in the world!’ (RD 19-12-01)

In A's case it was when he presented his theory of catching robbers (see Chapter 6). When Sh explained what he thought 'commoners' were, and M told me about the 'smell' of the ladybirds in his garden and J explained about spiders eating their own webs for 'a bit of nourishment' and E told me about his cat making plans and Ao told me that when you get an answer you can always question the answer (Chapter 7), I got to know these children as the warm lovable caring people with whom I love working.

Noddings (1998) suggests that care theorists agree with Socrates that education must encourage students to explore their own lives and investigate the great human questions that human beings have always asked. She also provides a caveat to Socrates: 'Care theorists,' she says, 'would not force students to grapple with the so-called "eternal questions"'. Rather we would invite such conversation and allow students to co-direct the line of investigation' (1998 p.191). I believe that this is what I do: I do not tell my children what to think. They co-direct the line of enquiry. My research archive and this document contain substantial amounts of evidence against which to test this view.

My understanding of caring is one that is grounded in the intersubjective nature of my relationships with my students, a relationship that allows them to be free active social players with a voice rather than passive recipients of care. I draw here on the ideas of Tronto (1993, 1995) who also advocated the activity of caring as a practice rather than as a set of abstract principles to be followed. When I say I care about my students, I think again of A and C rather than of abstract students, and this sense of relationship strengthens my resolve to show how I hold myself accountable for my work. Like Jaggar (1995), I can see that reasoning about care encouraged my personal accountability and my individual resistance to oppressive structures.

I now wish to depart from a discussion about the need to critique dominant conceptualisations of values orientations in the literature, and to return to a main conceptual framework, as a synthesis of the values of care, freedom and justice, which is to do with allowing the individual create themselves, as they wish themselves to be.

### **Letting the other 'be'**

Derrida (cited in Noddings 1998 p. 194) speaks about 'letting the other "be"', which I understand as respecting the other as other. It does not mean mere co-existence. Some of the implications for me as a teacher mean living my practice in a way that honours

the children as unique human beings who can learn rather than as objects who need to be taught. Acknowledging the uniqueness of learners is also one of the principles of the curriculum (see Introduction, Government of Ireland 1999 p.8). 'Letting be' does not mean ignoring, however, nor does it involve, as Noddings (1998) suggests, 'abstaining from intervention' (p.194). It neither entails indoctrination through the coercion of reward and punishment, nor the imposition of one's will on another. It involves recognising the other as a 'genuine, unique subject who gazes back at me' (Derrida, in Noddings 1998 p. 194) and engaging that other in dialogue. I am not convinced that these issues have been fully explored by the compilers of the principles of the curriculum. Research into classroom practices such as already cited (Murphy 2004, Eivers *et al.* 2005, Government of Ireland 2005b) would seem to bear this out. To achieve a situation in which relationships can develop involves exercising educative influence through affirming and dialogical relationships.

I realised early in my studies that I needed to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of dialogue, and I found Bohm's (1998) insights helpful in enabling me to develop appropriate pedagogies.

The object of a dialogue ... is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions – to listen to everybody's opinions, to suspend them, and to see what it all means.

(Bohm 1998 p.6)

The qualities outlined by Bohm here were evident in my circle discussions and the children also clearly recognised this aspect of their dialogue themselves (video discussion on Thinking Time 24-04-06). In the video the children can be seen speaking to each other and to the group, listening to each other's ideas, building on the ideas and agreeing and disagreeing with equanimity and delight. A child called W had made what the group seems to consider the contentious statement: that Thinking Time was 'good for wasting school time'. Although most children disagree with W, there is good humour and no 'side-taking' or attempts to change others' opinion. Towards the end W says, 'I need to say something.' The microphone is handed to him and he says,

I kind of disagree with myself now 'cos ... I've been thinking about it there and we aren't wasting time – we're using time (RD 24-04-06)  
([Video link: I disagree with myself](#)) .

An examination of the video shows children smiling at each other and at me, listening intently, making eye contact and engaging with ideas. It can be seen that the children display no inhibitions about expressing opinions with which I may disagree, which seems to demonstrate that they feel a sense of safety and trust in the circle. I can be seen at the end ensuring that W has not felt pressured into changing his mind. Mindful of the vulnerability he may be feeling in the face of the others' earlier disagreement with his stance, I expressly tell him to 'make sure to think his own thoughts'. This constitutes evidence of the realisation of my embodied values of care and respect for the other, not only to let them be, but also to encourage them to be in their own way.

### **Letting the other be silent**

Learning to 'let the other be' has also meant that I have learned to respect silence. In traditional didactic classrooms, silence is often linked with 'not-knowing'. If a child is asked a direct question and remains silent, one might assume that the child does not know the answer, or is being defiant or heedless. When children remain silent in our discussions, I understand their silence to have a range of meanings. Perhaps they are taking the opportunity for creative daydreaming; perhaps that they are thinking deeply. H and R, quiet reflective children, frequently said when it is their turn to speak, 'Come back to me; I'm still thinking.' ([Video Link: Respecting silence](#)). This video is an amalgam of two video clips: in both children can be seen forgetting what they wanted to say; choosing to remain silent, passing and later asking for the microphone to be returned. It is usual for children to 'pass' in the circle as they choose to continue grappling with a thought. Sometimes, too, they lose their train of thought and trail off into silence. This does not worry them or me: they know that they can interrupt if they remember.

Respecting silence in this way contrasts starkly with my own terror of silence as a child, particularly when asked to recite from memory, often using language I did not understand. I spent hours at night 'reciting' my homework and pestering my parents to 'ask' me my work. The worry about forgetting the memorised content frequently meant that my mind would go blank when asked in school, and I would feel the cold fear that preceded a punishment. It is one of the reasons why I never force a child to speak if they chose to remain silent. I will never subject a child to the same kind of emotional harassment that I endured as a child.



When I was at school, we were silent for much of the day, yet were expected to speak promptly in response to a direct question. Jaworski (1993 p.169) explains how children can be ‘socialised into silence’ but that they can liberate themselves from it when they grow up. His use of the word ‘liberate’ is interesting, implying to me that silence is seen as a confinement from which children free themselves. This may have been true in an era when children were expected to be seen and not heard, such as when I was a child, but in my current classroom contexts, silence and speech are equally respected, as can be seen in the videos I include here as part of my evidential base.

I have also had to reflect on the importance of my own silence in classroom discussions. Fiumara (1990) speaks about the silence of listening as ‘the other side of language’ (p.4). From being a teacher who relied heavily on verbal skills in a largely didactic practice, I have learned to take a back seat as regards speaking in classroom discussion. Macdonald (1995, cited in Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.91) referred to the need for the teacher to meet their students ‘person-to-person, not status-to-person’ (Macdonald op cit), and speaks of school settings as opportunities where ‘the teacher may hold open the world for a child’ (Macdonald op cit). By staying silent in classroom discussions as much as possible, I can use my silence to hold doors open for my students to find their voices and think and speak for themselves.

### **My capacity for silence**

The data presented in my videos show that I rarely speak except at the beginning of the discussion period. On 06-02-03, A, a Spanish teacher in our school sat in on one of the discussions and later wrote an evaluation, in which he said:

The teacher had also a very important role ... [she] had to listen very carefully without speaking for a long time (RD excerpt from evaluation by A. 12-02-03, Appendix H.6.)
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A also stated that he was astounded by how articulate the children were. He posited that this was not a ‘normal’ lesson. In a ‘normal’ classroom, ‘the children’s voices are the silent ones.’ (RD 06-02-06). Other observers have also referred to my ‘invisibility’ during classroom discussions, as in the following comment.

It's quite amazing watching one of these [discussions] because it seems like you disappear into the background and the children run the discussion and I think they often even forget you're there. (RD conversation with SH 12-10-06)

Buber (1965) also spoke about attentive silence. He believed that in an educational encounter it is important to enter into the spirit of a dialogue through an attitude of respectful attentiveness. This, he suggested, could often be achieved through silence, not a hostile silence, but a respectful hope-filled, pregnant silence, in which participants are prepared to give the other their full and undivided attention.

The capacity for empathetic silence, however, has to be considered within contexts of institutional power that often serve to enforce silence, rather than nurture dialogue.

### **Enforced silence, care and dialogue**

There is a considerable body of literature around the concept of enforced silence. Piercy (1971), for example, wrote about 'Unlearning to not speak'. Martin (1994) encouraged me to question how women have been marginalised and excluded from educational discourses and led me to research writers such as Spender (1980, 1982, 1983). Spender's work also made me understand how language is frequently organised from a male perspective and made me sensitive to how I use language and how I encourage children to do so. I read Held (1993, 1995) whose ideas on justice and care encouraged me to rethink what I understood about caring. Through engaging with the literatures, I began to see that teaching in a caring way involved relationship and dialogue.

Buber (1965) explains that 'the relation in education is one of pure dialogue' (p.98). Dialogue, for Buber, meant not only speaking and listening, but also receiving each other in silence. He referred to it as 'the silver mail of trust ... that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education' (Buber 1965 p.98). I understand Buber's use of the word 'dialogue' as a form of communion. It does not always need words. Kind gestures, a smile, a sense of being respected and valued can also be understood as 'dialogue'.

### **Maxine Greene's influence**

My study has also been deeply influenced by the ideas of Maxine Greene. When I first read her work (Greene 1978) in 2002, I was instantly enthralled by her belief in the

potential of each person and in the need to educate so as to encourage the development of this capacity and to ‘transcend passivity’ (Greene 1978 p.2). Greene argues that

Talk of participation in policy-making by those affected is heard less and less often. Technological expertise has taken over; things are done *to* people or *for* them; apathy and passivity increase. Uncritical, frequently bored, individuals become evermore susceptible to mystification.

(Greene 1978 p.1, emphasis in original)

She argued that unless educators engaged in their own quests for meaning they would be unlikely to be able to influence or encourage others to do so. This made sense to me. So also does her statement that teachers must be on-going questioners and, through questioning, learners.

The more fully engaged we are in this quest for meaning, the more we can look through others’ eyes, the more richly individual we become.

(Greene 1978 p.3)

I can see a strong connection between Greene’s ideas here with what Derrida (1964) wrote about respecting the otherness of the other and letting the other be. Greene (1988) led me to try to come to an understanding for myself of what an education for freedom entailed. Educating for freedom means, for me, that I must do what I can to encourage myself (alongside, and in relation with, my students) to come to an awareness of the many points of view there can be, and the multiple ways that exist for interpreting our worlds. To be free, I believe, is to be able to think and speak for oneself; to be able to engage the world in an ongoing conversation; and to value the power and meaning that new points of view bring to the collective search for fulfilment. I was enabled by Greene (1978, 1988) to understand that freedom requires a refusal to accede to the given, that it entails a reaching for new possibilities and potentials and a resistance to the objectification of people. I drew connections between Buber’s (1965) and Freire’s ideas about a problem-posing form of education (1972), Derrida’s ideas about allowing the other to be (1964), and Dewey’s ideas about reflective thinking (1934). Greene enabled me to see the need for such connections:

The activities that compose learning not only engage us in our own quests for answers and for meanings; they also serve to initiate us into the communities of scholarship and (if our perspectives widen sufficiently) into the human community, in its largest and richest sense ... Teachers who are alienated, passive, and unquestioning cannot make such initiations possible for those around. Nor can teachers who take the social reality surrounding them for granted and simply accede to them.

(Greene 1978 p.3)

Greene's work led me to revisit Dewey (1934): he too emphasised the dangers of passivity and 'complete uniformity' the 'routine and the mechanical' (Dewey 1934 p.272). Greene, like Dewey, advocates that education should be aesthetic, encouraging 'wide-awakeness' (Greene 1988 p.125) rather than 'anaesthetic' (Dewey 1934 p.272). Anaesthetic education, she argues, numbs people and prevents them from reaching out and enquiring.

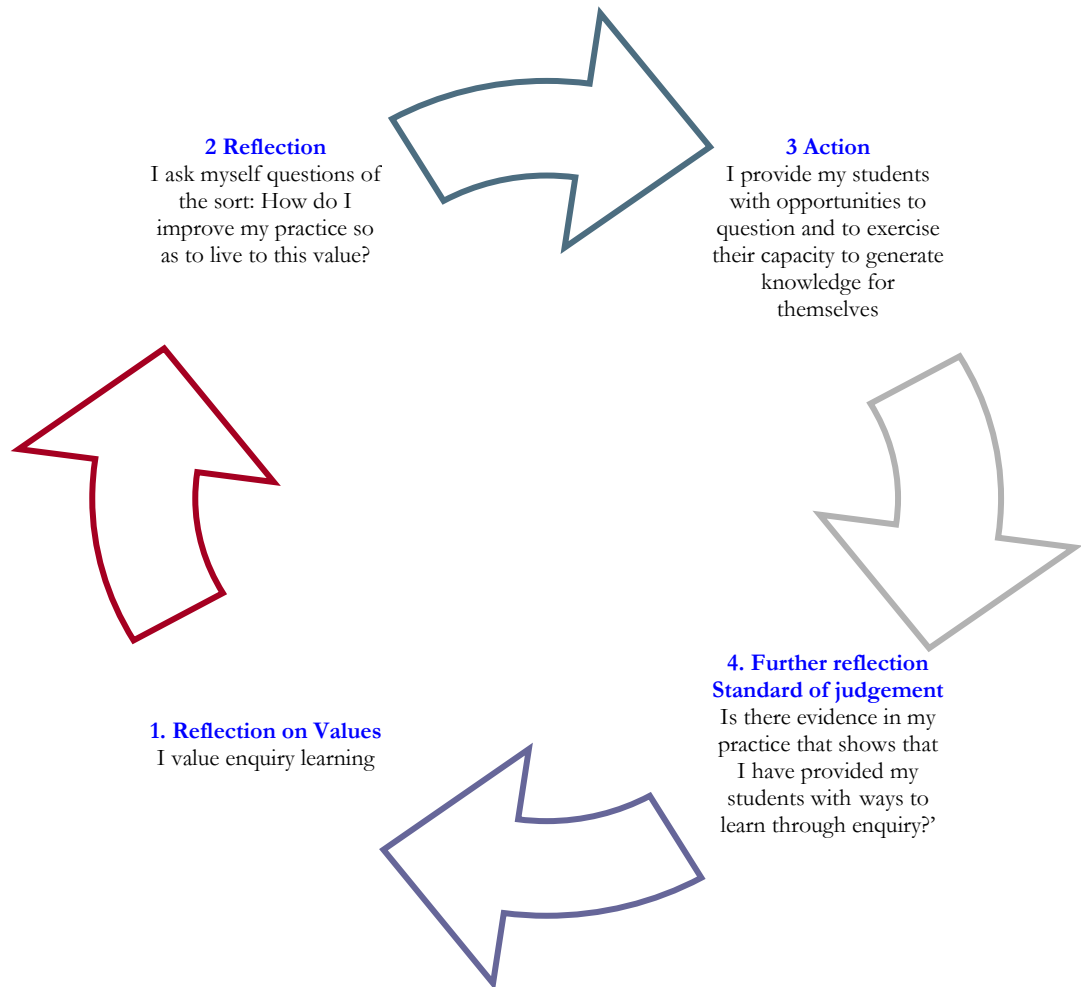
I am suggesting that there may be an integral relationship between reaching out to learn [how] to learn and the 'search' that involves a pursuit of freedom.  
(Greene 1988 p.124)

Learning to learn, 'unlearning to not speak', learning to question, to reach out, and to draw relationships between my values and my practice, has become a key focus of my research and informs my conceptual frameworks. In Chapter 1 I articulated some of my values about life and freedom, and about the kind of education I want to be involved in. Throughout my research I have set about transforming my values into practice, and I have also come to understand how those values have transformed into the living standards of judgement whereby I evaluate my practice to see if it is commensurate with my values.

I value others as unique human beings who have an infinite capacity for development. I value this quality in myself. This is why Greene's work spoke so eloquently to me. I recognised in her work and in reading about her life that she appeared to be operating from a perspective less grounded in propositional logics than many other educational philosophers. Her work inspired me to make the relationship between my values and my practice more explicit for myself. Through the work of McNiff (1993, 2000, 2004, 2005a, 2005b); McNiff *et al.* (1992), I was given the language to organise my ideas more elegantly. Through the work of Whitehead and McNiff (2006) I came to understand more fully the philosophy underpinning the generation of living theory through which I was able to make explicit the links between my values, the action I took to improve my practice and the standards of judgement I employed to test my claims to be realising my values.

### **Linking values, action and standards of judgement**

I have tried to depict the link between values, action and standards of judgement in a diagram (Figure 4.5):



**Figure 4-5: A diagram of my understanding of the link between values, action and standards of judgement**

Making this link also enables me to appreciate the transformational relationships between dialogue and dialogical ways of knowing. The transformative cycle in that case takes the following form:

- I value dialogic pedagogies
- I ask myself questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve my practice so as to provide opportunities for dialogue?’
- I find ways of improving my practice: for example I now participate with my students in classroom dialogues.
- The questions I ask about my research to establish the validity of my knowledge claims develop into my living standards of judgement: ‘Is there evidence in my

practice of me living in the direction of my values about dialogue and dialogical ways of knowing?'

### **Cultural influences**

To clarify these ideas further, I would like to digress briefly into an account of my early schooldays, and show how the cultural influences of that time informed the development of the values that informed my decision to pursue this research. Like Noddings (1997) who suggests that her professional and academic life developed largely as a result of 'various accidents and awareness of opportunity' (p.166), my research also involved some less than happy 'accidents' as well as some fortuitous opportunities.

The educational values which led me to research how I might teach in ways that honour the capacity and right of all for independent thinking were influenced as reported earlier by my early schooldays which were dominated by a culture of didactic pedagogies. It was schooling in Illich's (1973) sense of the word.

Schooling ... the production ... the marketing of knowledge ... draws society into the trap of thinking that knowledge is hygienic, pure, respectable, deodorized, produced by human heads and amassed in stock. ... [people] are schooled to believe ... that learning is a thing rather than an activity; a thing that can be amassed and measured.

(Illich 1976, cited in Gajardo 1994 p.715)

When I was a schoolchild the teacher generally talked at us. I sat and absorbed and tried to work out what the teacher wanted so that I could give it to her. Failure to do so would result in verbal or physical punishment and humiliation. I also knew I would have to regurgitate the acquired 'knowledge' in exams. This pedagogical model was premised on controlling behaviours. My behaviour was less about trying to please and more about trying not to displease. Such schooling did not feel just: it appeared to have more to do with the power of the teacher – and the powerlessness of the child to control her own learning environment in any way – than with education, as I understand the concept now.

My experience was symptomatic of Irish education in the 1950s and 1960s, which can be characterised largely as a culture of control and subjugation. I have engaged with literatures explaining the values base of Irish education during that period (S. Farren 1995, T. Brown 2004, Drudy and Lynch 1993) and literatures of power (Danaher *et al.*

2000, Foucault 1980, Peters 2002). As a result, I now understand that while issues of control and subjugation influenced my student life, they also often influenced the lives of those who appeared to hold power, such as teachers, who were themselves often controlled, according to T. Brown (2004 p.236), by the hegemonic practices of a dominant and controlling church-state collaboration.

At the heart of the system was the National School teacher ... Rigidly controlled by the Department of Education, these teachers were often themselves ... a source of that ubiquitous Irish authoritarianism which ... was to be found in the carefully regulated relationship between church, state and National Teacher.

(T. Brown 2004 pp.236-7)

The patriarchal and authoritarian culture that existed in Ireland at that time (see T. Brown 2004, Drudy and Lynch 1983) found it easy to silence teachers, the majority of whom were female. This helps to explain to me why, even as a teacher, I remained an uncritical receiver of others' knowledge. Several works support the notion that women have been systematically silenced or 'written out' of the world, particularly the academic world (Spender 1982, 1992, 1993; Martin 1985, 1994).

Martin (1994) explains how a literature has now developed which documents the ways in which the intellectual disciplines (history, psychology, literature, the fine arts, sociology and biology) are gender biased. The criticism contained in this new body of literature, she says, reveals that historically women have typically been excluded from the 'conversation' (see Martin 1985) that constitutes the history of Western educational thought, and that the disciplines fall short of the ideal of epistemological equality, including the representation and treatment of women in academic knowledge itself. Furthermore, she adds, the disciplines exclude women from their subject matter:

They distort the female according to the male image of her; and they deny the feminine by forcing women into a masculine mould ... women are excluded both as the subjects and objects of educational thought from the standard texts and anthologies: as subjects.

(Martin 1994 p.35)

When Martin talks about women being excluded as subjects she suggests that 'their philosophical works on education are ignored' (op cit p.36) and by being excluded as objects of educational thought, she posits that women's roles as educators of the young are 'largely neglected' (ibid).

This has a threefold significance for my study:

- it provides a deeper understanding of my ontological stance: why I am how I am; why my schooling and training were run on the patriarchal authoritarian lines that they were; and why (if Gilligan (1982) is to be believed), traditionally, male propositional logics have come to dominate over more dialectical or dialogical logics.
- it has significance for my methodology which redresses the traditional practice/theory divide and is grounded in dialectical logics.
- it has significance for my pedagogies, in that I wish to contribute to the kind of education of my students that encourages them to critique taken-for-granted assumptions about the world that mean that issues such as gendered bias often go unchallenged.

I believe that my work, in encouraging children to think, to question and to enter into a conversation with each other and with their world, may have the potential to change normative educational cultures. I can see some of this potential realised already, as in this excerpt about the nature of courage:

CY, arguing that courage was not something that showed in a person's appearance and was not synonymous with size or physical strength, illustrated his point by suggesting that  
*'you could see this big strong guy and think he looks brave, but then something bigger comes along and then he's really scared and runs away screaming like a girl.'* (RD 03-04-06) ([Video Link: ...run away screaming like a girl...](#)).

In the video clip, one can hear a shocked intake of breath followed by laughter from the other children. Subsequently, the dialogue turns towards discussing whether girls are as courageous as boys.

CM: Well men probably have a teeny bit more courage than women but only because they can get them to do things. Girls are treated like things – they stick them in their underwear [in ads] and throw them on the bonnet of a car - just to sell the car!' (RD 03-04-06)



The excerpt demonstrates, I believe, critical awareness of the fact that the children understood intuitively that CY's statement should not go unchallenged, and CM demonstrated an awareness of how women can be objectified in marketing strategies.

By exploring these issues I came to new understandings of the concept of hegemony.

### **The concept of hegemony**

T. Brown (2004) referred to the 'hegemonic practices of a dominant and controlling church-state collaboration' (p.236). I am interested in the concept of hegemony because I feel it has relevance for my study at two levels: first, examining the concept helps me to understand my own background; second, I want to become more critically aware so as to assist my students also to develop critical awareness.

The Italian political theorist Gramsci (1971) considered hegemony to be the process by which dominant power-wielders maintain and hold their power. The key dimension of hegemony is the manipulation of public opinion in order to gain public consensus, according to Kincheloe (2004).

When hegemony works best, the public begins to look at dominant ways of seeing the world as simply common sense.

(Kincheloe 2004 p.65)

Through a coalition of coercion and moral and intellectual leadership, dominant groups are usually in a position to maintain their influence over other groups. Edward Bernays (1891-1995), nephew of Sigmund Freud and considered by many to be the one of the most influential public relations propagandists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recognised the power of manufacturing consent through the hegemony of propaganda and stated in 1928 that:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country....

(Bernays 1928 p.1)

If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it? The recent practice of propaganda has proved that it is possible ....

(op cit p.71)

Manipulating and controlling ‘the masses’ involves collusion at several levels. Shine Thompson (2005) argues that hegemony involves a symbiosis between intellectuals, the state, and people themselves, in which intellectuals educate the people, and high culture informs popular culture, so that subordinate groups consent to those who are dominant (p.189).

... coercion has been met in equal measure by an educated consent, by acquiescence to the moral and intellectual leadership of the various hegemonic groups in the constellation of the child’s life. Traditionally these have included the church and state. ... The vast majority of children is educated into compliance with the values inscribed in these institutions both formally in the school system and in extracurricular contexts; for a child to be ‘good’ is to be conformist and tractable.

(Shine Thompson 2005 pp.191-2)

As I reflected on how hegemonic public practices influenced my childhood and my early education two things happened. First I began to critique how I have until recently been led to think in terms of the dominant forms of propositional logic. Second, as I became aware of how I have been shaped by these propositional logics into passive uncritical acceptance of the status quo, I resolved to improve my practice so as not to contribute to an education in which children would be educated into compliance with uncritiqued values.

I am determined not to let the same powerlessness and silencing as I had experienced befall my students. I encourage them to be well-behaved, but not at the expense of being critical (Russell 1932). I resolved to encourage my students to question and challenge anything that they did not understand. My work could therefore be seen as counter-hegemonic (Freire and Macedo 1987).

I will show in Chapter 7 (Action Reflection Cycle 2) how, when my five year olds began to challenge the status quo by asking critical question such as, ‘What’s so good about straight lines anyway?’, I found myself realising that I too needed to interrogate some assumptions. When a four old child challenged the wearing of a uniform one day (RD 16-01-02) by asking, ‘How come we all have to look the same in blue clothes?’, it meant that the children and I began to problematise concepts of uniformity, and whether or not it was a contributing factor to equality. I found myself defending the idea of uniforms at first, because they are part of our institutional status quo. However, later I found myself questioning my stance, as I filled in my journal.

There are several reasons for why wearing school uniforms could be seen as desirable: uniforms make everyone look the same, so no-one can avail of the social capital of having more expensive clothes; a mandatory uniform speeds up the process of getting dressed for school (from my own experience of being a parent).

But in the military, uniforms play a role in training personnel to obey so blindly that in battle situations they will even rush uncritically into death...So wearing a uniform can also diminish children's chances of being individuals, of standing out from each other... (RD 16-01-02)

Later on again, when my 3<sup>rd</sup> class discussed issues from the story of Gandhi, I had to revise my thinking once again (Chapter 7).

My research into the literatures about socio-historical influences on education in Ireland in the 1950s informed developing insights into my ontological and epistemological stance and provided an impetus for me to delve more deeply into literatures that challenged dominant epistemologies (including Belenky *et al.* 1986, Gilligan 1982, 1995; Held 1995, Martin 1994), radical pedagogy literatures (such as hooks 1994, 2003; Kozol 1992, Shor 1992, 1998, 2002), and critical pedagogy literatures (such as Darder *et al.* 2003, Kincheloe 2004, Leistyna *et al.* 1996). As I read, my consciousness was heightened and I began to see instances of injustice in my world that I had hitherto allowed to go uncritiqued. I vowed then to use my educative influence to encourage my students to be autonomous thinkers.

Through my research I have become aware of how power is embedded in education (see also Foucault 1991, Devine 2003, Lynch and Lodge 2002). I have found also that issues of power permeate and influence the story of my learning journey. For example, when my students began to challenge norms and practices of my institution, I began to examine for the first time the nature of the power relationships within my classroom, my institution and within education generally. With my newfound critical awareness I have begun to try to make sense of some of these power issues.

### **Some power issues and paradoxes**

Developing the capacity to critique, however, always needs to be understood as taking place within a social context, which can be problematic. Leistyna (2002) says that a major role of critical research/interpretation should be to expose and transform inequities of power (p.72). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1996, in Leistyna *et al.* 1996), state that the great paradox of contemporary schooling and teacher education is that

while educators speak of empowerment as a central goal they often ignore ‘the way power operates to subvert the empowerment of teachers and students’ (in Leistyna *et al.* 1996 p.191). The paradox of seeking ways of empowering my students, while at the same time often feeling disempowered myself by the education system of which I am a part, and by the prescriptive curriculum which decides what knowledge may be taught and when, has been one of the dilemmas that I have had to try to work around as I taught my students to learn to think for themselves. As this account shows, I have also had to negotiate it for myself as I, too, tried to learn to think critically.

A. McIntyre (in McIntyre and Dunne 2002) identifies a somewhat similar paradox in education when he states that the main purposes of education are the formation of citizens while encouraging people to think for themselves (McIntyre and Dunne 2002, Dunne and Hogan 2004). As I tried to engage critically with that paradox, I have had to grapple with questions such as, ‘Can I work creatively towards my epistemological values within a prescriptive curriculum?’ I have come to the realisation that, although I do not have a great deal of latitude about deciding what subject matter is taught, I do have autonomy about how I teach.

I must also ask myself if my students are to be free from my imposing my way of working on them and how I will know whether, by encouraging others to think for themselves, I am imposing my values (Appendix B). In Chapter 1, I stated that I believe in freedom for all from the imposition of the constraints on their right to think for themselves. When I stated, in a recent seminar with my study group in March 2006, that one of the core concepts of my study was freedom, my supervisor asked me if I had examined my stance in relation to imposing freedom on others (RD 24-03-06). This led me to revisit the work of Berlin.

Berlin (2002) critiqued the work of six philosophers who were prominent just before and after the French Revolution and whose work, he said, all had some qualities in common, one of which was that:

... they all discussed the problem of human liberty and all ... claimed that they were in favour of it – indeed some of them passionately pleaded for it and regarded themselves as the truest champions of what they called true liberty  
(Berlin 2002 p.5)

However, Berlin then added

... yet it is a peculiar fact that in the end their doctrines are inimical to what is normally meant, at any rate, by individual liberty, or political liberty. (ibid)

In other words they were in a sense all 'hostile to liberty' (Berlin 2002 p.5) in that they endeavoured to impose freedom on others, not recognising that what they were doing was a denial of the very form of freedom they supported. I wondered if I could see myself reflected here.

A similar dilemma of practice presented itself as I interacted with my colleagues. Because of experiencing silencing in my early teaching life, I have spent many years trying to ensure that I am affirming and co-operative with teaching colleagues. This is relevant for my study because as, I will show in Chapter 5, I have a position of responsibility in relation to younger colleagues, in that I have been charged with the task of developing pedagogies to support a spirit of critical thinking that will inform school policy. My practice is not then confined to my own classroom. As I attempt to establish and develop a caring critical community of enquiry in a caring community of practice (Wenger 1998) with my colleagues, as well as with my students, I try to ensure that I use my educative relationships to encourage people to be critical thinkers, rather than coerce people to do critical thinking. Wenger (op cit) speaks of the power of communities of practice for mutual empowerment and personal and professional development through educative relationships. In arguing that learning is not just an individual activity, he places the focus of learning on participation so that an individual's learning can contribute to the learning of their communities (p.7). I have had to consider how I can contribute to such learning by sharing the experiences of studying my practice. Like Whitehead (2004b) I have come to ask how I might contribute to the education of social formations, in my case, the social formation of the school staff of which I am a part.

The contribution I wish to make is, while living to my stated values of care, freedom and justice, to develop myself as a critically aware thinker, and encourage colleagues through my educative influence to recognise their own potentials for critical thinking, and for us all to encourage this capacity also in the children with whom we work. In this way, I believe, we can collaboratively nurture a culture of democratic critical enquiry in our school. I am aware, however, through my studies, of the difficulties of influencing

normative cultures that do not embrace the idea of enquiry. Russell (1932) explains, reminiscent of the Ireland of the 1950s and 1960s in which I grew up, how there is often ‘too great a love for conformity both in the herd and in the bureaucrat’ (Russell 1932 p.144). Russell saw these two factors as grounds for ‘the harm that is done to education by politics’ (op cit p.144). I now understand education to be a deeply political concept, rather than a neutral enterprise, as I had believed before my study. My wish to influence the nature of work practices that are in harmony with values of democratic enquiry is political insofar as a population of educated independent thinkers, passionate about what Bohm (1998 p.2) called ‘a spirit of dialogue’ and who ‘share opinions without hostility’ in a ‘coherent’ way (pp.6-7), has potential significance for an open and democratic society, as Bohm explains:

...a genuine culture could arise in which opinions and assumptions are not defended incoherently. And that kind of culture is necessary for the society to work and ultimately for the society to survive.

(Bohm 1998 p.7)

These ideas find resonance in many other literatures about democratic practices. Young (2000) contrasts deliberative democracy with activist democracy. Deliberative democracy, she argues, relies on reasonableness and discussion while activists take political matters into their own hands by the use of such techniques as boycotts and protests. In activist democratic situations all citizens are actively involved, while in the deliberative model citizens elect representatives to speak on their behalf. Said (2004) suggests that active or critical democratic participation is considered a ‘danger to stability’ (p. 137). Referring to the report of the Trilateral Commission (1975) he says

... the argument is that too much democracy is bad for governability, which is that supply of passivity which makes it easier for oligarchies of technical or policy experts to push people into line. So if one is endlessly lectured by certified experts ... there is very little inclination to address this order with anything like individual or even collective demands.

(Said 2004 p.137)

Chomsky also has pursued such arguments through his systematic critique of US foreign policy (Chomsky 1995, 1999, 2000, 2002). Like Said, Chomsky and Young, I too believe that all people should have access to participative democratic practices, and it has become one of the reasons why I place such importance on encouraging full participation in classroom dialogue and in developing a culture of critical enquiry throughout the school.

This can be an uphill struggle because, in my experience, and in relation to the ideas in this chapter, schools are rarely modelled on participative democratic principles. Teachers seldom have autonomy over what to teach, and students appear to have even less autonomy over their learning environments. I am not alone in this opinion: McNess *et al.* (2003) point out how in the UK the ‘effective’ (in terms of policy for producing improved performance ‘outcomes’ in the ‘Key Stages’ of education) has come to dominate the ‘affective’ (in terms of the previously more holistic teaching policies). Likewise Bonal (2003), and Robertson, Bonal and Dale (2002) examine how the full responsibility for education and for accountability in educational practices has been transferred by the state to teachers and schools, while the state simultaneously retains control of education at a more central level:

Neoliberal political rationality, however, develops mechanisms through which the state can manage to reduce its presence as well as its legitimation burden, while at the same time uses new modes of governance to intervene in the affairs of individuals and communities. ... Individual and collective behaviour are formally free, but new forms of governance are able to shape that behaviour.

(Robertson, Bonal and Dale 2002 p.469)

As reported earlier, educational policy in the Ireland of the 1950s virtually ensured a form of compliant non-participative democracy when I was in primary school. I believe that I internalised my experience of oppressive models of education, to the extent that speaking out, questioning, or thinking critically were never an issue for me, mainly because I did not know that they were possible. Like many children I was ‘socialised into silence’ (Jaworski 1993). I relate this experience to those of other researchers in the literatures (see Hartog 2004; Church 2004). My study has enabled me to ‘unlearn to not speak’ (Piercy 1971). In correspondence with several colleagues and friends in Ireland and in many other English-speaking countries, I have learned that my experiences of school were similar to people of different ages from different educational and geographic contexts. (Appendices G.1. to G.7.)

I am now able to articulate my desire to offer a form of counter-hegemony by exercising my voice as a researcher, and by presenting the voices of my students as researchers. Through the generation of my own living educational theory, I challenge the traditional epistemological gate-keeping role of the academy by claiming to know my own educational development (Whitehead 1989a). I wish to exercise my capacity to

influence my colleagues to do the same. It is a relatively new departure for a hitherto silenced teacher population to be in a position to claim theory generation.

I believe this to be the nature of my original scholarly contribution: I am now able to generate my own living theory for how I have come to understand and improve my practice, and to encourage my colleagues also to do so. I have done this initially through my engagement with the literatures of critical pedagogy, and with the literatures around the conceptual frameworks of my study. The next chapter focuses on contextual issues and I will engage with literatures around the contexts of critical thinking, the Irish primary school curriculum and research contexts in order to show how I critique these contexts and test my claim to have developed pedagogies, in line with my values, that encourage critical awareness. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 will describe how I introduced such critical pedagogies into my classroom practice, and Chapter 9 speaks further about the potential significance of my research for the education of the social formation of my school.



## Chapter 5

### ***Becoming Critical: Engaging with the literatures of critical thinking, policy and research contexts***

In this chapter I continue my theme of how I took action in my context, without, at first, critically reflecting on what I was doing or why I was taking action. However, as I have already shown, some new understanding began to emerge as I engaged with the literatures of critical theory and critical pedagogy. This too became a form of action because reading critical literatures (such as Apple 1979, Bartolomé 1992, Chomsky 2000, Freire 1972, Kincheloe 2004) raised more questions for me than answering them. I often found the process quite destabilising as my faith in the hitherto unshakable foundations of the education system of which I was a part, had begun to crumble. Now I began to look with new eyes at education and question many of the assumptions around current educational policies. For example, in this chapter I begin to deconstruct the notion of a standardised curriculum, the breaking up of knowledge into discrete curricular areas, the dominance of didactic pedagogies and standardised assessment processes and the ensuing labelling of children. It will be seen that these understandings permeate this document. Now, with raised critical consciousness I began to look again at what I understood by intelligence and interrogate how I had made assumptions about children in the past. I also began to question my own logics. It was only then as I began to deconstruct concepts and my own mental models that I began to realise that, although I thought I was teaching children to think critically, I needed first to engage in the idea of what critique meant. In order to do so I first needed to examine the contextual frameworks of my study – critical thinking, the Irish primary school curriculum and the research contexts around teaching children to think critically

The starting point for my critique, as I undertook my action enquiry, was to consider the idea of experiencing myself as a living contradiction when my values were denied in my practice. Early in my studies I was able to articulate my values, but it took considerable critical engagement with my own learning to see that I needed to transform those values into a living practice. Developing such an understanding came about

through reading, talking with critical friends, reflecting on practice and eventually coming to the point where I was actively able to critique. I explore these issues in this chapter, and now engage with the literatures around my contexts of curriculum and critical thinking. I also examine some research contexts in the field of critical thinking. Moreover, I demonstrate how I have come to think critically by engaging critically with the literatures whose content I am now critiquing.

I begin by offering an account of the early stages of my research, and the experience of myself as a living contradiction.

### **Experiencing myself as a living contradiction**

Throughout my teaching career I have consistently sought ways of including children as active participants in their learning processes and in dialogue. However, my emergent capacity to articulate my values, and to consider the extent to which I was living in the direction of my values, gave me cause for concern, especially in relation to an expectation that I would conform to normative school regimes, and my lack of resistance in doing so. From my reading of critical and radical pedagogues such as Ayers (1995), Greene (1995), Holt (1964) hooks (1994), Shor (2002) I now saw that along with setting aside time for discrete weekly discussions I needed to develop a wider range of dialogic pedagogies in order to live more closely to my values (see Chapter 7). However I was frequently frustrated because living to these values meant that I often found myself unable to ‘cover’ the entire range of curricular areas. For much of my teaching life I had neglected to ask why this should be so. I understand now that didacticism is premised on propositional logics whereas my epistemological values are grounded in more dialectical forms of logic. I can now see that didactic lessons are reifiable ‘things’ that can be ‘planned’, ‘executed’ and ‘assessed’ within a given timeframe especially if the only voice is that of the teacher and the children passively follow her plans. Such a lesson could be considered a product. A dialogic lesson is a process: it is about opportunity, conversation, flow, engagement, being: the process can be ‘planned for’ but there can be no guarantees around ‘outcomes’ or about what happens when children and teachers explore and create new knowledge together. Dialogic pedagogies could be seen as square pegs that resist being pounded into the round holes of timetables and schedules. Evaluating such activities can also be problematic as I will demonstrate below.

For much of my teaching career, life had been simple. I had allowed myself to be dictated to by the demands of the school system of bells and timetables, and a curriculum which presents the different subjects as discrete areas to be timetabled accordingly (Introduction, Government of Ireland 1999 p.70). As reported, I had not questioned this state of affairs although I had often felt uncomfortable about my practice, because for much of my life I did not realise the status quo was questionable. Now with increasing critical awareness I found that interruptions such as bells and timetables make dialogic practice difficult and that I needed to deconstruct for myself the concept of knowledge being a ‘thing’ to be chopped into discrete deliverable ‘things’ called subjects (for example see Figure 5.1 below).

**Figure 5-1: Table: Suggested minimum weekly time framework**  
*Suggested minimum weekly time framework*

Curriculum areas	Full day		Short day [infant classes]	
	One week		One week	
	Hours	Minutes	Hours	Minutes
<b>Secular instruction</b>				
Language				
L1	4	00	3	00
L2	3	30	2	30
Mathematics	3	00	2	15
SESE	3	00	2	15
SPHE	0	30	0	30
PE	1	00	1	00
Arts education	3	00	2	30
Discretionary curriculum time	2	00	1	00
<b>Total secular instruction</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>00</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>00</b>
Religious education (typically)	2	30	2	30
Assembly time	1	40	1	40
Roll call	0	50	0	50
Breaks	0	50	0	50
Recreation (typically)	2	30	2	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>20</b>

*Note: Some modification of this framework may be necessary in the context of the outcome of the pilot project on modern languages.*

(Curriculum Introduction, Government of Ireland 1999 p.70)

For a long time, though, in spite of appreciating my values as the guiding principles of my practice, I complied with what was expected of me so as to try to ‘deliver the curriculum’. Although I had not the language initially to articulate my feelings of dissonance at the contradiction between the kind of teacher I wanted to be, and the kind I actually was, I now see that at heart there was an inherent tension between my dialectically informed epistemological values, and the propositional forms of logic that underpin technical rational timetables, the separation of subjects into discrete contents, and the prescription of teacher manuals.

As my studies progressed, and I began to develop more dialogical pedagogies, I was frequently stymied by the technical rational constraints of the school day. For example, in my current institution I met every fortnight for short-term planning with two other teachers. We searched our textbooks and resources to devise interesting lessons in each subject area and sought appropriate assessment strategies. When I introduced ideas for more dialogical forms of practice, my colleagues were supportive, but we found that dialogical pedagogies do not ‘fit’ tidily into twenty-five minute timeslots. I could see the competing epistemological stances clearly for the first time.

### **The concept of timeslots and dialogical ways of knowing**

Drawing again on the work of Capra (1997), the concept of curriculum as a sequence of timeslots can be understood as grounded in a technical rational managerial approach to education and in positivist ways of knowing that hark back to Cartesian epistemological values (see Chapter 3 this document). Descartes understood mind and body as separate entities. He saw the universe as a mechanistic entity, which could ‘be understood through analysing it in terms of its smallest parts’ (Capra 1997 p.19). He developed a form of thinking that ‘consists of breaking up complex phenomena into pieces to understand the behaviour of the whole from the property of its parts’ (Capra 1997 *ibid*).

Dialogical pedagogies, on the other hand, involve what Bohm (1998) calls entering into ‘the spirit of the dialogue’ (p.2), in which knowledge is understood as a flowing process involving wholeness (Bohm 2004). Bohm states that fragmentation originates in how we think and suggests that ‘it is thought that divides everything up’ (p.10).

Every division we make is a result of how we think. In actuality the whole world is shades merging into one. But we select certain things and separate them from others – for convenience at first ...

(Bohm 2004 p.10)

It can be seen immediately how the concepts of fragmentation and flow are in tension. The artificial division of knowledge into separate categories is indicative of an education system that perceives education as something to be controlled and managed. Foucault (1980) would suggest that it is indicative of a public discourse that sees people as things to be controlled and managed also. McDermott and Richardson (2005), cite Freud’s statement that ‘education must inhibit, forbid and suppress’ (p36). I work in a school that is collegiate and supportive of innovative practices. Our mission statement, which I, as one of the first four members of staff, helped to generate in association with

a group of parents, states that we endeavour to ‘create an environment where all are free to question and encouraged to think.’ Nevertheless, broader educational systemic norms influence policy. These systemic norms involve rules, routines, administration, a standardised curriculum with discrete subject areas, and large classes of 30 or more children with scarce resources unless they are provided by fundraising on the part of parents and staff. As I struggled to implement dialogical pedagogies, I now saw such norms, especially the breaking up of knowledge into discrete subjects as a prime example of the fragmentation of which Bohm (2004) spoke. Trying to adhere to timetables is frequently frustrating when I am involved with my children in a creative process and a bell goes which tells us it is now time to go to Drama class, and we are already immersed in a flow of creativity, such as poetry composition or art.

I did not, however, abandon my wish to develop a creative, dialogical experience for my students and myself, and I persevered in my efforts to devise interesting learning activities that spoke to the children’s experience. I was diligent in my short term planning. I addressed the demands of the curriculum, and wrote up my fortnightly schemes accordingly. However, I found it impossible to stick rigidly to schemes: when a subject was interesting and when the children were creative and involved, I would join with their sense of delight, and, providing the children were not obliged to go to another area of the school for lessons, I saw no problem with allowing the activity to run on until, together, we felt we had fully explored the subject. This got me into several kinds of difficulty: initially I risked alienating the goodwill of other teachers, such as the learning support and language support teachers who provide in-class support and who expect me to be doing what it says on the timetable. An entry in my diary reads:

When D came in for Maths today, the children were experimenting with constructing bridges that would support an increasing weight of materials. It was noisy, fun and exciting.

She was very supportive and got involved, but interestingly, the children she usually supports didn’t appear to need her help with construction. Their difficulty appears to be with abstract, conceptual mathematics.  
(RD 30-03-06)

Children who need help with learning have a right to every possible resource that the system can offer. The learning support teacher, the language support teacher and the resource teacher (who also has to come to my class), are obliged to adhere to timetables in order to fulfil their obligations to the children who need them in various classrooms: I

have to try to teach in ways that support my values. There are competing rights and value-systems here, and each of us has the best interests of the children at heart. It has taken cooperation and collegiality to come up with creative and just solutions whereby the rights of the children in need of support are met. However, to return to the data extract, the fact that the students did not need the assistance of the learning support that day bears out the thinking of several educators (Gardner 1983, Dewey 1910, 1929; von Glasersfeld 1995, 1996) who argue that children need experience with solving ‘real’ problems, as much as with abstract conceptual mathematics. The learning support teacher and I were then able to use this knowledge to develop a range of alternative ways of scaffolding learning.

The issue of evaluation and assessment remained. At the end of each month, I would submit my planning schemes to my principal as monthly progress reports, with each area duly ticked off as ‘done’ or ‘not done’. As it was not always easy to determine what exactly had been ‘done’, I got around my difficulty by sometimes including CDs of discussions or photos of children working individually and collaboratively, as illustrated in Figures 5.2 and 5.3 below.



**Figure 5-2: Photos of my students researching together**



**Figure 5-3: Photo of E presenting her findings of her research on dinosaurs**

From reading critical pedagogues, such as Ayers (1995), Shor (1992) and others, I began to question again the didactic practices which had been so much part of my teaching repertoire. I began to look for ways to incorporate more dialogue, and more enquiry learning methodologies into my practice and seek ways of devolving more autonomy to my students. I gathered data from some of these enquiry methodologies that show my students engaging with a variety of learning opportunities. However, the learning involved would often be difficult to assess by any kind of standardised methodology. Factual knowledge could be checked but the full range of the children's learning is probably immeasurable.

Figures 5.2 and 5.3 demonstrate one such activity in which the children researched dinosaurs in teams (3<sup>rd</sup> class November 06). The 8 and 9 year old children took responsibility for the whole activity. It involved the interpersonal skills of negotiation and management in deciding who would do what, in terms of who would get the material and document the data, who would compile it, and who would report to the class what the team had found out. I stepped out of the activity other than to direct individual children towards resources. In this way the children negotiated a complex range of new learning. One such was the discovery of how to use the index in reference books, a source of surprise to J who said:

You mean I could have just looked there in that list and found the right page! I've just spent ages going through the whole book! That's so handy! (RD 24-11-06)

My students researched palaeontologists on the internet, drew and made models of dinosaurs, looked up whether their dinosaur was a carnivore or an herbivore, brought in

models for display, composed poetry, learned a song about dinosaurs and wrote up their findings, and finally presented their work publicly. The learning involved multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983) and coverage of different areas of the curriculum. However little of this learning could be assessed by technical measurement.

Other examples of enquiry learning that were difficult to assess in technical rational ways, include investigating seeds, making butter, sowing potatoes, examining prisms, looking at fingerprints, making raisins ‘dance’ in fizzy drinks and several other science projects, as illustrated in Figures 5.4 to 5.6 below. Children who performed well in these activities were often the same children who did not encounter success in standardised tests.



**Figure 5-4: Photos of my students examining seeds and planting potatoes**



**Figure 5-5: Photos of acid/alkali indicator and exploring sounds experiments**





**Figure 5-6: Photos of students working together on measurement and prisms**

As well as working dialogically together in the area of history, geography, maths and science, I also arranged opportunities for my students to meet with artists and craftspeople who visited our classroom to demonstrate their work, and to talk with the children. The children were helped to learn to knit in collaboration with a team of local women. This was a very successful project, because, as well as learning the craft, the children and knitting experts were soon exchanging ideas about colours, textures, styles of knitted garments and stories from the knitters' early knitting attempts, as shown in Figure 5.7 (below) and which also shows a video still of a group of children in a 'knitting and chatting' circle, which some boys, in particular, seemed to enjoy (see also video link 'dialogue and knitting' in Chapter 9).



**Figure 5-7: Video still and photo of dialogue and knitting**

But again the learning was of the sort that cannot easily be assessed by technical rational methods. When I tried to tick the ‘done’ and ‘not done’ boxes in my progress reports, I found it difficult to articulate what had been ‘done’.

We also visited several art exhibitions. The physical act of going there could be ticked off as ‘done’, but to try to assess, or even to describe the learning that took place, was not so easy. It is not possible to measure the kind of learning that happens when a child is in rapt communion with a piece of art. It may not be even possible for the child to articulate her response in any other way, except through smiles, or through drawing or through engaging in silent dialogical engagement with the art – see Figure 5.8 below.



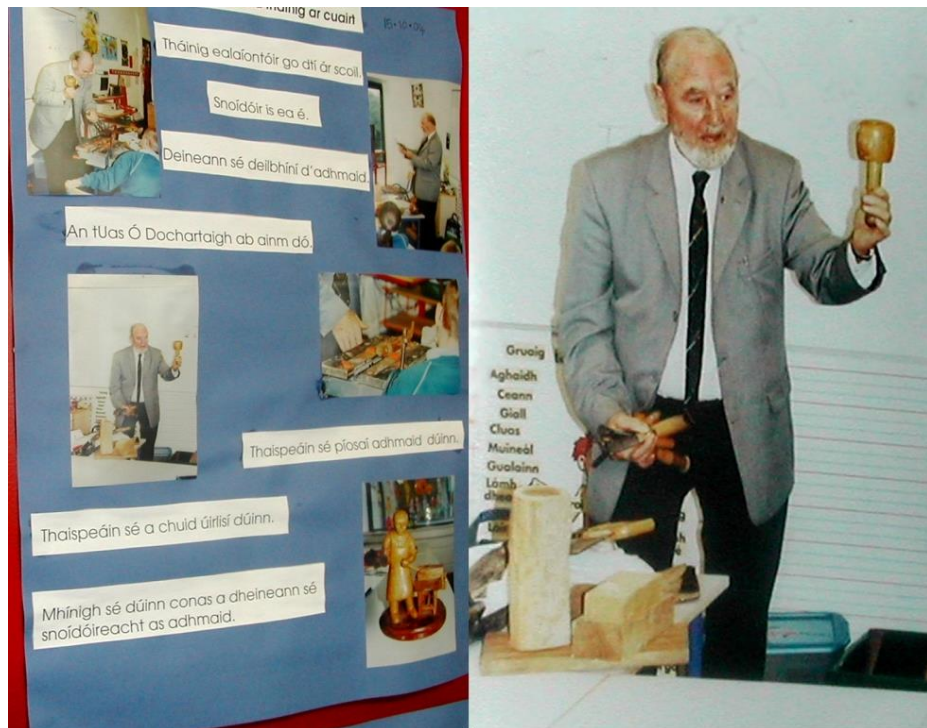
**Figure 5-8: Photos of students in a gallery**

Neither is it possible to gauge what is happening when a child is in conversation with a visiting knitting volunteer. I can say, ‘X learned how to cast on 10 stitches today’, but perhaps X also learned about life in school when the knitting volunteer was young, or perhaps X was exposed to a new methodology for holding knitting needles if one is left-handed, or experienced an aesthetic response to the texture or the colour of the wool. It is not possible to quantify empirically, for example, what kind of relational knowledge was generated or what development of interpersonal or intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner 1983) occurred while in a dialogue with the visitor. When activities ran over their allotted time, something else had to be dropped. This meant that I often looked in dismay at my progress records and ticked several ‘to be done’ boxes.

For example, in November 2004 my father visited my class to talk to the children about his passion for woodcarving (Figure 5.9 below). The visit was scheduled to last for forty minutes. Instead it lasted over two hours. The children listened, questioned, and

engaged him in dialogue. They experimented with tools; they felt and smelt the wood and rubbed the wax; they had a science lesson about how bog oak is formed; and a history lesson about what life was like when my father attended school more than seventy years ago. Afterwards, parents came to thank me for what appeared to be one of the ‘coolest’ (according to one child) school experiences their children had had. I wrote in my diary:

A week after the woodcarving presentation M told me that she and her child had gone to the shopping centre. They passed a display of wooden carvings. C touched several pieces and said, ‘Somebody carved that with tools and rubbed wax on it to shine it. I’d like to do that too sometime.’ (RD 16-11-04)



**Figure 5-9: Display of photos from the woodcarver's visit**

I have offered these stories to show that I was consistently experiencing myself as a living contradiction, because the values that inspired my everyday practices were often denied by the technical rationality of the wider education system of which I was a part, and with which I was expected to conform. The realisation that I was a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989a) came about slowly. I believe that I have always been a reflective practitioner (Schön 1983) and have always tried to teach with integrity, but now I realise that reflection alone is insufficient for bringing about methodological

change in one's practice. In my case, a further element was needed, that of becoming more critically aware.

One of my tasks in becoming more critical was to try to see things not just as they were and are, but also how they might be otherwise. Greene (1995) suggests that each person's reality must be understood as interpreted experience, and that the mode of interpretation depends on his or her situation and location in the world. It depends as well, she says, on the number of vantage points a person is able or enabled to take: the number of perspectives that will 'disclose multiple aspects of a contingent (not a self-existent) world' (p.19). Didactic teaching mostly involves one perspective – that of the didact – either the teacher or the textbook. I sought pedagogies that embody my values of care, freedom and justice – pedagogies that would allow my students to think for themselves and go beyond the commonplace and glimpse what 'could be'.

It is to see beyond what the imager has called normal or 'commonsense' and to carve out new orders in experience. Doing so, a person may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be, and what is not yet. And the same person may, at the same time, remain in touch with what presumably is.

(Greene 1995 p.17)

I have referred to how my critical awareness emerged when I started researching some critical pedagogy literatures. I looked again at my practice and my context to try to develop my ability to envisage possibilities I had not hitherto imagined. For example, I suddenly became aware of the increasing prescription in textbooks and teacher manuals.

The Religious Education programme and the Irish Language programmes are particularly prescriptive in outlining every day's activities, the questions I should ask, the answers I should solicit and the tasks I should set the children: nothing is left to chance. They are being marketed as 'teacher-proof' and no-one seems to see the irony there. (RD 22-01-02 and Appendix F.1.)

I understand prescription as signifying a lack of trust in people's ability to discern and make choices, and that it can close down critical thinking. For Freire (1972), prescription has connotations of the oppressor:

One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription.

(Freire 1972 p.28)

I had never challenged prescription before, because I had never noticed it. Critical awareness developed only gradually. For example I wrote:

R, S and I spoke today about the gradual systematic erosion of teacher professional autonomy. I explained my concerns about the Irish and RE programmes. S commented that the RE manual was so prescriptive that if given to the postman he could probably 'teach' the lessons. It specifies what to say in discussions and when; what questions to ask and when; what artwork should be done and how: there are even some questions and answers to be memorised! (RD 22-02-03)

My capacity for critique came from talking with critical friends and engagement with the literatures, and it is to these literatures that I now turn.

As an organising framework for this section, I draw on the ideas of Foucault (1982) that discourses are made up of discursive practices. Foucault describes these discursive practices as a body of anonymous, historical rules (p. 45) and he held that power relations are embedded in the discursive practices of institutions such as schools. According to McLaren (2003a) such discursive practices refer to the rules which

... govern what is said and what must remain unsaid, who can speak with authority and who must listen... [these are] not simply words but [are] embodied in the practice of institutions, the patterns of behaviour, and in forms of pedagogy.

(McLaren 2003a p.83)

I explained in the previous chapter how I thought about what might be the discursive practices embedded in my classroom and institution, and researched literatures pertaining to Irish contexts (Lynch 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006; Lynch and Lodge 2002, Devine 2003, Drudy and Lynch 1993). I came to see that teachers as well as children are sometimes powerless. Although I knew that traditionally children 'must listen' in class, until recently I did not realise that teachers were also among those who 'must listen'. While verbally dominant within their classroom context, within larger institutional and education systems teachers are often encouraged to ask only procedural or operational questions in relation to systemic or institutional norms, making them simultaneously powerful and powerless (Lynch 2005). I realised too that the power differentials in education seem to have remained more or less the same since I was in school. Lynch (2005) states that

... power inequalities are not just a problem for students. Teachers experience power differentials both horizontally and vertically, in terms of school

management and colleagues respectively ... They are subject to control by external bodies and by the authority of those in superordinate positions within their own institution. They are simultaneously both powerful and powerless.

(Lynch, in Lyons and Waldron, 2005 p.155)

When I looked at my own practice, I saw that, although I can challenge pedagogical issues in relation to the curriculum, I cannot unilaterally decide to jettison any part of the curriculum, or decide, for example, that the concepts of division or fractions should be left until fourth class rather than be taught in third class. To do so would have to involve whole school policy and negotiation with the inspectorate. Similarly, I could not challenge with any authority, issues such as proposed performance related assessment of teachers and children, standardised testing of children, or the publication of inspectors' reports about schools on the internet, all of which appear to me to be at odds with the rhetoric of the 1999 Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999), which emphasises child-centred learning and democratic practices.

I could, however, change my pedagogy, and so challenge pedagogical norms by introducing new forms of pedagogy that seemed to carry more hope for the realisation of my values than traditional didactic pedagogies. This is what I decided to do. I now offer a critique of the contexts in which my critical pedagogies are located, and in my next three chapters I explain how I put them into action, and how I also began critically to reflect on and generate insights about what I was doing. I began to move from description to explanation.

I start by offering an overview of the contexts of Philosophy for Children (PC4), and Thinking Time, and their relevance for thinking and teaching with critical awareness and I test my ideas against them.

### **An overview of the contexts of Philosophy for Children (P4C), Thinking Time, the Critical Thinking movement**

In the 1990s, as noted earlier, I introduced a programme called Thinking Time into my practice. This programme was adapted from the ideas of Matthew Lipman (1982, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1996; Lipman et al. 1980; Lipman and Sharp 1994) who devised a programme so that teachers, equipped with Lipman's novels and instruction manuals, could introduce philosophical dialogue in their classrooms. The teachers would then aim to draw out responses from the children according to Lipman's methodological guidelines. For many years I accepted the underpinning assumptions of

Lipman's work. Now, through my increased critical awareness arising from reading critical pedagogy literatures I began to ask some questions.

For example, while I agree with many of Lipman's reasons and ideas, his methodology seems to me to be unduly prescriptive, and rests on an underlying assumption that, without Lipman's manuals, teachers would not be able to guide the discovery of knowledge through dialogue. Lipman's ideas have been adapted for use in many countries ([www.icpic.org](http://www.icpic.org)) and training courses have been set up to ensure that teachers know what to do. A critical appraisal of the materials, however, would reveal that children are being 'taught to think' in order to work towards an end point called 'better thinking'. Vansieleghem (2005), for example, suggests that the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement appears to be an all-or-nothing 'package':

... there is reason for scepticism ... Since we are expected as a matter of course to subscribe to the basic assumptions of Philosophy for Children, we seem to have tied ourselves to the whole package, as it were, without reservation.  
(Vansieleghem 2005 p.20)

I also find disquieting some of the claims of the P4C movement in that there appears to be an assumption that a general consensus will be reached though guided discussion. This makes me anxious, because it appears to hint at some kind of 'right answer' that children will achieve, given enough time and guidance by the teacher. My videos show that in classroom discussions with my students, I position myself as co-participant and remain largely silent, speaking only when it is my turn or when I feel that the children are unable to move the discussion along. Several observers have remarked on this:

... the children just keep talking and you don't really intervene at all  
(comment by YO'F after observing several classroom dialogue sessions.  
RD 06-12-04)

What's surprising to me is how little input you have in the discussion.  
(comment by parent DMcC following a viewing of videoed dialogues  
22-05-06)

Lipman believes, however, that the teacher should intervene frequently and drive the dialogue through a specific agenda, so the children's thinking becomes guided by the teacher towards what seems to me the 'correct' philosophical conclusion (see BBC TV 1990).

Furthermore, the Lipman programme appears unduly deterministic, although the avowed aim is to create democratic citizens for the future. This view is not commensurable with my own values. Like Russell (1932), I believe that it is better to produce free-thinking individuals than conformist citizens. Hence my decision to generate my living theory of practice, which, while it incorporates insights from Lipman's work, is grounded in the realities of creating democratic and fair conditions in my everyday work, and in the evidence I produce to show how I am creating those conditions. The reasons for adopting this perspective appear to be shared by Vansieleghem (2005), who says:

... thinking and dialogue as conceived by Philosophy for Children cannot be a basis for democracy and freedom simply because it is determined in advance by a specific kind of thinking and acting in accordance with roles that we are expected to fulfill: namely, being autonomous, critical, creative and communicative citizens. Other possibilities are excluded.

(Vansieleghem 2005 p.20)

Long (2005) also critiques Lipman's emphasis on the 'training' of children as philosophers by learning the skills of argument, maintaining that philosophy therefore becomes an end rather than thinking for its own sake. I agree with Long, albeit from a different perspective. I want my students to learn to become critical thinkers not merely to learn to acquire debating skills. To that end I provide opportunities in which to discuss and dialogue – not training sessions.

I also agree with Reed and Johnson's view of the purposes of philosophy for children:

The assumption behind philosophy for children is that if you can get children to talk well ... you are well on your way to achieving the goal of creating a person who can think well for herself or himself.

(Reed and Johnson 2000 p. 206)

Like Reed and Johnson (ibid) I question the inherent assumptions underlying the notion of 'getting' the children to 'talk well' and the idea of 'creating a person'. To me these phrases are redolent of prescriptive practice and propositional logics. To achieve the situation in which children do talk and think well, I adopt the following strategies for classroom discussions. First I provide the starting points for formal dialogue by making plenty of time available. I arrange a circle seating arrangement by moving the classroom furniture with my children (see Figure 5.10) and sometimes by taking them



to an empty classroom where chairs are already made available in a circle, although this latter later proved to be problematic (see Chapter 8).



**Figure 5.10: Video still of children preparing the room for a circle**

I sit in the circle at the children's level, where possible, and after reading a story or introducing a picture or poem or a child's question as a starting point, I then turn the responsibility for the discussion over to the children and become one with them in the circle. I sit, listening, thinking, remaining silent, or speaking when it is my turn (see Figures 5.11).



**Figure 5-11: Video stills of my participation in discussion**

In my videos it can be seen that the children 'run' the discussion: they keep the flow of dialogue going; they listen to each other attentively and with respect; they engage with each others' ideas and build on them; they exhibit delight in the use of words. They fulfil many criteria that Bohm (1998) suggests are essential for dialogue: they can

maintain eye contact through the circle arrangement; there is no set agenda other than an open discussion about what the story or topic meant to them, and there is an open forum, with no scoring of points.

During discussions like this, I have found myself drawn in by the richness of the dialogue and amazed at having my own ideas challenged both by myself and by the children. It is clear, I believe, from my videos (see accompanying CD), that my students have demonstrated their capability to think for themselves in critical and creative ways. My deep learning from my research is not that I have taught them this, but rather that I have learned how to think critically myself alongside them so as to recognise the importance of what is happening.

Despite my reservations about his methodologies, however, I found much to be admired about Lipman's work. I have incorporated elements of Lipman's ideas and elements of other different thinking programmes into my practice.

For example, Donnelly's (1994) idea of Thinking Time offers open-ended selection of topics and affords opportunities to pursue these topics in a wide variety of directions. In this model the teacher seeks to be a member of the discussion circle rather than an overt authority figure. However, I will show later that as I became more critically aware myself, I saw that this approach, if it is isolated from a wider dialogical practice, fails to fully realise my value of teaching children to be creative autonomous critical thinkers.

### **The dangerous reification of critical thinking**

I have been influenced by the large body of literature relating to critical thinking (for example Ennis 1987, Lipman 1984, 1987, 1988; Paul 1993, Paul and Elder 2001, Paul *et al.* 1995, Quinn 1997, Siegel 1988, Splitter and Sharp 1995, Thayer-Bacon 2000). However, these literatures largely view critical thinking from a propositional perspective, as a reified 'something' that one 'does' following the acquisition of specific skills. The aim is to produce a product called 'better critical thinking' through an analysis of skills, dispositions and knowledge. For example, Paul and Elder (2001 p.84) list eight universal elements of reasoning that are present in all reasoning of all subjects in all cultures for all time. Their ideas appear to be firmly grounded in propositional thinking. Paul *et al.* (1995) suggest that teachers should develop themselves into critical thinkers. I agree with this stance, but I disagree with their

suggestion that teachers should do so by learning and using the principles and skills of critical thinking. Again this approach is also premised on the view that knowledge is reified, and that critical thinking is ‘thing’ that incorporates a set of skills that can be ‘got’. Splitter and Sharp (1995) advocate promoting a culture of critical thinking in a classroom, an approach with which I agree, but they also adopt a propositional methodology for doing so.

Siegel (1988) articulates a view of critical thinking that comes close to my own when he says that a critical thinker possesses both skills and character traits. He refers to these traits as a critical spirit (p.39). He argues that a person must not only be able to think critically, but that critical thinkers must be willing or otherwise disposed to doing so. He does still, however, tend to reify critical thinking, and favour the ‘having’ of a set of discrete skills.

I believe my research goes beyond propositional theories, although it incorporates elements from many of them. When I sit with my students and take a non-didactic role in the discussion I am not ‘studying critical thinking’, nor ‘teaching critical thinking’ neither am I studying my students. I don’t ‘teach’ the children any skills for doing ‘good’ discussion. I don’t prepare a lesson in advance on dispositions of critical thinking. Instead I listen to what is being said (Figure 5.12) and I engage with my children as a co-thinker, co-talker, and co-participant in the conversation.



**Figure 5-12: Video still of me listening as a child speaks**

I find much to relate to in the work of Burbules (1993) who criticises ‘antidialogical’ instructional practices, particularly the initiation-response-evaluation type of questioning which he says, serve to ‘maintain the crude appearance of discussion while

maintaining the teacher's desire for actual control' (p. 154) and which displays 'lack of commitment to truly open-ended and exploratory dialogue (p.153). Burbules' approach is honest and tentative:

...I would recommend a pragmatic, contextual, fallibilistic perspective that regards the possibilities of dialogue with persistence and hope, while being prepared as well for its possible failure and breakdown.

(Burbules 1993 p.160)

Unlike the Lipman methodology and focus on the product of 'better thinking', my discussions with children are open-ended processes. There is no artifice, no pre-planned agenda to the discussions. Once we are seated in a circle, discussion tends to happen organically. In my research diary on 03-04-06 I wrote

I have been discussing this story ('Dragons and Giants': Lobel, 1992) with different classes now for about 6 years and I am amazed continually by children finding new aspects of the story that I have never considered.

A's comment today about there being 'no way of looking brave, but a way of looking not brave' was very interesting. Does this mean that you can see fear in a person but not courage? Where does this kind of learning come from? I certainly did not 'teach' it.

J's analytical enumeration of all the different kinds of courage was interesting. One can see his logical scientific mind at work. It was a stimulating discussion. It was interesting how the topic of courage segued into physical strength: it's as though some children see physical strength and courage as synonymous. (RD: 03-04-06)

I can see that in my reflections I am shifting from a position of observer and teacher into one of participant and learner. This is as it should be, I believe: my researcher voice, learning voice and teaching voice are interwoven with my ordinary human participative voice.

The next piece of data is drawn from a discussion on freedom following the reading of Anne Frank's story (Polle and Barrett 2005) from our history syllabus. Neither I nor the children set out with the agenda of discussing freedom. The children's comments on what they understood by freedom came about organically as they responded to the story. It shows me the high level of critical awareness that some children can reach.

K: People deserve freedom: everybody is human, so in that way everybody is the same. It's not fair if one person makes another person do something they don't want to do. No one is more important than anyone else ...

C: I agree with T that freedom is being able to do whatever you want but you shouldn't have the freedom to kill anyone. Or you shouldn't be able to take over the world and kill people ...

Jk: I just thought of this when CY was talking about slaves. I think freedom isn't something you can give to someone. Even if you're a slave owner: because the slave might have freedom already inside themselves and you might be only giving them sort of like ... permission or something. Permission doesn't really mean the same thing as freedom ... (RD 07-02-06)

One child who was new to the school spoke about the need for people to be left alone while they grieved.

DH: I think freedom is something you need all the time but sometimes you need it more than other times, like if someone dies and you're very sad you need freedom to be alone ... (RD 07-02-06)

This student has experienced difficult situations in his personal life: it was poignant that it took a classroom discussion on freedom to release some of this emotion in words. I later wrote:

I came to think more deeply about freedom through this discussion. The liveliness and energy of the children was almost palpable. They were engaged completely ...

... the conversation continued as they walked out to yard break at lunch time. I was really surprised that DH spoke about grief. This is a major step for him and took a lot of courage. I must make sure he gets some extra attention. (RD 07-02-06)

The entries in my diary differ considerably from the kind of rhetoric in the mainstream literatures of critical thinking. I am living and working with real people. We share human experiences, and our discussions involve us in a genuine sharing of ideas, in a constant flow as Bohm (1998) described.

I now move to a brief discussion of policy contexts to which research about critical thinking may be relevant.

## Policy contexts

The main policy documents that are relevant for my research context are *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (Government of Ireland 1971) and the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* (Government of Ireland 1999). I give a brief outline of both documents.

## The 1971 Curriculum

It is important to realise that the dominant theoretical approach in Irish educational sociology up to the 1970s was functionalist (Drudy and Lynch 1993 p.29). Such an approach promotes an ‘equal opportunities’ meritocratic ideal, grounded in an ideology that promotes a view of success in education and industry as based on ability and effort and not on socio-cultural factors such as social position, background, race, gender and place of residence.

... it is the task of education to make sure that every member of society has, as it were, an equal chance to be unequal and can move according to skill and effort into the social position most appropriate to their talents.

(Drudy and Lynch 1993 p.31)

It could be argued that the offering of a broad base of curricular subjects at primary level seems to imply less emphasis on meritocratic ideals and thus less danger of selectively screening children for future employment as happens in the secondary system. However, this is not the case in reality. In the primary education system pedagogical practice is still heavily reliant on the weighting of the ‘academic’ disciplines of ‘the 3 R’s’ (see Murphy 2004) and, despite awareness of theories of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983), the Irish primary school assessment system still relies heavily on empirical standardised norm referenced assessment. Tests such as *Micra T* (Wall and Burke 2004) and *Sigma T* (Wall and Burke 2007) are used extensively in Irish schools and are seen as reliable methods of determining the cognitive abilities of students. Spirituality, interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities, spatial awareness, or an aesthetic sense are often ignored as indicators of future success. They are not ‘measurable’ by national standards and therefore not valued (see also Apple 2001b).

Studies such as the Irish National Teacher’s Organisation (INTO) (1986) and Hall (1995) showed there were high levels of support for the principles of the curriculum but at the same time (according to an INTO survey cited in Drudy and Lynch 1993 p.103),

60% of teachers expressed a preference for traditional didactic approaches. INTO (1986) and Hall (1995) show that, in the majority of schools, practice was teacher-centred, and that there was divergence between approval of the curriculum and its implementation.

The 1971 Curriculum claimed to favour enquiry learning and an emphasis on oral work. However, according to Hall (1995), implementation of the 1971 Curriculum recommendations was mainly limited to the infant classrooms where a constructivist approach grounded largely in Piagetian theory was favoured. Middle and senior classes, on the other hand, seemed to be guided by a constructivist theory but implemented a behaviourist practice. This situation was contradictory, in that constructivism provides descriptions of how individuals learn rather than prescriptions for how they should learn. A survey by INTO (1986 pp. 18-19) suggested that two-thirds of teachers reported spending more than half their time in whole-class teaching using didactic pedagogies, which would appear contrary to the 1971 Curriculum guidelines.

### **The 1999 curriculum**

The introduction of the 1999 revised New Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999) was preceded by several papers: the OECD's *Reviews of National Policies for Education* (Government of Ireland 1999); *Education for a Changing World: Green Paper on Education* (Government of Ireland 1992), and *Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education* (Government of Ireland 1995). The White Paper built upon the consultative processes following the National Education Convention in October 1993 (Government of Ireland 1995 p.1). The opening sentence on the section entitled 'Education and the State' (p.6) reads

The State's role in education arises as part of its overall concern to achieve economic prosperity, social well-being and a good quality of life within a democratically structured society.

(Government of Ireland 1995 p.6)

'Economic prosperity' and 'investment' are referred to, several times.

Economic activity is increasingly dependent on the knowledge and skills of people and their capacity to learn ... Thus investment in education is a crucial concern of the State to enhance Ireland's capacity to compete effectively in a rapidly changing international environment.

(op cit 1995 p.7)

A functionalist ideology appears to remain as an underlying principle of the philosophy of the 1999 curriculum.

I have already referred to how critical thinking is referred to in the Introduction, History and SPHE documents and how the idea of a teacher using her own critical awareness to promote her students' critical awareness is not addressed. Furthermore, although references appear about the need for discussion and for higher-order thinking skills in several places in the Curriculum handbooks and teacher guidelines, apart from the already cited SPHE exemplar 19 (SPHE Teacher guidelines Government of Ireland 1999 p.83) referring to seating children in a circle for discussion, there is no clear provision of contexts as to how these can be linked and implemented so as to allow children to engage in dialogue in conjunction with the fostering of critical awareness. The aims of the English/literacy document are specific in relation to language development and to cognition, but nowhere in the curricular documents can I find an acknowledgement of the child's capacity as an autonomous critical thinker.

In Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), the idea of 'thinking scientifically (predicting, hypothesising, evaluating and making cognitive connections)' is referred to. References to 'discussion' occur in strands of the geography and history sections. While this awareness of the linking of higher-order thinking and language is to be welcomed, I believe it stops short of addressing what I consider to be the real purpose of thinking in a classroom context: learning to think for oneself. I suggest that in our classroom discussions my students and I place a greater emphasis on learning how to think than what to think. We engage in non-violent and non-judgemental argument; we respect the rights of others and 'question answers rather than answer questions' (Chapter 7). We learn to view knowledge as something that we can co-create: we learn to learn, and to make good judgements.

### **Research contexts**

I now turn to a brief discussion of the external research contexts in which critical thinking and philosophy for children is placed.

Studies into philosophical enquiry with children include the following:



- In the USA: studies on philosophy for children and the community of enquiry movement have been carried out primarily by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC), Montclair State University, New Jersey see for example <http://cehs.montclair.edu/academic/iapc/research.shtml>
- In England: Robert Fisher in Brunel College, London; the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and reflection in Education (SAPERE) whose research can be accessed at <http://sapere.org.uk/research/>
- In Wales: Karin Murriss and Joanna Haynes have been the principal researchers into Philosophy for Children.
- In the University of Dundee, Scotland: Keith Topping evaluated the Thinking Through Philosophy programme (see Trickey and Topping (2004). The results of the Clackmannanshire Study (see [www.aude-educa.co.uk/others.htm](http://www.aude-educa.co.uk/others.htm) ) were widely reported in the media <http://sapere.org.uk/category/news/>
- (see also <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,2006734,00.html>)
- In Australia, studies conducted by Laurence Splitter of The Centre of Philosophy for Children and the Australian Council for Educational Research have been carried out into Philosophy For Children.
- In Ireland there are two completed PhD studies into Thinking Time (Donnelly 2005 and Russell, J. 2005) and several members of the Association of Teachers of Philosophy with Children (ATPC) have carried out research that led to the awarding of Masters Degrees (including my own MA study Roche 2000b).
- Studies have also been carried out in several European, South American and Asian countries (see Splitter and Sharp 1995 pp. 147-154).

The accumulated findings of the studies listed above attest to several phenomena in common:

- Improvement in performance in other curricular areas
- Improvement in ratio of pupil : teacher talk

- Improvement in teachers' level of skill in open-ended questioning
- Improvement in children supporting opinion with evidence
- Improvement in moral reasoning
- Improvement in discipline and behaviour
- Improvement in interpersonal skills
- Improvement in self-esteem
- Improvement in teacher/pupil relationships
- Improvement in the skills of dialogue
- Improvement in metacognitive abilities
- Statistical improvements in levels of pupils' verbal, non-verbal and quantitative reasoning (see Clackmannanshire study at: [www.aude-educa.co.uk/others.htm](http://www.aude-educa.co.uk/others.htm))

I question the 'measurability' of thinking or the quantitative assessment of the learning from dialogue. The improvements measured above seem to rely on what Hymer (2002 p.7) calls a 'fixation' with ranking and measuring.

However, although the many researchers have attested to the improvements in children's thinking, nowhere have I found a study into critical thinking, or Thinking Time, or Philosophy for Children, in which the researcher examines the improvement of her own practice, or the development of her own critical awareness, or of her own living theory of practice as she engages in transforming herself from being a propositional thinker into a more critical thinker through developing her dialogical pedagogies.

This is where I feel that my study will fill a lacuna in the research area, and will qualify my research as making an original and significant contribution to knowledge of my field.

## **Conclusion**

I have told in this chapter how I began to take action in my classroom to improve an unsatisfactory situation, which was to do with how my children were being silenced by my didacticism, and how I had also learned to be a silent and uncritical deliverer of a curriculum. I took action by informing myself critically through researching critical pedagogy literatures and literatures pertaining to the area of critical thinking. I developed programmes and pedagogies that would encourage critical thinking. I had not yet, however, begun to reflect critically on what I was doing as research. I still tended to see it as practice. Over time, however, and through critical engagement with my study group, I began to perceive my practice as a form of research, and developed an acute understanding of the need to offer explanations for practice, as much as descriptions of practice. This becomes the focus of the next three chapters. I saw how my practice had actually constituted three distinct though interrelated action-reflection cycles, and the accounts I now offer show how I am able to speak about the action I took, and also offer critical reflections on the significance of the actions themselves.

## Section 3

### *Chaos into order*

In this section I show how I am now able to theorise my practice, in the sense that I am able to offer coherent explanations for what, at the time, I understood only as practical action. Having reflected on the experience of being immersed in a confusing experience of trying to live in relation to my values, while not being clear about what was going on, both in myself and in the wider context, I am now able to see that I was in fact engaged in a systematic process of action reflection, and that there were distinct phases in the focus of my actions and the learning arising from those actions. I therefore organise my account as three chapters, each of which is the story of reflection on the actions I have recounted. Each chapter therefore constitutes an action reflection cycle. I aim to show how one cycle emerged out of the learning from the previous one, and transformed into new practices and new learning. In a sense then these next three chapters represent my meta-reflections on my action-reflection.

## Chapter 6

### ***Reflecting on Action: Action Reflection Cycle 1 – identity issues and beginning my research***

This chapter covers the period 2001–2002, the beginning years of my research. That period was characterised by considerable confusion and anxiety, as I tried to make sense of who I was and what I was supposed to be doing. I can see now, as I reflect on my practice, that I was struggling with issues of how I had been influenced by a range of factors, including dominant theories and normative assumptions, as communicated through the literatures, and how these had come to form my social understandings and my values. This was also a time when, inspired perhaps by my ‘curious spirit and my yearning for change’ (Ropers-Huilman 1999 p.21) I was working out a new professional identity (Sachs 1999). Sachs citing Kondo (1990) argues that identity is often context dependent:

In times of rapid change identity cannot be seen to be a fixed ‘thing’, it is negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous, the result of culturally available meanings and the open-ended power-laden enactment of those meanings in everyday situations.

(Kondo, 1990, p.24 in Sachs 1999 p.5)

This was my experience, as I struggled with moving from a practice of obedience, by trying to fit my practice into a predetermined framework set by others, to a critical practice, where I saw my practice as emergent and in relation to my own articulated educational values.

I can also locate my understanding against Wenger’s (1998) view that there is a profound connection between identity and practice: ‘Developing a practice requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another and thus acknowledge each other as participants’ (p.149). I can see now that initially I failed to acknowledge that my students and I formed a community of practice and I failed to ask critical questions of my context and my practice. This understanding is borne out by the evidence that my questions from this first Action Reflection cycle are mainly procedural and operational, and, were shaped by my earlier identity as a conforming

thinker. However, through my ongoing engagement with critical literatures, as outlined earlier, I had come to question the idea of universal or transparent truth. Now after five years of my study, I hold my knowledge lightly, and I have begun to recognise the uncertainty in the temporary and tentative nature even of my new knowledge.

### **Identity issues**

My story begins therefore with my reflections on my identity as I began my studies, and how this identity might have influenced why I stayed for so long at the procedural and operational stage of questioning. Some literatures of teacher identity suggest that past ideas of self can significantly influence present identity (Cooper and Olson 1996, Coldron and Smith 1999). This has relevance for my slow emergence as a critical thinker and my initial reluctance to challenge normative practices, including my own. Propositional knowledge prioritises objective know that and know how (Ryle 1949). I found it a comforting, if somewhat closed, world. I could look to ‘experts’ for answers. Now, I have come to the point where I incorporate the propositional into more dialectical forms of logic, in which there is a constant open interplay between questions and answers. This form of logic resonates more fully with the epistemological values that underpin my methodology and my pedagogies. I have developed a practice that integrates propositional and dialectical forms within a living inclusional form of logic (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006 p.39).

These understandings are new to me. They have emerged through my reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schön 1983), and are emerging even now, as I write this account, through what I call my ‘meta-reflection’ (my reflection-on-reflections) about the whole process of enquiry.

I have recounted above how the impetus for developing my capacity for critical thinking came from the two main influences of working with my study group, and changing schools. Here I frame the experience of the change of school as a reconceptualisation of my identity.

### **New school, new identity**

In 2001, at around the same time as I began this study, I took up a position teaching Junior Infants in a new mixed-gender school located in a middle-class suburb of Cork city. My study on philosophising with children (Roche 2000b) had been an influential

factor in my appointment (conversation with principal: research diary 21-11-01). My principal had expressed an interest in and support for the idea of classroom discussion and advised me that he wanted it ‘to be one of the core foundations of our educational policy’. It was my responsibility ‘to get all the teachers doing Thinking Time as soon as possible’ (Research diary 11-10-01). I was of course pleased.

... I am now going to work in a school where not only are my ideas about classroom discussion and critical thinking welcome, but they even seem to be crucial to the development of the school ethos and policy. (RD 11-11-01)

In my previous school apart from two supportive colleagues, my work had been largely met with derision. In my new institutional context, I felt that at last I was in a position to influence the ethos of my institution.

It was suggested at my interview in 2001 that, in time, I would be invited to help colleagues to get my ‘version’ of classroom discussion established in their own practice. While this was pleasing, however, the responsibility of putting a culture of classroom discussion formally into practice throughout a developing school eventually became a huge pressure. I felt an enormous sense of responsibility to ‘get it right’ because I was one of the founder members of the school. This meant that I did not try to look critically at my practice in the early stages of the study. The case was quite the opposite, because as it was my responsibility to ‘put critical thinking into school policy’, I became defensive about my practice of Thinking Time, and I certainly did not want to make any changes to a model that I felt ‘worked well’.

By November 2001, when I began in my new school, I had already started on the literature research of my study programme without any clear idea as to what I was studying. I had an idea that I wished to carry on from my MA research, so I set out to ‘investigate developing higher-order thinking skills in children’. This was the idea behind my proposal for the University of Limerick (Roche 2002b, see also ‘letters requesting permission to carry out research’, Appendices A. 2. and A. 4.). I decided to begin my field work within my own classroom and keep transcripts and detailed notes of all my weekly Thinking Time discussions. My aim initially was to develop as a reflective practitioner, as I investigated how I was teaching children to think critically.

The idea of ‘the reflective practitioner’ is well established in the literature. Ample advice exists about what a reflective practitioner is and how to be one. Here is a typical quotation.

Reflective practitioners think about their experiences in practice and view them as opportunities to learn. They examine their definitions of knowledge, seek to develop broad and multifaceted types of knowledge, and recognise that their knowledge is never complete. Reflective practitioners are concerned about the contexts of their practices and the implications for action. They reflect on themselves, including their assumptions and their theories of practice, and take action grounded in self awareness. Finally, reflective practitioners recognise and seek to act from a place of praxis, a balanced coming together of action and reflection.

(Kinsella 2001, in Procee 2006 p.237)

However, I quickly began to appreciate that being a reflective practitioner involves more than reading words and applying them to practice. It involves a real-world practice of becoming critical, and this practice is ongoing. As evidence of this position, I can say that my reflections now, at this ‘writing up’ stage of my study, are informed by a greater critical awareness than were my reflections during phase one of my study. In a sense I will always be reflecting on reflection-on-action (my idea of meta-reflection).

I am therefore using this thesis as a living example of what it means to become critical. For that purpose, wherever the document needs it, I will use two voices: Reflections 1 (reflections I made during the data gathering period) and **Reflections 2** (my current or meta-reflections upon the older reflections).

#### Reflections 2

Even as I write this, I am struck by the idea that, in speaking about ‘reflection’, I was making the assumption that the concept of ‘reflection’ is propositional. Perhaps I am working towards Whitehead’s (2004a) understanding that inclusional logics include propositional logics (reflective journal 24-07-06).

I can appreciate Procee’s (2006) propositional analysis of the concept of reflection:

...[there are] different levels of reflection - a technical, problem-solving level; a hermeneutic level focused on interpreting different views; and an epistemic, critical level that emphasizes analyzing fundamental points of reference.

(Procee 2006 p.239)



However, says Procee, the concept of reflection is ambiguous:

The concept remains elusive, is open to multiple interpretations, and is applied in a myriad of ways in educational and practice environments.

(op cit p.239)

I now believe that I went through several different forms of reflection during my three Action Reflection cycles. In Action Reflection cycle 1, my reflections could be said to be at a first-order technical, problem-solving level when I focused on offering descriptions of practice. In cycle 2, I began to ask more hermeneutic second-order questions, and began to offer explanations of practice. In cycle 3, I began to ask critical higher-order questions, and also began to integrate descriptions and explanations into the communication of my living theory of inclusional and democratic practice. This last type of critical reflection will be evident in my meta-reflective voice throughout these three cycles of action and reflection.

Some significant understandings came about for me through collaborative reflection with critical friends, in agreement with O'Hanlon (2003), who suggests that, in order to defend against 'hasty misjudgements' (p.114), discursive and interpretative feedback between the research participants is necessary:

It is in the research communication, conversation and discourse that interpretations are developed and confirmed through sharing of evidence, perceptions and ideas. Interpretative reflection can only emerge through dialogue. It needs communities of discursive practitioners to engage in dialogue on the crucial issues of inclusive practice.

(O'Hanlon 2003 p.115)

While I agree with O'Hanlon's interpretation here about the importance of collaborative reflection and discursive communities of practitioners, and I agree that interpretative reflection can emerge through dialogue, which includes dialogues with the self, as it emerges as a process of meta-reflection, I have found that through reflecting on my reflections over a period of time, I have created new understanding for myself. When I present this new understanding as a written text, further opportunities for reflection emerge which can then lead to new understanding.

### **Processes and analyses of Action Reflection Cycle One**

I wish to develop this idea of how reflecting on an experience, and analysing the reflection, can lead to improved insights about oneself and others. I bring this procedure to a description and analysis of the processes of undertaking Action Reflection Cycle 1.

Given that I began by accepting uncritically that the practice of Thinking Time was ‘a good thing’, my data archive from Action Reflection Cycle One consists of written transcripts of sixty-seven Thinking Time discussions on various topics, along with video and audio tapes of discussions with my students, my field notes and research diary, interviews and informal conversations with children and parents, interviews and informal conversations with colleagues and with critical friends, and email conversations with my supervisor. Data are also drawn from early attempts at writing my research account, from correspondence and from critical feedback of presentations in the wider teaching community (see appendices B. and C.).

The data from classroom discussions were collected mainly in my written transcriptions of what the children said. I also made several audio recordings and some video recordings of Thinking Time sessions and transcribed them later. Data are also provided in the form of observations of others who witnessed classroom discussions and several examples are included in my appendices (Appendix H).

The research questions I presented initially seem to be concerned with procedural and operational issues. This shows me two things:

- I did not fully understand my ontological stance in relation to the methodological assumptions of insider research and self-study;
- I did not appear to have an understanding of the ideas about the epistemological base of living theory.

However, I began my research assuming that I was doing self-study, and, having negotiated permissions, I set about monitoring the weekly Thinking Time discussions in what was, effectively, an outsider researcher mode.

The first few weeks were spent helping the children to get used to the idea of arranging their chairs in a circle. This was not without difficulties, and in my diary I wrote:

How can I do this better? Making space for a circle is difficult in the prefab. The children put their tables to the sides of the room. I lift half of the heavy tables upside down on top of those on the floor, to create space for the circle. The whole process is repeated in reverse afterwards. I am often hot and bothered by the time I begin the session. The children make quite a racket rearranging the furniture. There is only a thin partition between my classroom and next door... I am concerned about the noise. (RD 20-11-01)

I tried preparing the room during yard time: it's not really working out. The children are rarely finished their lunches in time before going to yard.

I also realise that I want the children to help get the room ready because I feel that it's an important part of the procedure: it gives them an organising role, and some ownership of the process. (RD 16-12-01)

## Reflection 2

A critical question now might be why all the fuss about making a circle. Why did I feel that a circle was an appropriate format for discussion? What is the underlying epistemological premise for a circle? I realise now that because I had been trained in the philosophy with children method of Thinking Time, I had accepted a circle format unquestioningly. Initially, perhaps, I acted out of some subconscious sense that resonated with my values of inclusion but I now understand that the circle allows for equality of position and facilitates eye contact and inter-personal relationships and dialogue. I now realise that I probably had absorbed this knowledge and embodied it without articulating it explicitly for myself.

It could be argued then, that it was personal knowledge that influenced me when I placed such emphasis on making space for a circle. I hadn't really given any thought to why I felt that a circle was appropriate other than an intuitive sense that it 'felt right' when Donnelly (1994) recommended it. Polanyi (1958) suggests that personal knowledge is developed through experience and strongly influences an individual's problem-solving approaches. Looking again at the journal entry above, I also see that it

tacitly acknowledges my embodied values around children as active participants, whereas the rest of the entries from that time seem concerned with management and control. This demonstrates that I was not fully sure of my ontological perspective and that while I had a tacit understanding of myself in relation with the children, this would frequently slip in favour of my more uncertain identity as a newcomer in the school.

Involving the children in preparing the room was a significant part of the process. Dunne (1995) speaks about the importance of engaging children in the decision-making processes of the classroom and refers to the hidden curriculum of the school as ‘the ways in which it constructs the role of pupil’ (Dunne 1995, in Carr 2005 p.154). I believe that I was conscious of a need to give my children the opportunity to be active participants in classroom decision-making processes.

When I spoke about the hassle of getting the circle ready a colleague asked why I bothered. ‘Surely you could have a class discussion without all that fuss? Leave them in their ordinary places!’ I defended the circle format by explaining that in their ‘regular’ places, norms had probably already been formed by the children and I around classroom discourse, such as certain children always dominating and others always staying silent. I said that I felt the circle interrupted norms of classroom culture and was a more democratic form. (RD conversation with D 13-12-01)

I believe that I had a foundation of values of freedom, care and justice for my practice, but my appreciation of these values was often muddled by more mundane identity issues. Because I was determined that my Thinking Time discussions would go well, I did not dream when writing my diary that I would ever ‘make my angst public’ (Mellor 2001 p.479). However, by the time I came to writing up this document, I realised that in order to be truthful, and to avoid my report being considered a victory narrative (Stronach and MacLure 1997) I would need to show how often my research almost foundered. I felt too that perhaps my struggle would be helpful to other practitioners. I can now relate to Mellor’s (2001) understanding.

... it is refreshing to find thoughtful writings ...that vividly portray the intellectual and emotional struggles that researchers face when they are truly concerned about truth value and ethical behaviour in their work although it is rare that authors share their angst publicly.

(Mellor 2001 p.479)

In spite of organisational problems I persevered with Thinking Time in my own classroom but the difficulty of influencing others to try the practice of Thinking Time

remained. I was concerned with for example, that, until we moved into spacious permanent classrooms, my colleagues might well reject the whole idea of Thinking Time because of the tedium of moving furniture around. I countered that by enthusiastically sharing stories of practice with colleagues and encouraging them to take their children out of their regular school places and form a circle. My concerns about my possible over-enthusiasm were allayed when a colleague said:

... after listening to your stories, I really wanted to try Thinking Time out for myself. I could see how much you believed in it and were getting so much from it. (Research diary: conversation with R 16-10-05, Appendix B.1. i.)

Coldron and Smith (1999) say that sharing accounts of practice may add to teachers' repertoires.

At a time when there seems less space for choice by teachers and the personal dimension is diminished by competence models, it is especially important to affirm the significance of each teacher's art, and to examine how teachers may be able to plot their paths between creativity and control.

(Coldron and Smith 1999 p.723)

McDermott and Richardson (2005) refer to how thoughtful conversation between teachers 'will both catch and create a reality of teaching from the teachers' perspective and encourage a conscious shaping of future teaching situations in line with the best experiences of the past' (p.32). This is borne out elsewhere, for example in Clark (2001). Clark suggests that authentic conversation is about 'making sense of and articulating our own experiences, implicit theories, hopes, and fears, in the intellectual and emotional company of others whom we trust' (p.177). He argues that while 'the heart of conversational learning for teachers is about ourselves' (p.177) 'a conversation group, in the best of circumstances becomes a social context for doing the work of reflective practice' (p.180). I realise now that, by inviting colleagues to share in my accounts of practice rather than prescriptively lecturing them about the idea of doing classroom discussion, I was living out one of my values – that of the importance of care in relations with others, while recognising the essential role of dialogue in forming caring relationships and developing community. This aspect has some relevance, I believe, for my claim to be contributing to the education of the social formation of my

institution through my educative influence (Roche 2005), although I had not articulated it for myself during the early stages of my research.

Bourdieu (1990), among others, presents the idea of social formations as people coming together in different social contexts. Whitehead (2001, 2003, 2004a) speaks of the education of social formations when he refers to people in groupings come to understand their own processes of working together. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) maintain that the process of the education of social formations begins with 'each participant learning to recognise themselves as 'other to the other' (p.34). When I say that I now believe that I have contributed to the education of the social formation of my school, I am referring to my understanding of the way in which I perceive myself as one in relation with all the others in my classroom and in my institution, and to whom I am yet another 'other'. Given this understanding of the other, I am referring also to how I believe I have contributed to the learning of others in my institution and their understanding that I have helped them to learn something. In return, I have learned from their comments and suggestions and this has added to the improvement of my practice.

One of the key aspects is that working together is far from unproblematic: it involves negotiating meanings and working through the conflict of respecting that other people think in different ways and have different values. (RD email from J March 2005)

In my practice both with my colleagues and with my students I now understand the education of social formations to be about how we have learned from one another, and how we bring that learning to our work in other contexts. The data (below) demonstrate that although initially my motives for sharing my accounts with colleagues were part of a policy agenda, I have realised the capacity of individual practitioners to influence their own practices, with the potential of influencing organisational structures.

I was amazed by what my infants knew! I've been teaching infants for years and I suppose I just never let them talk enough before. The stuff they said about their souls... amazing! I couldn't believe they knew all that! (RD extract from conversation with ML 08-03-05, Appendix B.1. f.)

Mary introduced me to the concept of Thinking Time in a casual conversation. I was immediately interested: children thinking laterally and creatively, speaking in turn and listening to each other: I wanted to know more! ... I listened to Mary talk about her class, ways in which she facilitated the setting up of the circle etc. Through these discussions I picked up many ideas that I later tried out in my own classroom. (RD, email from RL 06-03-05, Appendix B.1. i.)

(These data are representative of thirteen similar comments from my data archive. See also Appendices B.1.a. to B.1.m.).

### **Creating new rules and norms**

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) comment on how social situations are manufactured by the people who inhabit them:

A social context is not a free-standing entity, but comprises people who make decisions about how they should think and act. Sometimes these decisions become solidified into accepted rules and structures, and sometimes the rules and structures take on a life of their own, and rise above the heads of the people who made them in the first place (Habermas 1987). People come to serve the rules, rather than have the rules serve them, and see the rules no longer as temporary answers, which were appropriate for a particular situation at a particular time, but as fixed norms.

(McNiff and Whitehead 2006 p.168)

I believe my work is significant for enabling others to revision their identities, as I have done, and to use their knowledge to create new forms of rules and practices that show how they can live their values in their practice. Our school was unusual because it had started from a 'green-field' situation, and therefore provided a creative space for such revisioning. We were endeavouring to put in place structures that had the potential to initiate traditions, practices and discourses as a foundational ethos as the norms of our community. I wanted to contribute to a culture of openness and critique. This gave rise to my early intent to 'perfect my model' of Thinking Time and communicate it to my colleagues. I saw nothing problematic here.

Here is my subsequent reflection on my self-identity and positioning of that time.

#### **Reflection 2**

This shows me now that I had little understanding of the asymmetrical nature of the power structures I was creating. Although I had negotiated with colleagues that I would include them in my research process as collaborators, I think now

that I really had not understood how this would involve negotiating the balance of voices raised (O’Hanlon 2003) in my research process.

When I decided to share my practice with colleagues, I was sharing *my* model of practice. Although I had adapted Donnelly’s (1994) methodology to suit my practice (Roche 2000b), I was not conscious of the need to allow my colleagues to develop *their* own style of doing Thinking Time: I felt there was a ‘right’ way, and I ‘knew’ it and would ‘transmit’ it. I realise that I was actually a living contradiction of my values on several fronts.

My data show that initially I was concerned more with the facilitation of discussion circles than with critiquing my practice in relation to my values. My solutions focused on prescription and ‘Othering’ as shown in this data extract:

I’m struggling to ‘perfect’ my model of Thinking Time. I’ve started by monitoring who spoke and who didn’t and who should not sit with/opposite whom. I feel sorry about breaking up a little clique of boys who insist on sitting together and distract each other. I discovered that I could not allow R to sit opposite T because they make each other collapse with giggles.

...The thin partition means that if the class next door begin singing or doing any other loud activity, my children get distracted. I often have to abandon the Thinking Time and reassemble the classroom furniture again.

However most initial sessions went really well and I transcribed all the discussions and gathered lots of data in relation to them. (RD 07-12 -01)

Over the years of doing Thinking Time I have learned to write quickly in a type of personally developed shorthand so I wrote down what the children said and typed it up as soon as possible afterwards. I audio-recorded several sessions and made plans for videoing some. P, a non-teaching member of staff, was available to record the first one.

The episode was a nightmare: I was so tense, some children acted up for the camera waving and messing. 6 children failed to speak at all ... This was not supposed to happen! This was not how I had planned the session.



I felt inadequate in front of P who looked bemused by the process. My feelings were compounded by the fact that her son was in my class. There were also several interruptions: milk arrived, children from another class came looking for some art materials ... in the end I cut the session short. (RD 20-02-02)

Reflection 2:

From those data excerpts it is clear to me now that at that time I saw myself as a teacher who should have a well managed and quiet classroom. If my class were noisy or inattentive I felt guilty: I thought my 'performance' as a teacher might be suspect. Despite my years of experience I had been persuaded to think that a quiet class was a good class. I felt the same fear of 'adverse reaction' (without any grounds for it) that I used to feel in my previous school.

It would appear from my data that I was more concerned with appearances and superficial aspects of classroom discussion than with the discussions themselves.

The critical questions I did not think to ask myself include:

Why did I merely 'count' how many children 'failed to speak' in the first data excerpt? (and why do I use the term 'failed' here?)

Why did I feel it was relevant that I note who spoke and who didn't?

What does this tell me now about my attitude to silence in a child?

Reading the diary extracts now from a distance of four years, I am conscious that there appears to be a tension between the ontological and pedagogical perspectives in my statement that 'I feel sorry about breaking up a clique of little boys who insist on sitting together and distract each other'. It appears to indicate some awareness of my epistemological commitment to a more inclusive dialogical form of knowledge, while the phrase 'I feel sorry about' appears to indicate that I had an awareness of something being not quite fair about that action. I cared about the well-being of my students and I wanted them to enjoy their discussions. However, as I asserted my control over them in trying to manage the classroom discussion times too precisely; I see that I ran the risk of achieving the opposite. I wanted my children to have the freedom and the space to

dialogue; I wanted to bring about a more just and equitable teacher-student relationship, yet now, on reflection, I see that despite trying to bring about an improvement in my practice I was still a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989a). I just did not seem able to trust in my practice sufficiently to let the children be free to be themselves rather than some image of themselves that I had constructed for them. In the episode where I tried to have the discussion videoed I believe I was taking on too much too quickly: I was new, the children were still not completely at ease with me, they had had two teachers before me in their first 10 weeks of school. I should have relaxed and enjoyed talking with the children, maybe not even being concerned about data capture, just enjoying the interpersonal relationship and allowing trust and 'safety' to build up.

I encountered several difficulties, not least my own lack of confidence around my practice. I was conscious that in my new institutional context, my three colleagues had high standards of professionalism. At times I lost confidence and became fearful that I had been mistaken in considering my discrete classroom discussion circles an innovative practice and that facilitating them was in fact causing disruption. However, I did persevere with Thinking Time, and gradually my confidence in the programme as a means of establishing a culture of dialogue in my classroom was restored.

I learned two important lessons from reflecting on the data above: the first is how my identity was bound up with doing Thinking Time and the second is how normalised I had been into dominant ideas around what constitutes a 'good' classroom. I realise now that making noise, or requesting the next door class to schedule a quiet activity for the duration of my Thinking Time sessions would not have been a problem: there was such goodwill and collegiality among the staff that every effort would have been made to accommodate me. With hindsight, I believe that my previous years in a non-collegiate context negatively influenced my self-confidence. I was also conscious at that time that I wanted my colleagues to view Thinking Time in a positive light. I completely and uncritically believed in Thinking Time as a method of classroom discussion. As part of my identity it had become a means of presenting myself and my work to others (Mellor 1999 p.170). Now I felt that if I were to complain about any aspect of it I might influence my colleagues to view it negatively, and this upset me. I wrote towards the end of my first year:

I desperately want to make Thinking Time a success. In a way I wish I could be left alone to carry on with it in my own classroom and not have to be responsible for putting it formally into school policy. I would much rather gradually and informally invite teachers who think like I do, to share in the practice and not have to be prescriptive. (RD 22-05-02)

#### Reflection 2

The seeds of a critical stance against propositional thinking and prescription are demonstrated here. At the time I did not perceive it as such. I now believe that I was drawing on an intuitive recognition that being invitational about sharing my practice was more commensurate with my values. As time went on I also became aware of the paradox of wanting to preserve my Thinking Time methodology while simultaneously becoming fearful of creating norms and rules which would be difficult to change in light of future self-evaluation. However, my outsider researcher stance is also clearly evident as I reify 'Thinking Time' as an 'it'.

The value of care that I articulated in previous chapters is a value that links care to justice. I care about my students as people and so I want them to experience an educative experience that is inclusive and democratic. Perhaps I was experiencing what Carr (2005), drawing on Van Manen (1990), suggests is a betrayal of caring responsibility

It seems that we constantly betray the call of caring responsibility in our efforts to be caring in the general sense of duty ... Effective practice is not the primary reason to remain open to the ethical demand. Also important is that caring in this deeper sense is the source for every other kind of caring.

(Carr 2005 pp.226-7)

In the data excerpts above, I can see that I was demonstrating a value of care. However, it was a self-focused care about my practice and how it looked to others: I cared about my identity as a 'good' teacher. I cared about being a researcher and gathering 'good' data; I cared about how I appeared to observers rather than about the well-being of the students; I cared about not upsetting other teachers by making noise. In short, my 'caring' priorities were in disarray.

The next extract also seems to emphasise that I was situating my value of caring justice in a secondary position to that of caring about my own identity.

I can clearly see [from research journal entries] that I am extremely vulnerable in relation to my personal identity being bound up with that of my teacher identity to the extent that if my class make noise, I worry that I will be judged and found wanting. I seem to be vesting a lot of personal identity into my practice. This is interesting. Why can I not de-centre from my work and see it professionally? Why am I so vulnerable in relation to how I am perceived by colleagues? Is this a legacy from my previous workplace conditioning? (RD 22-05-02)

Reflecting on these early journal entries, I was tempted to dismiss them as being irrelevant but, reading Mellor (1998), I understood that ‘the fuzziness and disorder of the real world, and my attempts to find a way to explore it’ (Mellor 1998 p.455) can help to clarify the research process:

I hope later to explore how far the notion that honesty, in the sense of exposing confusions, side-tracks etc. may add to the credibility of a report, following Atkinson et al 1991. ...The question is, does research suffer or benefit from bringing these front stage? Measor and Woods (1991) argue that such accounts are important in that they offer the reader “more material through which to interpret the study.” (p.79)

(Mellor 1998 footnote 6 p.468)

Like Mellor (1999) I began to wish I were doing an inquiry which would allow me to interrogate my practice of Thinking Time as my method of developing classroom discussion, but not necessarily change it. Thinking Time was a technique I was ‘good at undertaking’ (Schön, 1983 p.318). I saw it as being the kernel of living to my value of providing my students with time for talking and thinking in my practice. I saw no irony in the fact that it was a kernel of dialogic practice surrounded by a hard shell of didactic practice. In fact, as I will later show (Chapter 7) I felt it somehow counteracted my other didactic practices.

From the start I was a very committed ‘believer in the ... method’ ... For me, this was not simply a belief of the kind where I might believe a particular piece of information to be true. This was a vital aspect of my work, an aspect which gave me purpose. ... it was part of how I viewed myself ... It was an identity... (Mellor 1999 pp.171-2)

I could identify closely with Mellor. His faith in his particular working method had also become bound up with his identity. Mellor’s articulation of his struggle helped me to

articulate my ideas about how my identities as a new researcher and newcomer in my school had influenced the first action reflection cycle of my study. I too was ‘a believer in a method’, in my case the method of Thinking Time, where I would bring out the best in my students in discussions.

#### Reflection 2

The phrase ‘bringing out the best in my students in discussions’ now strikes me as being problematic. What did I mean by it? I think that what I meant was something to do with having my students ‘perform’ well for my data.

Again it appears that my ontological and epistemological commitments were in transition. I seem to be a spectator of my students’ actions, trying to make my data fit a hypothesis. Bourdieu (1990) speaks about how reality is often modelled in a way that makes the model more real than the lived reality. Perhaps I was trying to make my model of the reality of doing classroom dialogue become a reality while at the same time being fearful that the reality of my model was itself becoming another reality. Perhaps too, that is why I was reluctant to prescribe to colleagues. I could not say why I knew this was inappropriate at the time. I thought it was a fear of being overly prescriptive. I wanted a ‘perfect’ methodology and I wanted others to share in it, but I didn’t want to lecture others on it: I wanted instead to invite them to see for themselves how ‘perfect’ it could be, and maybe try it out in their own contexts. However, from my regular critical encounters with my colleagues in the University study group, and my reading around issues of critical pedagogy I was also slowly coming to a realisation that more than a formula for facilitation was needed, that had to do with the idea of being a thinker rather than having a set of thinking skills. In other words, the seeds of my living theory were here except I did not recognise them then.

In light of Mellor’s (1998, 2001) explanations about bringing backstage issues to the fore, I read over my notes and wondered if my early journal ramblings had any significance. I researched literatures of teachers’ identity (Coldron and Smith 1999, T. Day 2005, C. Day *et al.* 2006, MacLure 1993, Nias 1989, Sachs 1999) to see if I could find further clarity around my confusion.

Teachers, especially ...beginning ..., may more readily identify with the craft tradition. ... Their professional self-esteem is closely connected with the skills

of class management and control. Similarly, the confidence of the most experienced and successful teacher can be sapped by a class that proves unmanageable. They fear that they have 'lost their touch.'

(Coldron and Smith 1999 p.722)

The issue of identity proved complex: I was not a 'beginning' teacher in Coldron and Smith's sense (above), unless my position as newcomer in the school could be viewed as the beginning of a new identity as both a researcher and as a teacher. In many literatures of teachers' identities (Coldron and Smith 1999, C. Day *et al.* 2006, Nias 1989) identity is considered to be socially and biographically situated, and MacLure (1993) suggests that teachers' perceptions of the context and community in which they work can become central to their professional identity (pp.314-6). MacLure (*op cit*) also contends that identity should not be seen as a stable entity that people have but as something that they use to make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate (p.312). Also, because my research was action research, it was central to my life; it was bound up with the notion of potential and a moral commitment to improvement in a socially just sense and this too influenced my feelings about the research process and my practice of doing classroom discussion. Mellor (1999) suggests that the identity of being a professional and a researcher is not simply an abstract notion, or a qualification. It is, he suggests, 'central to the lived experience of working life' (p.17).

My identity in 2001 then, was enmeshed in ideals of trying to improve the quality of social justice in my school, and attempting to improve my practice and make children's school experience more participative, while trying simultaneously to prove I was worthy of hire despite being 'an older teacher'. This has relevance for my study because for the first two years, as I searched for a research question, I spent an inordinate amount of time justifying the methods and procedures of Thinking Time to myself and others, but not critiquing it objectively and honestly. I had been deeply affected by the experience of working for many years in a context where my practice of doing Thinking Time had been largely ignored, and even disparaged by some colleagues. My confidence as an experienced and successful teacher had been sapped, not by a 'class that proved unmanageable' (Coldron and Smith 1999 p.722) but by my experiences in an institutional context which resulted in what Andy Hargreaves (1994 p.171) called the

‘cult of individualism’ to which, he says, teachers resort in order to survive in non-collegiate contexts.

Coldron and Smith (1999) also assert that a new teacher in the process of establishing himself or herself in a school makes choices and works hard to achieve what an outsider might describe as socialisation into the school culture (p.724). I concur with this analysis. In my case I made a deliberate choice to try to demonstrate that I was worthy of the trust that I had something to offer the school in terms of my learning about classroom dialogue. I did not stop to ask why classroom dialogue was ‘a good thing’ or what I was achieving in terms of improved understanding of my practice.

### **Encountering dilemmas**

C. Day *et al.* (2006) suggest that teachers’ professional identities are not always secure. During different life and career episodes, they say, a teacher’s identity can be fragmented in the continuing struggle to achieve stability. They suggest that the professional has been described as ‘mobilizing a complex of occasional identities in response to shifting contexts’ (p.613) which occur in the space between the exercise of personal agency on the structures of the relationships between power and status. The interaction between these influences how teachers see their personal and professional identities (C. Day *et al.* 2006 p.613). These ideas are relevant for my study because, without the confidence of my sense of agency, I was unable to be objective enough to be a self-critical critical thinker. Furthermore, C. Day *et al.* (op cit) argue that ‘professionalism is bound up in the discursive dynamics of professionals attempting to address or redress the dilemmas of the job within particular cultures’ (p.614). I agree with this analysis and found it to be the case in my early practice.

The first of these ‘dilemmas of the job’ presented itself quickly.

<p>My principal wants the professional development in relation to Thinking Time put on a more formal footing. I believe he thinks I am too casual in wanting to share accounts of practice informally with colleagues. He wants me to start providing in-house in-service to ‘get them up and running: kick start the process so that everyone will begin doing it.’ (RD 20-03-02)</p>
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I was hesitant about adopting prescriptive practices, despite the fact that initially I too wanted everybody doing Thinking Time ‘my’ way, as I explained earlier. Now I

experienced tension between delight (that my ideas were accepted to the extent I was asked to disseminate them institutionally) and concern (about the potential impact on interpersonal relationships by my being positioned as instructor).

My overarching unease however, was to do with the prescriptive nature of ‘instructing’ colleagues and the risk of assuming ‘expertise’ and thereby immersing them too quickly in a practice which had taken me many years to understand, and about which I was still learning. I also felt considerable reticence about presenting publicly to a group of peers. I was concerned to maintain cooperative relationships with colleagues who were co-researchers:

Because I have already negotiated permission from colleagues about their cooperation in my study, I fear that they will misunderstand my motives in providing in-service and perceive me to be just feathering my own professional nest at their expense. (RD 26-03-04)

After reflecting for a long time, I began to see the duelling tensions inherent in that data excerpt: I was concerned both with how I would be viewed by colleagues and about how my values were being challenged. Increasingly my resistance to being prescriptive arose as I began to articulate my values explicitly.

In an earlier draft of this thesis (Roche 2004b) I worked through and arrived at an articulation of my value of respecting others as individuals who have the capacity and the right to think for themselves. Honesty is important to me and I felt uncomfortable with the idea of compelling colleagues to adopt a practice just because my principal and I believed in it. Mellor’s (1999) work again resonated:

An important aspect ... would be ... honesty about “mistakes”, diversions, dead-ends etc. As Devereux (1967) describes “it took me more than three decades to fight my way through the tangle of my own preconceptions, anxieties and blind spots, to whatever truths this book may contain” (p. xiv). He discusses these blind spots openly and has the courage to celebrate them “the admission of one’s human limitations is not only not self-degrading but actually useful.”

(Mellor 1999 p.42)

I suggested to my principal that I felt it might be more effective to have an invitational style. I posited the idea that if teachers feel coerced into a practice into which they have not fully bought or do not fully understand, then the whole idea might backfire. I also felt that the notion of being *compelled to do critical thinking* was paradoxical. (RD 26-03-04)



From my reflections on my diary entries it is clear that in those first two years I was concerned with wanting to develop an affirming and relational model of professional development in my new institution that, unlike my previous school, would encourage educational discourse that was future oriented ‘open and potentiating’ (Bowie 1993, cited in McDermott and Richardson 2005 p.31). Yet I was apprehensive about appearing to ‘push’ my model of practice at colleagues. It was confusing. At times I was living to my values while simultaneously denying them.

A significant and ongoing part of being a teacher, then, is the experiencing and management of strong emotions. ... the emotional climate of the school and classroom will affect attitudes to and practices of teaching and learning... this dimension of identity has been given relatively little attention in much of the research.

(C. Day et al. 2006 p.612)

I had to remind myself of what I knew about educative relationships as characterised by care and the capacity to recognise the individuality and originality of mind and spirit of the other (McNiff 2002 p.7) and my commitment to living my value of freedom in respecting the rights of others to think for themselves, including those who disagree with me. I reminded myself about how ‘this very value can present difficulties, and educative relationships can sometimes present a challenge for educational practice’ (McNiff 2002 p.7). Initially, I perceived my dilemma in terms of a binary dualism: either I was right or my principal was, I thought. I reasoned then that by default one of us had to be wrong. I failed to see it as a contest of two rights: my principal’s right as leader of the staff group to direct our school in accordance with his values (and the expectation that I, as one of ‘his’ staff members would comply), and my right to work in a way that was appropriate for me and commensurable with my values. In feeling miserable about the apparent clash of epistemologies in our respective stances, I failed to see its positive aspect – that we were both trying to achieve the same vision, but by different methodologies, as these were grounded in dissimilar ontological and epistemological standpoints.

### **Early Thinking Time episodes: successes and non-successes**

Despite these organisational worries, I was encouraged by the responsiveness of the children in Thinking Time (see selection of transcripts in Appendices C.1. to C.9.). I also began to experience feedback that was encouraging:

Parents have started to comment about the discussions: M's mother said that he looks forward to Thinking Time each week.

KR's mother said she 'likes this way of learning for her daughter' and asked to see some of the transcripts. She wants to send them to K's grand father in Bangalore, in India.

So the children (and their parents) seem to be enthusiastic and I also look forward to the weekly sessions. (RD 06-05-02)

Before beginning philosophy with children I had often asked questions in class but mostly from a position of establishing whether or not the children were paying attention. I had been frequently been guilty of relying on the monological technique of Initiation-Response-Evaluation (Cazden 1988) – a technique I now understand as located in logics of control. Now, I began to ask more open-ended questions and encouraged the children to challenge some of the assumptions in their rhymes and folktales. I now see this change in practice as evidence for my transformation to a more dialogical form of logic.

For example, instead of asking my four-year-olds how many colours were in Humpty Dumpty's trousers or how many buttons were on his shirt, I began to invite the children to explore why he was up on the wall at all. With such open-endedness all the answers hazarded by the children had the potential to be 'right' and many theories were put forward.

D: Maybe he had short little legs and he couldn't see over the wall.

E: Maybe his Dad lifted him up.

Me: Do you think he knew he was an egg?

R: He might have been trying to see what was making all the noise.

S: It's actually very stupid for an egg to go climbing walls.

D: Yeah well, how do you know? Maybe it's like teacher said, maybe he didn't know he was an egg. (RD 07-02-02)

At this time I began to compile a resource bank of materials for use by all staff members. The topics for our classroom discussions were wide-ranging and came from different sources such as poems, picture books, photographs, questions asked by children in the course of curricular work. Sometimes I would read a story, such as The

Little Red Hen (16-01-02), and we would discuss any aspect of it that captured the children's attention.

I will now use that particular story as a representational device for many similar transcribed discussions. Following my reading of the story the children did not suggest an idea with which to begin, so I opened the discussion with the question, 'I wonder why the Little Red Hen's friend refused to help her?' In my research diary I noted that 'the children took the question very seriously':

R: Well, maybe they weren't friends, not really friends.

H: I wonder did they have a fight ...before the book... maybe they had a big fight and now they're not talking to her.

C: Yeah the Chicken might be too bossy.

CY: Maybe they don't know how to do those jobs...they might be scared of doing it bad ...

KH: I think maybe the man in the ...place...the mill ...might be a giant and he would cut off their heads snip snap with a carving knife and they were scared.

*The discussion continued with each child adding his or her reason for Little Red Hen's dilemma and then it came to my turn again and I said:*

Me: I wonder ... what does friendship mean anyway?

C: See, if someone lets you play with them – that's your friend.

CY: Or if someone likes you.... he is your friend.

T: Friends are kids that your Mum lets you play with.

RA: You aren't scared of friends ... but you're scared of strangers.

M: Me and my friends share and sometimes they fight, and we won't be playing for a little bit but they're still my best friends. (RD 16-01-02)

In my diary I also wrote:

Nearly all the children spoke. They seemed interested in the topic and didn't want the discussion to stop when the time was up. K still 'passes' each time: today he looked as though he might be going to speak and then passed. (RD 16-01-02)

I include this excerpt for a number of reasons:

First, it is representative of my data gathering around classroom discussions. Again, I thought all I had to do was set aside discrete time for discussion, sit the children in a

circle, choose a topic that interested them and a discussion would start. I would note in my journal who spoke, whose 'input' into the discussion impressed me and who 'passed'. Looking at the data now from the perspective of distance I can see several aspects which show a lack of critique, a lack of care, a lack of awareness of injustice on my part and a denial of the freedom of the children.

For example, despite being aware that the children did not 'want the discussion to stop,' I see now that I ignored their wishes in favour of my management priorities. I saw no problem in stopping the children from carrying on with a discussion that they were enjoying: my organisational self decided time was up and without negotiation I used my teacher power to decide what we would do next. I was certainly not living out my values of justice and care in my anxiety to get the next timetabled item underway.

I can see now too that there was little reflection on what was happening, just record keeping. I did not challenge myself as to why I felt that any of the discussion data was worthy of recording, or why I felt that merely providing some time for the children to talk was enough. I felt that by assiduously adopting the methodology of Thinking Time I did not have to think very much about the procedure because it was already established as a methodology and I had 'proved' to myself that it 'worked' from my earlier MA study (Roche 2000b).

Now as I analyse my data from the first research cycle, I notice the discrepancies between my espousal of insider research and an enquiry approach to knowledge creation, while at the same time propositionally accepting a 'template' for a thinking programme and 'applying' it to my practice. I also see that my practical judgements were being informed by a form of logic in which I saw Thinking Time as a reified 'thing' that I would apply in my classroom to my students, irrespective of their ideas. I saw it as a 'solution' to a problem rather than, perhaps, a living enabling process that could help me to live more in harmony with my values.

Second, my data show no explicit effort to establish whether I was living to my values of care, freedom and justice, except perhaps to the idea of allotting some discrete time for classroom discussion. I now believe that had I critiqued my practice and tested it against some living standards of judgement I might have recognised that by actually overcoming organisational and confidence issues and persisting with doing the

discussions, I was (albeit tacitly) attempting to live to values of care, freedom and justice in employing pedagogies that I felt were inclusive and democratic. However, during this data gathering stage, once the children were talking and seemed to be what I had previously referred to as ‘philosophising’ (Roche 2000b), I was fairly satisfied with what was happening.

The data excerpt shows that the children were certainly ‘thinking well together’, to use some of the criteria I employed in my MA dissertation (Roche 2000b p.64) and thinking critically. I saw that my students were hypothesising, reflecting through using the terms ‘perhaps’ and ‘I wonder’, building on their own past experience (knowledge) to make judgements and new knowledge, and so I was content.

I can see now with the benefit of hindsight and a more critical reflection ability that our discussions were open, fair and democratic, in that I did not force the children to speak and did not criticise those who chose not to speak. I waited my turn to take part and tried to be as non-judgemental as possible, in that I tried not to infer from my body language or facial expression that I favoured one child’s contribution over another. But until I identified my standards of judgement, it took me several more years before I could explicitly recognise that some values were embodied in my practice even then.

Third, when I asked myself ‘what did I learn by looking at that data excerpt?’ and ‘how can I improve future practice by examining that data?’, I felt during those first two years, that I did not learn much more than the evident aspects of my practice. I saw, for example, that the children were adept at providing reasons for their answers. I saw that there was evidence of moral and critical reasoning in that discussion and in other discussions. It was evident too, that while some of the children had a grasp of what friendship involved, others had little understanding of the concept. They showed that they understood how friendship can be put at risk by ‘bossiness’, and by misunderstanding. However, while my learning from the dialogue was significant for my practice, it did not build much onto what I had already learned during my MA study.

I failed to see many of the significant aspects of my practice with those Junior Infants, including the fact that they were four and a half years old, yet were able confidently to create knowledge and meaning together. They were active participants in dialogue,

learning to listen as well as to speak. In my diary I noted that ‘A has a theory about catching robbers;’ that ‘K’s first words were in a Thinking Time session one day for the first time after seven months of elective mutism;’ that K R’s granddad in Bangalore was being sent transcripts of the dialogues by KR’s Mum and that he was charmed that I had described his granddaughter as ‘very lyrical in her language’ without realising that her grandfather was a poet; that C had impressed her father with her calm reasoning skills and her use of ‘I disagree, Dad because...’; that R requested that we do a Thinking Time about bread because it was ‘so interesting’. My data archive contains many instances of such remarkable occurrences.

I am also aware now, but took for granted at the time, that I did not tell the children what to think or try to influence what they said. My influence was in encouraging them to think for themselves by critiquing the story of the Little Red Hen and by providing a context within the school day for doing so. Despite my focus on classroom organisation and my uncertain identity, I see now that I was actually embodying some of my values in my practice, as demonstrated in the following journal excerpt about a discussion on rainbows (25-05-02).

When I later typed up the transcript of this discussion and reflected on what had transpired I began to wonder about what the children said, not just in this discussion but in all our discussions. For instance this excerpt from a discussion on rainbows:

A: A rainbow’s got only happy colours.

C: I know the answer to D’s question! It’s an upside down smile. And I know that you can see it the right way up in Australia because my auntie lives there. I think the sky is smiling because the rain is gone. And I think clouds hate being grey because it’s boring.

B: I disagree. Clouds and the sky don’t feel. I think it’s just because the rain has washed the sky and the sun lets us see lots of bright colours.  
(RD 25-05-02)

When I looked at my learning from that episode I saw some of its potential implications for future action. I wrote:

C is, as usual, quite dogmatic; B seems to have the beginnings of scientific thinking that sunlight and rain are both involved in making rainbows. I have a better idea of what kind of a thinker B is. I can use that knowledge to try to make science more interesting for her. I need to encourage C to be more diplomatic - useful for SPHE ...

I have a germ of an idea about how Thinking Time can support the curriculum rather than be an 'add-on.' (25-05-02)

That 'germ of an idea' later translated into the notes for a week-long summer in-service course for teachers (see Appendix A.8.). I also began to recognise the significance of the episodes for my own learning. For example, reflecting in 2004 on my journal entries from this first cycle of the study I wrote:

#### Reflections 1

Where do these ideas originate I wonder? Did I influence them? Did I communicate them to the children? No, I just provide a context in which to voice their ideas. I don't tell them what to say or what to think. These ideas are all their own: they came to this knowledge themselves.

All I've done is to open up a space to let them tell each other their stories and display their knowledge and make new knowledge together. ...they seem to build on what each other say and learn together: that bears out Vygotsky's (1962) idea of the social construction of knowledge and his theory of the 'zone of proximal development' in that the articulate children seem to scaffold the less able children who learn from them and acknowledge that they share a similar thought without having to articulate it by saying 'Yeah' or 'I agree'. (RD 06-09-04)

However, I did not immediately see the significance in the words 'All I've done is to open up a space to let them tell each other their stories and display their knowledge and make new knowledge together' for my own practice, as well as its potential for wider educational practice and even for the greater social good of having children think for themselves and generate their own knowledge. It also took some time for my realisation that 'Thinking Time could support the curriculum rather than be an add-on discrete area' to filter through my consciousness. This in fact would later become a key aspect of my living theory of practice.

#### **A critical episode**

A transcript on beauty encouraged further reflection on how classroom discussion can open up opportunities for developing the affective domain of learning.

M: I think I know what beauty means ... maybe it means things that look nice.

A: Beautiful is when something smells really good. Grass smells beautiful when it's all crinkled up.

S: My golf set is my favourite thing in the whole world – it is so beautiful. (His Mum later told me it was an old broken toy ‘in flitters’ but that he did love it).

C: Teacher, I actually know what the most beautiful sound in the world is. (Excerpt from ‘Beauty’ transcript RD 11-02-02)

C’s statement ‘I actually know what the most beautiful sound in the world is’ has presented many learning opportunities for me. I explained earlier about how I had trusted my innate judgement, against advice from colleagues at times, and allowed C to walk about, from an intuition that he was not being wilful or naughty, and would eventually settle down. During the course of the discussion on beauty he was as usual walking around, but then he suddenly came into the circle to his vacant chair, sat down and said:

I actually know what the most beautiful sound in the world is: it’s when ‘you’re all alone in the deep dark forest and there’s all noises around and suddenly you hear a voice saying “C: it’s Mummy: I’m over here”....That’s the most beautiful sound in the world!’ (RD 19-12-01).

When I met C’s eyes I felt responsiveness such as Levinas (1989) spoke about in his work on caring responsibility.

In the words of Van Manen (2000),

[H]ere is this child in front of me, and I look this child in the face. Before I can even think about it, I already have experienced my responsiveness. I ‘know’ this child calls upon me. It is undeniable: I have experienced the appeal. And this experience is a form of knowing. I am called. I am being addressed – or to use a Levinasian phrase: ‘I am the one who is charged with responsibility.’  
(Van Manen 2000, cited in Carr 2005 p.224)

I have tried to write about the incident with C many times and always ended up floundering in words and unable to describe the intensity of the emotion I felt at the time. I believe that the incident was one of the most profound and moving experiences of my entire teaching career, yet for a long time I failed to find adequate ways of theorising it. When I read Van Manen’s (op cit) comment, I felt a sense of recognition. He goes on to say:

The point is that in everyday life the experience of the call of the other ... is always contingent and particular. It can happen to anyone of us, anywhere,



anytime. Every situation like that is always contingent. I can only be here and now. In this home. In this classroom. In this street. Thus it is the singularity of this person, this child who addresses me in my singularity.

(Van Manen 2000, cited in Carr 2005 p.227)

Reflecting on this incident for almost five years I realised C had addressed me in his singularity: he had ‘burst on my world’ and I had felt the response of which Levinas and Van Manen spoke. He had made a claim on me: I had experienced an emotional response to the child’s gaze that manifested itself in a concrete physical way. Tears came into my eyes as I looked into his. Without the practice of classroom discussion, C might not have felt free enough to speak like this and I would not have had what I now believe was what Buber (1965) referred to as encounter.

Buber defined relationships in terms of ‘I/Thou’ and ‘I/it’. His idea of ‘I/Thou’ was that it signified a relationship of reciprocity and inclusion. ‘I/it’ indicated a relationship of unequals, who are detached from each other. My ontological stance is that I am one among other equal ‘I’s’, and this is why I feel obliged to do insider research. ‘I/it’ seems to indicate that an outsider research stance would be acceptable. ‘I/Thou’ is a subject-to-subject relationship whereas ‘I/it’ denotes more a subject-to-object relationship.

Encounter is an event or a situation in which relation occurs. We can only grow and develop, according to Buber, once we have learned to live in relation with others, to recognise the possibilities of the space between us. The fundamental means is dialogue.

(Smith 1999 n/p)

Reflecting on the encounter with C was perhaps the moment when I realised that my practice was grounded in an ethic of caring justice.

Had I been strict and authoritarian with this vulnerable child I might have done irrevocable harm. Had I forced him to comply with classroom ‘norms’ I might have lost his respect and trust.

Something in his demeanour stopped me and encouraged me to let him take his own time to settle down. When he finally joined in the discussion circle I felt that my trust was vindicated and that our relationship was on a new footing.

Since then I have confirmation from his parents and Grandmother that he now felt secure and safe in school. I began to look at Thinking Time with new eyes and recognised the power of dialogue for ‘encounter’ (Buber 1947). (RD 03-08-04)

When I began to analyse my data and select what I wanted to use for this account, I wrote to my supervisor regarding the incident with C. I explained that the episode had made me reflect on how I felt that C was representative of all children who are forced to conform to school norms. I wrote:

I recognise the potential for these discussions to affect our relationships is tremendous. I genuinely feel that C is a metaphor for all those other children whose behaviour does not 'fit' what society, the institution and the curriculum seem to demand of four-year-olds.

I believe that this has profound implications for how I teach and how I try to see the children as individual people with huge vulnerability in relation to the power systems inherent within society, institution and curriculum. (RD email to J 03-08-04)

My decision to allow C to wander around, while reflective of my values of care, freedom and justice, was an unarticulated aspect of living my values in my practice. Intuitively I knew that the child deserved space to come to demonstrate his capacity for knowing and his intelligence in his own way.

#### Reflection 2

I see that I should have asked more critical questions about my practice. For example, as well as asking 'how can I do it better?' I also need to ask questions of the kind:

- What pedagogies can I develop to put more dialogical learning opportunities in my classroom?
- How can I help students like C to feel free to express their singularity and uniqueness?
- How can I encourage all my students to express this uniqueness by thinking more critically for themselves?
- Is simply supplying my students with a weekly discussion time enough?
- How did I act following reflections on my data?
- How is my research shaping me as a person, as a teacher and as a colleague?

However, as I will show in Chapter 7, my learning from the incident would later translate into a more examined and reflective response in relation to questioning my pedagogical values for another child, Er, for whom sitting in the circle was also problematic.

### **Stopping in my tracks: A second critical episode**

Sometimes I started classroom discussions with a poem or a picture; sometimes the children suggested a topic and sometimes I chose a concept for discussion. In this way, during their first year in school, my Junior Infant students and I discussed several concepts including friendship, beauty, courage, loyalty and fear. I wrote in my diary:

The children amaze me with the variety of their responses and the seriousness with which they address the questions. I was proud of doing Thinking Time and I shared some anecdotes of what had happened in some discussions with BL, a colleague from my study group. I expected her to share my delight.

When I had finished my anecdote she said, 'OK, I agree that what they are saying is pretty amazing for four year olds: but I can't help feeling that it's all a bit too serious for small kids. I mean, why are you doing this? What are you teaching them this stuff for? Can't it wait until they are older? Why not just let them be kids?'

I was stopped in my tracks by this question. I respected B's evaluation. In my heart I felt I was doing something worthwhile, but now in the light of her comments I was less sure. (RD 30-03-02)

B's question took me by surprise. I reflected on it for days. I came up with answers such as, 'Because I believe it is a good thing for children to be given space for thinking and talking;' or 'It will help their learning in other areas;' or 'The infant school day is so full of my input – it balances out if I give the children some space to present their views.'

I can see now that my values about education are implicit in those responses but I have not clearly articulated or tested them. Where should I start? (RD 30-03-02)

I looked over some transcripts. I read:

KR - Colours dance when they are drawing a happy picture. They hop around. (Colours 15-11-02)

H -You're free when you lie in your bed and dream. You can think whatever you like. (Freedom 16-12-02)

Cn - I think the giant was right to be mad cos Jack robbed all his stuff and he told lies and he ran off. That's bold. I don't think Jack should be the hero. (Is Jack a hero? 27-03-03)

The colleague who had asked the question is not a teacher. I asked her had not her own children been full of questions at that age; had she not been besieged with why's and what-if's? She said, 'Yes, but I waited for them to initiate it. I didn't sit them down and say, 'OK It's time to ask questions now'.

I began to think that perhaps my entire study somehow was dependent on my response to the question, why are you doing this? Suddenly I understood that it was not enough then, to reply that I believe I am teaching children to think for themselves and that it is a good thing to do. This would be rather like saying, 'I am teaching children how to do addition sums because it is useful.' Thinking and doing addition might be ends in themselves, but as a teacher I am positioned as a person of influence in an institution that has a certain purpose within a given society. I wrote in my diary:

#### Reflection 1

I need to look at what are the purposes of education in my society and compare it with what I understand are my purposes of education. I need to look at my Curriculum document and examine what purpose of education is presented.

I need to look at the literatures and find out what other theorists consider to be the purposes of education, and reflect on whether I agree or disagree with them.

The purpose of education in the current post-industrialised world education seems to be focused on creating people who will be good consumers and obedient servants.

Intuitively I feel that what I am doing has a greater social purpose. I believe that the purpose of education is to help us make sense of our lives and live them as best we can in ways that are life-affirming for others.

By encouraging my Junior Infants to think and talk and listen in a democratic setting such as a circle, where all take their turn, including me and where they are free to speak or not, I believe that what we are doing is almost like playing with the basic building blocks – the ABC - of philosophising and thinking well together.

Dewey (1897) stated as part of his pedagogic creed that he believed that education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living and that education must be a continuous reconstruction of experience.

What is 'my pedagogic creed'? Why am I doing this research in my own situation? What do I hope to achieve in practical terms, for children, for colleagues, for wider systems? Why am I trying to influence colleagues?

I have a vision of what might be. But it's a general philosophy of education and what might be ... I need to transform these general philosophies into a practical philosophy of practice, to show how I am working at the level of interactions and systemic communicative action.  
(RD extract from some early writing 11-03-03)

I also wrote:

I need to examine what purpose I hope to achieve by encouraging children to think critically.

Why do I feel compelled to provide space in my busy schedule for Thinking Time?

B's question rankles: Why not 'just let them be kids'?

What does it mean - *to let them be kids*? What normative view is implied here? RD 13-03-03

## Reflection 2

This seems to be one of the first times I have asked what I now consider to be a critical question. At the time I did not recognise the importance of this question in terms of my own development as well as its importance for my study. I now see that it was the kind of question that I needed to ask about my practice so that I could begin to theorise what I was doing – that is to reflect on my practice and then to provide explanations as well as descriptions for my actions.

When I questioned B as to what she had meant by saying 'why not just let them be kids' she said:

'I don't know exactly: I think it's because I just feel that they're too young for all this thinking and maybe they need to just get on with ordinary childish things like playing without being forced to do all this thinking.' (RD 30-03-02)

I decided to ask the children what they thought: I told them that I had a friend who thought that they shouldn't be doing Thinking Time at their age. I explained that she

thought it was a bit too serious and that maybe they should wait until they were older.

My diary shows what happened:

C said, 'But we like it and it's not too hard.'

R said, 'It's not too hard for me.' Several children agreed.

D (a very active and restless boy) said, 'Well, anyway, sometimes it's boring, *sometimes I don't really like it at all.*'

RW said, 'I like Thinking Time but I don't like waiting my turn because sometimes I forget my thing ... what I wanted to say.' (RD 11-03-03)

#### Reflection 1

I had thought that all children had seemed happy when I announced it was Thinking Time – little sibilant 'yessses' could be heard. Now I see that perhaps that I was choosing to ignore the dilemma posed by admitting that some children dislike sitting in the circle. I am not sure how to deal with this dilemma. (RD 11-03-03)

#### Reflection 2

I still did not begin to give serious consideration to the possibility that there could be children like D in every class: I did not yet seem to feel that I would need to address the fact that not all children will like doing Thinking Time. However, by the middle of action reflection cycle two this issue rears its head again and will get a more measured and appropriate reflection. (Chapter 7)

I can see now that in searching for 'answers' to B's question, I began to fall into what I now understand to be modernist ways of thinking. I wanted to eliminate doubt and provide a perfect reason for why I was doing what I was doing. I felt that there was a 'right' answer and that if I could find it she would be satisfied with my explanation. I was frustrated when instead of answers I seemed to come up with even more questions. I also can see that I did not want to deal with any notion of the methodology not suiting some children. In a sense I was still being didactic – ironically about a dialogic process. I wanted 'my' classroom discussion methodology to be a perfect 'one-size-fits-all' instructional recipe (Reyes 1992).

When writing this account later, it occurred to me that as I now retrospectively examine the nature of what I was doing in those early years of my study, I understand now that I am working with critical postmodernist ideas. I realise now that there is no right answer to B's question. My answer is that I hold values about care, freedom and justice and I believe that I should hold myself accountable for my practice which should reflect my values. I hold myself accountable by offering my theorisation of my practice up for public scrutiny through this account. One way in which I can honour my values is to provide my children with ways of being in class that provide them with space and opportunity to think. I ask open-ended questions; I don't always provide answers. I encourage the children to provide possible answers and to ask more questions. They can choose to speak or to be silent. As reported earlier silence in this context is not synonymous with 'not-knowing'. In traditional didactic classroom settings when a teacher asks a question and a child responds with silence, the assumption made could be that the child does not know. In our discussion circle, it means, 'I'm still thinking' or 'I'm listening.' My practice of respecting talk and silence equally as elements of dialogue, seems to be an exception to general practice in classrooms which demands silence as teachers talk at students.

Through reflection with my data and engagement with literatures around dialogue, I began to see some of the potential significance of my practice. Burbules (1993) for example, suggests that dialogue, 'unfortunately, comes to be seen as an extraordinary and fortuitous exception to the rule' (p.150) and adds:

One of the most striking facts about schools is that even as educators hold forth models of dialogue ...we tolerate institutional structures and routine practices that make dialogue unlikely for most teachers and most students most of the time.

(Burbules 1993 p.151)

Likewise, Richard Bernstein (1983) asks 'what is to be done when we realize how much of humanity has been systematically excluded and prevented from participating in dialogical communities?' (p.226).

## **Conclusion**

As I have stated, during this first action reflection phase I was initially concerned with procedural and operational matters: what the children did and said, how frequently they spoke or did not speak, how well the discussion worked or did not work, and my

reflections on these. Although I clearly had values about teaching children in a way that respected them as knowers and that encouraged them to think and talk, I had not adequately articulated the reasons and purposes for the study to myself nor had I examined my ontological stance in relation to doing the research. Although I was beginning to see the potential relevance of my work, I saw it from the vantage point of standing outside the action, looking on.

Writing this account is part of the enquiry process in that the meta-reflection of which I spoke earlier now affords me the opportunities to see my practice with the benefit of hindsight and an increased critical awareness. I realise that I needed to ask further questions of the practice of Thinking Time such as:

- How do I live to my values of care and justice regarding children like D who don't like doing Thinking Time? Do I insist they participate? What if I don't? (in Chapter 7)
- How do I live to my values of care and freedom and justice to include children in dialogue who are challenged cognitively or linguistically e.g. children whose first language is not English? (in Chapter 8)

I now turn to a consideration of the action and reflection of Action Reflection Cycle 2, where I began to develop new insights and new practices.



## Chapter 7

### *Action Reflection Cycle 2*

This chapter relates to the school year 2003-2004. During this period, my enquiry moved into a more hermeneutic framework as I began to problematise my practice to a greater extent than before, in order to establish whether or not my practice reflected my values.

The chapter is in two sections. First, I examine my work in relation to encouraging a senior infant class of twenty-seven children to think critically. In the process these children educated me about many things, among them the importance of ‘ordinary conversation’ (Noddings 2002 p.146). They helped me to examine my practice in relation to Thinking Time in a more explanatory way, as well as open up my practice into a more emancipatory and democratic form. In this chapter I show the emergence of my living educational theory as I interrogated my ontological and epistemological perspectives in a more explanatory manner.

Second, I look at how presenting my work publicly to teachers led to a new dimension in my understanding of the purpose of my research. I show some episodes of learning, from my classroom practice and my more public practice, and how reflection on these episodes translated into evolving pedagogical values that informed my emerging living educational theory and, in turn, transformed into improved practice.

I also reflect on the difference between my practice with the two previous junior infant classes and this senior infants group, and I present extracts from my journal as evidence for my claim that I now began to question my values about using the specific methodology of Thinking Time as a context for critical enquiry, and wondered if the process supported or denied my values of care, freedom and justice. I show how I even considered jettisoning Thinking Time in favour of teaching the skills of ‘critical thinking’, and my journal extracts show some of the reflections involved.

However, from the data, it will be clear that my understanding of ‘critical thinking’ still remained at a predominately conceptual level, because I had not fully problematised the

idea of doing insider research. I still did not fully understand the intertwining of ontology, epistemology and methodology.

## **Part 1**

### **Cats, spiders and commoners: Thinking Time with Senior Infants.**

Kincheloe and Berry (2004) explore how the idea of researching things-in-themselves, abstracted from the complexity of life, is a reductionist view. The things-in-themselves, for me during 2003–2004, were ‘Thinking Time’ and ‘critical thinking.’

As reductionists abstract such phenomena from the contexts and process that give them life and meaning, they destroy them ... entities are not simply things-in-themselves. They are embedded in the world, existing in multiple horizons, in multiple, parallel, and intersecting universes.

(Kincheloe and Berry 2004 p.xi)

They suggest that researchers need to explore the ontological view of ‘being-in-the-world’ both for themselves, others and the phenomena they set out to study. In 2003, I had not yet made this conceptual leap for myself and I still perceived Thinking Time to be a ‘thing’ that enabled me to do the ‘thing’ called ‘critical thinking’.

When I look at the journal data from this particular year, I see that my interrogation of data begins to differ from earlier data examination. During the first two years, I had focussed almost exclusively on my students, and had interrogated my own actions only insofar as they related to organisational issues. I had risked destroying what was probably most precious about my practice, as Kincheloe and Berry (2004 p.xi) say above. In continuing to look at the procedures of classroom discussion, I failed to see that I was still doing outsider research, even though I do seem to have become more aware of my practice.

Gradually, I began to embrace a more critical relational ontology and moved from the ‘some-thing’ of substance to the ‘no-thing’ of relationship (Kincheloe and Berry 2004, p.xi). I started examining and explaining my own actions more critically. This third year of research, then, represents a watershed of sorts, as I gradually moved into a perspective more compatible with my ontological values.

For Kincheloe and Berry (2004), an ontological concept is a ‘pragmatic scholarly assertion that holds the power to change the way we research and perceive both

ourselves and the world around us' (p.xi). Viewed from a living theory perspective, this makes sense to me, grounded, as a living theory approach is, in a critical relational ontology, but I also recognise that, during the first two years of my study, I did not seem to have made this connection. By this time I was fairly sure that the weekly practice of Thinking Time allowed me to live more closely to my values of care, freedom and justice, but I still had not yet identified my practice as a form of theory, or my theory as a form of practice.

By 'practice as a form of theory and theory as a form of practice' I am referring to the distinct feature of a living form of educational theory in which I test my claim to knowledge against my identified values as they emerge through my practice. I still had not reached the stage where I could demonstrate how my embodied values compelled me to engage in social and educational practices that encouraged children to think critically. I had identified my values and articulated how I wanted to live these in my practice. I had not, however, explained (even to myself) how I transformed these values into the living critical standards of judgement by which I wish my work to be evaluated, but I believe that in this middle year of my study some explicit sense of the intertwined nature of the ontological, epistemological and methodological processes involved in creating a living theory of practice began to surface.

I am aware also, that, by June 2004, I felt more secure in my identity as a teacher-researcher. This confidence empowered me to take some risks and begin to articulate the distinctive contributions of my practice. I also began disseminating my work in the wider educational domain.

During this school year, I began also to do some professional tinkering (Huberman 1992). I began adapting Donnelly's (1994) methodology of Thinking Time to suit my values of critical engagement, because I found that the discussion frequently seemed to lose momentum. My 'tweaking' consisted initially of speaking out of turn from time to time, to keep the children on track and to encourage them to be more critically engaged.

As an example I have selected the transcript of a discussion on 'Is Jack a hero?' (RD 11-02-04; and Shermis 1992). Data excerpts show how I intervened whenever I perceived that the children were getting side-tracked and the discussion became anecdotal:

Em: Yeah, I think that Jack is a hero because he was very brave at fighting the giant ...and ... because he went off up to the giant's place all by himself.

JM: But he didn't actually fight with the giant! He ran away from him and that means he's *not* brave...!

Sh: He *might* be a hero ...cos in the end he got loads of money for his Mum.

E: Do you know what I'd do if that was me? I'd buy a million sweets if I got that much money!

J: If you ate a million sweets you'd get sick and your teeth would get bad. That's what happened my cousin.

M: Teacher, guess what? There's about a million ladybirds in my garden and you can smell them under the hedge.

Me: Hang on a moment ... we're getting sidetracked now – let's go back to Jack ... how do we know if someone is a hero? (RD 12-11-03)

I began to feel that the children might become more critical if I pushed them to what I considered to be higher-order thinking, in this case, a conceptual analysis of what constitutes heroism. However, I was reluctant to change the procedure I had been following for so long. In my diary I mused on the various pros and cons of deviating from my normal routine:

But what about my sense of responsibility to encourage the children to stretch their thinking into higher-order levels: does that negate or support my pedagogical values? What do I want from doing Thinking Time? Why am I teaching children to do critical thinking?

My educational aims are to help my students to think for themselves in the interests of a better social order. How does interrupting their discussion support or negate that aim? If I try as far as possible to allow the discussion to flow, and only interrupt when absolutely necessary, am I not still living to the values I have outlined? Am I not also going some way towards achieving my aims? (RD 16-10-03)

I believe that the reflection above constitutes a change from the kind of reflection I did during Action Reflection Cycle 1. Here I seem to be looking for a more explanatory perspective. I seem to be less concerned with what the children are doing and more concerned with what I am doing in relation to improving my practice. However, it would also appear that I still continued to reify Thinking Time and 'critical thinking' as 'things'.

Prior to this I rarely spoke out of turn, because I felt it important to devolve the power of keeping the dialogue alive to the children, and so I often ‘passed’ when it was my turn. It was this democratic feature of Thinking Time that had attracted me from the beginning. I wondered now if I threatened that feature by interrupting.

In an examination of the exercise of power in children’s experience of school, Devine (2000a) suggests that adults ‘exercise considerable control over both the definition and experience of childhood, establishing boundaries over children’s time and space...’ (p.189). Drawing on Giddens’ (1984) account of the structuration of social systems and the authoritative resources involved in such systems, Devine (op cit) focused on three main areas of adult power in schools:

- Control over children’s time and space through pedagogy and curriculum
- Control over children’s interaction through social relations
- Control over children’s life chances through evaluation (p.191)

I was conscious that in Thinking Time sessions I had sought to avoid these and other possible scenarios of teacher power. I had genuinely attempted to create an equitable relationship with my students, and a safe and caring environment in which we could develop as thinkers together and individually. I agree with Burbules (1993), who suggests that

We engage in dialogical approaches not because they are methods guaranteed to succeed, but fundamentally because we are drawn to the spirit of equality, mutuality, and cooperation that animates them.

(Burbules 1993 p.143)

By appearing to step back into ‘teacher’ mode, I felt that I might jeopardise what had been achieved up to now. I was mistaken. I should have had more trust in my relationship and in the children themselves.

In an effort to be just, I had been endeavouring to give the children freedom over the direction of the discussion. Until now I had considered the Thinking Time methodology suitable for my purposes, due to the low profile role of the teacher in the discussions. Now, after a lot of deliberation, I decided to go with the idea of a limited number of interruptions, as and when necessary. My decision came from my pedagogical

commitments to try to encourage the children to be aware of their thinking and to learn the habits of active listening, critical thinking and active participation in dialogue. This still did not mean that I would continuously interrupt in the way that Lipman's teachers were encouraged to do (see BBC video 1990). Donnelly's (1994) Thinking Time methodology was developed to avoid just such a scenario. I now realised that the Thinking Time format needed tweaking to fit with my values. Some teacher intervention was needed, sometimes, I believed.

To return to the data extract: despite my interruption, the discussion about whether or not Jack was a hero did not seem to me to develop into higher-order thinking. J's idea of 'a million sweets' (and M's subsequent assertion that his garden harboured a million smelly ladybirds) seemed to have fed the children's imagination in a different way to what I had hoped. The fact that the children did not seem to take any notice of my suggestion that we get back to examining if Jack were really a hero, is not unusual in Thinking Time. Colleagues at postgraduate level who have studied Donnelly's (1994) programme testify that children often seem to ignore any input by the teacher, in their eagerness to present their own arguments (Campbell 2001, J. Russell 2005).

Quite frequently the children completely disregarded my contributions – even when I presented them as questions. They didn't seem to notice that I was trying to lead them in a different direction, or if they did, they ignored me. (RD: conversation with JR 07-07-03)

They often don't seem to notice what I say; if someone does, it's rarely the child next after me – it could be a child who is four or five speakers after me who picks up on what I said ... then again I have had episodes where nobody at all picked up on what I said. (RD conversation with EC. 26-02-05)

In the case of 'Is Jack a hero?' the children seemed reluctant to develop the discussion into any analysis of concepts such as bravery, courage or 'reality.'

Me: Let's go back to Jack...how would we know if someone is a hero?

R: I'm not really sure ...

JM: Eh...come back to me later, I'm not ready.

K: Well ... anyway, I think he was great at escaping. The giant had big long legs and big huge feet but he never caught him.

C: I think Jack was clever for getting the gold for his Mum.

Me: But is he a hero? What do you think makes somebody a hero?

E: I dunno.

M: I can't figure out how come the giant didn't fall through the clouds when he was running after Jack.

K: Yeah, he's really heavy.

Em: Maybe it's because it's only in a story. It's not real.

Me: What do you mean by 'not real'?

Em: It's ... makey uppy stuff, it didn't *really* happen. (RD 12-11-03)

When I looked again at this transcript I saw something else that I had missed: initially I had felt frustrated that I did not seem to be able to bring the children to a deeper conceptual analysis of what constituted heroism. I now realise that in focussing on what I thought the children weren't saying, I failed to see the wonder in what they actually were saying; and that they were comfortably and effortlessly taking part in a discussion on their terms, not mine. I had been guilty of trying to 'force' some kind of maturity on them and, while I was honouring my value of freedom in the sense that I was providing Thinking Time as a vehicle for free discussion, I was simultaneously acting as a living contradiction, and denying another aspect of my value of democratic freedom, of allowing the children to think for themselves without any leading or coercion from me. For a time at least, I appeared unable to relax and have faith in my students. Like Lipman, whose P4C methodology I have earlier critiqued, I appeared to be trying to lead the children toward a product called 'better thinking' rather than focussing on the dialogue as evidence of my students and me entering into a reciprocal, caring, trusting relationship.

I can see now that I was back to where I had been in my very first Thinking Time discussion, as I described in Chapter 3. I 'knew' what I 'wanted the children to say', and because they didn't 'oblige' I felt that the discussion (and, by default my practice) were lacking in some way. In retrospect, perhaps conscious of doing 'good' research, as well as conscious of the need for 'good' thinking, I see that I was looking for 'good data', for evidence of causality, that my practice of doing weekly discussions was 'resulting in' higher-order thinking.

I certainly did not appear to focus on my ontological commitment of valuing each child as a unique knower in his or her own right. I assumed that, as 'teacher', I was the main knower in the room, with responsibility for producing a product called 'critical

thinking' from the discussion. I did not see that, as with my methodology, the living process of discussion was the important factor. As human beings enquiring together, my students and I were engaging in conversation and coming to know at our own pace, and in our own unique ways. This was only the children's' second year of school. It took some time for me to realise that, in becoming used to the idea of discussion, to engaging in active and respectful listening, to learning to ask interesting and critical questions of me and of each other, they demonstrated that they were a critical 'community of enquiry' (Lipman *et al.* 1980 p.45).

The notion of community of enquiry is widely used in Lipman's Philosophy for Children movement and originates in the work of C.S. Peirce (1955). The term 'community of enquiry' is located in the idea that people are participants, not spectators in knowledge making. This idea was also developed by Dewey (1934), who believed in problem solving through cooperation. Throughout his work, Dewey suggested that schools could become democratic and participatory communities, wherein all members could learn and develop. The practice of collaborative enquiry resonates also with the underpinning principles of action research (see McNiff 1988, McNiff with Whitehead 2002, McNiff *et al.* 2003, McNiff and Whitehead 2005, 2006). Furthermore, Haynes perceived collaborative enquiry as grounded in critical theory:

In the practice of collaborative enquiry we can also detect traces of critical theory, with its emphasis on the desirability of social transformation, reconstruction and the need for students to acquire critical languages and frameworks to analyse a wide variety of issues and to challenge existing power structures.

(Haynes 2002 p.46)

In trying to establish a community of enquiry in my classroom, I believe I am also fulfilling some of the ideals of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, in which there is now a legal impetus to the notion of increasing participation by children in a wide variety of decision-making processes. I have involved my students in negotiations in a range of decisions, such as the way we do classroom dialogue, and the rules of Thinking Time. Haynes (2002) suggests that children should be encouraged to participate in society from an early age, in 'contexts that are meaningful to them such as families, schools and other settings where they have a stake' (p.46).



The aims and purposes of education in a democracy are not only to provide training in basic skills to assure economic wealth for society but equally to address the problems and needs of daily life, in public and private domains.  
(Haynes 2002 pp.46-7)

Through introducing my Junior and Senior Infant students to the process of critically engaging with 'ordinary' stories, they have actively discussed topics as diverse as the soul, time, space, animals' rights, animals' ability to think, concepts such as beauty, peace, courage, friendship, honesty and what would the world be like 'if there were no adults/rules/schools/manners/trees etc'?

Noddings (2002, 2006) argues the case for educating students to think critically about what is involved in living an ordinary life, creating a home, learning how to learn, and learning how to be happy. She emphasises (2006) that students should be provided with opportunities to ask critical questions concerning their own lives:

The neglect of topics that call forth critical and reflective thinking pervades our system of education ... why do we not teach critical lessons ...? One answer to this question is ignorance. People who never explored these topics are unlikely to provide opportunities for others to do so: the notion never arises.  
(Noddings 2006 pp.2-3)

Through the practice of discussing topics that catch their imagination from Junior Infants onwards, my students might well debate critical questions such as Noddings (2006) suggests, before they leave primary school. However, in seeking to establish a context for critical questioning in my classroom I was initially so caught up in the idea of making the dialogue as perfect as possible, that I felt disappointed when my children behaved just like the five-year-old children they were. Like Burbules (1993), Wood *et al.* (1993) discuss this failure of communication in traditional didactic classroom settings.

The manner in which the teacher chooses to constrain and limit students' participation in discussion influences their opportunities and willingness to talk about their own thinking ... It is the communicative qualities in the dialogue between teacher and students that influence the nature of the interaction that occurs.  
(Wood et al. 1993 p.59)

In my haste to encourage my students to be rational and critical thinkers, I neglected to see the importance of first providing a safe and comfortable environment where we could create caring relationships, and where the children would have space to take delight in language, and in their wonder in the world. I possibly risked denying my

students the opportunity to take pleasure in active communication with each other and with me, and to be reasonable and respectful, in favour of being rational.

Bruner (1996) argued that a curriculum is at its most effective when it is participatory, proactive, and communal, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them.

The possibility of nurturing the 'respectable person' lies at the heart of education in a liberal democracy. Reasonableness is more than rationality. Being reasonable is neither simple nor constant.

(Bruner 1996 p.78)

In focusing initially on trying to encourage a form of critical rationality in my students, I possibly neglected the quality of being reasonable that Bruner considered important. I realised now that I also needed to learn how to become more reasonable. It is an interesting paradox that, as a teacher endeavouring to honour my values of care, freedom and justice, I was in danger of simultaneously destroying the very means of living to those values, through being more concerned with the end point of critical engagement, and therefore not fully understanding my commitment of being in relation with the children. The fact that as I write this document, and provide meta-reflection on my practice and show that I can now recognise my initial lack of understanding, in itself provides strong evidence for my claim to have developed my own critical capacities.

However, back in December 2003, the transcripts of our conversations made me despair of the children ever reaching any kind of critical thinking on their own, and I began wondering whether I ought to focus regularly on teaching critical thinking through strategies advocated by, for example, De Bono (1985).

I don't think Thinking Time is enough. I can't see where it's going ... the same old procedure every week ... surely there needs to be more than this?

There's a lot of talking going on; there's evidence of some critical thinking, but I still think I need to do more ... more what, though? (RD 21-12-03)

Briefly during December 2003 and January 2004, I lost faith in the methodology. I looked forward to our weekly discussions and the children appeared to, also, but I began to feel that the process wasn't 'academic enough' for my study. I felt I needed to do something more related to the subject 'critical thinking'. It is interesting to reflect

now that I seemed to ignore the fact that my children were alert, active and questioning throughout the school day, as demonstrated in these comments.

Do cats know that they're cats and that we're people or do they think we're kind of different cats? (RD 17-10-03)

Teacher, you know green? Well, who gave green the name? Who gave all the colours names? Who gave everything in the world names? (RD 14-11-03)

Is a million billion zillion the biggest number? (RD 21-01-04)

When there were no people, did God know that he was called God? (RD 11-02-04)

Is every single person in the world really different? Are there a few the same anywhere? (RD 25-03-04)

I failed to appreciate that I had enabled my children to question and engage in dialogue with me and with each other regularly throughout the day. I needed it to be pointed out to me by several visitors to my classroom: for example by a learning support teacher, by a special needs assistant in my class, and also by my principal:

The children have fantastic opportunities to speak up and interrupt and challenge you. (RD comment made by learning support teacher DOS 21-01-04)

The children feel free to question and discuss existence and life and God knows what else. (RD comment made by special needs assistant YOF 06-02-04)

I have never seen anyone with so much patience – talking to H, explaining things, encouraging him to talk ... (RD comment made by MOC 12-02-04)

I had not recognised this aspect of my practice as being anything special. As I examined my data and reflected on diary entries, I now felt that I needed to develop this feature of my practice. However, rather than perceiving this as an opportunity to include Thinking Time into a broader palette of dialogical pedagogies, I saw it initially as either choosing to do Thinking Time or else developing a more dialogical practice in general – a perception that once again displays my lapses into propositional form of logic.

I explained to my students that I felt we were getting rather stuck in Thinking Time and perhaps we should try something different. Some of the children were upset: 'Ah no

Teacher, we like Thinking Time’ (RD comment by Eo 27-02-04). Some were determined to be helpful:

Em: Teacher why don't we keep doing Thinking Times and maybe we could help you to try new ways as well?

Sh: Well what about this: keep our big Thinking Time and *do loads of tiny ones* as well, everyday?

JM: You're right, Teacher, we probably do need to get a bit more time for thinking out stuff.

I was really pleased to hear the children seemed to have always enjoyed the classroom discussions: I was charmed by their willingness to help and encouraged by their reluctance to part with our weekly practice (RD 27-02-04)

I was struck by Sh's idea of 'keeping our big Thinking Time' as was, but also 'doing loads of tiny ones everyday' and felt that in his suggestion lay the germ of better pedagogical practice for me. I decided to test this methodology out: to continue with the weekly discussion time but to develop additional dialogical pedagogies so as to allow for more open-ended questioning and discussion. I saw that I needed to incorporate more questioning, more dialogue and more time for thinking and 'thinking out stuff' in my daily practice.

The fact that I accepted the children's suggestions and saw opportunities for developing my practice through reflecting on their ideas is significant. It has relevance for both my methodological values as well as for my pedagogical values. It shows that my students are active in the process of helping me to become a better practitioner as well as active co-researchers in their own right. The idea of consultations with students is developed in the work of Flutter and Ruddock (2004) who highlight the importance of such consultation and the change in role and status that it can bring about:

Consultation offers a means by which the young learners can be invited into a conversation about teaching and learning so that their role changes from being an "object" of research attention to one of active participation.

(Flutter and Ruddock 2004 p.20)

The fact that I did consult my students and ask their advice shows that I valued the children as co-researchers and engaged with them in creating relational knowledge. This aspect of my study is of considerable importance for me. It emphasises the way in which the creation of my living theory of practice is drawn from reflections on my

practice, and also from talking with the children. I created a dialectic between my students and myself, between my pedagogical practice and their ideas, and we succeeded in creating relational ways of knowing together.

For the rest of that year, as well as providing as many opportunities as I could throughout the school day for questioning and discussion, I also made space for small group discussions, and peer-to peer dialogue. I began to notice that there seemed to be much more participation in discussion in general outside of Thinking Time, especially at story time.

It is going to take ages to read *Charlotte's Web* at the rate we're going! The children keep interrupting and discussing various bits of it. In an hour today I only got through a paragraph because there was a big debate as to why Fern's father felt it was OK to kill the runt of the litter and 'he's actually a kind man.' (RD 12-03-04)

I also noticed evidence of the children becoming more critical:

Sh: I think I know two more different ways of doing that! (Maths lesson 09-03-04)

Is: I can think of about twenty more things that Charlotte could have done to help Wilbur! (Story time 27-03-04)

Cl: I disagree, Teacher, how do you know that's what the wolf was thinking? (Story time 04-05-04)

Eo: What so good about straight lines anyway? (Fire drill 04-03-04)

Eo: Who invented uniforms? (SPHE lesson on I am special: I am me. 12-03-04)

Ao: And if you go home with a question and you get an answer to the question you can always question the answer! (after Thinking Time 27-02-04)

My evolving pedagogical values appeared to be transforming into living practice. I noted also that the children seemed to take the discussions more seriously.

The discussions recently seem to have taken on a new intensity. Nobody 'passed'; the children listened really attentively; they often ask afterwards 'Do you think that was a good one, Teacher?'

The children seem to be taking their role as co-researchers very seriously;

EO came up to me today in the yard following a discussion on the story of The Three Bears and said 'I've been thinking: remember when S said that Goldilocks was right to go into the bear's house because the door was open? Well, I don't think so, and maybe we should have talked a bit more about private property!'

Amazingly I had never valued this kind of informal comment as relevant for either my study or my pedagogy. (RD 12-03-04)

Several colleagues who observed my classroom practice wrote evaluations:

... the children share their views ... rather than being simply told by the teacher. (written comment by LH 23-02-05)

There was no rigid structure and children are allowed to participate in 'free thinking' ... the children were not under pressure to give a right answer and they were very at ease. The child's opinion on a topic was given equal status to that of the teacher and any other adult. They are not being taught to think in a certain way. (written comment by JM 24-02-05, Appendix B.1. a.)

A young colleague remarked after doing some classroom observation in my room:

You teach in a different way: you're just talking with the children ... rather than actually teaching them stuff off the board. (RD comment by OD 14-06-05)

You really enjoy teaching, don't you? (RD comment by DQ 22-11-05)

A learning support colleague remarked following a Maths lesson:

There's great energy in your Maths lessons. It's fun, they're working away and involved. And they're learning so much more than Maths. I loved the way you got all the children from the different nationalities to tell each other what the word for 'nothing' was in different languages, and then you gave them the Irish word 'faic': so they're playing with language. That's the kind of nice stuff you remember from your childhood. (RD comment by DQ 22-11-05)

These data support my claim to have begun the process of transforming my pedagogical values into practice, and into my evolving living educational theory. I am not just validating my beliefs from my own internal processes of critical reflection (Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.103), 'as an individual claiming originality and exercising my own judgement with universal intent' (Polanyi 1958). I have also provided triangulated critique to test the validity of what I am claiming, several of which are in Appendices B.- H.)

### Creating an authentic space for dissent

To return to the class debate about whether to continue with the weekly discussions: the only child to demur on that day was Er who said, 'I hate Thinking Time. I don't want to do it no more!' This had happened also with another child, D, in Junior Infants, but I had been unwilling or unable then to problematise the dilemma it posited for my claim to live to my values. Now I saw that I needed to transform my values into action.

I spoke with Er during lunch time and am convinced that he is genuinely not happy in the circle. When pressed for a reason he replied, 'I hate it, just sitting there and talking, Teacher: it's so boring!' (RD: 27-02-04)

#### Reflection 1

Er's needs must be addressed: I can't continue to assume for example, that 'all children will enjoy classroom discussion'.

What should I do? How do I best honour my values in this area? What is the most caring and fairest thing to do here? Should I arrange for him to be out of the room during discussion? Should I let him do something else and keep his chair ready in the circle as I did for C in Junior Infants?

The first action will be to present this as a research dilemma to the children and to Er himself. They are, after all, my research collaborators and need to be involved in my actions. (RD: 27-02-04)

This episode and my reflections on it demonstrate a clear move towards living my educational theory in my values. It is the first time I have made the link explicit, I believe. This data extract can be seen as evidence for my respect for the collaborative nature of the methodology of action research, for my students as co-participants in decision-making processes regarding improving my practice, and for giving the children a democratic voice. Although I had involved the children in discussions about whether to keep Thinking Time as a weekly practice, I still did not appear to have made the link between values and practice myself and focussed more on what I did as a result of the discussion, rather than on the discussion itself as a form of living values in action.

The reflection on what to do about Er's dilemma translated into action and into awareness of creating my own educational theory. I thought about the episode for some weeks and then I decided to ask Er what he thought we might do to try to solve his problem, and then to open up the discussion to the class:

I invited Er to discuss with the class what he wanted to do and ask for possible alternatives:

Me: Well if the others are doing Thinking Time, what could you do instead so that maybe you could still kind of take part by hearing what other people say?

Er: I'd rather be doing stuff ... playing with the blocks or the Márla (Plasticine)

Me: (addressing the group) OK, I think we can arrange that, but my worry is that if I let Er play, then lots more children might think that they should play too and that would mean that our Thinking Times might have to stop.

Eo: Well not me anyway, I'd rather Thinking Time ... but why don't we try it and see?

JM: Me too, I like ... the circle and talking. I love it.

Sh: Teacher, you know that I just **love** Thinking Time: it's my favourite thing but supposing I had the chickenpox or something. Then maybe I'd like to just play too.

Ja: Me too ... how about if Er takes turns doing it? That'd be a bit fairer.

I: That's a good idea!

Other children agreed: some passed.

K: Yeah, but what about if he makes loads of noise? I think he shouldn't get toys, he should do work.

Er: I won't make noise.

Me: Er, do you think that's a good solution – to do some art, and maybe listen in as well to the discussion?

Er: OK – nods and smiles. (RD 01-04-04)

The extract above shows that in involving Er in the negotiations, as well as presenting my dilemma to the class for discussion, I was transforming my values of a relational ontology and my values of respect for the capacity of the children to solve their own problems in their own way into pedagogical practice.

Er was already receiving learning support. The learning support teacher and I were concerned about his capacity for concentration: he also suffered from allergies that possibly made it difficult to relax. I understood how sitting quietly in a circle could have been difficult for him. Professionally, I had to balance my compassion against appearing to condone non-participation in a classroom event in which I fully believed. As in the case of C in a previous class (see Chapter 5), my decision to allow him to



choose whether to participate ‘worked’ and he had eventually joined in the discussions. However, apart from one or two sessions, for example in a discussion on animals following the reading of the story ‘Dear Greenpeace’ (James 1992) (below) in which he was particularly participative, and despite the fact that his chair was always kept ready for him in the circle, Er did not often elect to participate. I worried whether I had made a right decision, and offered the episode for critique to colleagues from my study group.

M: I think you’re making the fairest possible judgement: you didn’t impose your will, you allowed the child himself some autonomy and gave all the children some say in it.

C: I think it demonstrates you live your values in your practice – certainly in relation to giving the children a voice.

P: Absolutely! The fact that you gave all the children a voice in the decision process demonstrates to me that you have an inclusional and democratic practice.

B: It was a risk though. Supposing they all decided to play with the toys – what would you have done?

Me: I don’t know ... I had a feeling that most of the children would still opt for Thinking Time to continue. I suppose there’s no right answer to your question. All I can say is ‘it didn’t happen’ ... luckily!

BL: ... it was a very fair process, and very caring ... I can’t imagine any of my teachers doing that when I was in school. (RD discussion with critical friends 11-05-04)

Despite my colleagues’ responses, I still had misgivings. I needed to examine what I could learn from my intervention. I asked myself whether allowing Er to opt out of classroom discussion constituted good ‘teaching’.

Noddings (2004, in Dunne and Hogan 2004) reflects on what good teaching involves, examining Dewey’s (1934) ideas, among others, that unless a student has learned, a teacher cannot be said to have taught.

Teaching may be compared to selling commodities. No one can sell unless someone buys ... there is the same exact equation between teaching and learning that there is between selling and buying.

(Dewey 1934 p.35)

Noddings (2004) suggests that such a view reduces the act of teaching to an uncomplicated means/end activity. She argues that a conception of teaching as an activity geared towards effecting already specified learning outcomes fails to

understand the complexity of what is at stake in a good education. I agree. Several complex issues were involved in my decision to allow Er to opt out of the discussion, involving values of care, practical judgement, my own critical awareness, and possibly many others. Noddings (2006 p.113) refers to ‘the four major components of moral education: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation’. In my attempt to provide Er with the best solution to his (and my) dilemma, I hope I modelled fairness and kindness, engaged in dialogue with the child and with his peers, and confirmed him as a person whom I respected and trusted to think for himself.

... when we confirm someone we attribute to a questionable act the best possible motive consonant with reality. To do this, we must have sufficient knowledge of the other to make it plausible that this better motive was actually operating. Miscreants of all ages – but especially children and teenagers – often react with relief and gratitude: Here is someone who sees my better self! The better self, perceived through receptive listening is thus encouraged.

(Noddings 2006 pp.113-4)

I wondered if Er’s ‘better self’ would have been better served by being made to conform in a situation in which he was miserable, or by being allowed space to be creative while, possibly, listening to the discussion. He was, after all, only five and a half years old. According to my colleagues’ feedback, in responding to his needs I appeared to be living consistently with my values of care, freedom and justice. There were still some critical pedagogy issues to be considered, however.

In terms of Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, Er demonstrated a high degree of artistic ability and a lesser verbal-linguistic ability. He appeared to learn by doing than by talking and listening. To be allowed to be creative on his terms was, I felt, a more humanising pedagogy (Bartolomé 1992) than compelling him to sit still in a circle, and in which he did not want to participate. I refused to impose my values on him. This I believe is commensurable with Bartolomé’s (1992) critique (in Darder *et al.* 2003) of what she calls a ‘one-size-fits-all’ instructional or ‘methods fetish’ (Darder *et al.* 2003 pp.408-9). Bartolomé’s argument influenced me deeply. It resonated with my epistemological values on relational knowledge and with my ontological values on seeing the child as a significant and real other rather than an amorphous or anonymous ‘pupil’. I had pondered her paper for a long time and returned to read it several times and it influenced my pedagogical values. She argues for a ‘humanising pedagogy’ that recognises difference in students’ learning styles, suggesting that educators need to seek

a balance between the interactional rights of teachers and students, so that the children can participate in ways that are comfortable for them.

The teacher who was willing to negotiate with students either the topic of discussion or the appropriate participation structure was better able to implement her lesson. Conversely, the teacher who attempted to impose both topic of discussion and appropriate interactional rules, was frequently diverted because of conflict with students over one or the other.

(Bartolomé 1992, in Darder et al. 2003 p.420)

From Bartolomé's perspective, I feel that my decision makes sound moral pedagogical sense.

I now question where my intervention on Er's behalf becomes significant, and how this episode contributes to my theory of practice of teaching children to be critical thinkers. By not forcing him to take part, and encouraging him to exercise his particular talent, I believe I acted in a way that was just and I also believe that Er possibly felt cared for and free, which may have given him opportunities to think, and in allowing him that space I modelled a caring pedagogy to the other children. For the rest of the school year, I compensated as much as possible for his non-participation in the circle by inviting Er to speak often and encouraging him to ask questions. In the discussion on 'Dear Greenpeace' (below), for example, he took an active part (see Appendix C.4. where Er's contributions are marked with asterisks).

I believe that the incident is representative of how I arrived at professional decisions from a 'relational and critical ontology' (Kincheloe and Berry 2004 p.xi). It also provides evidence for my claim to live my values in my practice. In trying to deal with the ethical and pedagogical dilemmas involved, I demonstrated that my practice is grounded in my embodied values of care, freedom and justice. Many more examples are available, but this vignette acts as indicative of my practice. In providing explanations as well as descriptions of the episode I have theorised my practice in relation to this one child.

As I looked at my transcript data from the first part of Action Reflection Cycle 2, I realised that Noddings' (2002) ideas about conversation also resonated with my practice. As I revisited the transcript from 'Is Jack a hero?' I wrote:

I've stopped looking for nuggets of 'brilliance' in what the children were saying because I suddenly saw this transcript as 'a conversation'. In fact until I reflected on the dialogue transcripts as 'ordinary conversation' (Noddings 2002 p142) I did not see the value of my practice of allowing the children the space to sit and think and talk. (RD 15-01-04)

Gutmann (1987) also suggests that the cultivation of the knowledge, skills and virtues necessary for political participation is more important morally than any other purpose of public education in a democracy (p.287). I can see now that what the children say is sometimes of less importance than the fact that they speak respectfully and listen calmly to each other and to me. I appreciate now that I was opening up spaces for the seeds of democratic habits.

As already stated in Chapter 1, I resist the propositional overtones of analysing and labelling dialogue into categories. However, I find some relevance in Noddings' (2002) identification of three main types of conversation:

- Formal conversation, as in Habermas's (1983/1990) 'practical discourse' (p.117)
- 'Immortal conversations', dealing with existential questions (p.122)
- The 'very heart of moral education – the quality of ordinary conversation' (p.126)

Discrete classroom discussion times such as Thinking Time can be seen then as a construct for initiating both practical discourse and immortal conversations and for synthesising several aspects of dialogue. Some of these ideas informed a presentation in June 2003 (Roche 2003e) in which I showed a video clip where my students suggested the topics they would like to discuss:

M: How do trolls get under bridges ... because they're as big as a giant?  
C: Why do fish live in water?  
CD: How do ... teeth get made ... 'cos if God's magic ... how (why) can't he magic the teeth in?  
E: We could talk about princesses in a castle.  
Ch: What do live and what don't live? (RD 02-05-03 and video link 'interesting questions' Chapter 1)

I felt (wrongly as it turned out) that the question ‘what lives and what doesn’t live’ was not one the children would necessarily find intriguing or select for discussion. The video clip, however, shows that R immediately said, ‘*That’s* a good question!’ and J followed with ‘That’s a [sic] interesting question by Ch’.

The conversation then continued:

Me: Well what do you think Ch’s question means? Why are we alive, I wonder?

A: Maybe it’s cos our mammy wanted a new baby. My mammy told me she was very lonely until I came along.

Me: Do you know anything that’s not alive?

J: Well ... slugs maybe?

C: No - they’re alive! They slither along and they eat cabbage! They’re alive because you can kill them.

Me: Well ...I’ve just thought of something else - is the cabbage alive too, I wonder?

M: It’s alive cos it’s growing, and it’s not alive cos it doesn’t make any noises or move around. (RD excerpt from conversation 02-05-03)

To me, this conversation represented more than an exchange of views: it involved thinking about existential questions as to what constitutes being ‘alive’. It was a real ‘ordinary conversation’ in Noddings’ (2002) terms: a frank and open dialogue in which I was as intrigued by what ‘being alive’ meant as the children were. In my presentation I suggested that

Many children lack opportunities to engage in real conversation with adults, where all parties listen and respond to one another. Ordinary conversation between adults and children require the adults involved to display qualities of ‘open-mindedness, whole-heartedness’ (Dewey 1910), and encountering the child as a person.

(see Roche 2003e n/p)

As the adult involved I neither coerced nor patronised the children: I simply responded to what was said and contributed my thoughts and questions as just another member of the group. It wasn’t a teaching situation in the traditional didactic sense, although I do believe we all learned from it in terms of raising our critical awareness and contributing to a more critical engagement of existential matters. Habermas (1983) however suggests that people must possess special qualities to participate in ‘formal conversation’. They have to be ‘capable of logical reasoning, and they must be reflective enough to reject

conversational moves to destroy the process' (Habermas 1983 pp.118–119). My students were perhaps too young to have these ideal qualities of logical reasoning yet they seemed to be able to partake in formal conversation on their own terms. My abundant transcript data shows evidence of formal and ordinary conversation.

Englund (2006) states that Habermas' idea of an ideal conversation and its validity claims of truthfulness, rightness, appropriateness and comprehensibility ought to be seen as goals to strive for, but not necessarily as elements built into every conversation. Englund (op cit) also suggests that teachers should be ready to participate in ordinary conversation, such as, perhaps, in my data excerpt about what being alive means, and in further data extracts below.

Throughout this action reflection cycle, I appear to demonstrate a more critical and confident researcher voice than I did during the first Cycle. I was now offering my own reasons and explanations, and beginning to grow into my identity as a researcher-practitioner.

### **Ordinary conversation about cats, commoners and spiders**

As reported earlier (see Chapter 1) I believe that it would be a display of a technical rational form of logic to try to analyse classroom discussion episodes by separating them into various components and say this is discussion, this is dialogue and this is ordinary conversation. An overall 'spirit of dialogue' (Bohm 1998 p.2) is what's important, I believe. However, from my reading of Noddings 2002) I have learned to value the informal 'ordinary conversation' that often happens spontaneously. In the following interaction between C and R, two five year olds, during a discussion on whether the children thought animals have feelings, it can be seen, I think, that the children's ordinary conversation incorporates elements of formal conversation:

D: I think that animals have no feelings
Chorus of 'I disagree, D, they do!'
A: Well, I know if I kicked an animal, they'd scream.
R: I was actually just thinking the same thing as A!
D: Well ... OK ... but they only have little feelings!
C: I disagree, D. Animals have very big feelings to protect their babies.

R: I agree [*think*] that C is really good at talking and listening ... and I think that actually, C, you actually know everything...

C: Yes, I do.... Thank you, R, for saying that.

R: Don't even mention it. (RD 30-04-03; Appendix D.3.)

Informal ordinary conversation appears to play as significant a role in enabling children to think critically as does the more formal setting of discrete classroom discussion. Within the context of ordinary conversational exchanges, the relationship between my students and me, and between my students and each other, is enhanced through the development of trust and the existence of a spirit of dialogue (Bohm 1998). The children also appear to be developing communicative competence (Dillon 1994) which includes:

improving our expressiveness, learning various rules of discourse and acquiring complex abilities of interaction. We learn to talk better. ... We learn the intellectual, procedural and social rules and conventions ... we develop in the moral culture of discussion ... we experience personal growth, considered apart from academic learning ... in discussion our personal involvement is deeper and more significant to us.

(Dillon 1994 p.109)

Dillon (1994) suggests that when young children are paired in conversations with a teacher, the quality of responses is enhanced:

The children ... spoke longer and showed more elaboration, contributions, ideas and questions when the teacher stopped questioning them and substituted instead declarative statements and phatics [such as] "I like going to the park too": "that must have been awful."

(Dillon 1994 p.99)

My data show that my students regularly engaged in such conversation with me. During preparation for going home one day J leaned against my chair and said:

JM: Teacher, do you know that some spiders actually eat their webs?

Me: Do they? I didn't know that!

JM: ... apparently the webs have some bit of nutritional value.

Me: That's very interesting! Now I've learned something new today. Did you?

JM: Not really. (RD 20-10-03)

A context for peer-to-peer tutoring was encouraged in the classroom, and, despite being the youngest student, JM soon emerged as a natural 'tutor':

Eo: JM do you know what you were saying about ants and greenflies? Is that true?

JM: Yes. The ants act like shepherds with the greenflies as their sheep. They need the sticky stuff that the greenflies produce: it's really quite fascinating. Actually, I have it on a video. I'll bring it in. (RD 08-03-04)

To me this is an example of a child scaffolding another child's development and learning. Vygotsky (1962) hypothesised that a distance exists between what a learner can do unaided and what he or she can achieve with support. This space he called 'the zone of proximal development' (ZPD). In classroom discussions, some children, like JM, operate at the upper level of their ZPD, so in the discussion circle situation a child like JM whose excellent communicative competence could be seen as supporting other children's ability to participate, sometimes above their actual ability. Morehouse (1999) also asserts that more articulate children act as scaffolds (Bruner 1960) for less articulate children in the circle (see Roche 2000b p.20).

Campbell (2001) asserts that in Thinking Time discussions

... even children who exhibit a restricted linguistic code can portray an urgency and a potency which honours the quality of their thoughts, their thinking resonates with a sense of seeking, with mutual scaffolding and empathy, and frequently with refreshing subversiveness.

(Campbell 2001 p.81)

Rogoff (1990) drawing on Vygotsky's (1962) theory of social communication and learning suggests that children's participation in communicative processes is the foundation on which they build understanding:

As children listen to the views and understanding of others, and stretch their concepts to find a common ground; as they collaborate and argue with others, consider new alternatives, and recast their ideas to communicate or to convince, they advance their ideas in the process of participation. It is a matter of social engagement that leaves the individual changed.

(Rogoff 1990 p.195)

By the middle of the second term 2004, the children appeared to be confident in their relationship with me and often came to me informally for a chat. These episodes afforded opportunities to further develop a caring relationship, particularly with children like Eo, a nervous child yet a creative thinker, adept at verbal reasoning. I gave these conversations high priority for enabling the children to develop their critical thinking and celebrate their natural curiosity about the world. Extracts from these



conversations demonstrate the transformation of my values into pedagogical practices, whose quality can be judged by my values as living critical standards of judgement.

Eo: Teacher, I'd say my cat can definitely think.

Me: Really? How did you find that out?

Eo: See, I watch her all the time – when she's not looking. I'd say she thinks about loads of things.

Me: That's interesting ... like what, for example?

Eo: Well ... anything really, like catching mice or butterflies and playing and getting food off me.

Me: Wow. She sounds really clever. I used to have a cat too.

Eo: Did you? Do you still have her?

Me: No, she ran away one night and we never saw her again. Your cat sounds like she's very smart, though. (RD 02-02-04)

Cadwell (1997) says that language links us to the world and to others and that, through dialogue, shared meanings are shaped and our singular perspectives are enriched (p.62). My 'singular perspective' was enriched by this child's passionate belief in his cat's ability to think. From this conversation a topic emerged later that week, about whether animals could think, and a significant discussion ensued ('Dear Greenpeace' below).

Oakeshott (1959) suggests that conversation participants are not engaged in inquiry or debate. He considers conversation as 'an unrehearsed intellectual adventure' in which the responsibility of educators is to provide contexts for such intellectual adventures.

Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.

(Oakeshott 1959 p.198)

Oakeshott (op cit) also argues that both poetic and practical language is found in varying proportions at all stages of development of children. The desire to communicate leads towards 'getting things done in the world' (ibid) and the delight in utterance represents talk as pleasurable. This was frequently manifested in our conversations, as follows:

Sh: Teacher, will I tell you a very, very sad story that my auntie told me?

Me: Sure!

Sh: D'you know down in West Cork ... there's a big sort of house ... and a kind of white stone on the side of the road?

Me: Er, yes...kind of...

Sh: Well that's where the sad thing happened: See there was this really rich man and he had one beautiful daughter and guess what? She fell in love with a commoner and her Dad didn't want her to marry a commoner so he said No and he locked her up and she died. Of a broken heart. That's what my auntie said. Teacher, isn't that just so, so sad?

Me: Yes it really is very sad; but what's a commoner?

Sh: I'm not totally sure; I'd say he's a kind of servant.

Me: I wonder why her Dad would not want his daughter to marry a commoner.

Sh: Maybe he only had one or two and he needed them ... to do the work.

Sh's face, as he told me this story was bright and animated. He loved being able to 'explain' something to me - 'commoners' was not a word I expected to hear from a five-year-old (RD: 03-03-04)

Besides the utter pleasure of the conversation, it also demonstrated to me the high level of thinking on Sh's part that sees him drawing on his prior knowledge to make sense of a new word. Like his friend Eo, Sh fares badly in standardised reading and Maths tests, yet excels in verbal reasoning and thinking. The episode is another example of why I feel that a didactic pedagogical manner and whole class formal instruction can often be unjust, in that it can serve to deny the intelligence of children like Eo and Sh, who need a more dialogical engagement with knowledge, and time to come to know on their own terms rather than terms dictated by strict adherence to subject coverage. Didacticism excludes children from being seen as significant and unique. It places children in the category of Other (that is, different from me) whereas my theory is premised upon my ontological values that see children as others (that is, like me but different in their uniqueness). Thus my learning from such ordinary conversation has now come to inform my developing living educational theory.

### **Moral outrage**

I have so far offered reflections about the actions I took to encourage critical practices in myself and my children. I now wish to reflect on the growth of my own critical stance.

I have said that I read widely about philosophy with children and radical pedagogies, and I was aware of their increasing influence in my own thinking. I initially experienced a sense of moral outrage (Purpel 1999) about a range of issues: that I had been teaching for so long and yet remained unaware of the injustices inherent in the form of logic underpinning much of what is taught in schools; about the manner in which people are often ‘mis-educated’ by the hegemony of dominant ideologies (Chomsky 2000). Chomsky argues throughout his political work that formal education systems work to impose ideas. Like Bourdieu, Chomsky sees such imposition as a powerful cultural means of social reproduction. McNiff (2002) also suggests that

How people come to know through conventional teaching methodologies is lasting: they effectively learn not to question. Education is used as a means of controlling the thinking of consumers.

(McNiff 2002 p.65)

I felt passionate about the need for students to build critical self-defences against what I saw as neo-liberal consumerist agendas and the potential exploitation of young people through advertising. In my early draft writing I wrote furiously about these issues, bombarding my supervisor with my angst, and was justifiably critiqued for my polemicism.

It is clear from your writing that you are very angry, and this shows through in the polemical style. (E mail correspondence from J 05-06-05)

My increasing critical awareness however, seems to have influenced my practice, and the anger gave way to more disciplined critique, as in the next excerpt.

We had a fire drill today. Silence and straight lines were demanded.

Suddenly Eo who was just five asked anxiously ‘well, what’s so good about straight lines anyway?’ I saw that he was very frightened by the general air of tension. I explained that teachers needed to make certain that all the children in each class were safe if ever a real fire happened; that children had to hear the roll-call; and that it was much faster to count people if they weren’t all moving around. Eo said, ‘Oh, OK, I get it now.’

I found Eo’s question stayed with me, and asked myself, What *is* so good about straight lines? Why are uniformity and compliance to rules so synonymous with schooling? Suddenly I found myself questioning many of the norms upon which primary education is frequently premised. (RD 04-03-04)

This led me to research and write about my new understanding of how technical rationality frequently manifests in a managerial and corporate approach to education in many post-industrial contexts. I understood now why Polanyi (1958) urged people to think in ways that would enable them to strip away ‘the crippling mutilations imposed by an objectivist framework’ (p.381) and to seek to understand the world from their own original perspective.

Other ideas resonated with me, including Feyerabend’s (1995) critique of scientism and his passion to deconstruct

the tyranny of philosophical obfuscators and abstract concepts such as “truth”, “reality” or “objectivity”, which narrow people's vision and ways of being in the world.

(Feyerabend 1995 p.179)

He criticised the ways in which children are taught to think in ways that shut down opportunities for critical engagement.

What is excluded is the use of institutionalized values for the condemnation, or perhaps even the elimination, of those who prefer to arrange their lives [differently].

(Feyerabend 1970 in Lakatos and Musgrave 1970 p.210)

He laments the lack of critical thinking:

What is excluded is the attempt to “educate” children in a manner that that makes them lose their manifold talents so that they become restricted to a narrow domain of thought, action, emotion. (ibid)

I gave further critical reflection to how authoritarian decisions are often made by adults in school contexts, without consideration of children’s reactions, and I was aware of how such ‘antidialogical actions’ (Burbules 1993, Freire 1972) are premised upon an ontological stance that sees children as ‘Other’.

Bruner (1996) suggested that schools are valuable and extraordinary places ‘for getting a sense of how to use the mind, how to deal with authority, how to treat others’ (p. 78). In light of Eo’s question, I began to reflect that straight lines and uniforms have overtones of behaviourism and teach us, perhaps, that in dealing with authority it is often safest to obey uncritically and become part of what Russell (1932) calls an obedient herd. I felt that being ordered to stay silent demonstrates the frequent inequality of power relationships between teachers and children, and are discourses of

repression and control. I was concerned that my children might learn that authority is automatically entitled to obedience. Such practices aim at colonising thinking, and their underpinning logics frequently transform into a technology of control:

... how people are actively prevented from thinking for themselves through the body of official knowledge, and then how that knowledge is pedagogised into specific ways of teaching and learning, and institutionalised into specific technicist epistemologies. We know what happens when people are prevented from exercising their capacity to question, the gradual loss of excitement and the quietude of acceptance.

(Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.45)

I see my students as significant and unique human beings who share with me a capacity to question and enjoy active participation in their school experience. In light of Kristeva's (2002) idea of each person's right 'to become as singular as possible' (in Lechte and Margaroni 2004 p.162), there is frequent ambivalence about what is expected of children, especially since many of our institutions valorise uniformity. An insistence on conformity denies my ontological values. My pedagogies aim to encourage relational ways of knowing, that celebrate the uniqueness and diversity of the individuals in my classroom.

During this third year, therefore, as I grew in confidence within my institution and began to develop my researcher voice alongside my practitioner voice, I began to realise that I have to model these values throughout my institutional life.

The children discussed Gandhi's decision to wear only the plain cotton clothes which he had woven.

They debated his decision and C said:

C: Well, if everybody dressed in simple white clothes then no-one would be able to decide if people belonged to the rich group or the poor group. How could you be an 'untouchable' if you were dressed exactly like a rich person? That's what's good about our uniforms too. It's more equal that way. (RD 13-10-06)

#### Reflection 1

I realised that inherent in this child's statement there was a lesson for me: I saw that during my study I had gone from an initial uncritical acceptance of uniformity to an equally uncritical rejection of uniformity. Earlier in my studies it had 'suited' my research purposes to decry the wearing of uniforms as evidencing control and oppression.

Now I thought: maybe the uniform is not a symbol of oppression unless I attribute such qualities to it? I need to do some more thinking about this. As my students frequently say, 'I'm beginning to disagree with myself a little bit!' (RD 13-10-06)

My ontological values were informing my ideas: these values were transforming into practical commitments in the world through my practice. Following Eo's critical question, I began to examine issues of technical rationality in relation to educational policies and practices in the post-industrial western model. I learned to value my practice of encouraging freedom to think and speak, as I recognised its potential for a more open society and a good social order. When I explained this new conceptualisation of my practice to colleagues at a study group seminar in February 2003, I was encouraged by my supervisor to read Popper (1966, 1972), Russell (1932) and Said (1983).

From Popper (1966) I learned the importance of being open to criticism. He advocated the testing of (scientific) ideas through criticism rather than replication. However, he disappointed me by considering dialectical thinking to be 'loose and woolly thinking' (1966 p.316). To me dialectical knowing and thinking are essential for the generation of creative and relational ways of knowing. Russell's (1932) ideas about citizenship encouraged me to consider the potentials of my study in relation to the responsibility of citizens to challenge and critique the state. Said (1983) also speaks about the importance of critique:

Criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interest of human freedom.

(Said 1983 p.29)

Two discussions in particular from this phase of my research were influential for my developing living theory of practice. One was 'Rainbows and Reality, following which Ao made her startling critical pronouncement about questioning answers (Appendix C. 5.); the other was 'Dear Greenpeace' which I will now discuss.

### Dear Greenpeace

A significant example of my children thinking for themselves occurred in the discussion that followed reading aloud the story 'Dear Greenpeace' (James 1992) (See Appendix C. 4.).

I consider it to be one of the best discussions I have participated in, and one of the longest. Er joined in to talk about his dog. A came in for the Spanish lesson but when he saw the children so rapt and engaged he simply sat into the circle.

Y observed and took notes.

Y and A gave me written evaluations later: they were both hugely impressed. (RD 06-02-04; full transcript in Appendices H. 5. and H. 6.)

The children began by discussing pets and Eo suggested that his dog made plans to catch his cat.

Me: I'd like to go back to something Eo said earlier about dogs making plans. I think that's very interesting. Can dogs make plans? Can dogs think?

M: Well I think they think about loving their owners and stuff.

Cl: I don't think they can think. You need language to think.

Me: I wonder about that ... about whether or not you need language to think? Can babies think?

M: I don't think so, I think they do a lot of feeling and dreaming but as they grow they learn more stuff and then they can think.

Er: Well my dog is always thinking about me!

Sh: If we put Er's brain in Cl's head, who'd be doing the thinking – Er or Cl?

K: We think with our brain so Cl would have Er's thoughts and memories and dreams.

I: I don't think so. I think that for a little time it would be mostly Er's thoughts but then it would start to be Cl's thoughts.

Er: I think every bit of us can think, even our skin, because our skin gets itchy even when we're asleep.

Mr: Yeah cos if our skin didn't think, we wouldn't be able to turn in the bed at night.

The discussion engaged all of the children for over an hour and a half.

Y subsequently wrote:

[this] was the most amazing conversation I ever heard in a group of children in all my years caring for children ... it was the most thought-provoking morning ...

... they started talking about their pets and whether they could think ... this led on to a conversation about human thoughts and brains ... they discussed if their brain slept or not ...

A ... felt the same as I did ... amazed that children of such a young age could have so much knowledge in their heads (RD excerpts from Y's evaluation 08-02-04)

A wrote:

The teacher had also a very important role ... [She] had to listen very carefully without speaking for a very long time. This is a very difficult skill for a teacher to learn because normally a teacher is one who does most of the talking in a classroom.

In Thinking Time the teacher must use her power wisely and discreetly so that the children have control of the discussion. (RD excerpt from A's evaluation 10-02-04, Appendix H.6.)

These data, I suggest, constitute evidence for how I make space for my children to think for themselves without imposing my views on them (a demonstration of my value of freedom). I listen carefully and attentively (my value of care) and I only interrupt when necessary (my value of justice). I have learned to respect the children as knowers who can learn in their own way (my ontological and epistemological values). I claim therefore that I am showing how I transform these values into pedagogical standards of judgement within my claim that my articulated values have emerged and transformed into my living standards of judgement about the quality of my research.

### **Encountering resistance to my ideas**

It has to be said that not everything was comfortable and not everyone agreed with me.

I doubt if you can undertake an AR [action research] Expedition that involves living the values that carry hope for the future of humanity, without experiencing some painful (and creative) tensions of encounters with other individuals and groups in a network of power relations that act to deny these values.

(Whitehead 2004b n/p)



I encountered resistance to my ideas when I presented a week-long professional development summer in-service course entitled ‘Thinking Time and the Revised Curriculum’ (Roche 2004a). I explained how classroom dialogue could support the whole curriculum, but only if teachers were willing to be critical thinkers themselves and ground their practice in a relational and humanising pedagogy. Although this idea had been growing steadily for the last three years, I was articulating it here publicly for the first time.

On the first day of the course I articulated my educational values and explained how I had come to the point where I now believed that learning to think for oneself was probably the most important aspect of education. I presented an overview of the idea of philosophising with children and showed some video excerpts of children engaged in lively discussion. I then asked the teachers present to respond to what they had heard and seen: I was aghast when one teacher said:

That is the greatest load of rubbish I have ever heard or seen. The idea of letting children talk like that ... that’s very dangerous! You’ll have them all in mental homes when they’re older! (RD 01-07-04)

No one else present agreed: in fact, this teacher’s response acted as a catalyst in provoking discussion. When all the teachers who wished to, had responded, I thanked the first speaker for her courage in taking a stand that went against the grain and expressed a hope that perhaps by the end of the week-long course, she would come to appreciate that what I was hoping to achieve was a caring and just form of practice. She remained unconvinced and at the end of the course she said:

Children come to school to learn; they are told what to do. That’s the teacher’s job: that’s what we’re paid for – to teach, to give information to the children, to help them learn. Children can’t do this! This is highly dangerous! (RD excerpt from conversation with AC 05-07-04)

In this response the teacher is echoing what perhaps many conservative educationalists feel in relation to giving students too much of a voice. Fullan (1991) for example points out the rarity of children being asked for their opinions within education contexts and asks:

What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?

(Fullan 1991 p.170)

I have referred already to Noddings' (2006) summary that critical topics are not presented in educational contexts largely because of ignorance – 'the notion never arises' (p. 3). Now, like Noddings, I saw that fear too plays a dominant role:

But fear may be an even greater impediment. What harm might we do to our students if we encourage them to think critically and reflectively? It is not only fictional characters like ... Dickens's Gradgrind who fear that real harm might be done to individuals or to the social fabric by promoting critical thinking. ... Burke and Galston feared that the social order itself might suffer if citizens were to exercise critical thinking.

(Noddings 2006 p.3)

The teacher who protested against the idea of teaching children to think for themselves spoke from her own ontological stance. I do not think that her values about education allow her to support the notion of a free-thinking and dialogical environment. Her epistemological values may be fixed in a propositional form of logic that views knowledge as a commodity to be deposited into students. Her idea of the value of didacticism appears to be grounded in conventional logics of control and oppression (Marcuse 1964).

Marcuse (op cit) argues that propositional thinking forms the basis for a social technology of control and that the idea of citizens thinking for themselves would represent a huge threat to such forms of thinking. He speaks about the ways in which an 'advanced industrial society' creates sophisticated, scientific forms of management and organisation:

In this process, the 'inner' dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down. The loss of this dimension, in which the power of negative thinking – the critical power of Reason – is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition.

(Marcuse 1964 p.10)

The teacher in question appears to be displaying a fear of loss of control. Perhaps ignorance and fear are two sides of the same coin that militates against critical thinking.

## **Conclusion**

I have explained how throughout my life I have been schooled, and told what to think. I have only now begun to educate myself. I have come to see how didacticism is something we do 'to' others. Education, I believe, is something we do 'for' ourselves and 'with' others. The former is grounded in a logic of repression and control and in

ideas of difference and ‘Other’: the latter is based on a critical relational ontology of being one-in-relation-with-others and on values of ‘I-Thou’ forms of encounter (Buber 1965). Drawing on the ideas of McNiff *et al.* (1992), I claim that I have come to realise the generative transformational potentials of my practice to influence the learning of others.

I have explained how I have come to know my own educational development in a more hermeneutic way. I have shown how my living educational theory is developing from an ontological ‘outsider’ perspective to a more inclusional ‘insider’ one.

In my next chapter I consider how I have reached the point of realising my own capacity for critical engagement with my own critical thinking, and also how I have enabled my children to do the same. This, I feel, is a most significant aspect of my practice, and can stand as an original contribution from my research to knowledge of my field of education.

## Chapter 8

### *Action reflection cycle 3*

#### **Developing as a critical thinker: working with 8 and 9 year old children in 3rd class**

This third action-reflection cycle largely encompasses the period from September 2004 to the present (March 2007). During this time, I moved into a more critical phase, and I began actively to articulate my values as my living standards of judgement against which to test my claims to knowledge. In this chapter I explain how I now feel justified in claiming that I have developed a greater understanding of my engagement in a living form of action research (Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

I am claiming that I have exercised my educative influence to encourage others to become creatively critical in their thinking. By this I mean that through developing dialogical pedagogies and through living out my ontological value of seeing myself in relationship with, and recognising the worth and dignity of, others as uniquely creative thinkers, I try to act towards my students and others in a way that honours their originality of mind and capacity for critical engagement. I do not impose my ideas on them but help them to come to discern what is appropriate for them. Like McNiff (op cit) I, too, endeavour to hold myself accountable for my practice because

I believe that it is the moral, social and epistemological duty of those who are positioned as knowledge workers, to account for ourselves as we go about our work, in order to ensure that the nature of our influence is educational.

(McNiff 2005b p.1)

McNiff further suggests that holding oneself accountable is a matter of one's own ontological wellbeing. According to Raz (2001), she says, 'we are defined in terms of our attachments to others, specifically in terms of the duties we have to them' (McNiff op cit). I care about my students and want them to have an equitable and just educational experience in which they are free to explore their critical capacities. I have highlighted my value of care within my practice because I concur with McNiff's view that 'my ontological wellbeing, as a committed educator, is inextricably bound to my

duties to those for whom I care and for much of whose academic support within an organisational context I am responsible' (McNiff 2005b p.1).

Working with 3<sup>rd</sup> classes from September 2004 to the present (March 2007) has allowed me to develop my practice and my living educational theory to the point where I can now begin to see my theory as a viable one that resonates with my values and allows me to act with integrity. In this chapter, I will show how I began to relax into my identity both as a researcher and as a teacher and how, towards the last years of my research phase, as I began to reconceptualise my practice and my identity, I gradually recognised that as well as establishing for myself the importance of providing discrete time for classroom discussion, I could, by changing the form of logics upon which my ideas about my practice were based, situate my discrete discussion sessions within existing curricular and organisational frameworks, work at providing a broad array of dialogical pedagogies and still stay close to my values. Gradually I came to value my practice more, as the relevance and significance of doing discrete critical classroom dialogue, within a broader dialogical form of pedagogy, became clearer to me.

### **What does my practice look like?**

I need now to give a flavour of what my practice actually looked like.

As my practice evolved during my study, I began to take it for granted. I thought that I 'did' very little that was different from regular classroom practice, and I thought my classroom was much like any good teacher's classroom. Then a critical friend who had watched some of my videos said in an email:

What you are doing is important. I don't know any other teacher who engages children in thinking and talking as much as you do. I really have never seen children so actively engaged in thinking critically and so involved in listening and building on each other's ideas as these children. Your classroom discussion videos are inspirational. (Email from M. 10-11-05)

In a recent conversation with my supervisor and a critical friend, my supervisor asked me to explain my role within classroom discussions. 'What is it that you actually do within your practice that encourages critical thinking?' she asked. I thought for a moment and then answered 'I don't think it's really about what I actually *do*; it's probably more about how I *am*, and about what I *don't* do.' (RD extract from conversation with J and C 12-11-06)

By this I meant that I now understand that my practice is often as much about how I am in relation to my students and therefore what I refrain from doing. For example, my ontological values influence my educational values so that I try not to impose my own thinking on the children, or ask predominately closed questions; neither do I treat the children in a patronising or superior way. I engage the children in ‘ordinary conversation’, and automatically I now make time available for discussion during every lesson. I automatically use appropriately ‘sophisticated’ language (a critical friend who watched my videos commented, ‘I notice you don’t talk down to the children; you use quite sophisticated language’ (RD 26-10-05)). I have taken care to ensure that my students never feel prohibited from interrupting with questions or offering their thoughts. In this I believe I am demonstrating care for my students as people and respect for their integrity as learners while encouraging their capacity to be critical thinkers. At the beginning of my studies, as I consciously transformed my pedagogies, these were deliberate acts. They have now become ‘automatic’, that is, they have become ‘how I am’, or a way of being in relation with my students.

However, my supervisor’s question made me think. Perhaps I had underestimated my own role. So in this chapter I will explain what I do to facilitate a form of dialogical pedagogy that encourages people to be critical. What was interesting to me a few weeks after the conversation with my supervisor, as I began writing this chapter, was that I realised I had not immediately considered all the dialogical practices I use, as I have now described throughout. Perhaps I took my pedagogical values for granted. I considered that I only did what seemed the sensible thing to do at the time. I invited parents into my classroom as knitting partners, and as listeners as children read. Parents who have an interesting occupation or come from another country were invited to speak with the children. I invited elderly people in to talk about their lives as children and I encouraged my students through the ‘working as a historian’ strand of the History syllabus to work on projects that involved them interviewing their grandparents. I encourage the children to think critically about their history lessons and to ask, ‘whose voice is being heard and whose voice is absent in this account?’ We now regularly discuss history lessons critically and the children have begun to show evidence of being extremely critically aware (see ‘St Bridget’: Figure 8.3 p.235 below). My students correspond with children in the USA and have had interesting learning experiences from this practice (Chapter 9). I organised African drumming workshops for the

children, which was then expanded to take in the whole school. I invited singers to come in to teach them songs from other countries and incorporated the songs into a school-wide Intercultural Celebration Day that I organised. I take my students out on field trips, on charity work expeditions, such as carol singing, to the theatre, to other schools, to the cinema (It must be noted here, however, that institutionally such practices are encouraged and supported). I accompanied my students to galleries to share in the aesthetic experience of others' artwork and to respond by drawing from observation. I provided opportunities for my children to respond creatively to artwork through their English writing syllabus (see Appendix E) and invited visual artists to my classroom to share their love of their craft with the children. The children have responded by engaging these visitors in dialogue. I feel that all these events provide learning of a kind that makes the children critically aware of the multiple perspectives and realities of their world (Figures 8.1, 8.2, below and other pictures throughout).



**Figure 8-1: Photos of my students going carol singing and browsing at a book fair**



**Figure 8-2: Video still of my students researching together and photo of students presenting findings of their research**

I will now focus my reflections on how my practice is beginning to influence wider institutional practices and cultures.

### **Influence on institutional practices**

During the third Action Reflection phase of my studies I worked with groups of approximately thirty children aged eight to ten years in three Third classes. At about this point, I also began to reconceptualise my understanding of what I was doing in my practice in relation to influence wider school practices. I will develop this theme in Chapter 9, but will say here briefly that by September 2004 when action-reflection cycle 3 began, all classes in the school were now doing some form of weekly Thinking Time discussions. At the request of our principal, colleagues and I developed an open-ended evaluation sheet which enables us to assess and monitor our practice in relation to classroom discussion (Appendices D.1. to D.5.): and I also set up a process of ongoing professional development for staff members because our school was growing rapidly and new staff needed support in learning about Thinking Time. This support took several forms, including the following:

- regular invitations to colleagues to observe and critically respond to my weekly discussions (2004–2006)
- input at staff meetings about topics that worked well in my classroom and an invitation to colleagues to share in these practices (2004-2006)



- on school policy planning days I organised group sessions whereby teachers who were gaining confidence in doing classroom discussion were invited to provide practical guidelines for other less confident staff members (2004–2006)
- through a mentoring programme already in place in the school I set up a forum whereby new teachers who wanted further support would come and observe my classroom practice (RD 2005-2006)
- I developed a ‘Thinking Time’ folder for each teacher with explanations, ideas, sample topics and some references to literatures. I did this from my own experience of feeling inadequate and lacking support when setting out to do classroom discussion ten years ago (2003–2006).
- My principal continued to be enthusiastic about Thinking Time and had put an empty classroom at our disposal as a discussion room. This meant that children and teachers did not have to spend time rearranging their own classrooms to make a discussion circle.

I also continued having weekly discussions with my children while developing my evolving dialogical practice. My students were getting more and more frequently involved in discussion during each day. When this happened initially, I was perplexed at being unable to teach a lesson didactically and worried about letting go of my lesson plans, and I will shortly explain what I learned from a particular incident.

Remaining with my theme that I could articulate more clearly how I was able to make informed decisions about the quality of my work, I can say that, alongside the development of what I believe to be critical awareness in my students, I too began to ask more critical questions of my practice and my thinking as I increasingly challenged problematic issues. I problematised and refined my understanding of the terms ‘discussion’, ‘dialogue’, and ‘critical thinking’. From an initial concern that my children and I could not always claim to be in dialogue, because sometimes it seemed to me that we were involved in discussion or in ‘informal conversation’ (Noddings 2002 p.142), I soon realised that being overly concerned with such labelling was grounded in a propositional form of logic and that it did not matter whether we were engaged in discussion, dialogue or conversation so long as I could claim to be living to

my value of trying to transform my practice from less didactic to more dialogical and so long as an overall spirit of dialogue (Bohm 1998) was present. I realised too, that were I to try only to analyse into discrete categories what happens when my students and I are talking and thinking together I would not be doing a self-study of my practice: I would be moving into outsider interpretive research about my students and their utterances and adopting a traditional social science methodology. As it is, I have learned the importance of incorporating these moments of analysis into a holistic representation of my research. I can appreciate now how discussion, as the sharing of opinion, often segues into dialogue, as an engagement whereby each person enters into a closer and more equitable relationship through sharing ideas, and can also transform into conversation, a practice capable of encompassing both dialogue and discussion.

Gradually, the discussions with my students showed me that I needed to make myself more aware of several issues and I was increasingly led by my students to a problematisation of issues as diverse as the objectification of people; racism and stereotyping; consumerism and advertising; globalisation, the MacDonaldisation of society, freedom, courage, and even classroom discussion itself.

### **Trying to become a better teacher**

In trying to come to an improved understanding of my practice, in this last cycle of my self-study research, I believe that I also refined my understanding of the affective and relational aspect of my role as a teacher, so that I now accept that it is because of who I am, and how I am, in my relationships with them that I am able to influence my students to contribute critically to their own education. I now began to reconceptualise my identity as a critically aware person and it is now very much part of 'who I am'. I had begun to see this in the previous two cycles but now I recognised more keenly that, unless I could say that I was working in a way that promoted equitable, caring and fair relationships with my students, I could not claim to be living to my pedagogical or social values. Claiming to be engaging in democratic and inclusional practices meant first recognising the equality of the mutual sense of uniqueness and importance that the children and I held, and how this view carried implications for how we may wish to influence our wider contexts. Whitehead and McNiff (2006) state that 'if you perceive yourself as in living interaction with the world, and also involved with others in

processes of knowledge creation, you may come to see social purposes as finding ways of improving both your own processes of interaction and knowledge creation' (p.24).

I also began to appreciate that my aim of improving my practice, of being a 'better' teacher, implied that I needed to have a clear sense of what it means to be a 'good' teacher in the first place. To me, being a 'good' teacher involves taking my responsibility seriously and holding myself accountable for my practice by constantly testing it against my standards of judgement and against the literatures. Being a 'good' teacher for me is also closely linked with my relationships with my students, so the quality of the relationships becomes a living standard of judgement.

McNess *et al.* (2003 p.245) suggest that what it means to be a 'good' teacher is not only a mix of professional knowledge and skills, but also encompasses an ability to build relationships with the learner. From the 1930s onwards, if not before, they state, many researchers and writers have argued that the affective dimensions of teaching are central to being a 'good' teacher. Waller (1932, in McNess *et al.* 2003 p.245) has also argued that human relationships were vital in schools, saying, 'the important things that happen in schools result from the interaction of personalities.' To me this view of teaching does not go far enough. I agree that relationships matter, but good relationships may not come about by accident. I would argue that an interrogation of one's educational values, so as to develop educative relationships that foster a spirit of dialogue, is essential. This for me is key to understanding how I encourage my students and myself to be critical. My awareness of my own understanding of what it means to be a good teacher further influenced my ideas of what a good school means, and I brought these understandings into my professional education work with colleagues as our school began to expand (see Chapter 9).

I also began to look at my data and the form of representation I had chosen.

### **Forms of representation**

I now recall an incident that occurred in the second year of this third Action Reflection phase when I expressed my dismay to the children that a particularly lively discussion had not been 'witnessed':

Me: I just wish that someone could have been here to witness that you all said these wonderful things...
--

Emily: Scuse me teacher...but we're here. You have 29 witnesses...  
Me: Oh! So I have! Of course! (RD excerpt from 'Once upon an ordinary school day' 04-10-05; Appendix C.7.)

Along with the fact that the children could authenticate my claim to have acted in a certain way, I also began to look anew at the form of representation of my data. For example, following the episode regarding the discussion about 'The Indian in the Cupboard' story outlined in a data excerpt below, I noted in my diary that I

... regretted that I was reduced to a linguistic form of representation for this episode and wished I had videoed it. (RD 25-02-05)

I began to wonder if I could present my practice in a more 'living' way when offering it for public scrutiny were I to video more of it. This insight was central to my subsequent decision to film as many of the discussions as a 'visual narrative' that would make it possible 'to capture the nature of reality in a way that verbal reports cannot' (Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.74-75). In an effort to be as fair as possible, I decided to go with my decision to capture all subsequent discrete classroom discussions, the good, the bad and the really awful, and where possible, to keep a visual narrative of a sample of dialogical pedagogies as examples of practice. I did this also because when I first learned about the practice of philosophy with children in 1996, I was shown only videos of 'successful' discussions, and subsequently was dejected when my students and I did not seem to utter philosophical 'nuggets'. It would be important too for practitioner researchers to see that research is not always tidy and that classroom discussions do not 'happen' on demand.

### **Beginning work with 3rd class**

Returning to that first year of Action Reflection cycle 3: in September 2004 our school community moved into the permanent school building and I was allocated a 3<sup>rd</sup> class of thirty-two eight to ten year old boys and girls. Throughout that school year, until June 2005, I held weekly discrete discussion sessions with them on a wide range of topics, and during the first year of this phase of my study I initially relied mostly on transcribing what the children said from audio tapes or by using my 'shorthand'. The discussion topics mostly arose as children critiqued from a resource of books incorporating artwork, CDs, novels and picture books which had evolved into a 'Thinking Library'.

As already noted, there was also another resource made available in that an empty classroom opposite mine had been designated the Thinking Time room by the principal. However, after first welcoming this arrangement from a practical point of view, an episode from my practice showed me that its existence was actually reinforcing the idea that thinking critically was ‘different’ to ordinary classroom practice (see ‘data excerpt 3’ below). For example, in order for the spare room to be readily available for use by fourteen teachers, its use had to be timetabled. To me this reinforced the divorce of classroom discussion from that of an organic dynamic engendered within classroom relationships between critically aware teachers and students, to something that was artificial and separate from regular practice. This understanding developed as I began to see that the teaching of critical thinking was not what I was about, and that my work was about encouraging critical thinking as part of my everyday practice, with potential for becoming part of institutional practices.

### **Episodes of learning from practice**

Focussing on some discrete discussions however, I now draw on several data episodes that I believe will demonstrate that, along with becoming a more critically aware practitioner-researcher, my children also provide ample evidence of being critically aware, and this capacity enables me to articulate clearly how I judge the quality of my practice and my research.

### **Data excerpt 1: learning from ‘The Indian in the Cupboard’**

The first episode occurred on 24-02-05 when the children and I discussed the novel *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Reid Banks 1982). The novel explores many concepts, among them the idea of the objectifying and using people for gratification – in this case as children’s toys.

The children were seated in their circle in their own classroom, discussing what they found interesting in the novel. Two teachers new to our staff were present as observers. Neither of them had any previous experience of this kind of classroom discussion. Their attendance had been negotiated with the children and their parents and was part of the professional development programme in our school whereby teachers learn about classroom discussions by actively observing and taking part. In keeping with my democratic values, the teachers and I sat in the circle as equal participants with the

children and only spoke when it was our turn to do so. I noted in my diary that ‘The children’s questions quickly became deeper and more thought-provoking.’ (RD 24-02-05). One of the children raised the idea that Omri, the principal child character in the story, had become very mature as the story evolved. She said:

M: Well, I think Omri kind of grew up in the story because at the start he was excited about having a real live Indian toy to play with and then when the Indian chief died he began to see that you can’t use people as toys or things. Then when Patrick wanted to get loads of cowboys and Indians to come to life and make them fight, Omri was really terrified of that idea.

S: Yeah, I agree with M: I actually think that this book is really kind of important for making us think about the way people get used ... like soldiers get used and like we were saying before, beautiful girls ... models ... they often get used for selling boats and cars and stuff. People aren’t things; people shouldn’t be treated like objects.

One of the teachers later commented:

Those children made me think about issues that I’ve never thought of before! ... I’d be scared to teach that class – they know more than I do! (RD 24-02-05, observed by LOS and MOM)

A second incident in the same discussion also provides evidence of deep and critical thinking on a child’s part. One boy E struggled to articulate something that appeared to mean a lot to him:

Well, what’s interesting for me is that Boone, the cowboy, is ... like ... so kind of *stuck* ... in the way he thinks about Little Bull. Like, he calls him a ‘dirty stinking savage’, even though Little Bull is spotless – always washing himself – and Boone hardly never wants to take a bath. He won’t even take off his underwear when he’s washing himself! ...

Is that how wars happen? Is it over the way that some people think other people’s ways are different to their own ones and their ones are the right ones? Boone seems to think like that: he seems to think he has to be right because he’s a cowboy. And Little Bull is ‘only’ an Indian ... Why do wars happen anyway? Why can’t people just get along and live with each other? (RD excerpt from discussion *Indian in the Cupboard* 24-02-05, observed by LOS and MOM)

The observing teachers and I discussed the session afterwards. Both teachers commented on the way that E’s entire demeanour had changed as he spoke. His voice had gone from being quiet to impassioned and earnest; his face had expressed great seriousness as he had struggled to articulate what he was thinking.

This child had been so articulate and so deep-thinking in the discussion circle that both teachers were surprised to learn later that he attends learning support on the basis of his standardised test results. They had never questioned the authenticity or necessity of standardised tests before. Like I had done for many years, they saw such assessment procedures as being valid ways of finding out what children knew. (RD 25-02-05)

Apart from the importance of my deepening understanding of a child's ability to think for himself, I also saw what I had not seen before – the 'person-ality' of E who had been largely silent and low-key in previous discussions. His values of justice and fairness and freedom were suddenly evident to me. I saw his empathy and compassion for the marginalised Little Bull and the purity of his sense of outrage at the bigotry and prejudice of Boone. I saw his struggle to make sense of the non-sense of war. In Chapter 4 I spoke about two children who, although articulate and clear thinking, could not demonstrate their intelligence in the standardised tests. Here now was another child for whom a standardised form of assessment is inadequate and unjust. It would appear that his intelligence is not recognised or valued by such tests: in fact I believe it would be fair to claim that the standardised pen and pencil based tests fail his intelligence rather than his intelligence fails the test. Such tests offer a very impoverished view of a child's intelligence. In debating such matters, McNess *et al.* (2003) suggest that 'the affective' domain of English classrooms has been overwhelmed by 'the effective' – a culture of managerialism which presents a pragmatic rather than a consensual approach to education and which relies heavily on a technical rational form of logic, displaying:

... what Habermas has referred to as 'instrumental rationality'. This ensures that the criteria used to establish the best course of action are decided not by reference to the best reasons, but with reference to the most efficient and effective course to achieve desired ends. As a consequence the current emphasis on a performance-oriented managerially effective model of teaching had caused teachers in England to struggle to hold on to a commitment to the pastoral and affective while trying to enable their pupils to achieve the ever increasing academic targets being set for them in national testing.

(McNess et al. 2003 p.254)

Following this incident I reflected that Kincheloe's (2004), Apple's (1979) and Darder *et al.s'* (2003) critiques of the technicisation and standardisation of education now made more sense to me. I saw how standardisation can be seen to negate the uniqueness and individuality of learning styles and intelligence, and how it can stymie teachers from teaching in creative ways. I saw how children are expected to be depositories of knowledge in Freire's (1972) 'banking' metaphor, and I could see also a link to

Foucault's (1980) idea of how people who do not 'fit' a predefined model are pathologised and 'othered' as needing remediation. I realised that my efforts to provide spaces for children to think 'outside the box' were a form of justice that somehow I hoped would redress the unfairness of didactic pedagogies and prescriptive practices based on propositional logics and technical rationality. These understandings led me to conceptualise my values as the standards of judgement by which I was able to establish the quality of what I was doing.

M and S and E, the children whose voices I have presented in the data excerpts above, are ordinary eight and nine year old school children. They are not being 'hot housed' into thinking in a certain way. They 'love doing Thinking Time' (RD 26-01-05), and are eager to discuss their ideas with peers. The choice between silence or speaking is theirs to make. Those who choose to speak come to their thoughts themselves, through sharing ideas and developing what others say. They have not been told what to think by me; I encourage them to think for themselves, as my transcripts and videos demonstrate. There is no pressure, other than they show respect while others are talking as can be seen in the video links throughout this document.

I can now articulate that, from an early focus on teaching my children to think critically, when I would have judged my practice in terms of whether or not they did, I now judge the quality of my practice in terms of whether my students are able to use that capacity for critique in creating their own contexts of care, freedom and justice. In this way, I ground the manifestation of my own capacity for educational influence in how my values are lived throughout my practice. I claim that my revised purpose is to examine and explain what I do in my practice in relation to living more closely towards my values of respecting children's capacities to think critically for themselves, while also tracing the development of my and their critical awareness, and how this is used with social intent.

This growing awareness however led to further problematisation.

### **Data excerpt 2: beginning to change practice**

In February 2006, while pondering the concept of freedom as I wrote this document, I decided to ask my 8 and 9 year olds what they thought freedom meant. Their answers led me to think again about whether my process of classroom discussion demonstrated



freedom. Despite the fact that the excerpt shows that the children were actively involved in the process of being thinkers rather than displaying acquired ‘skills’, I began to question again the idea of setting aside discrete time for discussion and reverting to largely didactic practices for the rest of the week. It was then that I began to reconceptualise my practice and see that I needed to locate my discussions in a broader dialogical framework as discussed earlier. Here is the excerpt from the discussion and my initial reflections on it.

T: Well, yeah, maybe ... I think doing whatever you want is freedom – even doing bad stuff except it’s not good to do bad. But you’re free to do it. You have to choose. Freedom is choosing.

W: I think that maybe there’s ... like ... free freedom and sort of ... freedom that’s not free... like you know ... you’re free to do good stuff but there’s freedom to do bad stuff too, but you’re not really free to do that, because if you get caught you get punished. But nothing happens to you for using the good freedom.

Jr: I agree with T and with A too. You can think what you like but you can’t always say what you think... freedom would be thinking and saying what you like ... Real freedom would mean being free to do everything even if it is killing ...

P: I disagree with some people and I agree with others who said that freedom is doing whatever you want but only in a way.... (RD excerpt from ‘Freedom’ 07-02-06)

Later, following transcribing the dialogue and marvelling at the richness of some of the children’s contributions I wrote in my diary:

The children seemed to enjoy this topic: I sensed that it was stretching them a little as thinkers and, as different thoughts were added to the combined pool of thoughts, I had a sense too, of several children’s thinking being expanded to include ideas from others.

The contributions from the children range from relatively simple observations such as C’s: ‘I think freedom means that everyone is kind to one another’ to more sophisticated thinking such as W’s and Jr’s and on to the very thoughtful and critically aware suggestions such as T and P made.

P’s remarks were built upon what he had heard others saying and his reflections upon those ideas led to his sorting through each contribution carefully – ‘I disagree with some people and I agree with others ... but only in a way.’

P is very definitely thinking for himself here when he says ‘but only in a way’.

To me, the transcript displays strong evidence of children ‘being thinkers’ – actively voicing their thoughts and actively engaged in critique, analysis and synthesis of each others’ input into the discussion.

They are not, I believe merely showing that they ‘have’ a set of skills and can display them; instead they are engaged in the process of being thinkers together, of collective participation and of delight in the activity. I also posit that there is no evidence of them trying to ‘please’ me; neither is there evidence of me imposing my views on them. (RD 07-02-06)

As the last stage of my research got underway I continued to reflect on what I was doing and how I was going to write about it. I felt that I had moved on in my thinking about my practice to a more critical phase but I still had the nagging voice urging me to look again, to reflect more, to do something else. As I wrote my journal (17-02-05) I posed a series of questions to try and come to some understanding as to why, despite all I had done, I still felt a sense of dissatisfaction with my practice.

#### Reflection 2

I am claiming throughout this document that I value children’s capacity to think for themselves. However, I am still somewhat limiting this to discrete discussion and as shown in Chapter 7 to ‘informal conversation’ (Noddings 2002 p.148). Is this a just and fair and caring practice really? Noddings (op cit p.144) argues that ‘conversations reveal care, promote trust and invite remembrance’ but is it enough to say, ‘Well, look at what I have achieved: I’ve adopted more dialogical pedagogies: I’ve set up weekly discussions, I’ve provided space for ‘ordinary conversation’ – I really can’t see how I can do any more than that. Why then do I still feel that something is missing from my practice?

How do I improve further what I am doing so as to honour the values of freedom and justice and care that I outlined in Chapter 1? Is doing Thinking Time and making more space for informal conversation enough? Maybe these two changes to my practice are but a beginning. I still need to do something more. Have I actually grasped the nettle of living my values and my living theory of educational practice yet?

Is there not a contradiction between claiming to value children as equal to me yet holding control over when they do discussions and when they are free to speak?

This was the stage when I began to introduce an even wider dialogic array of pedagogies into my practice such as have been outlined earlier. I also try to resolve that dilemma by saying that although I claim to see the children as equal to me in their human dignity and worth, I also recognise that the children and I are in an unequal power context within the classroom, which is why I say that I ‘provide’ spaces and opportunities for active engagement with knowledge generation. I need now to examine what I do to see if, in order to try to achieve some balance of power in my classroom, I try to use my power in a caring way (Noblit *et al.* 1995) so as to create the conditions for a more dialogical form of practice than is the often the case in Irish classrooms. My purpose now is to check whether the children are able to make judgements about what they are doing. If they can do that, I will be content that I have managed to live in the direction of my educational values to the extent that my children are able critically to comment on my values themselves, and decide for themselves whether to live those values in their practice, without coercion from me. I also now see that I can possibly use existing curricular structures to do this.

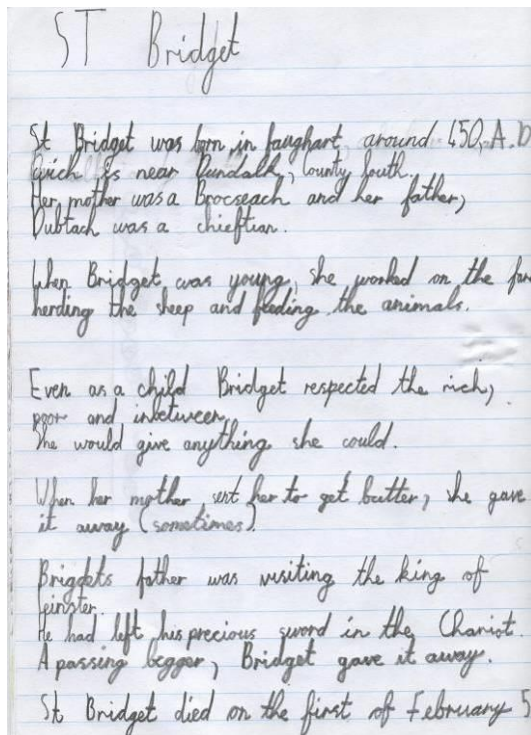
### **Changing practice**

I realised during 2004–2005 that my practice was changing when I found myself giving more and more time to unplanned classroom discussion. Topics for discussion arose spontaneously throughout the school day. A discussion arose one morning when a child challenged one of the tenets of the Creed from the RE programme. He asked: ‘If there is only one God and he became man in Jesus then how can Jesus be “seated at the right hand of the Father”? Does that mean he is seated at the right hand of himself?’ (RD 02-11-04). A PE class developed into a discussion about the importance of rules in play, following a row where one child asked, ‘What’s the point of playing games if X keeps on breaking the rules?’ (RD 27-01-05). The history programme led to discussions such as: ‘How did Stone Age people know what foods to eat? Are we descended from the ones who made the right choices about which mushrooms and berries were safe?’ (RD 09-02-05) or ‘Why do some countries want to fight and conquer more than others?’ (RD 22-03-05). Investigating Francisco Pizarro and the effect of his Conquistadors on the Aztec civilisation using the data projector and the internet site

<http://www.pbs.org/opb/conquistadors/> led to the P's question: 'How come nobody stopped Pizarro? To which CH replied 'Well how come nobody stops George Bush? Pizarro was after the Aztec's gold. Bush is after oil. Same thing! It's because he's a superpower like The Conquistadors!'(RD 10-03-05). A lesson on timelines evoked the question, 'Our universe is supposed to have started with a "big bang", well, what did the big bang happen in?' (RD 28-04-05). Discussions also evolved around topics such as conservation, ecology, gender and social issues sparked by questions arising from the Social, Environmental and Scientific Education programme (SESE) and the Social and Personal Health Education (SPHE) programme. Towards the end of the research cycle my students and I had moved on to examining textbooks for examples of 'woolly thinking'. For example in February 2007 as my students and I read the History lesson about St Bridget's life, C suddenly had a critical epiphany of sorts:

Today C was reading aloud the story of St Bridget from the History textbook and said 'That's a very woolly sentence there – 'Bridget loved the poor ...what does *that* mean, 'she loved the *poor*? That's cracked! Did she not love anyone else?' RD 02-02-07

Later, that day as I corrected written work based on the lesson, I discovered that C's comments had contributed to the critical awareness of others (see Figure 8.3 below):



ST Bridget

St Bridget was born in Faughart around 450 A.D. which is near Dundalk, County Louth. Her mother was a broccagh and her father, Dubtach was a chieftain.

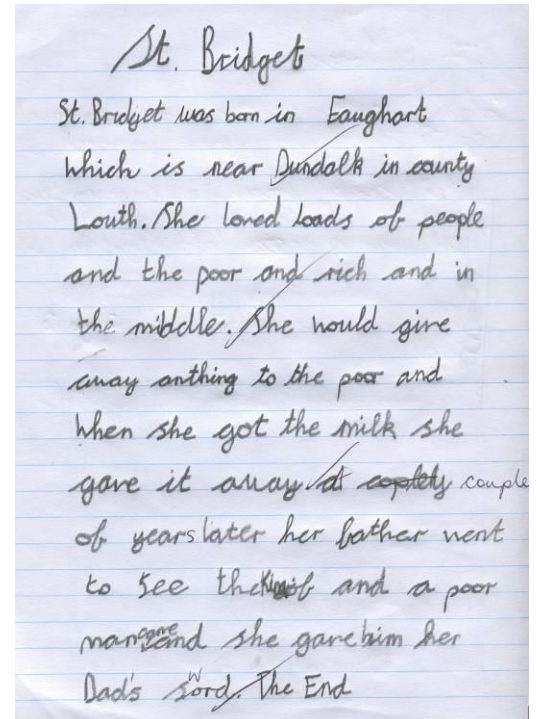
When Bridget was young, she worked on the farm herding the sheep and feeding the animals.

Even as a child Bridget respected the rich, poor and inbetween. She would give anything she could.

When her mother set her to get butter, she gave it away (sometimes).

Bridget's father was writing the king of <sup>pinister</sup> ~~pinister~~. He had left his precious sword in the chariot. A passing beggar, Bridget gave it away.

St Bridget died on the first of February 51.



St. Bridget

St. Bridget was born in Faughart which is near Dundalk in county Louth. She loved loads of people and the poor and rich and in the middle. She would give away anything to the poor and when she got the milk she gave it away. ~~at a~~ <sup>at a</sup> couple of years later her father went to see the ~~king~~ and a poor man <sup>came</sup> and she gave him her Dad's <sup>w</sup> sword. The End

Figure 8-3: Scanned copies of Cn's and En's stories about St. Bridget

En clearly learned from this exchange with C because on 06-02-07 he wrote: 'Bridget loved the rich, the poor and the people in the middle.' Cn was similarly influenced. He wrote 'Even as a child Bridget respected the rich, poor and in between.' (RD 01-02-07)

**Data excerpt 3: Learning to 'let go' of lesson plans:**

On 30-05-06 my students and I were involved in a Geography lesson about the rivers of Ireland. Before we began I tried to honour my value of giving time to the children to display their knowledge about rivers.

The children began to tell what they already knew about the longest rivers and the widest rivers and the rivers with the greatest volume of water and their experiences of rivers. The conversation was lively and enjoyable. Then CM said  
  
'The Amazon has the most water but it's being threatened by all the trees getting cut down in the Rainforest' (RD 30-05-06).

I wrote in my diary:

Several children wanted to give their views and demonstrate their knowledge about that topic so I put aside my plans for the lesson on 'the rivers of Ireland' and settled down to listen. I was amazed at the amount of knowledge the children had about deforestation and the threat to the ecological balance of the world.

Then JK said, 'One of the main reasons why so many trees are being cut down actually is because the people are really poor and McDonald's gives them money if they cut down trees and make more fields so that loads of McDonald's cattle can eat grass on their farms.' The discussion became heated. Many children had opinions about McDonald's and wanted to their voices to be heard. Several hands were waving madly. I tried to let everyone who wanted to speak do so.

Suddenly CO said, 'Teacher this is so, so important! We should be doing a Thinking Time on this. I'll check and see if Room 15 is free and Teacher, get the camera out of the cupboard because it's good for our research too and good for our brains and our thinking and we should be filming it.'

In a matter of minutes the children had formed a circle of their chairs in Room 15; CO had set up the tripod and A was attaching the camera and the external microphone. The discussion lasted over 90 minutes. The children were initially extremely polemical about McDonald's but they became more reflective and critical as the time wore on. (RD 30-05-06)

The episode showed me several things.

- First I saw that I had come a long way from being the kind of teacher who was so concerned with sticking to my lesson plans that I would never have allowed children to digress to this extent. Now I believe that by doing so, and giving the children the floor, they were learning vital skills and making meaning for themselves about something that was obviously very important to them. They were actively engaged in critiquing consumerism and advertising – knowledge that I would never have been able to deliver didactically.
- Second, they were demonstrating a critical capacity to say why this was important and its potential significance. I realised that in interrupting the class and making me aware of the importance of what was being discussed, CO displayed greater critical awareness than I did. She saw that ‘this was so, so important’ and that we should be recording the discussion. She also seems to have recognised that the discussion in the classroom was not as fair as it should be, and that the ‘hands up’ system was excluding some and favouring others, so a circle would be fairer.
- Third the children appear relaxed in the circle and seem to engage with me at a mature and equal level. At one point KL says that ‘in some countries McDonald’s give toys and put in playgrounds to get the kids’ attention so they’ll go there more often’. I interrupt and say, ‘But the kids don’t really have the money, surely, it’s the Mums and Dads who decide,’ and KL says, in a relaxed conversational way, ‘Yeah, but sometimes Moms and Dads could be really nice and they just do whatever their kids tell them to do.’ (see below - Video link: becoming more critical and confident) This point, I suggest, shows KL’s awareness of what advertisers call the ‘pester power’ of children. My students appeared to have had a grasp that children sometimes had power over adults.

Well, it’s not just kids ... lots of Mums are glad to go in there [McDonald’s] too because there’s people to carry the tray for you and there’s people who’ll mind the kids.

Well, I disagree with T because if they knocked down McDonald’s the Mums and Dads would be upset too because the kids would be going mad. (RD 30-05-06)

Reflecting on how I ‘was’ in relation with my student in the excerpt, it struck me that equity was evident in the manner with which KL and I spoke to each other, with no

sense of this as an unequal power relationship. The same kind of interaction can be seen in several videos where there is sharing of ideas and turn-taking, with no hint of me imposing my views on the children ([Video Link: Sharing of ideas & turn taking](#)).

As I watched the video, I was impressed with how the children seemed to have critical awareness around consumerism, advertising, globalisation, and the hegemony of brand driven culture. They also showed an awareness of inequities in the world. O spoke about the way in which McDonald's is perceived to be a 'posh' restaurant in Belarus when she spoke about her aunt's experience of being frowned upon for entering the restaurant wearing casual clothes:

O: When my cousin went to Belarus and [she] went into McDonald's she had on just a tracksuit and a T shirt and when they went in everyone was staring at them because the people thought that McDonald's was a posh place and they should've dressed up.

Cl also seemed to grasp the fact that 'happy meals' were a device to attract children into the restaurant:

I think they're tricking small little kids into buying Happy Meals ... they're only buying them for the toys.

This was interesting for me because Cl is a timid girl who rarely ever spoke in a discussion. (RD 30-05-06) ([Video Link: Becoming more critical & confident](#)).

#### Reflection 2

This discussion seemed to provoke Cl into speaking, perhaps because she considered it to be an important topic. H, who also rarely contributed to discussions, also made several contributions to this discussion. The video shows her blushing and fiddling with her shoe but determined to have her say. Perhaps it was the relevance of the topic to their experience; perhaps it was the fact that it was May and we were now comfortable together or that this discussion had been the children's own idea. It doesn't matter. What matters is that for an hour and a half my children and I were engaged in critiquing the dominance of a multinational company that Kincheloe (in Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997) suggest perceive children as 'consumers in training' (p. 255).

I subsequently looked up the concept of pester power and was concerned when I read that:

... today's average British child is familiar with as many as 400 brand names by the age of ten. Researchers report that our children are more likely to recognise Ronald McDonald and the Nike swoosh than a representation of Jesus. One study found that 69% of all three-year-olds could identify the McDonald's golden arches – while half of all four-year-olds did not know their own name.

<http://media.guardian.co.uk/site/story/0,14173,1600020,00.html>

I saw that by encouraging and supporting my students to critique concepts such as the globalisation and monopoly of fast food, I was living one of my values in practice – that of contributing to an open society. McDonald's in this case can be seen as a metaphor for the increasing technicisation and rationalisation of society. According to Ritzer (2004) Ray Kroc, the 'founder' of McDonald's, spearheaded the principles of rationalisation as he lectured franchisers of his business on the merits of a standardised menu, one-size portions, 'same prices, same quality in every store' (p. 40). In 1958 according to Ritzer (2004) McDonald's published a manual that 'told operators *exactly* how to draw milkshakes, grill hamburgers ...fixed *precise* cooking times for all products ...fixed *standard* portions .... identified that french fries be cut at *nine thirty-seconds of an inch*' (Ritzer 2004 p.41, emphasis in original). Echoing Habermas (1987) Ritzer (op cit) argues that McDonaldization did not occur in an historical vacuum, 'the assembly line, scientific management, and bureaucracy provided many of the basic principles' (p.41).

Reflecting later on the discussion with the children, I could see that my students' thinking had provided me with food for thought: they had helped me to make critical connections that I had not hitherto realised existed. For example, I could now see parallels between the phenomenon of the technicised and globalised fast food industry and the increasing technicising and bureaucratisation of society – including the current corporatisation of education (see also Bonal 2003, Greene 1988, Kincheloe 2004, Lynch 2006, McNess *et al.* 2003). My students demonstrate that they are now active analytical critics who see clearly what advertisers and multi-national chains are trying to achieve. Even more significant, they are able to comment on their own capacity for critical engagement. By relaxing the 'regular' syllabus that day and agreeing with the children that this topic was important, I demonstrated my faith in the children's capacity to recognise an important learning area. I was living to a value of encouraging children to exercise their capacity for thinking for themselves, and to explain that they were



capable of doing so. I did not tell these children what to think. Instead, I found myself being influenced by what the children said.

CM displayed further critical awareness when she also critiqued the one-sidedness of the topic:

The thing I'm wondering is why are we just talking about McDonald's? Because there's Eddie Rocket's, KFC's and all those and all we're saying is McDonald's, McDonald's, McDonald's! (RD 30-05-06)

And KL demonstrated her capacity for sound judgement when she said,

I disagree with what K and T said because if you just eat McDonald's every day you'll get fat and ... you'll get very sick but its probably nice if you eat in McDonald's for a treat say once or twice every couple of weeks. (RD 30-05-06)

I was provoked to think also when JK said

I think that there might be some relation with Disney and McDonald's because if you think about it, loads of the toys in Happy Meals are toys from Disney films. (RD 30-05-06)

As the discussion progressed I found myself realising (particularly, when A. a child from Lithuania who had only recently joined our school, spoke about the toys being 'better' in the Vilnius' McDonald's) that food, which is a distinguishing feature of culture, is being homogenised by the hegemony of largely American fast food values. I was also led to question my hitherto taken for granted assumptions about the recent phenomenon of the immigrant labour situation in Irish society when CM said:

Yeah and something else ... look ... when you go into McDonald's they're mostly all foreign – the people that work there ...you'd think that people come from other countries just to work in McDonald's you'd barely hear any English ... you'll hear the people behind the counter speaking French, Spanish and all other languages and you'll barely ever hear English and you'll wonder where did this come from and why did it come? (RD 30-05-06)

I considered CM's statement to be evidence of high critical awareness and an unusual capacity for debating skills. This led me to some reflection:

## Reflection 2

I need to think this through: why do so many foreign workers get employment in McDonald's? Is it because of the low wages for which young Irish people are not prepared to work and that therefore exploit the foreign workers? Or is it because everything in McDonald's is so standardised language is not essential – are the foods available there so ubiquitous that they almost constitute a form of language in themselves? CM's questions led me to ask some critical questions.

This discussion led, in fact to me buying several books about the 'MacDonaldization' of society, (Ritzer, 1998, 2004) and 'Kinder-culture' (Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997), books which, when I read them, endorsed my admiration for my students' keen analytical skills and grasp of issues relating to child-targeted consumerism.

In other words, I now believe that, through thinking critically and thinking for themselves about issues of globalisation, the children had influenced me to be more critical also.

Reflecting on what I have written in this chapter, I am aware of how I have changed my pedagogies from coercive controlling to invitational openness. I see how I am receptive to the children's thinking and the lessons I can learn from my students. I am now aware that, despite nearly five years of study and more than ten years of doing philosophical enquiry with children, I had been so used to imposing my views on children through traditional instructional practices that I frequently failed to see how deeply ingrained this didacticism was. I had also failed to see them as people, let alone the critically analytical people they are capable of being.

I have now learned that I must be prepared to let go of my plans and to go with the dynamic created by the children's capacity for original thinking and critical engagement. Often I do not get to present lessons in the way I expected to at all. Part of the reason why I was so ready to 'let go' of my lesson plans on 'the rivers of Ireland' was because of a turning point in my practice that had occurred two months earlier, in March 2006, when I attempted to 'deliver' a lesson from the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) syllabus.

#### **Data excerpt 4: Learning from failure**

RSE is one of the core resources for the Social and Personal Health Education curriculum. One of the lessons for third class which, in our school, is called the 'sensitive content lesson' and which involves notifying parents in advance so that they can be prepared for further questions and exploration of the topic – contains information about the growth of the foetus in the uterus and how babies are born. It necessitates the use of the correct anatomical names for parts of the body and so, in an attempt to give the topic the gravitas it deserved, I decided to take my students into the empty room where we usually had our weekly Thinking Time session. The children automatically sat in a circle and I began by reading the preliminary part of the lesson, a poem about new life. I then tried to 'deliver' the rest of the lesson, but was confounded when the children constantly interrupted and discussed babies and pre-natal care and spontaneously shared their experiences of the births of new siblings or cousins.

My research journal notes for the day show how I became flustered and asked the children to 'please stop interrupting so that I could talk':

Suddenly C, looking perplexed, asked,  
But Teacher, I don't get it, like ... why did you bring us in here if you don't want us to talk?  
I answered that I had to teach the lesson and that I had to stick closely to the way it was presented in the teacher's book.  
C replied: Yeah, but why are we in here so? Why didn't we stay in the class?  
Heads nodded in assent and CF said:  
Teacher, like, this is ... like, our room for talking; and you're ... you're always saying you're just one of us like, one of the listeners - in here, Teacher. (RD 30-03-06)

Reflection 1  
I realised then that I had expected to be able to teach didactically without any challenges simply because 'I had decided'. Suddenly for the very first time I saw that years of experience of classroom dialogue in a circle format meant that the introduction of a didactic practice in that format now needed some preliminary explanation, if not an apology from me.

Instead I had simply assumed an authoritarian role and excluded the children – treated them as excluded ‘Others’ who must listen to me and absorb information without thinking for themselves.

I saw that thinking critically is a feature of a holistic education practice, not an add-on ‘bonus’ that I bestow at certain times. I saw that going into a different room ‘for thinking’ reinforced the reification of critical thinking as a ‘thing’ we do in Room 15, but not in our classroom, unless I ‘allowed’ ‘it’. I saw that my value of freedom was still not transforming into a lived democratic practice.

However, from an initial feeling of confusion and annoyance at the children’s interruptions and their attempts to turn the session into a discussion, I now felt a huge sense of achievement that I had brought these children to a place where hitherto unquestioned norms of didacticism were now being challenged. I thought of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969) and felt I had turned my teaching into a ‘subversive’ activity unwittingly and I was very proud of it! (RD 30-03-06)

Back in the classroom later I discussed the episode with the children and told them how I’d been taken aback by their involvement. I asked them what they thought would have happened if I had ‘taught’ the lesson in our own classroom.

G: Well, we would like, probably have let you talk more, like for longer I suppose.

C added, Yeah, but after like, a while, we’d still probably expect that we could interrupt with questions and tell you stuff too. (RD 30-03-05)

I then saw that while I had achieved some small measure of progress, there was still a long way to go. However, I now see that if I preface a lesson with an explanation of why sometimes I need the cooperation of their silence so as to impart information and assure them that I will then follow through with setting aside time for discussion, I can achieve a far more democratic practice while still also honouring my contract with the school.

I realised too, following the episode described above, that my children were not simply ‘going through the motions’ of discussion: as far as they were concerned they were taking part in real dialogue. This is different to what Elkind and Sweet (1997) referred to as the way in which many students see classroom dialogue as ‘filling in the blanks’ –

a process where, in ‘discussion’, children try to guess what the teacher wants and supply ‘right’ answers. They cite their own experience as students and state:

Our teacher would start to lead a classroom ‘discussion’, but we had a sinking suspicion that it was just a sham. All she wanted from the class was for us to fill in the blanks of her pre-programmed curriculum. She would fish around from student to student until she got the answer she was looking for. So we kids had to make a choice between sincerely expressing our own thoughts on the subject, at considerable risk to our grade, or simply giving the teacher what she wanted to hear. The ‘smarter’ kids chose to play it safe. Their reward was the teacher’s effusive praise for supplying the ‘right’ answer.

(Elkind and Sweet 1997 p.1)

Burbules (1993) also speaks about the irony of asking questions to which one already knows the answer, which, he says, only happens in educational contexts (p.98). Holt (1964) similarly showed that children use many strategies in order to provide ‘right’ answers, or to merely ‘survive’ in class by pleasing teachers. When I started out to encourage children to be better critical and creative thinkers, I wanted to provide my children with a more authentic experience, to engage them in what I understood by genuine dialogue (see below). I wanted to encourage them to be thinkers rather than teacher pleasers or providers of ‘right’ answers. I wanted them especially to begin to realise that often there are no right answers, and that social problems can often arise because of contesting rights. But I also wanted to be a ‘good’ teacher, to comply with norms of what I felt ‘good’ teaching meant. I was caught between these duelling identities for a long time with my living researcher voice, informed by a dialectical form of logic, trying to be heard over the louder voice prompted by years of propositional forms of logic. I believe that the episode above and several other episodes cited in this thesis, show that I have come some way towards realising my goal and hushing that didactic propositional voice.

### **My meta-reflections**

Transforming my practice is a continuous process. I started by gradually reconceptualising my teaching role and my identity. Over the period of this study, through examining my ideas about knowledge and knowledge generation, I have changed how I perceive myself as a teacher. For many years I looked on my role as being one of mastery of many subject areas and whose job was to ensure that I transmitted as much information as possible to my students. As I progressed through this study, I began to change that conceptualisation. I now involve my students in

project work, enquiry learning, and in critique and I have made a conscious effort to ask open-ended problematic questions that lead children to problematise issues for themselves. I talk less and I encourage my students to take responsibility for their own learning. Since 2001 I have been actively encouraging children to engage in discussion, formally in their weekly Thinking Time sessions and now more informally, also, as I have come to value my students as highly able critical thinkers. The transcripts of discussions (Appendix C.) and the video links included herewith, show clearly that the children display a facility in thinking and talking together.

The weekly discussions and my reflections on them have led me to question many givens about education. I have come to see that education in many western post-industrial contexts is premised on the idea of ‘having’ knowledge or skills or expertise. My identity as deliverer of syllabi and curricula was also grounded in this idea of ‘having’ knowledge and passing ‘it’ on. I even began this study in ‘having’ mode, so as to assist my children to ‘acquire’ higher-order thinking power. The reality of my experience of discussions with children aged from four to ten years however has led me to see that I can live more closely to my values if I to try to be a better critical thinker myself, and use my critical capacity to provide contexts for my children also to be critical thinkers. This involved a shift of logics and did not happen suddenly. There was no point where I stopped being a propositional thinker and became a critical or dialectical thinker. It was a gradual process with many regressions. But the reflections on my practice over the initial three years of my study led me to see that there was no other way to live to my values.

I value enquiry learning and have now gone some way towards establishing a critical community of enquiry in my classroom. Throughout my teaching life, I have seen how children’s burgeoning creativity and enquiry can be stultified by a system that relies on didactic pedagogical practices. I have referred to the several accounts in studies of Irish primary education that document this phenomenon (such as Conway 2000, Eivers *et al.* 2005, Government of Ireland 2005b, Hall 1995, Morgan 1998, Murphy 2004, Shiel *et al.* 1996). Nor is it just an Irish phenomenon. The passivity and non-critical thinking of students in the United States led Lipman (1988, 1991, 1993) to begin the movement now known worldwide as Philosophy for Children (P4C). I challenge the normative conditions that encourage dominant teacher talk and passive children. I realise that these

didactic situations are premised on a propositional form of logic. Propositional knowledge, with its emphasis on knowledge as a reified entity separate from the knower, also seems to me to ‘Other’ children. I believe that teachers can ‘Other’ children by talking largely ‘at’ them. I prefer to find creative ways of developing a more dialogic pedagogical style of talking ‘with’ and ‘to’ my students, a more dialectical form of practice, premised on a view of the other-in-relation to me and other-in-relation-with-others, and on a more relational epistemology (see McNiff 2000 and Thayer-Bacon 1998, 2000). Fromm’s (1979) ideas about ‘having and being’ have relevance for my practice. I seek to achieve a more inclusional and relational form of practice, grounded in open-ended enquiry and resistance to closure or absolutes, so as to live more closely to my ontological, epistemological and social values.

To test my claim that I am endeavouring to live in the direction of these values, I revisit my values and examine my practice by posing critical questions for myself such as:

- In my educational practice, do I ensure that all pupils are treated in a just and caring manner?
- Do I create the conditions necessary for a dialogical form of practice?
- Do I provide opportunities for talking and thinking in caring and just relationships?
- Do I encourage my students to be critical thinkers rather than acquire discrete sets of skills?
- Do I resist imposing my thinking on my students?

In this chapter I have offered evidence of incidents that demonstrate my efforts to try to transform my educational practice and that shows that I can answer in the affirmative to the questions posed above. By providing myself with explanations for my practice through a deeper reflection on episodes and events as they are recorded in my journal, in transcripts and on video, I show how I have arrived at deeper understanding of the living standards of judgement against which I test my claim to be presenting my students with opportunities for thinking critically for themselves through an enquiry

learning methodology involving a mixture of dialogue, discussion, and ‘ordinary conversation’ (Noddings 2002 p.142).

Finally, I believe I have shown how I have transformed my own thinking, from the outsider perspective of one ‘doing research on’ my students grounded in propositional forms of logic as I ‘taught critical thinking,’ to a more inclusional and respectful insider account of the dialectic practice of learning to be a critical thinker alongside my children.

These are significant insights for me. I now conclude my thesis by offering what I see as the potential significance of my research for future practices and future research.



## **Concluding chapter: The end is a new beginning**

The next chapter, Chapter 9, concludes my research document. However, it is neither the end of my story nor the end of my epistemological journey. In a sense when I end this chapter I begin a new phase of my practice – that of living faithfully to my articulated values and continuing to reflect on and improve what I do.

## Chapter 9

### *Conclusion*

#### **The potential significance of my research**

In this final chapter I outline what I claim to have achieved, and what I know I have learned. I also state what I believe is the significance of my practice, at a practical and a theoretical level.

I am claiming to have achieved the following at a practical level:

- I have begun to live my values of care, freedom and justice more fully in my practice
- I have encouraged and supported my students to realise their capacity for originality and critical engagement
- I have contributed to the improved subject knowledge of the children that I have taught
- I have contributed to the transformation of my institution through transforming my practice
- I have attempted to realise some of the principles of the 1999 Curriculum in my practice

I know I have learned the following at a theoretical level:

- I have reconceptualised my own practice, and influenced others to reconceptualise theirs
- I have developed my capacity to make judgements about the quality of what I am doing as a practitioner and a researcher, and influenced others to do the same
- I have improved myself as a person: having begun to think about what 'good' means, I am now closer to realising the vision of the good teacher I wish to be.

I now organise this chapter into two parts that deal with the two aspects of my claims to knowledge.

## ***Chapter 9 Part I***

I am claiming that I have realised my educational values in my practice. For example I developed dialogic pedagogies that contributed to the improved subject knowledge of the children. As I have shown throughout this document, developing these pedagogies meant, that as I supported and encouraged my students to think for themselves, I also increased my own critical awareness as I engaged with ideas about knowledge and critiqued the growing technicisation underpinning much of the rationalisation of the school day .

### **Releasing the Imagination**

Borrowing from Greene (1995), I am claiming that I have contributed to the children's content knowledge through releasing their imaginations. Like Greene (2001), I have tried to ensure that my students experience an 'aesthetic' education, a mode of education intended to make possible informed, aware participation in works of art. This is not, Greene contends, 'the kind of undertaking geared to the transmission of pieces of knowledge or specific skills to passive learners' (p.110). I claim that through thoughtful and critical pedagogies I have opened doors for the children to learn from artists and their work. By visiting galleries; listening to music and responding in pictures, dance, drama, writing or verbally; by sitting outdoors to draw from observation the children have unlocked new perspectives for themselves and identified new alternatives. I claim that by employing dialogical pedagogies I relate to my students as thinking human beings who can make meaning for themselves and engage in multiple vantage points. By giving my children the space and opportunities to engage in silent dialogue with themselves as they gaze at a piece of art or with others as they explore art together, I embody my values of care, freedom and justice, and communicate those values through my practice. I show the realisation of these values in the following photos. In Figure 9.1 the children are silent, but from the expressions on their faces it is clear that they are in communion with themselves, and thinking deeply, while in Figures 9.2, 9.3 and 9.4 they are engaged with each other.



**Figure 9-1: Photo of students deep in thought in an art gallery**



**Figure 9-2: Photo of students engaged in dialogue planning an art topic**



**Figure 9-3: Photo of two children in one-to-one dialogue about art**

I believe that in teaching the way I now do, I ‘hold open the world for a child’ (Macdonald 1995, cited in Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.92). I have faith in my own capacity to nurture dialogical ways of knowing that enable my students and myself to be aware of how we learn to think for ourselves. I agree with Greene when she says:

It may be our interest in imagination, as much as our interest in active learning, which makes us so eager to encourage a sense of agency among those with whom we work. By that I mean consciousness of the power to choose and to act upon what is chosen ... a willingness to take initiatives, to pose critical questions, to play an authentic part in ongoing dialogues ...

(Greene 2001 p.110)

The dialogic pedagogies that I have now put into place in my classroom find resonance in Bakhtin's ideas about the creation of knowledge. Holquist (2002) suggests that for Bakhtin, nothing *is* in itself.

Existence [for Bakhtin] is *sobytie sobytiya*, the event of co-being; it is a vast web of interconnections each and all of which are linked as participants in an event whose totality is so immense that no one of us can ever know it. That event manifests itself in the form of a constant, ceaseless creation and exchange of meaning.

(Holquist 2002 p.41)

This idea makes sense to me. In relation to my students' learning, and as Bakhtin suggested, there was possibly 'a constant ceaseless creation and exchange of meaning' (Holquist 2002 p.41). When the children were busily researching information for their projects, it seemed to me that they were engaged in the co-creation of knowledge in dialogue with each other or with their own thoughts. What matters most is that, in all these learning situations, the children have opportunities to think for themselves and are not just relying on received wisdom from textbooks.



Figure 9-4: Photo of children in dialogue about sculptures in a gallery

When a child is in dialogue with others in a knitting circle, ([Video Link: dialogue and knitting](#)) or in conversation with a man who has come in to demonstrate his love for the feel of wood under his hands, or who, having spent time engaging with works by Picasso or Miro, has responded with a drawing of her own (Figures 9.5a, and 9.5b), she has not been told what to say, do, or think. She relies instead on her own originality of mind and capacity for critical engagement.



**Figure 9-5a: Photo of students' responses to Picasso**



**Figure 9-5b: Photos of students' responses to Miro**

Included also in my data is a video clip showing the children engaged in dialogue as they collaborate on filling out some Halloween worksheets and worksheets based on the human skeleton and another clip that follows, showing the children cooperating with each other on a creative writing exercise based on Brueghel's 'Hunter in the snow' and 'Winter landscape' ([Video Link: worksheet collaborations and creative writing](#)). In Appendix E, there are also several examples of the high level of individual creative responses of the children to the music and artwork of others. Several research reports

into Irish classrooms decry the dominance of worksheets and workbooks (Greaney and Close 1989, Government of Ireland 2005a, Murphy 2004).

The classroom approach and methodology appears to remain teacher-directed and focused, with pupil activity consisting of the widespread use of worksheets and textbooks ... rather than on guided discovery, activity ...

(Murphy 2004 p.256)

There is an understanding amongst such reports that workbooks and worksheets are employed as passive and mindless drills. My video shows how even worksheets, if employed dialogically with several children exploring together, can in fact be rich opportunities for exploration and dialogue.

It mattered little to me that my students' learning from their various dialogical experiences was not quantifiable empirically as per my monthly progress reports (see Chapter 5). What was significant, I felt, was that my students were learning in ways that were life affirming, and the learning opportunities were appropriate to each child's unique way of knowing. I was delighted that the children learned that often situations occur for which no right answers are to be found, and that learning needs to be problematic. I felt that I had found pedagogies that encouraged them to problematise content knowledge as well as their own learning processes. Thus their main subject knowledge became knowledge of their own capacity to learn and to think critically.

The next episode demonstrates this clearly. It shows that the children learned to reflect on their own thinking and evaluate it in the light of new thinking. On 22-11-05 I gave them 'booklets' composed of the transcripts from four Thinking Times dating from early September 2005 to the end of October 2005 to read and discuss. In my diary I recorded that

The children were immediately engrossed and spent the first few minutes quickly scanning the pages for their own contributions. When they found their own name they read their own contributions several times and eagerly showed them each other. Only then did they read through the transcripts.

The children then evaluated their own thinking.

C: Actually it's kind of good to read these again. I wouldn't say what I said there again now though, because when you read what other people said you'd kind of get different feelings about what to say.

K: I think the discussion on Yellow Bird was pretty good. I'm kind of amazed at myself...at what I said. It's actually quite sort of ... grownup.

J: I remember after doing that Thinking Time I kept thinking about my feelings and my mind and my soul and wondering about it and stuff. I like what I said here. I'd still agree with it.

P: I still agree with what *I* said. It often strikes me when we're on about what the frog said and the toad said and the spider said and...look they're not human! Why are we getting so excited about them? – They're animals for God's sake! ...not even real animals...they're made up for a story!

J: Yeah but P... the point is what's it about ... what's the author trying to tell us? ... We don't believe the stories, we...think about what the point is. (RD 22-11-05)

I believe the data clearly demonstrate that the children can be critical about their own critical thinking. The data suggest that the children respect the discussions and take them seriously. P's contribution is very true to form: he regularly shows that he is one of the deepest and most lateral thinkers in the class, and he often states after some time in discussion that the suspension of belief he needed to go along with a fiction story has just collapsed. For example: 'I mean ... he's a toad! Why would he need a swimsuit? Frogs don't wear swimsuits!' ([Video Link: I mean... he's a toad!](#)). In the actual transcript of the 'Yellow Bird, Black Spider' story (Archer and Archer 2004) he had said

P: I don't know why we're all feeling so shocked about the bird eating the spider. That's what birds do...all the time! They eat spiders and worms and cute things like ladybirds. So what's so extraordinary about eating a spider? I think it's because we're looking at that bird as if he's human. He's a **bird!** (RD excerpt from transcript of Yellow Bird Black Spider 12-10-05; Appendix C.9.)

P recognises that children's fiction is steeped in anthropomorphic imagery. And he is not a fan of the genre. However, J's response to him, as they evaluated the transcripts, shows that J has grasped that the exercise in discussing such stories is an exercise in thinking critically.

#### Reflection 1

The episode shows me the significance of carrying out research in my own context.



As the teacher-researcher, I am in a position to evaluate what happens at a different level to that of an outside researcher and can learn from it so as to improve what I do in a caring and just way.

I know my children in a way that I doubt an outsider could. We share a 'communicative past' (Mercer 1995 p.61).

I 'know' their 'communicative history' as well as their 'communicative present' (op cit).

I knew how P disliked fictional stories, and so in an effort to be caring and just to him and to other children who did not engage with fictional material well, I ensured that we also discussed scientific concepts and history and mathematics – topics he chose and in which he engaged deeply. (RD 22-11-05)

I offer the data above as evidence that the children have reached a high level of metacognition as well as critical awareness. These data and my theorising of them also contribute to my arguments about the power of teacher-practitioner self study as a methodology for generating a living theory of practice (see Chapter 3).

The children also demonstrated critical awareness around day-to-day school issues: for example, when the children's creative writing ran overtime, or when they didn't want to stop researching because the clock said 10.30 a.m. and it was time for something else, they were demonstrating critical engagement. They declined to interrupt the flow of knowing of which Bohm (1998) spoke, or to break Bakhtin's (1981) idea of the 'wholeness' of the learning situation. Through working with the children, I also came to see my teaching as a holistic practice, and I linked this with my values of care, freedom and justice. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to the feeling of absorption in creativity as 'flow' while Pirsig (1974) calls it 'wholeness' and links it to care:

When you're not dominated by feelings of separateness from what you're working on, then you can be said to 'care' about what you're doing. That is what caring really is: 'a feeling of identification with what one's doing.'  
(Pirsig 1974 p.290)

The idea of wholeness also permeates the philosophy underpinning the living nature of the theory I am generating. Bohm's (2004) idea of the whole world as 'shades merging into one' (p.10) also has resonance for my methodology, because a living form of research involves a flow of inclusional and dialogical practices. Practitioner-researchers like me can take a long time to realise that there is no template, no 'set menu' for the methodology – in fact no reified 'methodology'. They learn to go with the flow of a living practice in relation with others.

In developing my living theory of practice, within the context of my institution, I had to learn to allow dialogical practices and the technical rationality of my existing school system to coexist. I had to learn to live with competing epistemological logics. I cannot, and should not, change institutional structures overnight. For example, it is not within my power to have an open-ended arrangement about using the computer lab or the PE hall. These resources have to be fairly divided between classes. I have had to incorporate the logistics of everyday school life into my practice, in the interests of a caring and just level of access for all, to limited resources.

Neither can I adopt a maverick approach to when the learning support, language support and resource teachers can work in my room with the students who need help. In terms of assessing my practice for planning and progress reports, I also had to be resourceful in developing inclusive ways of showing what I was doing, and hope that there would be adequate evidence of learning taking place. I deliberately developed creative ways of showing children involved in dialogical practices, by including CDs and photos of different class-based activities with my progress reports to the principal.

My children and I learned much from the work of my colleagues in my university study group. From M's sharing of her work on 'travel buddies' and East-West projects (Glenn 2006) I got the idea of setting up pen pal activities for my students with children in two schools in Arizona (2004/5; 2005/6), and in Portland Oregon (2006/7). Figure 9.6 provides a flavour of what happened when letters arrived.



**Figure 9-6: Photos of students reading & sharing US pen pal letters**

A cheer goes up when the letters arrive. First the children are quiet as they absorb their own letters, and then a buzz breaks out as they share letters. (RD 16-10-04)

The pen pal project was a huge success. As well as the social learning involved in communicating with each other and with children from other cultures, my children learned about geography, through an investigation into the topography and climate of Arizona, and, more critically, about the fact that their Irish reality was very different to that of the children in Arizona. For example, my students wrote about Gaelic football and hurling, assuming that their pen pals would know what they were talking about. They also learned about the differences in language and meaning between American English and Irish English:

S: My pen friend thought “hurling” meant being violently sick.

M: God! Look at this. She thinks we all live in cottages on a hillside!

CM: My pen pal asked me if I ever saw a leprechaun!

G: The Saguaro cactus flower is the national flower of Arizona: what’s ours? (RD 16-10-04)

Likewise the children in the USA laughed at some of the assumptions my students made about life in a desert region. When the American children told my students that they were doing a ‘big project’ on early American elementary schooling (Figure 9.7), my children were anxious to do a history project too, and they decided to do one that would demonstrate the antiquity of Irish culture.



**Figure 9-7: Photo of Arizona pen pals' schooldays project**

We are about to wrap up the 'Pioneer Schooldays' experience and will send a group picture in our pioneer clothes in front of the first territorial governor's "mansion"-- a 3-room log cabin about 150 years old. That's ancient for us white folks out here! (RD email from teacher: P.ALaf 21-01-05)

My students linked their history project with the Religion programme and investigated the effect of the arrival of Christianity on 5<sup>th</sup> Century pagan Celtic Ireland. As part of this project E constructed a church (Figures 9.8). Her work was meticulous and led to a significant learning episode for me and a challenging once again of how children are often failed by an education system that does not recognise their multi faceted intelligences (Gardner 1983). Other children then followed her example and constructed a monastic Round Tower, some toilet roll Viking raiders, a Viking long ship, a Norman castle and some Tudor toilet roll lords and ladies.



**Figure 9-8: Photo of E's church with 'action man' St Patrick**

E paid incredible attention to interior detail and her finished church was a considerable demonstration of her architectural, construction, and artistic skills. With her permission, some children then decided to add electric lights to the church, which was inaccurate chronologically and historically, but their efforts proved informative for me, as the next excerpt shows:

A group of children who were good at physics asked E. if they could 'electrify' the church. They set to work with the electricity kit. They had great fun stripping and cutting wires and arguing about what bulb and battery should go where. But after half a day they were no nearer providing light in the church although they had become expert wire-strippers.

I asked E to help them. After all it was her church. She was not strong at physics but I knew she was a good manager of people, with excellent organisational skills and tactful interpersonal intelligence. She allocated tasks, organised the tidying up of the kit box, delegated a team to clear the floor and work area, and within an hour the bulbs were lighting. (RD 17-02-05)

E is a child who attained a low score in both English and Maths standardised tests. According to the technical rational logics of the tests, she is a 'slow' learner. However, by my criteria, grounded in my inclusional logics and based on my observation of her real-life abilities, she is a superb artist, actor, dancer, architect, engineer, manager, communicator and a sociable, popular student. I am not alone in recognising this. It must be noted that E has been fortunate: her multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983) have flourished throughout her career in our school. The kinds of pedagogies I was developing were built on the recognition that children like E must have opportunities to demonstrate their critical intellectual strengths. These pedagogies thereby contribute to a more just and inclusional form of educational practice.

Two children (C in my class and V in Arizona) did a co-operative science experiment comparing the quality of wild water and tap water in Cork with that in Arizona. The experiment was entered in the Arizona State Science Fair.

V's teacher here. We have just made a video of our class science fair projects and we are so pleased with how V and C's project has turned out. What's even better is that our principal -- a former high school science teacher -- has told me it is one of the best projects he's seen in years. V made this great "stacking" graph showing the differences between the tap water sources and the "wild" water sources for each country.

Looking at the graph, we see that the boys' hypothesis was correct -- Arizona's wild water sources are very different from what comes out of the tap. Cork's tap water -- when taken as a whole -- is very similar to its wild water sources. We will be sending you all that V has written and displayed and I will take pictures of his board and email them to you.

As a teacher, this kind of learning really is exciting! (RD email correspondence from Arizona teacher P.ALaF 20-02-05)

Considerable critical awareness was generated also when my students grappled with the multicultural reality of why the American children said ‘Happy holidays’ instead of ‘Happy Christmas’ and why, despite their multi-ethnicity, they did not have to learn a compulsory second language like Irish. The Arizona/Cork communication culminated in the teacher of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class spending two days in my classroom sharing her knowledge about life with scorpions, snakes and cacti in Arizona with the children.

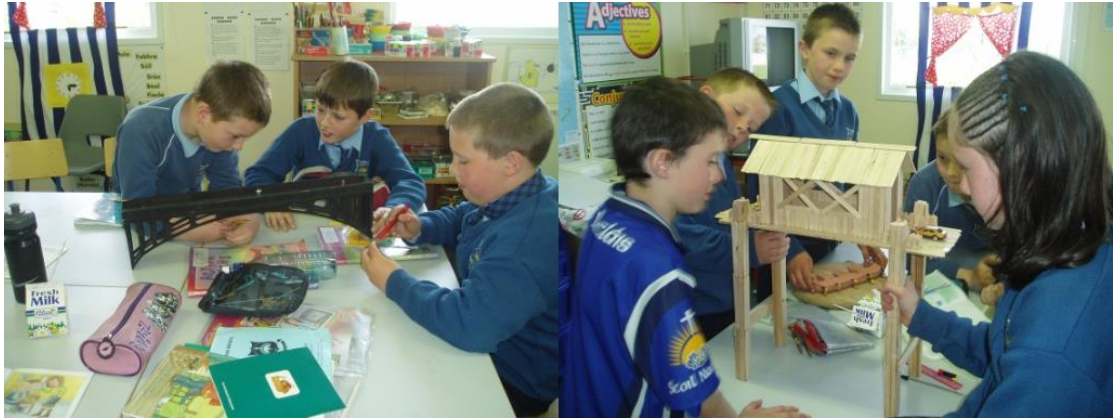
I can be at your school on that Thursday or Friday. I am so very, very excited. We are sending to you this week: a wooden model of a scorpion for your class to put together, scorpion information handouts for all students to read and color, and step-by-step directions for drawing an accurate model of these creepy arachnids. Is that ok? I would be glad to help students put together the model. (Extract from email correspondence with P.ALaF 25-05-05)

Almost three years after the initial correspondence began some of the students are still corresponding with their pen pals.

From C, a colleague involved in researching her practice with children who have Specific Learning Disabilities (Dyslexia), I became aware of the possibilities of asking children to become critical of their own learning (McDonagh 2000, 2002, 2007). This resulted in several projects whereby I encouraged my students to present their learning to others. On different occasions, they explained the principles behind the phenomenon of ‘dancing raisins’ to an Infant class, discussed the possible existence of aliens, and demonstrated butter making and magnetic car design. (Figures 9.9 to 9.12 below.)



**Figure 9-9: Photos students presenting creative writing & science experiment**



**Figure 9-10: Photos of bridges made by students during science**



**Figure 9-11: Photos of bridges demonstrated by students for science open day**

The students also demonstrated their learning to their parents and to children from other classes at a science open day as shown in the photos below: Figure 9.12.



**Figure 9-12: Photos of students demonstrating butter making & magnetic cars**

These are some of the ways in which I have been able to contribute to the children's content knowledge. Significantly, they and I have come to an understanding that content knowledge is related to individual processes of learning. Occasionally they are able to articulate this, as in many of the excerpts I have included throughout. I have definitely learned how to articulate this, and the importance of doing so. I am critically aware of my own processes of learning, and I encourage my students to develop this capacity also.

I am also claiming that I have enabled my students to exercise their capacity for originality and critical engagement. As well as encouraging them to exercise critical awareness in relation to the subject areas in the curriculum, I have, through focussing on making time available for discrete classroom discussion, also encouraged them to be aware of their capacity for originality and critical engagement, and to articulate this awareness.

My 3rd class and I had a discussion on animal rights on 27-02-06: I read 'Oi! Get off our train' (Burningham 1991) and 'Zoo' (Browne 1992) and then asked the children to discuss their thoughts about animals' rights.

Me: Should all animals have the same rights? For example should rats and Labrador guide dogs deserve the same rights?

A: Well, the guide dog is doing a job and he's useful so I'd put him in a different group to the rat 'cos they are just troublesome and if you get a bite of a lady rat you can die ...

A: I think all animals should have the right to freedom, like us. They shouldn't have to stay in cages for their whole lives. At least we get left out free at 18.

Sh: I've been thinking about rights and I don't think that every single animal should have rights. Some should have rights, not rats, snakes, crocodiles, maybe not wasps. If you made a line you could put those on one side, because they have sharp teeth and they can bite you. Then on the other side you could put lions and tigers and cows and dogs and cats and rabbits and bears. They deserve rights, they're good. (RD 27-02-06, Appendix C.2.)

Here are two excerpts: both following a reading of 'The Story of Anne Frank' with two 3<sup>rd</sup> classes



B: I was thinking ... well ... the way we all think can't be forced on us ... like we might think it's right to be Catholics but we couldn't **make** someone **be** a Catholic, we could bring them to the church but we couldn't force them to believe. You have to **be** one to really believe ... and you can't make anyone else **be** one unless ... they believe ... for themselves (RD excerpt from transcript of Anne Frank 06-02-06 with SB's class, Appendix C.3.)

K: I agree with T that freedom would mean doing everything you want even the bad. Well, do you know when you were reading the story [Anne Frank]? Well, you said the Americans joined with Britain to help them against the Germans. Well, in a certain way the Americans when they joined in, they were helping England with freedom, but then that means that they were ... against ... they were stopping Germany's freedom ...if you take sides ... it means that sometimes you are stopping someone's freedom ... well ... a bit ...

P: I disagree with some people and I agree with others, who said that freedom is doing whatever you want, but only in a way. You can only have freedom if you're alone. Because if you were really free to think what you like and say what you like and do what you like it and there were other people around, it could be the baddest thing ever for them because you might want to do all bad things with your freedom ... Freedom could be sometimes good *but sometimes it could be the baddest thing ever.* (RD: transcript of 'freedom' 07-02-06; Appendix C.6.).

The children demonstrate here, I believe, that they have grasped fundamental aspects of freedom, and they have begun to be aware of the development of their own ideas. Like Berlin (2002), P has come to see for himself that total positive freedom could be 'the baddest thing ever'. The children recognise that freedom means having choices but that one person's freedom should not impinge or take from another's, and they recognise that freedom, like faith and critical thought, cannot be forced upon people.

I did not teach the children about freedom, nor did I teach them how to use their capacity for originality and critical engagement. I read them an abridged version of the story of Anne Frank and invited them to discuss the story. Their comments in the full transcripts (Appendix C.3. and C.6.) show considerable diversity in sophistication. Here I have chosen those that I felt were particularly striking in their simple and heartfelt wisdom. The children involved are aged eight or nine years old. They arrived at these explanations of what freedom means for themselves. The significance of my practice here is that, by providing opportunities for critique, I believe I have created a critical

community of enquiry within a caring, free and just practice in my classroom, and that this is evidenced by the children's words.

### **My educational influence in my workplace and in the wider domain**

I am claiming that I have contributed to the transformation of my institution through transforming my practice. I did not set out to take this aspect as a core feature of my research. It became a value-added aspect, in that through my educative influence, I began to contribute to the education of my colleagues, and so came to contribute to the transformation of my institution.

As reported earlier from my appointment in 2001 I was involved in providing in-house professional development in the area of teaching for improved critical thinking in my institution. I now expand on what I wrote earlier, about how I engaged colleagues in informal conversation about my classroom discussions, and how my enthusiasm seemed to have influenced others to try the practice for themselves. Thirteen out of fourteen colleagues responded to me when I asked for evidence that I had been invitational in my approach to helping them try classroom discussion for themselves. Testimonies included the following:

Thinking Time has been a foundation stone for educational policy in our school since 2001. Mary has *changed my way of thinking as a teacher*. Thinking Time permeates the school day. It encourages children and teachers to think, communicate and interact in a different way. (RD Extract from letter from SO'L 28-02-05)

It is my belief that because of Mary's educative influence on the majority of the staff of fourteen teachers, they have been imbued with enthusiasm for the spirit and culture of thinking time ... I lecture part-time in a third level institution ... because of *Mary's influence I now give two lectures out of a series of ten on critical questioning and thinking*. (RD extract from letter from MC dated 22-02-04)

You don't push your views on anyone: you speak with obvious pleasure and enthusiasm and share your delight in your children's ideas. (RD comment by DW 18-02-04 (see further examples in Appendices B.1. a. - B.1. m.)

Gradually, as the school grew, I was obliged to put professional development in Thinking Time on a more formal footing and I began to provide workshops and presentations for colleagues in my own school and for a neighbouring school. My approach was largely invitational, conversational and non-coercive (see evaluations

below). I began by articulating my values about education and I showed videos of discussions, and then spoke about my own experience in classroom practice. I read simple stories such as ‘Something Else’ (Cave and Riddell 1995) and invited comments. Colleagues who experienced this provided positive (and sometimes poignant) feedback:

I wish I’d heard this long ago, when I could have done something about it. (RD comment by BD during summer in-service course July 2004).

I have been teaching all my life: I am ready to retire. Why am I only learning this now? This way of encouraging children – people!!! – to think would have made such a difference to my teaching ... it’s so simple and so powerful. (RD extract from conversation with MR following workshop Aug 2004)

On 16-11-02 I was invited by the local Education Support Centre to conduct a workshop for teachers (Roche 2002d). I presented my ideas about Thinking Time in my usual way, through video and participation in a thinking circle (using the story ‘Zoo’ Browne 1992). The participating teachers completed evaluation sheets in which one of the questions was:

Q3. Which aspect of this workshop most appealed to you?

The answers I received included:

The practical experience of a thinking time was helped by the videos which gave insight into the process. You have a lovely natural communication style – you are concerned for your subject, the children, and your audience of teachers who need your enthusiasm and support.

I like the idea of allowing the teacher to be at the child’s level in the discussion and the idea of the teacher and all the pupils listening to one child and that child isn’t wrong.

I loved the spirit of openness and willingness to participate which was evident in the group. (RD 16-11-02; Appendices B.4.a. to B.4.c. and B.5.a. to B.5.g.).

These responses were encouraging and affirming, and showed me that, like me, many teachers seek ways to encourage children to be more participative in classrooms. The evaluations in general show an awareness by teachers of different ages and levels of experience of the need for more dialogue in school.

I also provided a workshop for colleagues from my PhD study group and members of the University of Limerick Department of Education and Professional Studies (Roche 2002c). Colleagues agreed that the experience provided powerful learning:

I was amazed at how powerful an activity the thinking time circle is at promoting a depth of engagement ... I can only imagine the huge potential within philosophising with children for children's personal and social development ... I believe that the environment you create is critical to the richness of thinking and engagement ... I believe also that you are, through your thinking time, a mediator and gateway to children's innate knowledge and understanding. (RD email from MG 18-10-02)

I would have loved thinking time when I was a child: I was a non-sporty child, always thinking and pondering. This would have been so liberating and so wonderful for the 'me' I was back then: to have the space to explore feelings, thoughts, ideas – but that need was not appreciated at that time. (RD comment by TG, University staff member 12-10-02)

The weekly practice of classroom discussion is now embedded in school policy. Teachers joining our staff receive professional development in the form of being invited to sit in on my classroom discussions and those of other teachers. I provide support in the form of workshops, a file of ideas and a bank of resources of stories, poems, and pictures. Teachers evaluate their discussions by keeping transcripts of what the children say, and adding their own observations and/or learning from the discussion.

ML, a teaching colleague, organised her weekly Thinking Time discussion with her 4<sup>th</sup> class around the topic 'What did friendship week mean to you?' on 16-02-07. She knew I was finishing my thesis and offered me a copy of her evaluation from her monthly progress records file, because she said 'this activity was so significant for me and I think the evaluation might be useful for you' (RD 05-04-07). Her complete document is included in Appendix D.2. as an example of how colleagues now use their evaluations of Thinking Times as opportunities for reflective practice. Her actions showed me that my studies are respected and are recognised as having relevance for others in my institution. In her evaluation ML had written:

Very occasionally you experience a 'moment' in teaching that you know you'll always remember. This has got to be one of those times for me. (RD 05-04-07 written evaluation by ML; Appendix D.2.)

Evidence of my influence sometimes occurs when I least expect it. Corridor discussions with colleagues have been a rich source of data and learning for me. I now concur with Adger (2002) that ‘professional talk is not icing on the cake of professional development. It is the cake.’ (p.28)

In the corridor today R said, ‘I ended up having a conversation about feminism with Junior Infants! We started out talking about wearing summer clothes ... and next thing I knew we were into a discussion on feminism!’

S. replied, ‘That’s what I don’t get: how do you know when to interrupt the discussion ... and go with the new idea?’

R. replied, ‘I don’t know really: I suppose from listening to Mary. I’ve heard her say so many times: go with your hunches – you’ll recognise a ‘good topic’ when you hear it ... .. Mary often speaks about the need to look beneath the surface and the givens ...’ (RD 12-05-03)

Today MK gave me some transcripts from her eight year olds. I was very struck and heartened by the examples in the transcript that show the children recognising multiple viewpoints ... (RD 15-01-04)

At a staff meeting today the principal spoke publicly about his delight in reading Thinking Time transcripts from the teaching staff. He referred to a teacher’s comment in her evaluation that ‘the discussion represented one of those rare teaching moments that only happens once or twice in a career.’ (RD 20-03-07; Appendix D.2.)

I outlined earlier how I have also presented my work to teachers from outside of my own institution at workshops, in-service days and summer professional development courses and how teachers have been encouraged to try Thinking Time in their own contexts. A young trainee teacher recently spent some weeks in my classroom as part of her teaching practice. During this time she participated in several classroom discussions and was impressed with what she witnessed. She later wrote:

I have picked up loads of ideas during my teaching practice ... I liked your classroom discussions most of all though and I can’t wait to have a class of my own to do that ...

I like the way they listen so nicely to each other and the way they build up on each other’s ideas ... they don’t get upset at all when people disagree with their ideas. They seem to sort of say, ‘Hmmm – she disagrees with what I said ... maybe she has a point.’ Or ‘He thinks that and I think this ... that’s interesting.’

I also like the way that the teacher and the children are sort of on the same level of importance in the discussion and there are no right answers or wrong answers. It's very fair, and very democratic ... they really are thinking in those discussions.

I've been amazed at some of the thoughts they've had and I found myself thinking 'that's an interesting angle ... I didn't see that myself'. (RD extract from transcript of conversation from SC RD 08-12-06; Appendix B.1. j.).

In an email (received on 05-02-07) she subsequently wrote:

I am starting my last placement after midterm break ... I am so looking forward to trying out a thinking time with the class. I have even been telling my own class in college of how well it works. Hopefully the class teacher will be open to me trying it too. I'll keep you informed about how well it goes. (RD personal correspondence from SC 05-02-07)

The following is an extract from an evaluation written by a colleague who, some years ago, was influenced by my practice to try Thinking Time in her own context in a school that shared a campus with my former school. I had not known that I had influenced her practice or that she had continued with the methodology of classroom discussion to which I had introduced her, until she related an incident that occurred recently during her new status as a postgraduate student. She subsequently agreed to write about the incident and gave me permission to use it in my thesis:

I am currently studying for an M.Ed and was recently asked in a seminar run by Dr --- to describe a powerful learning experience. I immediately thought of the first time I used Mary's version of classroom discussion.

... I have used this format of classroom discussion since that first 'try-out' over ten years ago. I have found it to be an enriching and empowering way of 'being' with my pupils and only wish I had known of it much earlier in my teaching career.

This version of classroom discussion has, in my opinion, had a significant, positive effect on the dynamics in my classroom. It fosters a warm, respectful and supportive relationship between the children and between the child and myself.

The children, I think, learn to think for themselves and blossom in a classroom climate that encourages 'free' thinking and non-teacher-led discussion. (RD excerpt from written evaluation by MO'S 02-10-06 full evaluation in Appendix B.2.)

The data presented here demonstrate that one teacher can have an influence for good in the living practices of others. I can now claim, for instance, that my educative influence has influenced the practice of MO'S (above) and that she is now educatively influencing her students. Drawing on the work of Whitehead & McNiff (2006) I believe that in sharing my enthusiasm for and belief in dialogical practices I have had an educative influence in the learning of others. The others have not been coerced into adopting 'my' practice. They have not 'applied' my practice to their contexts. They have chosen to use the learning from my influence to create their own living practices in ways that are appropriate for them.

## ***Chapter 9 Part 2***

### **My claims to knowledge at the level of theory**

I am offering new understandings that will contribute to the development of educational research and educational theory. I begin with explaining how I have reconceptualised my practice, and enabled others to reconceptualise theirs. This capacity for reconceptualisation has emerged through the process of doing my research and generating my living theory of critical practice.

My reconceptualisation of practice has taken a range of forms.

### **Reconceptualising my relationship with my students**

I now understand my relationships with my students to be grounded in our common humanity. The relationships are dynamic and constantly evolving. I have no way of knowing, when I sit into a circle for a discussion, how the conversation will evolve. I do know that our interaction will be spontaneous, creative, and life-affirming for all (Figure 9.13)



**Figure 9-13: Photos video still from discussions with 3rd classes**

I have no planned responses when I talk with my students, other than to allow them to critique and discuss whatever story, poem, picture or topic has been chosen. Our interactions evolve dialogically in response to the ideas and the spontaneous contributions of each member of the group. There is no seeking of closure or right answers. I do know, however, that if I were to stand outside the group and direct or control it from without, in an authoritarian manner, and seek a product called ‘knowledge’ which could then be turned into ‘activities’ that my children call ‘school work’, it would not work. It ‘works’ because I am in the circle, as one-in-relation-with-my-students, enjoying the exciting co-creation of ideas, sharing our knowledge with each other, and just ‘thinking with one big head’ (Murriss 2000 p.262).

Shor (1992) explains that traditionally, school knowledge is assumed to be produced separate from students, who are asked only to memorise what the teacher orders. Consequently, the act of knowing is often reduced into a transference of existing knowledge, with the teacher as specialist in this transference. In this way the qualities of critical reflection, problematising, and uncertainty, which are all qualities needed for learning, are ignored in favour of absorbing others’ knowledge. I believe that I have produced evidence to show that in my classroom knowledge is vibrant, organic and in constant creation and re-creation and co-creation as my students dialogue with each other and with me (see Figures 9.14 and 9.15 below).





**Figure 9-14: Photos of students in dialogue with each other**



**Figure 9-15: Video still of me in one-to-one discussion with a student**

Like Noddings, I now see education in its widest sense as being central to the cultivation of a caring society. Noddings (2002) defines education as ‘a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation’ (p.283). The orientation of schooling systems in most advanced capitalist countries, Noddings argues, is a functionalist one with an emphasis on skilling to fulfil the future needs of business and the economy, whereas, she posits the view, as I do, that school needs to be about learning to live in relationship with others. I share her concern and her commitments. Relationships are what make life pleasurable or, if they are in turmoil, unbearable. While some attention is paid in the Irish Primary Curriculum to personal, social and life education (for example in the Social Personal and Health Education syllabus) it seems inadequate when set against the demands of Noddings’ theory of care. She has argued

that education from a care perspective has four key components: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. When I look at my evidence, I see that I am demonstrating all four concepts in action.

### **My improved self-understanding**

When I began problematising my practice during the early part of this study, I came to realise that I was a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989a), in that I held values that were systematically being denied by the structures of the institution I worked in. My commitments were to a form of educational inclusion wherein I value each person as a unique and ‘concrete other’ (Benhabib 1987) and wherein I see myself as one-in-relation with others (Bateson 1972, McNiff and Whitehead 2006, Whitehead and McNiff 2006). This meant that I felt uncomfortable with the idea of silent children listening passively as I ‘delivered’ lessons and changed my pedagogy accordingly to fit more closely with the values I held (see for example Figure 9.16 where children can be seen collaborating with enjoyment as they complete an assignment).



**Figure 9-16: Photo of a group in dialogue as they work in pairs on an assignment**

I now believe that I understand my practice at a deeper level. I see the relationship between my practice and the ‘creation of good social orders’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2006 p.255).

Drawing again on the work of Korczak, whose practice as an educator embodied his deeply held humanitarian values, Efron (2005 p. 146) states that Korczak wrote

“Thanks to theory I know, thanks to practice I feel. Theory enriches the intellect; practice colours feelings, trains the will” (Korczak 1924/2001 p. 47) ... Armed with knowledge of one’s own specific circumstances, the educator picks and chooses the particular practice that is most appropriate. This is a

personal and professional process, Korczak asserted, in which the practitioner is distrustful of both others' and his or her own opinion. "I don't know, I search, I ask questions ... By deepening I complicate ... Every 'elsewhere' is a new stimulus for the efforts of thought" (Korczak 1924/2001 p. 48).

(cited in Efron 2005 p.124)

Efron also suggests that Korczak's work is relevant for current thinking about the role of the practitioner researcher in current educational discourse:

In many ways, Korczak's concept of the role of practice in forming a teacher's personal theory of teaching was a precursor to the current notion of teacher's knowledge ... [he] valued teachers' personal, experiential, situational, and relational knowledge. His belief in the personal practical knowledge (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) draws on the teacher's "own knowledge, passion, beliefs and in accordance to the specific contextual circumstances in which one has to act" (Korczak, 1978, p. 305) and was the starting point for his educational body of thought.

(Efron 2005 p. 147)

This has relevance for my work. By becoming critical enough to challenge uncritiqued norms and to encourage others through my educative influence also to do so, I now see that interrogating my practice so as to form a 'personal theory of teaching' (Efron op cit p.147) influences what I do at the micro level of my practice, and also has potential for influencing macro or global social order. I understand, as McNiff and Whitehead (2006) point out that the future begins 'here and now' (p.255), and that, by living my values, I am beginning to improve my classroom practice and institutional practices. I also believe that I am influencing the education of others with whom I am in relation, just as they are influencing me and others. I also understand more about my values and, through trying to put them into practice, and justifying them to critical friends, I have begun to reconceptualise both my practice and my understanding of the conceptual frameworks of my study.

Self-understanding deepens when professional actions are articulated and defended with colleagues and research participants.

(O'Hanlon 2003 p.99)

### **Reconceptualising my understanding of freedom**

Rather than saying my students should be free to think for themselves I deliberately frame the freedom involved as freedom from the constraints of not being afforded opportunities to do so. I consider that there are issues of power and powerlessness

involved in the frequent asymmetrical relationships between students and authority figures.

I do not believe that I ‘confer’ freedom on my students. I do believe that unless I as a teacher exercise care and justice in my relationships and refrain from restricting opportunities for students to talk in classrooms, my children cannot exercise their positive freedom in developing their capacities for thinking for themselves. Negative freedom from restrictions to autonomous critical thinking precedes the positive freedom to think for oneself. By deliberately developing dialogical pedagogies I have begun to live those ideas in practice.

My living theory of practice has evolved to the point where I now have balance and equilibrium between my authority role as teacher, my relational role as caring adult and my democratic role as ‘just another person in the classroom’ (Figure 9.17).



**Figure 9-17: Video still of a student & I relating to each other through dialogue**

I used to see my role as deliverer of a curriculum, evaluator of how well I had delivered it, and assessor of how well the children had received it. Because of the nature of the syllabus and the number of children in the classroom, I saw myself as chief talker, manager and authority figure. I saw my role as making children conform. I spent a lot of time organising children and preparing worksheets. I was uncritical about what kind of learning this would encourage and what sort of socialising was taking place.

My values of care and freedom and justice told me this was not a right way to teach, but I had no strategies until I began to articulate my values take action. Winter (1998)

suggests that action research is about seeking a voice ‘with which to speak one’s experience and one’s ability to learn from that experience’ (p53). I have been empowered through my research to reconceptualise my identity as a critical practitioner and I have learned to speak with a confident voice. I have critiqued and problematised my role and I have made changes to how I taught, giving rise to the kinds of dialogical pedagogies described throughout.

This has involved reconceptualising my own philosophy of education, moving from a focus on denial to enablement. This for me is good practice. I now understand that in order to live a moral life I have to try to do whatever is possible to enable my students to realise the greatest amount of freedom to exercise their capacity to think for themselves. This is a just and democratic form of education, rooted in care for my students. I have also had to look at whether there is incompatibility between my values of freedom and justice. I have had to examine whether I am setting my students up for tension with the Irish secondary system which, according to many commentators, discourages critical engagement. I bear Holmquist’s (2006) warning in mind:

As ... students this week dutifully regurgitate the information they have been told to memorise, it may be a mistake to equate this with learning. Straying from the point, asking too many questions and exploring alternative avenues of thought aren’t rewarded with high points ... what is rewarded is the ability to do well in exams. There is a danger that by programming students with a predetermined curriculum, students are learning how to parrot not to learn. This makes them vulnerable to letting others tell them what to think on a whole range of philosophical, moral and ethical questions.

(Holmquist, Irish Times 09-06-06 p.15)

### **Reconceptualising my ideas about care**

I ask myself, am I exhibiting care for my students when I teach in a way that honours their freedom to think for themselves? I believe I am. My data base contains evidence that students who do a weekly discussion programme based on Thinking Time by and large exhibit self-control and dignity, demonstrate critical awareness, show care and respect for each other and for their teachers, and this has been validated by observers of discussions and by parents. (Appendix B.)

‘One of the things that amazed me [about the video] was the fact that children I would have thought of as timid were actually well able to speak their mind, but they did so with respect and kindness for each other. All the children acted really responsibly towards each other, even when they were disagreeing with others. And they disagreed so nicely with you too and it didn’t sound cheeky!’ (RD excerpt from conversation with H’s mother following Thinking Time video 06-06-06)

‘C watched as I put up a bathroom shelf. She said “Dad, that’s far too high.” I said it was for medicines so it had to be high. She looked me right in the eye and said very politely, “I disagree with you, Dad, because it’s actually too high even for Mum.”’ ... ‘I was amazed at a four-year-old using this language and it didn’t sound rude or anything. I wish I had learned to speak up for myself in school. In interviews I go all embarrassed and clam up. If I’d been given the chance to speak like C in school, who knows where I’d be now?’ (RD excerpt from conversation with CD’s father during parent-teacher meeting February 03)

### **Reconceptualising my practice as an exercise in justice**

Without developing dialogical pedagogies, I would not have learned how intelligent E was, how articulate A was and how sensitive C was. Children like Eo might never have had the opportunity to challenge norms such as straight lines and Ao might never have known that she was critically aware enough to ‘question the answer’. Children like R might never have realised he loved music enough to dance and roar like a mountain king; C would not have been exposed to the thrill of having his hypothesis about the comparisons between Cork’s and Arizona’s water quality tested and submitted to the Regional finals of the State Science Fairs. The children might never have looked critically at their experiences of Irish sport and Irish Catholicism and questioned if the reality of lived experience of children in other countries was similar. I am claiming that, while I have not been directly responsible for these achievements, I have played a part somewhere.

I have developed my capacity to make judgements about the quality of what I am doing as a practitioner and a researcher, and enabled others to do the same.

This now brings me to speaking about my capacity for making judgements. If I am making claims of the kind above, I need to demonstrate that I am capable of making judgements, and to test these claims against identified standards of judgement which inform my evidence base. This becomes the focus of the next section.

### **Judging the quality of my practice and my research**

In this section I show how I have learned to judge the quality of my practice and my research, and I explain that I use the same standards of judgement for both domains (Whitehead and Whitehead 2007).

Throughout, I have stated that my ontological values of care and regard for the other act as my living standards of judgement. These are my values, that is, what I value, so I regard them as good. I therefore judge my practice in terms of what I hold to be good, because my values reflect my commitment to who I am and how I understand myself in the world (see also Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.82). One of the most profound personal significances of my study has been in relation to how I now understand the relationship between my practice and my values. I realise more clearly that I am in relation with others, experiencing a sense of our common humanity and life on this planet.

As I endeavour to make meaning of this relationship for myself, I try to hold myself accountable for my actions. I try to ensure that my practice is informed by my moral standards and by my values of care, freedom and justice.

Like Benhabib (1992), I believe that

... each [individual] is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents and capacities.

(Benhabib 1992 p.159)

I have come to a new understanding of my role in facilitating classroom discussion in that I now see it as a moral undertaking that allows me to see my students as co-participants, co-researchers and the people with whom I work and share my classroom.

I believe that my early teaching practice was lacking in fulfilment of these values, because I had not examined my practice reflectively, nor checked if I was living in a way that was commensurate with my values. Once I did so, I came to see that I was dominating my classroom with teacher-talk in an effort to deliver a content-based syllabus to my students.

Through engaging with literatures of classroom interaction (Barnes 1992, Burns and Myhill 2004, Haworth 2001, Mercer 1995, Norman 1992, Wells 1999, Wood 1992) I

have learned that I was far from unusual in allowing my linguistic competence (Wood 1992) to occupy the space my students need to explore their own thinking through dialogue so as ‘to impose their own relevance’ Haworth (2001 p. 382).

Because of the teacher’s claim to prior knowledge of the subject content, and right to control the pacing and sequencing of its transmission, pupils rarely managed to impose their own relevance outside the teachers’ frame of reference ... resulting in very low level of pupil questions ... and pupil statements.

(Haworth 2001 p.382)

I have reflected in this document on episodes of past practice that reveal my best teaching self and I hope to project that self into future teaching situations (McDermott and Richardson 2005 p.31). I have also reflected on episodes where I failed to live towards my values or where I experienced myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989a). Through reflection and meta-reflection I have come to see the learning potential of such episodes for transforming into improved practice. I believe that I have transformed my practice insofar as I now live more fully in a relational and dialogical way. The evidence I have produced throughout this thesis supports this claim. I have not taught my students what to think nor tried to change their thinking. I have not tried to impose closure on their thinking or confine it to being a subject called ‘critical thinking’. I have learned to ‘let the other be’ and explore how I can best provide contexts where they can exercise their imaginative and creative abilities dialogically as they learn to be critical thinkers, and make judgements on their own capacity for critical engagement. The samples of children’s work in Appendix E and the samples of transcripts in Appendix C show, by their variety and uniqueness, how my students demonstrate a significant capacity for critical and creative thinking. The children’s voices as they sit in their discussion circles provide, perhaps, the strongest evidence of all ([Video Link: the children’s voices](#)). (Figures 9.18 to 9.20).

C: Yeah, maybe, cos like, if you’re always just following other people like, without thinking for yourself, and just doing what they want you to do... you could end up in trouble. (RD 12-10-05 from ‘Yellow Bird Black Spider’ (Archer and Archer, 2004); Appendix C)

E: You need to think your own thoughts just like you need to be yourself. You need to have fun too though. Thinking in a circle with your friends is fun. It helps you to be better at thinking on your own afterwards. (RD 12-10-05 Comment by E during conversation about doing Thinking Time following ‘Yellow Bird, Black Spider’ discussion)



S: If you didn't ever get to use your imagination then your life would be so boring and sad. (RD 04-10-05 'Once upon an ordinary school day' (McNaughton 2004); Appendix 3.7.)



Figure 9-18: Video still of a student enjoying herself as she voices her thoughts

### Attentiveness in dialogue

As I have learned how to encourage children to think for themselves, I see that an important practice is to be respectful and attentive to what my students are saying and to develop a just and caring relationship with them. This has meant adopting an ethical stance. Listening is itself an ethical stance toward the other, according to Bingham (2006 p.337). Many data transcripts and videos throughout this document incorporate evidence of my attentiveness to my students' thoughts and voices. Observers of these videos and discussions have attested to this aspect.

I was struck by the relationship you have with the children in the circle – there's no strong teacher role visible, no discipline or control. I mean you are in control but it's not obvious, it's more like you're friends talking and listening to each other and enjoying the process into the bargain! (RD 11-11-05 O's comment following observing a discussion)



**Figure 9-19: Video still of attentiveness in dialogue**

Following the viewing of some Thinking Time videos by my students and their parents on different occasions, several parents commented about my practice:

I don't think a teacher ever really talked to me as a person when I was in school. That's one of the most surprising things that struck me about the video – you're really listening and talking to them. You're not *teaching* them ... well, not like the teachers in our day! (RD extract from conversation with TMcC 25-05-06)

I invited parents to write their evaluations of what they had experienced as they watched their children take part in discussions. One parent wrote:

The videos of your classroom discussions were a revelation into the mind of a child in today's world ... How much things have changed from the formal 'shut-up and listen, repeat after me' process which was, as often as not, followed by corporal punishment for failure to achieve. The rigidity of my time in education in primary was one with some dour teachers and iron discipline with little or no attention to life study ... features of your classroom discussions greatly impressed me: the freedom of the children to behave as individuals, as equals, with you, in a group discussion ... the fact that the children were free to participate in, to discuss and expound, to disagree with others (including teacher) and even change their minds was fascinating to observe.

The democracy of the group discussion allowed opinions to be presented without reserve or embarrassment which can only aid the children ... I feel that this concept should be broadly accepted in the primary educational system and form a necessary part of the curriculum. (RD correspondence from P.L 06-06-06; Appendix B. 7. b.)

Parents who viewed videos of my children participating in discussions used words such as ‘equality’, ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ (see Appendix B.7. a. – B.7. f.) and said that these qualities were visible in our discussions in how the children behaved towards each other (see Figure 9.20).



**Figure 9-20: Video stills of students listening to peers**

Their testimonies are evidence that the children and I are ‘concrete’ others to each other in the discussions and treat each other with respectful attentiveness.

### **Developing my own critical awareness**

From a position where I understood education, intelligence, learning and teaching in propositional terms, I have come to view my practice as a dialogical engagement with others, with knowledge, with the literatures, and with myself. I cannot disentangle who I am from what I do, and I now understand that I cannot change others, nor do I want to try. This was not always the case. I may have set out to improve my students. Gradually I have come to realise that I can only change myself.

As I became familiar with the literatures of critical pedagogy I initially adopted a polemical stance and rejected all technical rationality. Then I saw that this stance was itself a form of closing down thinking. Through their articulation of their critical awareness, my children helped me to see that I was adopting a too narrow perspective and had to re-evaluate my stance. I now see that to be inclusive I need to incorporate all forms in my thinking, though not necessarily in my practice.

### **Beginning to realise the potential of my research as contributing to social betterment**

My early draft writing aimed to communicate how I influence children to think critically in the interests of contributing to social betterment. In 2005, as I reflected on my data, I saw my practice from a different angle. I began to see that what I wanted to do was to contribute to social betterment, and one way to do that was through encouraging children to think for themselves. I therefore had to establish the link between what I was doing in class, and the social order. I reasoned that if I wished to contribute to the development of a good social order, I needed to be clear myself about my meaning of ‘good’, and ensure that my practice was good, on those terms.

I read the work of Russell, Popper and Alasdair McIntyre and saw how my work resonated with some of their ideas. I recognised too, for the first time, how a living theory of practice such as mine, as I hold myself accountable for my actions, could also be seen as contributing to a more peaceful and productive world (Whitehead 2000). I now recognised that my practice was about trying to ensure that any influence I exercised in the lives of my students was educative, and that I should be able to offer my account of how I exercised (and judged) that influence for public critique, to show how I hold myself accountable. This for me was how I came to conceptualise my ‘good’. My practice could be deemed ‘good’ if I could show how I was living my values of care, freedom and justice, and if I could make the account of practice available for public critique. My practice could be understood as good if I showed how I had struggled to improve it, and could now show how I had improved, bearing in mind that I could improve even more if I tried (see also McNiff 2007). I have produced evidence throughout to show this struggle, and I can show how this has enabled me to influence my students so that they, too, cheerfully engage in their own struggle to be good.

My evidence resides in places where I have described the gradual development in critical thinking of my students from discussing why Humpty Dumpty was sitting on a wall, to the morality involved in Goldilocks’ actions, to whether or not Jack was a hero and up to the point where Eo challenged school norms (Roche 2004a p.6). I have subjected my ideas to the critical scrutiny of others, and received feedback of the following kind:

What Mary is doing here is exactly what Russell (1932) said was the work of educators, that is, encouraging the development of thinking in young people, the citizens of tomorrow, rather than producing passive, obedient followers.  
(McNiff 2004 p.7)

I have been contacted by people from the west Coast of the USA and from Australia who have read and been influenced by my MA dissertation:

On 17-08-06 RS wrote: Hi Mary! ... Did you know that your dissertation has been referenced on the P4C-list, the international discussion group? Congratulations! I'm forwarding the original to you. (RD email correspondence from RS 17-08-06). The forwarded original had been sent on 16-08-06:

I am currently enrolled in a PhD program at the University of Queensland. I want to train some teachers in Philosophy then track their progress and any change in pedagogy over 12-18 months... So far I have only been successful in uncovering three research projects looking at change in pedagogy following implementation of Philosophy [One of which is] Roche, M. (2000). How can I improve my practice so as to help my students philosophise? Masters thesis University of West England Bristol, available at

<http://www.jeanmcniff.com/maryrochema.pdf> 14/5/06 (extract from email from RS 16-08-06)

DK wrote from Washington State USA: I am working on my doctoral dissertation proposal on Inquiry Dialogue in the Kindergarten. I intend to do action research this spring to investigate how I can best implement a classroom context for inquiry dialogue with kindergartners ... My research will in some regards be a continuation of the work by Mary Roche (2000). (RD email from J 31-01-05)

I offer these extracts as evidence for my claim to have influenced people in the wider academic field.

### **My potential contributions to new forms of educational theory**

Whitehead and McNiff (2006) say that 'research is always undertaken with social intent' (p.45). When I began my studies, my 'social intent' was narrow and primarily focussed on my own classroom. Through developing my ideas in practice and reflecting on them, and engaging with literatures of critical and radical pedagogues, I have grown into a more confident critical researcher voice. My diary records the moment when this dawned on me:

Reflection 1

I read Marge Piercy's (1971) poem 'Unlearning to not speak' last night, and I recognised how all my life I have been a talker, but I've never really understood until now, that I have a voice and perhaps I have never really used my 'I' voice to try to make a difference in how education might be a liberating and profoundly caring endeavour, instead of a technical system for categorising people into discrete corrals. (RD 05-06-03)

I began to experience some satisfaction as evidence grew to show that my work had begun to influence others institutionally and in the wider domain. Citing Polanyi (1958 p.381) who worked towards encouraging people to think in ways which centuries of technical rational thinking had 'taught them to distrust' and who worked towards understanding the world from his own point of view 'as a person claiming originality and exercising his judgement responsibly with universal intent' (Polanyi 1958 p.327), Whitehead and McNiff (2006) suggest that it is in learning to engage in lively dialogue 'where they test their own living theories of education, and test those theories against the critical responses of others' (pp.45-6) that researchers engage in the generation of new knowledge, and can use their influence to challenge the repressive canon that often transforms into a technology of control.

I believe that I have demonstrated that through 'lively dialogue' I have begun the process of testing my own story as my living theory of education (see McNiff 2007). I am showing through this account the live processes that have enabled me to generate and test the validity of my own living educational theory of dialogical practice. I cannot say my study is over, because in a sense I have only just begun the process of examining my practice and my values through writing up this thesis. I believe that my understanding of my practice will develop throughout my working life as I continue to examine what I do, why I do it and how I can do it better.

-----  
Mary Roche

31st May 2007

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## **Appendix A: Ethics statement and letters of permission**

### A.1. Ethics statement

#### **Statement of Ethics**

To whom it may concern:

*As a primary school teacher, I am aware that I am in a position of responsibility and trust. I realise that I have the power to influence children.*

*Therefore, it is my promise that, while carrying out this research, I will observe the highest possible ethical standards. I will maintain the highest integrity at all times regarding data gathering. I will only report information that is in the public domain and within the law.*

*I will avoid plagiarism and fully acknowledge the work of others to which I have referred in my report. I will report my findings honestly and truthfully. I consider the research project worthwhile and of benefit to my students. Covert data gathering will not be a feature of my study. While acknowledging the rights of all the research participants, I also retain the right to report, providing that I have complied with all the ethical protocols outlined here.*

- I acknowledge that I am the focus of the research, which is being carried out with a view to improving my practice.
- The permission of my Principal and of the School Board will be obtained prior to the research study being carried out.
- The permission of the children and the written consent of their parents will be obtained prior to the study.
- The improvement in the learning of the children is of paramount concern to me.
- The children, as collaborators in the research, will be made aware regularly that research is going on.
- At no time will the research detract from the normal work of the class.
- Strict confidentiality will be adhered to. No names will be included in the written report.
- Parents will be kept apprised of all stages of the study and will have the democratic right to withdraw their children from the project at any time.
- I will have the permission of the parents to use the videotapes and/or written transcripts in the future for teaching or writing purposes.

Signed



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Mary Roche

A.2. Letter to Chairperson of Board of management requesting permission to carry out research

**For the attention of The Board of Management**

**February 2002**

**Dear Fr. I [redacted] and Members of The Board,**

As you are already aware, I am currently pursuing a course of studies leading to a doctoral degree in education from the University of Limerick. With this in mind, I now wish to seek the permission of the Board to carry out some research in my classroom.

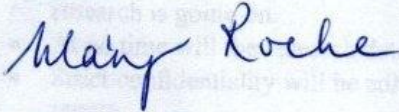
I would be grateful for this permission and for your support. I am the focus of the research and I aim to reflect on, evaluate and hopefully, improve my practice. In this study I am investigating the use of a programme called "Thinking Time" to promote higher-order thinking in my students.

My data collection methods may include some or all of the following: audio and videotaping, photographs, observations, interviews, research diary entries and anecdotal reports. I have sought and gained the permission of the principal and written consents from my students' parents.

I guarantee total confidentiality of information. I will only report information that is in the public domain and within the law. I will not reveal anything of a personal or comprising nature. If I intend to use information that is in any way sensitive I will seek the permission of the originator before using it. There will also be total confidentiality of all names and I will not name the school without permission. At some future time if I should wish to include transcript excerpts in a book and/or videotapes for teaching purposes, I have been given permission to do so.

**Is mise,**

**Le meas,**



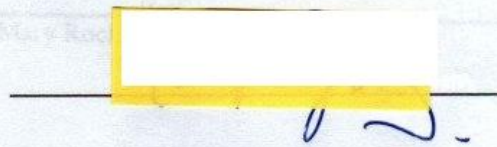
**Máire de Róiste**

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**To whom it may concern,**

Mary Roche has the permission of this Board of Management to carry out an action research self-study in her classroom and in this school, as described above.

**Signed**



A.3. Letter to principal requesting permission to carry out research

**For the attention of the School Principal**

20-02-02

**Michael a chara,**

I wish to carry out a research project in my classroom, as part of a doctoral degree in education with the University of Limerick. I would be grateful for your permission and support. I am the focus of the research and I aim to reflect on, evaluate and hopefully, improve my practice. Over the course of the next three years I aim to investigate the use of a programme called "Thinking Time" to promote higher-order thinking in my students. This work builds on and develops the work that I carried out for my MA in Education.

My data collection methods may include some or all of the following: audio and videotaping, photographs, observations, interviews, research diary entries and anecdotal reports. I intend to invite you and my teaching colleagues to collaborate with me in regular critical evaluations of the study. With your permission also, I intend to invite the parents of my students to view video-recordings of the classroom discussions from time to time and to provide me with feedback. I may at some future time wish to use the discussion transcripts in a book and/or videotapes for teaching purposes. I have sought and gained parental permission.

I guarantee confidentiality of information. I will only report information that is in the public domain and within the law. I will not reveal anything of a personal or comprising nature. If I intend to use information that is in any way sensitive I will seek the permission of the originator before using it. There will also be total confidentiality of pupils', teachers' and parents' names and I will not name the school without permission.

**Is mise,  
Le meas,**



**Mary Roche**

---

**To whom it may concern**

I give permission to Mary Roche to carry out an action research self-study in her classroom and in this school, as described above.

**Signed**





A.4. Letter to parents requesting co-operation, permission to carry out research and to use recorded transcripts

**Ethics statement and Parents' Consent form**

---

**Dear Parents,**

I am currently carrying out some research for a postgraduate study with the University of Limerick. The focus of the study is an investigation into my work in the area of stimulating dialogue and discussion in the classroom, through the use of a process called 'Thinking Time'.

To carry out this investigation I will be using a variety of data gathering techniques. These will include **audio** and **videotape** as well as **transcripts** of the class discussions.

In writing up the report of my study, I will observe the strictest confidentiality – neither the school nor the children will be named. You will already have seen an example of a transcript on 'Beauty' included in your child's February workbook and you will notice that the children's names do not appear on it. There are other examples on the school's website at <http://www.scoilnaomhainne.com> under the heading 'Thinking Time'. I would welcome feedback from you regarding any aspects of 'Thinking Time'. Any feedback you do submit will be also treated with the utmost confidentiality.

The main focus of the research is on my teaching processes rather than on the children, but I need their co-operation - and yours - in order to carry out the study. By observing and listening to the children and by reflecting on the transcripts, I will get valuable insights into my practice. You and they are my research collaborators in this study and have a right to read the transcripts at any time.

Another part of my study will involve workshops for teachers to familiarise them with 'Thinking Time'. I may wish to use some of the videos and transcripts as demonstrations. Be assured that all tapes will remain in my possession and will only ever be used in a teaching situation. All tapes and scripts will be treated with the utmost respect. It is possible that the results of this study will be published in a book. I would like your permission to include transcripts – and again, the strictest confidentiality will be observed.

You have the right to refuse permission for your child to co-operate. Should you wish to do so, I guarantee that your refusal will not in any way affect my relationship with you or your child. Please feel free to come and chat with me about any queries you may have.

*Thanking you for your co-operation,*

**Mary Roche, 19th March 2003**

---

**I give permission for my child to collaborate in this research project.**

**Signed: ----- Parent/Guardian**

A.5. Letter to parents of Junior Infants (2002-2003) accompanying sample transcript (original sample transcript consisted of several pages)

✓ Please return bottom portion of back sheet

[given to parents on  
12/02/02]

11-02-02

Dear Parents,

The following is a copy of a transcript of the discussion we had on a poem. (Copy of poem attached). The children's names have been deleted to preserve anonymity. Despite the fact that this initial session was very teacher driven – a question and answer session – I think you'll agree that some of the responses are very imaginative and even lyrical. My aim would be that, by the end of this school year, the children would be able to sustain a discussion on a topic without much intervention from me. Sometimes they will know the topic in advance. If you would like to read other transcripts, as time goes on, I will be happy to make them available to you.

Please read the accompanying letter carefully. If you have any questions, do come and talk to me.

Mary

Wednesday 30-01-02. 11.45am

*Facilitation: Children had been to yard. Seated in a circle, tables pushed to both sides of room. Good listening throughout. Poem had been read aloud twice on preceding days and was read again when children were in circle prior to discussion. Girls and boys contributed equally. Only two children 'passed' consistently. Two children were absent. Three children who rarely speak in class were remarkably animated in this discussion.*

Transcript : Colours

From 'First poems for thinking' - Robert Fisher

**Q1 What do the first lines mean when they say, "The colours live between black and white"?**

- : Black is the first colour and white is the last and red is one of the last
- : All the colours are in between black and white

**Q3 What do you think the poet means by 'knowing best isn't everything'?**

- : Cos some people are best too at different things

**Q4 In what way do colours dance?**

- : I think they have some legs
- : With paintbrushes – when you paint
- : They could flop around when someone makes play dough

A.6. Sample letters to colleagues requesting co-operation and participation in aspects of my research



28/02/08

Dear Colleagues

I am putting together a paper for ESAI conference on workplace learning. I need some evidence for my claim that I have influenced others educationally. I am using mainly stuff about Thinking Time and how I have influenced others through workshops, disseminating stuff, talking informally about Thinking Time etc....anything that illustrates my claim really. For example I intend, with participants' permission to relate some bits of conversation where people have expressed to me how their own thinking has been affected. If you can add anything at all, please do. Think about this over the weekend and let me have it (Mon or Tues (paper has to be delivered to ESAI Wed))

Mary Roche

A.7. Letter to participants in workshop requesting permission to use evaluations.

**Please take a few moments to read carefully through this sheet**

**‘Introduction to Thinking Time’**

Dear Colleagues,

I am currently pursuing doctoral studies in the University of Limerick and to that end I am carrying out a piece of research on my practice as a teacher. I have been examining the effect that Thinking Time has in my classroom both for my students and for myself. The focus of the research is my own practice and the learning that I am gaining from doing Thinking Time. With the support of my principal and colleagues, I have also been working on getting Thinking Time established throughout our school. This, too, has been a huge learning experience for me. Now I am focussing on the wider academic field, and it is my aim through this and subsequent workshops, to facilitate other teachers in doing Thinking Time in their own contexts. Again, it is my own practice that is under scrutiny.

I would be very grateful to have your permission to use any evaluation or feedback that you might give me, as data for my research. I will guarantee total confidentiality and promise not to reveal your name or the name of your school, should you have chosen to sign the evaluation. Following this workshop, I will invite all participants to fill out an evaluation sheet. If you wish to have your evaluation used, please select the ‘Yes’ option at the top of the sheet; if not, select ‘No’.

Thank you for your co-operation.



Mary Roche

A.8. Letter to participants on summer course requesting permission to use their evaluations

Please take a few moments to read carefully through this sheet.

**Thinking Time and the Revised Curriculum**  
Cork Education Support Centre,  
July 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> 2003

Dear Colleagues,

I am currently pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Limerick and to that end I am carrying out some research on my practice as a teacher. I have been examining the effect that 'Thinking Time' has in my own practice and the learning I gained from doing it. With the support of my principal and colleagues, I have been working on getting 'Thinking Time' established throughout our school. Now I am looking at how I can facilitate other teachers in doing 'Thinking Time' in their own contexts.

My research is in three phases

- In my classroom
- In my school context
- In the wider educational field

(In all these areas, it is my own practice that is under scrutiny).

I would be very grateful to have your permission to use any evaluation or feedback that you might give me, as data for my research. I will guarantee total confidentiality and promise not to reveal your name or the name of your school, should you choose to sign the evaluation. Following this course all participants will be invited to fill out an evaluation sheet. If you wish to give me permission to use your words in my data archive, please select the 'YES' option attached to the sheet; if not, select 'NO'.

Thank you for your co-operation.

*Mary Roche*  
Mary Roche

A.9. Sample letter to parents requesting permission to include specific photos in thesis document

Dear Parents  
I am currently completing a postgrad thesis and may wish to include photos of classroom practice in it. Attached are the photos that relate to when your child was in 3<sup>rd</sup> class with me. I would be very grateful for your permission to include photos that have your child in them. If you give your permission to have your child's photo included, please indicate below and return the permission slip to your child's current teacher.

Best regards

*Mary Roche*  
.....

**To whom it may concern: I give my permission to have my child's photo included in Mary Roche's thesis.**

Signed...  ... Date *15/02/07* .....

A.10. Letters to principal (and reply) requesting permission to include specific data in thesis document

10-04-07

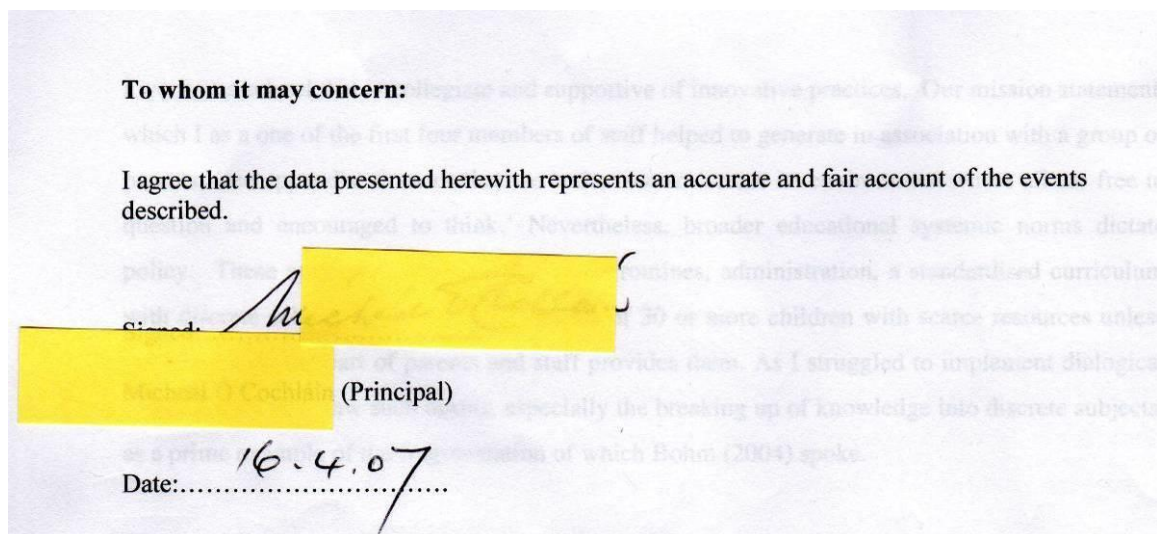
Dear M \_\_\_\_\_

Please find attached herewith an excerpt from my draft thesis document outlining some difficulties we mutually encountered when I was first putting my ideas into practice. Please take time to read the account. I would be grateful if you would sign the permission slip if you are happy to have the extract included as it stands. If you are not happy to have it included, I will delete it.

Regards

Mary

[TO NOTE: The attached text in question was an extract from 'Encountering Dilemmas' pp.163-166 of draft]



A.11. Letter to parents inviting them to view filmed classroom Thinking Times and requesting permission to use video clips in thesis  
**Evaluation of Thinking Time Video 25-05-06**

Dear Parent/s

Now that you've seen an example of Thinking Time in action I would be grateful for any comments. Perhaps the questions below might be of help in formulating your response: (PLEASE NOTE it is **not necessary** to answer any of these questions - they are merely there as guidelines. Your answers can be negative as well as positive - all comments will be welcomed.)

**Please sign and date any evaluation to indicate that I have your permission to use some or all of your words in my thesis.**

*For example - did you think the children were attentive? Did you consider that they listened to each other and built on each other's ideas? Did I as teacher appear to be leading the children to think in any certain way? Were the children displaying that they can think for themselves? Is this a valuable lesson, do you think? One aspect of their critical thinking lessons is that the children are learning to critique stories, not for their immediate content but for the underlying assumptions - is this relevant in today's society? Did you feel that the children were comfortable within the circle format? Did the children appear to be enjoying the session? Would you like to see more of these videos? Any other comments?*

If you wish to see more of the videos, please indicate whether next **Tues 6th or Wed 7th June at 7.30 p.m.** is suitable for you.

Please tick your preference:

**Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> June at 7.30 p.m.**

**Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> June at 7.30 p.m.**

I would also like to have your permission to submit some videos with my thesis and possibly, to use them in teaching contexts at workshops and conferences. The children's identities will not be made known.

Please sign below if you wish to give your permission:

Signed.....M..... Parent/Guardian

Date: --- 2-6-06 ---

Le meas

Mary

A.12. Letter to children & parents requesting permission to include samples their work in my thesis

06-02-07

Dear -----

I would like your permission to include some of your written work with my thesis. I have chosen it because I think it shows clearly that you are a critical and creative person who can think for yourself. If you give me permission, tick the 'yes' box and if you would rather not tick the 'no' box. I will respect your wishes either way.

Le meas.

Máire Bn de Róiste

Yes

*I give my teacher Bean de Róiste permission to include my work in her thesis.*

NO

*I do not give my teacher Bean de Róiste permission to include my work in her thesis.*

Signed..... Date .....

06-02-07

Dear -----

Your child ----- has given her/his permission for samples of written and art work to be included in my thesis. I would like also like to have your permission. I have chosen the work because I think it shows clearly that your child is a critical and creative person who can think for her/himself. If you wish to give me permission, tick the 'yes' box, and if not tick the 'no' box. I will respect your wishes either way.

Le meas.

Máire de Róiste

Yes

*I give my teacher Bean de Róiste permission to include my work in her thesis.*

NO

*I do not give my teacher Bean de Róiste permission to include my work in her thesis.*

Signed..... Date .....



## **Appendix B Validations and Evaluations**

### **B.1. Evaluations by teaching colleagues of my educative influence**

#### **a. Evaluation by teaching colleague JM**

Mary Roche has influenced me educationally in a number of ways but especially through thinking time. I've had numerous discussions on the topic of thinking time with Mary. These discussions have strongly influenced my perception of thinking time. Thinking time allows the child's mind to go where, no other lesson could take them. There is no rigid structure and children are allowed to participate in 'free thinking'. Upon observing a thinking time lesson in Mary Roche's class I found this to be very true. The children were not under pressure to give a right answer and they were very at ease. The child's opinion on a topic is given equal status to that of the teacher and any other adult. They are not been taught to think in certain way. Thinking time also gives children the opportunity to engage a whole group, not just the teacher. Through thinking time the children become aware of the importance of turn-taking and voicing an opinion. The children were also aware of the importance of listening to others and questioning their opinions.

The best example of 'free-thinking' I have experienced is when a child, who was a cardiac baby was asked who she thought invented time. She said "I think doctors invented time. They gave me more time to live when I was a baby". I felt this was a brilliant example of a child expressing her true feelings without any pressure to come up with a right answer.

Jc  
J

28-02-05

#### **b. Evaluation by teaching colleague DOS**

I was born into a world and educated in a system where adults had a monopoly on wisdom. Children were literally expected to be seen and not heard. It isn't an exaggeration to claim that children's thinking, in that milieu, wasn't so much undervalued, as accorded no value. While always attempting to value children's opinion (and thinking) in my own teaching, it wasn't until I came to work in Scoil N., where Thinking Time is a core value of the school, that I was exposed to an educational setting where children's thinking was accorded importance and value. I have been most impressed, not only by this liberating approach towards pupil/teacher interaction but also by the stress which is placed on the improvement of children's thought processes.

Mary Roche has always stressed the centrality of the guiding hand of the teacher in the facilitation of Thinking Time. Thinking Time is not an open-ended, laissez faire unstructured, directionless activity – but demands instead, a high degree of skilful guidance from the teacher. This subtlety of approach is vital in that it facilitates the pupil to improve the quality of their thinking, while still allowing them the 'space' to actually think for themselves.

DO'S. 28 February 2005

c. Evaluation by teaching colleague LOS

When I was first introduced to Thinking Time I was really excited about trying it out. I was very impressed with the reaction I received from the children, their enthusiasm in voicing their opinions and their varied ideas. I had worked quite a lot on language development in my previous school, and I encouraged my colleagues there to try this approach. I was amazed at the language used by junior infants when speaking and also the language gained from listening to other children.

LO'S 27 February 2005

d. Extract from transcript of conversation with LOS

Conversation with L [redacted] about Thinking Time: September/October 2004

*L [redacted]: I was up in Dublin for my 'going away night' with my old staff and I was telling them all about Thinking Time and telling them it's the best oral language programme I've ever seen! They were laughing at my enthusiasm! But I kept telling them 'No! Honestly, You'll just have to try it. Its great! I mean it!' They thought I was hilarious!*

Conversation excerpt February 2005: L [redacted]'s classroom Tuesday 28-02-05

*L [redacted] I find that even as I'm learning more about doing these discussions I'm now noticing more: like, for example who contributes and who doesn't and I'm wondering for example what can I do to try and make it better....could I come up and watch your class doing one some afternoon? I'd like to see one done with an older group..*

L [redacted] Do you agree that this is an accurate account of our conversation? Do you want to add anything or change anything or edit it in any way?

Mary



e. Evaluation by teaching colleague ML

Mary has really influenced me as a teacher as regards approaching philosophy with children. She encourages us to challenge the children (regardless of their age) with what I would previously have regarded as 'adult' topics of conversation. It has been a learning experience for me to discuss heaven and spirituality with an infant class. I am amazed at the dept of thought children at age 5 and 6 can have! The support given through workshops and our 'ideas file' have also been invaluable.  
ML 01 March 2005

f. Extract from transcript of conversation with ML

Conversation about Thinking Time: Staff meeting January 2005

M. [redacted]: I must tell you about an amazing Thinking Time we did on Heaven. It was just brilliant! I couldn't believe what they came up with. I was really surprised that children so young could hold a discussion like this. And they loved it!

Conversation excerpt February 2005: M. [redacted]'s classroom Tuesday 22-02-05

M. [redacted]: There was another amazing occurrence at Thinking Time today. Its brilliant what they can say. For example one child said: ...

M. [redacted], can you fill in the words that you thought were so advanced in the Thinking Time? Do you agree that this is an accurate account of our conversation? Do you want to add anything or change anything or edit it in any way?

Mary

7 Discussion: "What is your soul?"

Your soul is what controls you. ~~It~~ It makes you "you".  
You have your soul all your life, you can't lose it.

Your spirit & your soul go through your bones & your body  
Your spirit is what makes your feelings work!

Your soul / spirit helps you love people. It's all white, and  
when you die it comes out of your body & goes to heaven  
Your body stays in the ground.

Your soul is like your brain - it controls you.

g. Evaluation by teaching colleague SB

Thinking Time was a new idea to me as a teacher. There is a strong emphasis on the oral section of the revised English curriculum on teaching children to speak, and thinking has also been recognised as a priority. Thinking Time helps to develop speaking and thinking skills in children as young as Junior Infants. Thinking Time

allows children explore ideas in a creative way affording them the chance to be innovative. However, this was an area of my teaching that I feel was underdeveloped and through Mary's stewardship this is changing. The workshops are practical and specific to the teachers on staff. But far more helpful is the fact that as Mary is a teacher on staff, she is accessible (more or less) on a daily basis for questions or direction. Thinking time makes a lot more sense the more you do! This year the file with suggestions was particularly helpful.  
SB 23 February 2005

#### h. Evaluation by teaching colleague SD

Since using Thinking Time I have stopped taking mundane things for granted and now question more as to why things are the way they are. The experience of doing weekly Thinking Time sessions has made me appreciate others' point of view and have pride in my own judgement. In my teaching it has encouraged me to step back and give extra time for the class to express their opinion. The atmosphere in the room is more accepting of different ideas and opinions. The benefits of our Thinking Time sessions have enhanced the children's skills in many aspects; verbal reasoning, critical thinking, social skills, moral development etc.

My colleagues value the benefits of Thinking Time. It is a respected worthwhile activity that is a priority in Scoil N. As a staff we pride ourselves in being progressive and tapping into this fun activity that comes so naturally to the children. Mary you been very encouraging and supportive and I am delighted you shared your knowledge with us.  
SD 01 March 2005

#### i. Emailed evaluation from teaching colleague RL

**Sent:** 06 March 2005 09:23  
**To:** Mary Roche  
**Subject:** Thinking Time!

Hi Mary!

At last! I'm sorry for the delay in getting this to you--it's just been another madly busy week! Hope this is what you are looking for!!

The first day I came to Scoil N [redacted], through a casual conversation that we were having, Mary introduced me to the concept of thinking time. I was immediately interested :children thinking laterally and creatively, speaking in turn and listening to each other:I wanted to know more! I worked in the Junior Infant section with Mary that year. During our regular planning meetings, we would often discuss Thinking Time. As a 'new recruit' to the idea, I listened to Mary talk about topics that they had discussed in her class, ways in which she facilitated the setting up of the circle with 30 Junior Infants etc. Through these discussions, I picked up many ideas which I later tried out in my own classroom .At first, I felt even the fact of setting up the circle nd allowing each child as chance to say something, and listen as their classmates contributed was a major achievement in itself!! However, as the year progressed, I was looking for ways of taking the topics a little further or stretching their thinking a little more. I would have heard Mary explain how she would sometimes ask a child to clarify a point or add a comment or question in response to a point made by a child. This might lead the discussion off in a slightly different direction. This proved to be very useful to me in facilitating Thinking Times.  
During that year, I also attended a workshop presented by Mary on Thinking Time. I found that each time I took part in a discussion or debate on the concept,or actually did a Thinking Time with other adults as we did at this workshop, I learned something new. Mary's knowlegde of, belief in, and enthusiasm for Thinking Time certainly infected the large group of us present that morning!  
Three years later, I still regularly do Thinking Time with my class. I still need help with ideas, though I feel more confident in seeing opportunities now which arise naturally in class, through the telling of a story, a comment made in class et. Mary continues to be very supportive and encouraging. I find the file that Mary put together for each member of the staff very helpful.Thanks Mary!

j. Extract from transcript of conversation with SC

Transcript of conversation with S [redacted] C [redacted] 07-12-06

I have picked up loads of teaching tips in your classroom during my teaching practice. I like the way you explained the maths. I like Thinking Time most of all though, and I can't wait to have a class of my own to do that. I think its brilliant. I think I'd also like to film the discussions like you do and use them as further Thinking Times....or maybe show them to the children afterwards and see if they still agree with what they said.

I love the way the children are able to get the room ready and put the room back in order all by themselves – you'd know they liked doing Thinking Time because there's no messing or fuss.

I like the way they listen so nicely to each other and the way they build up on each other's ideas. I can't get over the way a child says 'I agree with x or I disagree with y...' and then you realise that it was ages since that child spoke and they've listened to everything in between and still remember who said what. And there's no unkindness or embarrassment or sneering. They don't get upset at all when people disagree with their ideas. They seem to sort of say 'Hmmm...she disagrees with what I said...maybe she has a point'. Or 'he thinks that and I think that...that's interesting'.

I also like the way that the children and teacher are kind of on the same level of importance in the discussion and there are no right answers or wrong answers. It's very fair; very democratic. They really are thinking in those discussions. I've been amazed at some of the thoughts they've had and I found myself thinking 'that's an interesting angle...I didn't see that myself'. It's really good for them.

Yes. I'm definitely going to do it with my own class!

-----  
*To whom it may concern: I agree that the above represents an accurate account of my part in our conversation.*

Signed: S [redacted]

Date: 8/12/06

k. Evaluation from school principal MOC

Scoil [redacted]

Workplace Learning

I am principal of a new primary school in Cork City. We were established in 2000 A.D.

I have always believed that critical reasoning could be developed more successfully in pupils than heretofore. I was so impressed by the philosophy and structure of "Thinking Time", I have made it one of the cornerstones of our new English school plan.

As a consequence, it is my belief that because of Mary Roche's educative influence on the majority of the staff of 14 teachers, they have been imbued with the spirit and culture of Thinking Time.

I lecture part-time to teachers on "Educational Practices and Theory" in the Cork Institute of Technology, a third level institution in the city. Because I consider this subject to be important to teachers and because of her educative influence on me, I give 2 lectures in a 10 lecture series on Critical Questioning and Thinking.

M  
Pr [redacted]

24.2.04

l. Evaluation by deputy principal SOL

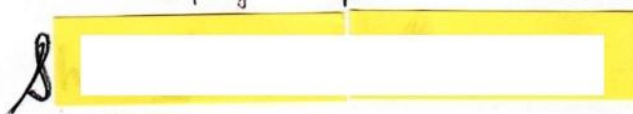
**Thinking time**

Thinking time has been a foundation stone for educational policy in our school since 2001. Mary Roche, by introducing the concept to the school has changed my way of thinking as a teacher. I now realise that philosophical debate is achievable even with very young children and that this discussion can be based on simple every day issues as well as stories and poems.

Learning about thinking time has made me more aware of the importance of developing critical thinking as a life skill for the children we teach. Turn taking, listening, assimilating information, agreement, disagreement, tolerance and discussion have become a way of life for both the children and the teachers in our school. I am now very aware that the teacher is not the only “font of knowledge” in the classroom and I encourage the children to look to each other for information and solutions to problems.

I have discovered that Thinking Time facilitates learning and therefore impacts on all other areas of the Curriculum e.g. clarity of thought, the childrens’ expressive skills. It is a subject –method of teaching that caters for the needs of all our pupils, ranging from the literal to the inferential, and is very much in line with the demands of the curriculum from the point of view of differentiation.

Thinking time cannot be limited to a subject area. It permeates the school day. It encourages children and teachers to think, communicate and interact in a different way.

Deputy Principal  
  
28.2.05

m. Evaluation by teaching colleague DOS regarding focus group

As part of my research methodology while undertaking research for a Master’s dissertation, I facilitated two separate Focus Group interview sessions. Each focus group consisted of six, nine-year-old pupils from the two 3rd classes in our school. Both interview sessions were of an hour duration (approx). Our topic for discussion was the pupils’ experience with a digital media resource in the computer lab over five sessions.

I was very impressed with a number of factors during the focus group undertakings:

- The critical awareness of the children
- The willingness of each individual child to share their personal opinion

- The genuine manner in which all participants listened to the opinions of the other members of the group
- The mature way in which disagreements of opinion were handled – the disagreement was with the *opinions* of others and no personal dimension attached to the disagreement
- The manner in which individuals accepted that others would disagree with them
- The manner in which individual children gave the reason why they disagreed with the opinions of others
- The manner in which individual children developed a point made by another pupil with whom they were in agreement.

The manner in which the ‘cut and thrust’ of argument and of dialogue was handled within the focus groups was most impressive in the context of the participants’ ages (9 years old). It was a display of maturity and genuine rapport not previously encountered by this practitioner of thirty year’s experience.

I attribute the uncommon skill with which the children handled the demands of a focus group setting to their experience of the dialogic process of their weekly Thinking Time sessions in Scoil N.

D----- O’S----- 14 June 2006

B.2. Evaluation by colleague from former school

To Whom it may concern,

I am currently studying for an M.Ed. and was recently asked in a seminar run by Dr. P. [redacted] [redacted] to describe a powerful learning experience. I immediately thought of the very first time when I used Manj's version of classroom discussion - I was an instant and fervent fan.

I have used this format of classroom discussion since that first "try-out" over ten years ago. I have found it to be an enriching and empowering way of "being" with my pupils and only wish that I had known of it much earlier in my teaching career. This version of classroom discussion has, in my opinion, had a significant, positive effect on class dynamics in my classroom. It fosters a warm, respectful and supportive relationship between the children and between the children and myself. The children, I think, learn to think for themselves and blossom in a classroom climate that encourages "free" thinking and non-teacher led discussion.

For myself, I have found Manj's classroom discussion format a humbling and salutary lesson - the comments and insights offered by the children frequently leave me speechless, literally. Over the years, I have come to understand just how discerning and sophisticated children can



be in their thinking. I cherish classroom discussion time, as do the children. We enjoy everything about the experience - the circle format which allows eye-contact, the clearly-defined rules of engagement - which the children and I decide on, together, at the start of the year, and the feeling of us all having the freedom to chew the cud at will.

The empathy engendered by Mary's version of classroom discussion permeates the children's way of being with others and colours their inter-personal relationships at class and whole-school level. Other teachers in the school, often comment on the maturity and kindness of the girls. I feel the girls learn self respect and respect for others, and learn to see me as a human being, capable of feelings, as opposed to just "a teacher."

Academically, the classroom discussion format as used by Mary, has huge benefits for the children. Their higher-order thinking skills develop steadily throughout the year, their verbal reasoning and skills sharpen, their ability to articulate ideas is honed on an ongoing basis and just as importantly, the children learn to adhere to respectful mores when in dialogue with others.

M

2<sup>nd</sup> October 2006.

B.3. Validations by critical friends in the PhD study group  
a. Emailed validation from BL

---

Sent: 03 March 2005 15:50  
To: Mary Roche  
Subject: RE: Influence

Hi Mary

At just a quick think I believe your work has influenced my thinking in numerous ways, some of which are;

That children no matter what age have not just the capacity to reason but to philosophise  
That they can go to many levels in their analysis  
That they are picking up information and have knowledge that we can tap into and build on rather than thinking of them as empty vessels  
That when treated as persons they respond to that way of teaching i.e. their persons and their ideas respected  
That when a teacher uses this method in the classroom that it can impact on many areas in their lives i.e. the use of language with a father hanging a shelf in the bathroom  
That it supports them to learn through questioning and the curious child is responded to rather than admonished for their curiosity  
That teachers themselves can become the pupils and learn from a child's unique perspective on things - that teacher/student relationship if reciprocal is beneficial to both  
That by treating the child as a person you are also building the self-esteem, self-worth and self-efficacy of that child  
If we have children who have the above in high quantities then that must impact on our society  
If voices are respected and heard then surely the person must feel valued - people who feel valued have more to contribute to society  
That children who can be seen as problems in other classrooms such as the child who didn't want to sing can be helped to progress their way

So as we know what happens in the classroom impacts on the child which in turn can impact on the society. That a teacher in child's life is imparting more than education they are instrumental in forming their character through their experience/interaction with them.

b. Request to CMD for critique and her reply

Mary Roche Validation Document 10-04-06

How can I improve what I'm doing?

You have watched a video of my students and I carrying out a Thinking Time discussion on a specific topic (Bravery) and some classroom based discussion based on a story about the Three Bears' revenge on Goldilocks. I would be grateful for your comments and analysis.

The following questions might help as a guide for discussion:

- Is there evidence in the video that I am living to my values of allowing children to think for themselves? *Yes Not only think for themselves but critique and justify their critique of your ideas + present ideas appropriately*
- Did I appear to be imposing my ideas on the children? *No - you are contributing on an equal basis to the thinking conversation*
- Did the children appear to have a democratic space in which to speak and think? *Yes They have time and opportunity taken though they are part of a very large group*
- Did the children appear to engage with each other and with the topic and enjoy the discussion? *Yes Tipping, turn taking strategies organise democracies ways to contribute or think in silence*
- I claim that I respect the freedom of all to think for themselves: was this reflected in my questioning style? *Yes Definitely*

*Amazingly well. Recalling topics + comments + responding to them after a long time lapse*

A second area of exploration involves the question:

- How might I improve my practice in relation to this aspect of my work?
- What might I change? *when you questioned a child about his comment (laughing like a girl) I think you asked him for an explanation or further comment. Pupils rarely asked each other for further explanation but mould their conversations on with their own opinions or critique. Is this a circle process only or can question-and-answer-type conversations occur - and would the be helpful or diminish the format.*

*(b) gradual removal of teacher in circle on occasions as pupils grow in competence in critical thinking*

*(a) [redacted]*  
13/04/06

c. Critique from BS following request letter as per B.2

Validation Document

1. It is clear from the video that you are living to your values of allowing children to think for themselves. In fact, it could be said that each individual child is contributing to the thinking time.
2. There is no evidence to suggest that you are imposing your ideas on the children. In fact, on one occasion when you expressed an opinion and invited comment, none of the children agreed with you but continued to give their own views.
3. The children appeared to have a democratic space in which to speak and think. There was no coercion and no onus on any child to contribute to the discussion, but all seemed eager to participate and to voice their opinions.
4. The children appeared to engage with each other, sometimes agreeing, other times disagreeing with a previous speaker, which indicated that they were listening attentively to each other's contributions. On the whole, they remained on topic in their discussion on 'Bravery', occasionally referring to related issues, such as strength and toughness. All seemed to enjoy the discussion and it was obvious that they have had plenty of experience of such discussions from the manner in which they listened to each other, allowed others to speak without interruption and demonstrated respect for the rights of others.
5. Your value of respecting the freedom of all to think for themselves was reflected in your questioning style. For the most part, you allowed the discussion to flow naturally, and only interposed with a question when you felt that the discussion might be moving off topic, or to move the thinking to a higher level.
6. I do not think your practice in this area can be improved on. I had been going to suggest that perhaps you could try to cut down on the anecdotes that some children told, but I realise that that would not necessarily constitute an improvement. It could limit their freedom to participate in ways appropriate for each child.
7. Nothing needs changing. It is a very rare phenomenon to experience 30 (?) children all participating so enthusiastically in a democratic and positive process.

B.  an

11-4-06

d. Request to MG for critique and her reply

Mary Roche Validation Document 10-04-06

How can I improve what I'm doing?

You have watched a video of my students and I carrying out a Thinking Time discussion on a specific topic (Bravery) and some classroom based discussion based on a story about the Three Bears' revenge on Goldilocks. I would be grateful for your comments and analysis.

The following questions might help as a guide for discussion:

- Is there evidence in the video that I am living to my values of allowing children to think for themselves? *Yes - the children show that a habit or routine of expectation that they can think for themselves has already been established well.*
- Did I appear to be imposing my ideas on the children? *No - but you were engaging in a dynamic that encouraged them to stretch their thinking*
- Did the children appear to have a democratic space in which to speak and think? *Yes - they were highly respectful of our opinions + listened and participated in a highly engaged manner. Politicians could learn a lot from them*
- Did the children appear to engage with each other and with the topic and enjoy the discussion? *Absolutely - even though it appeared to be a lengthy conversation - they were engaged focused and listening intently.*
- I claim that I respect the freedom of all to think for themselves: was this reflected in my questioning style? *Yes - you allowed them think for themselves - you encouraged them to think out questions to stretch + question their thinking*

A second area of exploration involves the question:

- How might I improve my practice in relation to this aspect of my work?
- What might I change?

To really mull...  
• I would wonder if the 'scream like a girl' comment was actually a sexist comment? I dunno, and was it not just adequate...  
Maybe you referring to it again might indicate that you were imposing your values [feminist, equality??] on the class?  
• I would like to see these kids in debate / argument where some would strongly disagree with others. Would they adhere to their democratic ways?  
• I would also like to see if these same qualities are exhibited in their PE, science class + in playtime? Is it influencing how these are in relation to others?  
H. [redacted] 11/4/06 Unity

e. Letter from BS 26 November 2004

26<sup>th</sup> November 2004

Hi Mary

Following your presentation at U.L. last weekend I gained the following insights into your work.

You are developing an epistemology of practice that is based on seeing the child as a knower in the classroom. This theory of practice is different to the normative view and you are developing a form of practice that acknowledges a child's rights, one of which is to have a voice in the classroom.

You are testing your theory through your practice and gathering data from various sources such as journals, interviews, letters, videos and tapes. You have also discussed episodes from your practice as evidence of the validity of this way of working with children (Er, Ca, on, discussions with colleagues etc). These episodes emphasise the values of democracy, freedom, social justice that underpin your work and describe the new learning that has taken place for both you and your colleagues through exploration and reflection on practice. In our various discussions you have raised the question of the competing ideologies that are within your role, the freedom of the child versus the need for the child to learn a set curriculum, and your constant struggle to be true to both.

You are now setting out your new theory incorporating the literatures of Apple, Dewey, Donnelly, Habermas and many others. You are testing your theory through your practice and gaining new insights while deepening your self-knowledge. You are becoming more aware of the values that underpin your work and why you hold those values. You are conscious of your influence on both your pupils and colleagues. The school in which you now teach has as part of its mission statement philosophical thinking for children. You are constantly reminded how this philosophical thinking, has permeated every lesson and interaction in the classroom, you no longer see it as something that is confined to one hour a week. You speak of the enriching of the teaching experience by acknowledging the knowledge holders in the classroom as being both pupil and teacher and both have gained from the use of dialogue to learn new subjects. You speak of your own knowledge and learning being enhanced by this dialogue. You are committed to continuing development of your own learning and improvement of practice through your study.

These are the insights I have gained into your work during your presentation of work at U.L.

Regards

E

f. Emailed letter from CMD

**Sent:** 25 November 2004 21:37  
**To:** Mary Roche  
**Subject:** UL Validation

Hi Mary, I really enjoyed hearing about your work at the weekend. This is my recollection of your validation session at the weekend. You have my permission to use anything I have written here or said on your recording. Good luck with the writing, C. [redacted] ia

Validation Session 21 November 2004

Mary, I heard you explain how you are developing theory from your practice. The values that underpin your work came from your personal experiences of life and the education system. Your theory challenges the idea of knowledge as transmissible facts. You have come to this understanding from the contradictions of theory and practice in your classrooms. Critical thinking is the core of your work and you have critically engaged with the works of Hooks, Stowe, Kosal, Holt, Dewey and Popper.

You have contributed to new educational practice on many levels – encouraging critical thinking in both pupils and teaching colleagues. The significance of your work can be seen in how it has been readily welcomed into the professional development arena. In the democratic practices you have set in place, children's voices and silences are equally valued and thus you have changed the understanding of silence in learning.

You have contributed to new educational thinking in creating democratic processes within your practice. You have reframed practice as research. By setting the 'What Ifs' free in your classroom you have made it safe to ask 'why?' I believe that this word 'why' is the key to shifting from quality teaching to quality research. Therefore you have found key to helping practitioners to become theorists.

g. Emailed letter from BL 27 November 2004

**Sent:** 27 November 2004 11:31  
**To:** Mary Roche  
**Subject:** validation

26th November 2004

Hi Mary,  
I'm sending you my recollections of your presentation at the validation session at the weekend. Feel free to use anything that you find useful for validation purposes.  
Regards,  
Bc [redacted].

Validation session at UL 21st November 2004

Mary, you stated that you were developing a theory of practice grounded in your capacity to encourage children to think for themselves and to be critically aware. Your value of democracy allows you to perceive your pupils as having a voice and to be seen as knowers, in contrast to the traditional, transmission model that sees the teacher as the knower and the children as non-knowers. You move beyond the idea of children having a voice to the idea of children having the opportunity to express their thoughts. This may involve interrupting the curriculum, in order to provide the space for children to develop their critical thinking skills.

You demonstrate awareness of ethical issues in your practice of working with children and live out your values of freedom and democracy in recognising the child's right to choose not to speak. You work in a collaborative manner and allow the children to determine the focus and trajectory of the dialogue. This is evident in your video clips of your critical thinking sessions with your pupils.

In your practice, you have created the conditions that have helped to develop dialogical practices, which encourage children to think for themselves, and in the process you have contributed to new educational practice. You have contributed to a new form of theory by positing the idea of children as critical thinkers.

h. Emailed letter from MG 28 November 2004

Sent: 28 November 2004 20:00  
To: Mary Roche  
Subject: Validation



Validation for  
Mary.doc

Mary,  
Here are some thoughts about your research. Hope they are of some  
relevance..

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I heard you speak about how your educational epistemology was formed as part of your critical pedagogy. This epistemology has evolved for you, in part, because you were educated yourself within a system of education that revered transmission models of education. Even though the 1971 curriculum promoted the child-centred approach, many behaviourist ideas lingered. Your work practices are part of your critical engagement with curriculum and perhaps the inherent injustice that is embedded in it. You talk about 'interrupting' the curriculum, which is another way of saying that you are instigating ways of thinking critically about curriculum. In new and exciting ways of working, you invite children to think for themselves. You are giving children a voice and giving them the recognition of being valid knowers. You are critiquing the notion that classrooms are democratic and you yourself hold democracy as a core value.

You are making a contribution to new and innovative educational practices and to new educational thinking. You are developing your living theory around democracy in the classroom by implementing your values around democracy in your work and by encouraging your children to voice their beliefs. You have frequently presented evidence to me to support your understanding of how you are living in the direction of your values in your practice in the your stories you have shared with me and the film clips of your thinking times.

Your theory of education, which is being formed as you are engaging in your research, is of enormous significance already because it has impacted on school policy and because your teacher meetings are incorporating your theory of democracy as a matter of course. At a wider level, you are informing the practice of other teachers by sharing you ways of working with other practitioners through summer courses and information sessions. You are also making a contribution to new theory by presenting your theory of education within the academy.

*email from M.G. 28-11-04.*



B.4. Samples evaluations by teachers attending in-service July 2003

a. Teacher '1'

'Thinking Time' was food for thought for all of us this week. I certainly am very keen & enthusiastic about taking it on board & I will encourage others to do so. Children as critical thinkers will lead to inquiry which in turn will lead to action and will put the children themselves in the driving seat - learning about what matters to them in their lives, lives that we as teachers have very little knowledge & experience of. Thinking Time will I think lead to learning for life which is for me the essence of education & knowledge.

b. Teacher '2'

I'm definitely going to do thinking time in my class. I've done alot of circle time all along but now I'm going to do it in a more open-ended way. Very enjoyable course.

c. Teacher '3'

17. List any topics/subjects you would like to see being presented in other course in the future:

Follow-up to Thinking-Time  
Possibly a support group coordinated  
by Mary?

18. Other comments:

Mary was a wonderful  
coordinator, who welcomed all  
contributors, positive & negative. She  
was responsible for building up  
a lovely atmosphere & sense of  
camaraderie. The pace of the  
course was relaxed & discussion  
occurred frequently.  
Thanks a million, Mary

- B.5. Sample evaluations by teachers attending workshop November 2002  
a. Teacher '1'

3. Which aspect of this workshop most appealed to you?

I liked watching the "Thinking Time" videos - as it gave an insight into how it worked.

I like allowing the teacher be at the child's level and the idea of the teacher and all pupils listening to one child and that the child isn't wrong.

4. Have you learnt anything new during this workshop which you will be putting into practice?

Yes, I'd love to use the concept in my class and I'm looking forward to seeing the results as regards teacher/pupil relationship

5. Further comments/suggestions:

Reading material provided will be of great assistance.

b. Teacher '2'

The <sup>3.</sup> practical experience of a "thinking time" was helped by the videos which gave some insight into the process. You have a lovely natural communication style - you are concerned for your subject - thinking time - the children and your audience of teachers who need your enthusiasm and support.

4. Have you learnt anything new during this workshop which you will be putting into practice?

I have a habit of searching for outcomes, "learning objectives". The process itself is the outcome - the simple act of respectful dialogue is a huge learning experience - I have learned this.

5. Further comments/suggestions:

The time frame didn't allow for more exploration of the very practical issues of the "how to". With a number of teachers present who had experience of Thinking Time it could be possible in future to divide into smaller groups and there in to identify concerns, issues

What happens if children reveal information that might highlight child abuse? What obligations has the teacher in this position?

c. Teacher '3'

3. Which aspect of this workshop most appealed to you?

The impact that thinking time has on children - how they flourish given the chance. How real children's ideas are & the different perspectives they possess.

4. Have you learnt anything new during this workshop which you will be putting into practice?

Yes, I will definitely be using this. I did learn not to give value judgements.

5. Further comments/suggestions:

Resources were excellent

d. Teacher '4'

①

3. Which aspect of this workshop most appealed to you?

The spirit of openness and willingness to participate which was evident in the group - most probably generated by the quality of the input of the speaker. ② The handouts which enable one to get a sense of the breadth and depth of children's thought - it is difficult to absorb everything within the context of the workshop itself.

4. Have you learnt anything new during this workshop which you will be putting into practice?

I was reminded of the layers which are to be excavated when children are engaged in authentic enquiry. The revised curriculum in its ideology and content ~~also~~ draws on the link between language and learning. Thinking Times seems to be ideally suited to this type of learning.

5. Further comments/suggestions:

Teachers who take their work seriously need a forum in which they can examine and reflect on their own practice. Ongoing - if only occasional - meetings like this might provide a context for meeting this need.

Well done to all.  
Compliments to the hotel for looking after us so well - and to the Education Centre for selecting this topic.

e. Teacher '5'

Which aspect of this workshop most appealed to you?

The newness of the concept for me

4. Have you learnt anything new during this workshop which you will be putting into practice?

to listen rather than dictate

f. Teacher '6'

3. Which aspect of this workshop most appealed to you?

Importance of hearing what you have to say - giving them a safe forum - structure during which they can express their opinions, ideas. Importance of giving you feeling that their ideas are valid, important. A process to allow them to develop

4. Have you learnt anything new during this workshop which you will be putting into practice?

- Yes - lots. I'm so happy I came along.

I would love to try this out in my classroom - I'm going to. I do circle time regularly so class are used to this structure

5. Further comments/suggestions:

I'd really like to attend further workshops on this area because as I implement it, I know I'll have more questions.

their thinking skills  
↓  
questioning skills

but I'd love to try this with the class.

g. Teacher '7'

3. Which aspect of this workshop most appealed to you?

All the exposure, inspiration and resources!

4. Have you learnt anything new during this workshop which you will be putting into practice?

How to practically use thinking time!

5. Further comments/suggestions:

I feel privileged to have been exposed to how important thinking time is in helping children to feel comfortable with themselves and value their and others individuality. It also reminds us how important our thoughts and freedom to express them are!

THANK YOU! THANK YOU!

- B.6. Evaluations of Thinking Time transcripts by parents 2002-2003  
a. Letter from CR

Bean De Roiste,

Thank you so much for the wonderful summary you gave us last week on thinking time in your class. It gave J. [redacted] and I great insight into the amazing thought process of our son and his friends. The reasoning on the way things work was just fantastic. I liked the thinking about the brain transplants!

I had to show it to my mother as she was mentioned in comments I recognised from M. [redacted]. She was so proud that her grandson spoke about her in school. It made her day.

It has inspired me to have more 'conversations' with my children on a variety of subjects that I probably wouldn't have realised they were either interested in or capable of understanding.

Education is definitely two-way process. I'm learning as well as M. [redacted] and I have to say it's a very pleasurable experience.

Thank you for sharing with us.

[redacted] Feb 26<sup>th</sup> 2004.

b. Letter from SOB

Thinking Time 6/2/04

This transcript was a delight to read. I spotted my daughter quite easily (and read with some trepidation)

Its amazing how certain "buzz" words can send them off on a tangent of thoughts and conversation.

By the sounds of things, brain transplants don't bother them too much - maybe we have some budding neurosurgeons in our midst.

An insight into the imagination of 5 & 6 year olds is eye-opening. I don't think I realised quite how much they can take in, mould & repeat our again using their own logic.

I look forward to some more.

S [redacted]

B.7. Evaluations by parents following viewing Thinking Time videos 2004-2005

a. Letter from SB, W's mother

30/5/06



Dear De Rose,

Firstly thank you so much for including us parents in viewing the Thinking Time video, it was both stimulating and exciting to think our children were being exposed to such possibility of thought.

Initially, the children appeared awkward and embarrassed once the story used was finished and as time moved on, you could see their mood to become involved became more urgent. They became confident in themselves and amongst each other. They listened well and reiterated well also - not their own thoughts @ first, this also became more confident with each round of the circle. You could see the layers of thought being stripped away from the very basic, down to a deeper thought process, more questioning. As one child opened one possibility of thought or aspect of the story - you could see the children diversify and the ripple effect

d. Highlights.

Interestingly, with their increasing confidence, they showed the ability to disagree with each other and <sup>with</sup> you as their teacher, i.e. peers and authority figure!! Gives hope for free thinking and them not ~~being~~ conforming easily or reacting to peer pressure.

The regret as mentioned on the day of the viewing was that the children were only getting going when the discussion needed to be stopped. Who knows the possibility of where it would have led to, or whether their interest would lessen?

Overall I think the whole process is an excellent exercise, one that should be adopted by adults more freely to reduce the barriers of ~~between~~ communication and stimulate interest in what is happening around us — will help children gain responsibility for themselves and others — Great job!! Could talk forever on the subject!

b. Letter from P. L. K's father

THINKING TIME

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I found the review of our children's "Thinking Time" most enjoyable and enlightening. I have been aware from the time that K [redacted] & H [redacted] started school in Scoil Ni [redacted] that teaching methods and education in general had changed profoundly since my time in school. Perhaps the greatest noticeable change is my perception of how much the girls ENJOY going to school. While I will always have some fond memories of my childhood and primary school I don't ever really think that any child truly enjoyed going to school.

To me the greatest testament to a school and its teachers is to watch your children skip happily out the door to school, full of chatter and looking forward to their day. At schools end they rush eagerly to tell you about their day and what they had achieved.

Thinking time was, to me, a revelation into the mind of a child in today's world- free to express thoughts and full of ideas and knowledge- perhaps only a little knowledge of a great many things gleaned from TV and the information super highway, but the seeds are there. They struggle to formulate a precise opinion on the subject matter as a group until encouraged by the individual and spontaneous contribution from a child which paved the way for a further enthusiastic philosophical discussion and analysis ,

How much things have changed from the formal, shut up and listen, repeat after me process which was , as often as not , followed by corporal punishment for failure to achieve .The rigidity of my time in education in primary school, with ( again not always but...) some dour teachers and iron discipline with little or no attention to life study.

I do not mean to be overly negative in reflection on my time in school but the positive features of Thinking Time greatly impressed me .The freedom of the children to behave as individuals, as equals in a group discussion, the gradual progression to tangents from the original points. The fact that the children were free to participate in , to discuss and expound, to disagree with others ( inc. teacher) and even change their minds, was fascinating to observe. The democracy of the group discussion allowed opinions to be presented without reserve or embarrassment which could only aid the children in overcoming any shyness and reluctance to participate.

I feel that this concept should be broadly accepted in the primary educational system and form a necessary part of the curriculum.

  
P. [redacted]

06/06/06



c. Letter from C.H. Kn's mother

I would also like to have your permission to submit some videos with my thesis and possibly, to use them in teaching contexts at workshops and conferences. The children's identities will not be made known.

Please sign below if you wish to give your permission:

Signed.....  ..... Parent/Guardian

Date: 1 June 2006

Le meas

Having watched the Thinking Time Video on 25/5/06, I thought it was an excellent and innovative way of teaching. I was amazed at how vocal the children were and how understanding they were of the topic. It is fantastic to see children thinking for themselves and being able to discuss their thoughts with their class and teacher in a relaxed atmosphere - even to the point where they disagreed with the teacher's thoughts!! It is great to see children thinking, giving their opinion and listening to other opinions. I felt as the video went on the children got more confident and all were eager to participate. It is a great asset to learning. If only we had had this opportunity when we were going to school!!

  
1<sup>st</sup> June 2006

d. Letter from M.H. AH's mother

Signed.....  ..... Parent/Guardian

Date: 29-05-06

Thank you

Le meas Congratulations: At last someone who thinks outside the box. Giving children the opportunity to think for themselves, to learn how to evaluate a situation and to listen to others ideas and opinions and formulate their own is wonderful.

25-05-06

Mary,  
I enjoyed the video about "thinking time" so much today. It was wonderful to see the boys & girls talking so freely in a relaxed atmosphere. It was interesting to hear all the different opinions about the 'lists'. I found my own mind thinking about the value of making lists or not! They were so confident. Each one listened to the others' opinion. Adults, I feel could do well to have a similar session on listening in the workplace! It was good to hear the children agreeing or disagreeing with each other and giving the reasons why they did so! There were children there that I thought were shy and retiring, and I was amazed how they spoke so confidently. I would hope that this will be a regular event as it is surely doing a great deal of good for our children.

M. [Redacted]

f. Letter from H.M. H.M.'s mother

31. May. 2006.

Mary,

Just to let you know that I enjoyed the video last week and found it most informative. H. [redacted] was quite to point out the empty chair on your first time 'round was hers! I have read the notes on the website under the 'Think Time' section but it is much easier to put the concept into context when you actually see how it is run.

One of the things that amazed me was the fact that children I would have thought of as quiet were actually well able to speak their mind. The other aspect I found interesting was that there was no "muttering" or "sniggering" when people offered ~~them~~ their views or opinions. It was very

obvious that everyone was respectful of others' opinions.

I feel showing the video to us in the presence of the children was also very beneficial. Our discussion at dinner last night was on "McDonalds". H. [redacted] gave us a rundown of that days Thinking Time. It's as if we know now all about it now as well and her discussion can continue at home. Maybe before this she felt we weren't aware of what Thinking Time was and she couldn't talk about it.

I would love to see more videos in time and maybe having one with parents might be looked at later.

Regards

H. [redacted]

086 8239895

- B.8. Samples of end of year letters  
a. Letter 'A'

Dear Mike,  
Thank you so much for  
all the care and guidance  
[redacted] has received! We  
are very lucky that both

- b. Letter 'B'

Many thanks for a very  
positive educational experience.  
We have appreciated your  
caring, thought provoking  
teaching this year.  
Enjoy your well earned  
summer holidays!  
Kindest regards,



e. Letter 'F'

Dear de Koiste,  
We would like to thank you most sincerely for making [redacted] introduction to school and the education system such a wonderful one. As you can see he loves every minute of it and is completely enthused by it which is due in no small way by the teacher he has.  
You are a lovely teacher and it is evident how kind and caring you are. Thank you again, and I hope he will continue to be so lucky all the way up which is unlikely when his initial influence was of such a high standard.

## **Appendix C Selection of transcripts referred to in thesis**

C.1. Animals in Zoos 07 March 2005

Read story of 'Zoo'. Had already read story of 'Oi! Get off our Train!'.

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- *L*: I think that actually the two books are related because they're both about cruelty to animals in a way except that in the Zoo book the Zoo is trying to protect the animals and zoos are not really bad. They don't try to do actually harm to the animals ... I mean, they try to keep them from getting extinct.
- *P*: I think they're related, both stories. They both try to explain to some people that animals are not actually safe at all. They're not safe in zoos. They're protected but that's not the same as saying they're safe. People don't treat them well. In the wild, animals have everything they need to live. But when they're in captivity, they can't get what they need because they can't make themselves understood to humans. Humans can't understand what animals really need. Even parrots that are trained to talk can't tell people what they need. The only way that animals would be really safe and protected is if humans became extinct.
- *K*: I didn't find them related at first. I found that they both are trying to mention how mean and cruel people are being. Maybe the authors are trying to get us to think so that when we grow up we can stop what greedy people do to animals and we might try to make people find other ways to get keys for their pianos and fur for their fur coats.
- *M*: I thought, while I was listening to that story and looking at the pictures, that in zoos it seems kind of cruel to animals that people are always looking at them and mocking them.
- *O*: D'you know the person who wrote those books? Well I think they're trying to tell us that all the animals that are in the world are in danger from people. Its people mostly that are killing them. People don't have to use animals like that.
- *C*: Like P said: if people didn't exist, some animals would be safe. There are other natural enemies and dangers for animals like poison, plants, bigger animals that prey on them and getting sick, but P is right: people are the worst enemy.
- *Cn*: We could try to keep animals as pets to mind them but they are even safe in our houses either because they can run out and get killed on the road or they can die from eating too much food. They can be abandoned and left to die on the side of the road when people get tired of them ... like snakes and things.
- *W*: I kind of agree with L. Zoos are not just there for protection of animals from extinction. They're also there for people, because people enjoy looking at the animals.
- *D*: Those two people wrote those books to tell us that animals aren't safe anywhere. Not even like Cn said in our houses. They can escape. My friend's snake escaped and they can't find him and they think he's up in the attic eating mice.
- *Ch*: I think it's better ... like P said. If there's no human being around ....animals would be safe from human beings who love killing animals. We need animals but animals need us to love them not kill them.
- *Kn*: I seriously agree with P. He *is* right. If we were extinct they'd be able to live. The zoo is not really for looking after animals. If they were free to do whatever they wanted that would be different but they're not. We're just using them....like objects.
- *D*: I agree with Kn and with P. If we were extinct we couldn't cause any further harm to animals ... but I wonder what would happen then?
- *Hi*: Well I don't agree with the idea of zoos like the one in that book. I don't think its right to have animals in zoos like that. In Africa we had places for keeping animals but they were big parks; animals could roam around free and you had to go looking

- for them because the parks are huge. There aren't any cages and the animals just carry on doing what they normally do.
- *Jr*: I agree with P: animals aren't very safe in our care. Once I was cleaning out my fish's bowl and changing his water and he jumped out of the bowl and I wonder if he was trying to escape back to where he came from.
  - *Sa*: In response to my question: 'which do you think, Sa: would animals like to be running free or in the zoo?' Sa answered "they should be out running free". 'Why?' "Because they'd be happier."
  - *Cr*: I agree with Hi: Wild life preserves are better than zoos. In the wild life preserve, the animals can not only do whatever they want, and humans won't destroy them, but also if one of them gets sick there's a vet or a team of animal doctors to look after them. Also they're kind of guarded so that animal trappers, who would try to steal them, can't get away with it because the wild life rangers are watching all the time. People try to steal animals for their fur or their teeth and you can get up to \$5000 for them. Bad people take them and kill them and stuff them and paint them. And that's wrong. They should be left alone.
  - *A*: I say animals like to be free. They don't like to be in the zoo or the circus. If I am an animal I don't like to be in a zoo.
  - *Me*: Do you think that they do not like the circus either?
  - *A*: Of course not. Its bad for them
  - *Me*: Do you like to go to the circus?
  - *A, smiling*: well yes....
  - *Ce H*: I think animals shouldn't be in zoos because it's not fair. Humans wouldn't like being in zoos so why do they expect animals to like it?
  - *Kn*: I agree with Mo. Animals shouldn't have to be in cages because its like they're on display and they probably hate all those people looking at them all the time.
  - *T*: I agree with L a little bit and I disagree with him a little bit and I agree and disagree with P too. Sometimes maybe zoos could be good. They can help some animals to be safe. Like if there were little bunnies in the jungle tigers would eat them. Zoos could help them get away from that kind of danger. But I also think that it's good to be out running free. I agree with P too, that people are the worst enemies of some animals but I disagree with him because they're also the best friends of other animals.
  - *Dn*: I disagree with P, Kn and D and I agree with T. If there were no people there would be no food for some pets. Who would look after the dogs and the little puppies?
  - *Ce*: I actually changed my mind about what I said before. Now I think that animals should be free...well not the dangerous ones, only the nice ones.
  - *Jr*: I think most animals would like to be free if we gave them a choice. When I look out my back window I can see rabbits and birds. I bet they would rather take their chances out there than be safe in a cage.
  - *Hi*: I don't think that people actually understood me properly. I wasn't saying that in Africa they capture animals and put them in the wild life parks: The animals that are there already lived there...only animals from Zimbabwe live in the wild life parks in Zimbabwe.
  - *Me*: Oh, so it's not like Fota where there are giraffes and we all know that Cork has no native giraffe population!
  - *Hi*: Yes. They're all native animals.
  - *Ó*: I disagree with Ce. She said that the good animals should go free and the bad animals should stay in the cages. I think that's a bit harsh because no animal wants to feel that they're not free. And who decides what good is or what bad is?
  - *K*: I have two reasons and they're both completely different. One is if animals were extinct then we couldn't hurt them. The other is that I disagree with Ó that bad animals aren't really bad but some of them can look scary but it might just be the way they look.



## C.2. Animal Rights 27 February 2006

- *AH*: Yes, animals should have rights because some animals are in circuses and they're kind of lucky because they have fun and they jump through rings but in Zoos they could be in cages for all of their lives.
- *Me*: should all animals have rights? Should they all have the same rights? For example would you think that a rat and a Labrador guide dog deserve the same rights?
- *AH*: well the guide dog is doing a job and he's useful so I'd put him in a different group to the rat cos they are just troublesome and if you get a bite of a woman rat I mean a lady rat you can die.
- *De*: I think all animals should have the same rights. Like if you put kids into cages and then you said to half of them 'ye can go out and be free and the rest of ye have to stay' that wouldn't be fair. So it's not fair either for animals.
- *Cn*: Zoos and circuses are kind of good for animals, they get exercise and have fun and get good food. Wild animals get killed.
- *Hb*: Every animal ought to have the right to have freedom. Like if a zebra is captured and put into a zoo and if her baby is born in the zoo, then that baby won't ever be able to leave because he wouldn't know what to do in the jungle. He'd find it scary and he wouldn't probably survive very long.
- *Am*: I think all animals should have the right to freedom, like us. They shouldn't have to stay in their cages for their whole lives. At least we get left out free at 18.
- *Me*: Should all captive animals be given the chance of freedom, all cows, chickens, pigs?
- *Am*: Yes
- *D*: I think some animals might like being in a zoo and some might hate it but say if the animal is endangered like the polar bear in that story...well if they met someone who would hurt them and then if they got the choice to live in a safe zoo, you'd find that they'd probably pick the zoo. Then some animals would rather have the chance to be wild. I've been to America and we went to a place called Sea World and they have those dangerous electric eels there but they coat them in oil so that they're not stinging and you can pet them and I think that's wrong. I think it's really cruel to put oil on them. And about the cows and chickens, well there are so many of them because they have vets to look after them if they sick whereas wild animals just die more often because they have no chance to get a vet.
- *Ds*: If we gave all of them freedom it could be bad, cows could be getting into fights all over the place.
- *Se*: I disagree with Cn: no way should animals be in circuses or zoos. Some animals are very dangerous and they have to be trained but say they got angry or fed up and decided to attack that would be natural for them but what do you think would happen? They'd get whipped to make them behave. Why should we whip animals just for doing what they're naturally inclined to do? Why should they be in cages to amuse people and do tricks? We judge some animals by their appearance and say 'oh that's only a rat or that's only a snake; they're bad' But that's like judging a book by its cover. In a contest between a worm and a bunny, people look at the bunny and see cute and cuddly so they give more rights to the bunny. That is not fair on the worm. Or they say another animal is dangerous and he shouldn't have rights so they kill it.
- *Me*: I agree with Se – all animals should have the right to live. Just because a lion is dangerous to humans doesn't mean we should kill it. If a person is training animals and the animal doesn't do what the person says then he shouldn't be allowed to whip the animal for not doing the tricks and what the human says. They use electric things and hurt them for not doing the tricks. That's not right! What did the animals ever do to us?
- *Me*: But if your Mum and Dad and you went to the circus and paid 5 euro each and then the animals just sat there doing nothing you'd feel swindled, wouldn't you? So maybe the circus trainers have to resort to using electric shocks and whips to make them do their tricks for you?

- *Me*: well, maybe we would... but I don't still think that it's right to beat them and hurt them to make them do their tricks.
- *Ag*: I agree with Se. All animals should have the right to do what they want. They shouldn't be shocked: they should all run away or break out. It's not fair to them that we have the right to hurt them but they don't have the right to hurt us back. Circus animals are easily hurt and I think its abuse of animals to make them stay in cages and go in lorries all over the world.
- *Me*: There's something I want to ask, do you think that we humans make a kind of distinction between the animal that we like and the ones we don't, and that we kind of give more rights to those we like?
- *Sh*: I've been thinking about rights and I don't think that every single animal should have rights. Like some should have rights OK. But not rats, snakes, crocodiles, alligators, maybe wasps. So if you made a line you could put all them on one side, because they have sharp teeth and they can bite you. Then on the other side you could put lions and tigers and cows and dogs and cats and rabbits and bears. They should have rights. They're the good animals.
- *Me*: but don't they have sharp teeth too? Couldn't some of them kill you too?
- *Sh*: well some of them are different though.
- *Srb*: I disagree with Sh – you can't have a 'bad side' and a 'good side' for animals. Who would decide? You can't decide to kill some because they're less cute and allow some to live because they more cuddly. Anyway some people have snakes for pets and they probably think they are cuddly.
- *Ax*: I think every animal should have rights. If you put a puppy in a stable he'd be delighted but if you put a horse in a kennel he'd be miserable. Animals are in a hierarchy except not for reasons you think. Dogs and cats can go in a garden but not horses; they destroy it but not on purpose. They have a hierarchy and they all belong in a certain place.
- *Ey*: I sort of disagree with Sh: If you had all the cute and cuddly on one side and all the rats on the other and if you killed all the rats then they'd be extinct and then cats and foxes that eat rats would die and soon all the cuddly side would die because they're all linked together and depend on each other in a way.
- *AD*: I would give every cuddly animal more rights
- *Ke*: I think it's cruel to put animals in cages. They could be in there for ages and then they might get angry and want freedom and they might bite someone
- *En*: I agree with D that some animals should be in a zoo because they are endangered.
- *Pr*: I think we should all be vegetarians, that way we wouldn't be killing animals.
- *AC*: I was wondering if there was a bird in the zoo and it was the last one left on Earth, and if there was loads of monkeys would we treat the bird better than the monkeys.
- *MMc*: Well...I was thinking about fish, I don't think they feel any feelings. After they lay eggs thousands and thousands and they don't wait to see if they live or die and sometimes people catch them but there are loads left. So I don't think they could have any feelings about so many eggs.
- *Ay*: I was thinking that if a bunny was dangerous and could bite and if an alligator was cute and cuddly we would treat the alligator nicer than the bunny. We treat animals differently according to how we feel about them.
- *B*: I disagree with Sh because we should not have a hierarchy of animals none is more important than the other. And I disagree with M Mc I think fish have feelings but no voices. And I agree with Pr that we should be vegetarians but it is really hard to be one. I'll tell you a funny story my Mum told me about when she was small on my Grandad's farm. She got to look after the new born lambs sometimes if their moms had died and she kept them alive and gave them names but she was saving up for a saddle for her pony and she kept asking Granddad when could she kill the lambs and sell them.
- *D*: I actually really do think that we do the line thing with good animals on one side and bad ones on the other. There's no such thing as bad animals really, but we see it like that.

C.3. Anne Frank's story 06 February 2006

**A:** I think it was very cruel what they did. If someone was treating a child badly on the street just because the child was a Jew and if people were afraid to help the child because they'd get beaten too... that is awful... I think the people should have still interfered, they are adults, they've had a chance to grow up...the child hadn't, so they should have tried to stop the soldiers even though they might get killed themselves.

**Sh:** It's not fair: it's cruel. People should not do things like that to 9 and 10 year old children, make them hide in a room like that with no fresh air. When I was in France on holidays we went to a place and there was still blood on the walls since the war.

**Ey:** Say if a child grew up in a country like that, it would be awful; no one could have an opinion or anything.

**A:** I agree with Ey. It is very important for people to have their opinions. That's the only way to get rid of guys like Hitler, all the other countries should have joined up and helped....who was he fighting? Anne and her family were Germans....was he fighting his own country, I don't get it...

**H:** I was thinking there could be war here, loads of wars start with the tiniest thing. Anything can lead to hatred and hatred leads to war. People make comments about other people and calling them names leads to hatred.

**Mn:** The people who helped the soldiers do bad things to Anne's family were just as bad as Hitler. I don't know how Anne must have felt when her friends started calling her names and saying they wouldn't play with her because she was Jewish, it must have been really sad and miserable for her.

**Ay:** I was wondering....was Hitler a very stupid man? Cos you said in the story that Germany was losing the war, so why was he killing so many of his own people? What's the point of killing all the Jewish people and the gypsies and all the others? He needs his own people! They might not all be on his side now, in that war, but maybe in the next war they might.

**Mre:** You know the way...?...I agree with Mn...I wonder how Anne felt when all the people started talking about her.

**Se:** I was thinking that it takes very little to start a war. Remember a while back we were talking about stereotyping? Well I'd say wars can start from stereotyping people, because that can lead to hatred and hatred can lead to war. It's like judging a book by its cover and not looking inside....some people think all Irish people are lazy and drunk and always fighting, and we know they're not...people get a bad name...like if our Junior Infants were out somewhere and they were messing and they had their uniform on and then people might say...'oh, that's Scoil N, that's a very bad school'...well they shouldn't: They should check it out for themselves. Hitler persuaded all the people to go against the Jews. The people should have asked, 'where's the proof that the Jews are all bad'?

**Sh:** I agree with Ay. I think Hitler was very stupid.

**B:** People should have stood up to him. He was just a bully. Bullies always act tough but they're not so tough if you stand up to them

**AB:** I agree with Se and Ay. On one hand, like Ay said he was stupid to kill so many of his own people, that was a big mistake....maybe some of those people would have been on his side...and I agree with Se that the people were stupid to believe him without proof.

**Mn:** I agree with Ay as well...Hitler was very stupid...what's the point of killing people over them being the wrong colour or the wrong religion?...people are people...what's the point?

**A H:** I don't know why either.

**Cr:** I think Se is right about stereotypes...but how come people who are stereotyped don't stereotype back?

**Ds:** But when they were hiding up in the attic, it was other Germans betrayed them...why?

**L:** I've been thinking about Anne in school when the other kids turned against her. They probably heard their Mums and Dads talking about the Jewish people in a bad way and the parents gave bad example to them and that's why they did it to her.

**Ke:** I was thinking why Anne Frank's family went to Amsterdam...why didn't they go to Brazil or somewhere but I suppose the Germans would go there then.

**AD:** I agree with Ke...it would just have spread the war to Brazil.

**En:** Anne Frank had a very cruel life. Even before she had to hide in the attic, she was sad in school. She was real popular and then they all went against her and that must have been ...not good and....then her whole life changed.

**Dn:** The Germans were already losing the war when the Americans joined in.

**V:** I was wondering, right? Say now she was one year old and people were going against the Jews...would they have hurt her even though she was only one? Would no one have said 'Stop'?

**A C:** I don't think anyone ever has a perfect life. Bits of it might be good but nearly everyone has some trouble. I don't know why some people have really bad ones but I think everyone has some bad stuff.

**Ag:** How come the helper...Miep? How come she didn't get caught?

**AHy:** Could a war start here? Like with the IRA or something?

**Ae:** You know Ag's question? Maybe the helper hid too somewhere?

**B:** I was thinking....well ....the way we all think can't be forced on us...like we might think its right to be Catholics, but we couldn't make someone **be** a Catholic, we could bring them to the church but we couldn't force them to believe. You have to **be** one to really believe... and you can't make anyone else **be** one unless ...they ...em...*believe* ...em ... in it...for themselves.

C.4. Dear Greenpeace (with Senior Infants) 06 February 2004

*The story 'Dear Greenpeace' (James 1991) is about a little girl called Emily who writes to Greenpeace telling them about the blue whale called Arthur who has come to live in her garden pond. (Er's contributions marked with \*\*\*)*

**Me:** What about that story? Who'd like to start?

**Ie:** In Spain, I have a friend called Emily the same as the girl in the story.

**Ia:** Pets kind of need to go to the vet to get injections in their bottoms.

**Cn:** (not in turn) yeah that's so they can't get babies.

**Sh:** I wonder why they don't want pets to have babies. Baby animals are sooo cute!

**D:** My granny's dog loves me so much when I do this (he nuzzles his shoulder with his nose) he does it back to me.

**JM** I liked that story because Arthur returned to Emily.

**E:** One day when my brother was walking my dog M, she got knocked down and the people in the car could not open the door to see if she was OK because her head was in the way, blocking the door so they followed them home. M had to go into the hospital and get stitches. She's alright now, she's fine again.

**M:** (new child in class, started yesterday): Well! In my old school my friend A had a pet lizard. His name was Spike. He was called Spike because he had spikes all over his head and his back. He was so cool. He could do this ... (flicks his tongue in and out).

**F:** Because there are really such things as whales I liked the story, but they are far too big to live in a pond. That's a bit ridiculous.

**S:** I got a dog called M and he always jumps on my back and I have to walk with him on my back.

**Ce:** My goldfish is getting bigger because I feed him every day. But I'm a bit worried because his goldy bits are going white.

**K:** I have 2 fish, and a cat and when I was nearly asleep she jumped up and put her head in the fishes bowl and she hurt my feelings because I thought she was going to kill them but I woke up and scared her away.

**H:** My cousin's cat Snowy died and they got a new one called Salem but then he had to be sold away and she got two new ones and one died.

**M:** I like whales very much. I like the water coming out of them. I would not be scared of them. They eat fish – not people. Sharks are scary. They can eat you.

**Eo:** I have two cats, one dog called Max...I mean two fish. My cat tried to eat the fish and once ...because we left the door open for the dog and he made a plan to catch the cat. Once a long time ago the dog saw the cat trying to eat the fish and he tried to stop him and got himself hurt. My dog loves to make plans and stuff.

**Ca:** I have two goldfish and when I got them the next day one died and the next day after that the other one died and then my bird died.

**Me:** Oh dear. Were you sad?

**Ca:** I was crying for my bird but not for my fish, because they're just fish. I loved the bird more than the fish.

**E:** My nana has a dog: the first time I call him he doesn't come and the second time he does.

**Mh:** My nana has about 9 or 10 cats in her back garden. Some of them are not hers but they like to come for a visit. Well...there is one that is black and white, one that is grey and one is all black. When my Auntie puts out food the grey one comes first and then the black and white cat chases him away and takes the food.

**Sh:** (inaudible at beginning)...my Mum had to sleep with my Auntie last night because she's getting a baby and they heard lots of noises outside the window. They couldn't get to sleep because of all the yowling and screaming and fighting. My auntie thought they were children – she really did! She said to my Mum 'what time is it?' and 'what are they doing out so late?' Because it was after 10 o'clock and they kept it up and up and they were on top of each other's backs and it was so noisy. And my Mum said to my auntie 'for goodness sake its only

cats not children; they'll soon go to sleep, ignore them' but they kept on getting up on each others' backs and they were sounding so like children crying and fighting that my auntie and my mum made a cup of tea and my mum opened the back door and said 'scram' to them.

**\*\*\*Er:** My dog is called M. he caught a mouse yesterday in my house and he put it in his basket and L took it out.

**Sh:** (interrupts) Who is L?

**\*\*\*Er:** my Mum, that's her name.

**Cl:** my goldfish died a long time ago and when I woke up and I looked in the kitchen and saw him dead I did not feel good.

**J:** One day in B\_\_\_\_\_n there was a ct looking at my dog B when my brother P took him for a walk, the cat scrawled his nose for no reason and it was all bleeding. P came home and said to my dad 'look his nose is all bleeding' but my dad said 'he'll lick it and it will be fine in a day or two' and I said 'can I look?' and I saw it and it was all bleeding.

*Several more stories about individual pets...*

**Ao:** I saw dolphins once – they were playing in the water. I know they were playing because they looked happy and they were smiling big big smiley smiles.

**Me:** *I'd like to go back to something that Eo said about his dog making plans. I think that's very interesting. Can dogs think and make plans, I wonder?*

**Ie:** No! I don't think they can think. They don't have a brain or anything like people.

**Sh:** I think they can. Well actually its very interesting because I can talk to them see I have a book and I learned the language. And you would not understand it. You wouldn't know what I am saying but dogs do and that is how I know that dogs can think. I'd need my book here to tell you so I can't say the real words but it sounds louder than a killer whale's splash, their language.

**Me:** *(to class) That's very interesting. What do you think dogs think about?*

**Mh:** Well they like bones and walks and people to throw sticks and say 'fetch' so maybe they think about that.

**Ie:** they might be thinking about loving their family and stuff like that.

**Ia:** I think they probably think about people and wonder what they're saying to them.

**Sh:** They can think about most things like we do but in a slightly different way. We think in mostly talk but they have a lot of ...kind of ...pictures ....like cartoons in their heads. Well that's what my dog has.

**Cl:** I disagree! Dogs don't think, Sh. You need a real language to think. Words. Real words.

**Ia:** I think a mouse probably thinks about going round and round and getting some cheese.

**K:** Goldfish do not think. My sister's friend E's goldfish didn't die and it got put down the loo for biting her other fish and they wouldn't do that if it could think about what was going on.

**J:** What about horses? Do they think? What would they be thinking?

**Sh:** (jumping up): They can think actually but I cannot talk to them. They have their own language: horses talk to horses and dogs talk doggish ....to other dogs.

**Me:** *I'm interested in what Ca said. She said you need a language to think. What about babies? Can they think?*

**Mn:** well, no. I don't think babies can think. My sister H cannot think, cos she cannot talk. When they grow bigger they learn the names for stuff and they learn to talk and then they can think.

**Sh:** I disagree with Mn. My baby sister can think very well. Look at all the stuff she can do. She can cry when she wants my Mum to come, she can laugh when things are funny, she can point to things when you ask her where's the light? Or where's the door or the window? That means she's remembering and you need thinking for remembering. Actually I was just thinking that if you get a brain transplant you would be the same but you would know what the other person knew because you would have their thoughts for while. Like if Er got Ce's brain he would know what Ce knows even though he would still be Er.

**JM:** Are you sure?

**Sh:** Of course! He would not know who he was but he would know lots of things because Ce knows a lot of things.

**Me:** *That's quite fascinating. How do we know who we are?*

**S:** My brain makes me who I am

**F:** My brain tells me in my mind who you are and who I am.

**Mh:** It's your ears as well. When someone calls your name your ears hear it and your brain knows that it's your name.

**Sh:** No no! I disagree!. In the brain ...your head is a boney shape. In there is your brain and in there is your mind as well.

**D:** I agree but I don't know why.

**H:** If you're dead, your body goes in the earth and you might go to hell and be a devil, and if you go to heaven you are an angel and your spirit comes out of your body and when a baby comes out of someone you go into a different skin.

**E:** Do you know when we were talking about brains and minds – they're not different things, people just call them different names.

**J:** What H said is right. If your skin is red you are a devil and if your skin is white you are an angel. Baddies have red skin, goodies have white skin

**Me:** *If you're a child who has brown skin and you're good what colour would you be?*

**J:** You'd still be white so long as you're a goodie.

**K:** when you go to sleep your brain keeps on thinking. Your brain doesn't go to sleep

**\*\*\*Er:** No it's not asleep. I agree with K. I think your brain thinks about dreams. Dreams are not real. They come out of your thoughts in your brain.

**Mh:** You go to sleep and your brain never goes to sleep. Your brain dreams and you dream.

**Ie:** Sometimes I get different dreams. People get different dreams at different ages.

**Sh:** Er with Cl's brain would get Cl's dreams

**Eo:** Er would forget some of his dreams, Sh. It would be like him starting up his own dreams again, age one, two, three, four...

**Sh:** You're right Eo! We all have different dreams and like Er said your brain never sleeps.

**\*\*\*Er:** your brain tells you your skin is itchy and you scratch it in your sleep and your brain tells you to turn and you turn even though you're asleep

**Sh:** well maybe then your skin is never asleep. Maybe its your skin that's doing that thinking...

**K:** remember what J was saying about spirits? I saw the Haunted Mansion on the telly and there was a spirit living there and the family saw the spirit.

**Mh:** You know about the brain given to Er? Well, Er would have his dreams but he might have Cl's dreams as well. He might have double dreams.

**Sh:** You do not give away your thoughts with your brain. You still have them even when you are dead. But if you were giving away the brain the brain would have thoughts that were alive and they would know that the brain was being given away.

**C:** I saw an ad on the telly and they had a brain and it was cut open and there was nothing inside only a whole mess of blood and stuff. There wasn't a mind in there.

**Sh:** Yeah, actually, (sighs) I saw that ad as well and I didn't see any thoughts inside either.

**Cn:** Know what? Mouses are very clever. They can think a lot. They can get everywhere they want. They make holes: they can think.

**Ie:** I always wanted a pet. Mum always says 'ask your dad' but he's always away in \_ making lots and lots of money so we can live a nice life.

**F:** We're not rich at all. Our house is full of church mice. They're everywhere.

**Ca:** I forgot to tell you about the two fish in S\_\_\_\_\_ playschool. We had a walk one day over to the pet shop and we saw a fish with his brains on his head – outside.

**S:** I saw a little shark in the garden centre pet shop. You'd have to be careful what you put into the tank with that.

**K:** I saw a big shark on the news paper.

**Ao:** I like thinking about thinking. It makes your head feel funny.

**Ia:** There's a pet shop in town and the tanks are filthy. My mum said its cruel to the fish.

**S:** I know that one. I saw rabbits in there and there was a bad smell.....(*several pet shop anecdotes follow*)

C.5. Rainbows and Reality 27 February 2004

*(Observers: YO'F - classroom assistant (also transcribing) and AT - Spanish teacher)*

**Ea:** Well, a rainbow is ... well ... since the rain is very dark sometimes – the sky is very dark and God decides after a whole lot of bad weather that the sun will come out and make lots of colours.

**Ag:** First there's some heavy rain and then the sun comes out and that makes a rainbow

**Cl:** I agree with Ag and Ea because I think too that the rainbow comes from the sun and the rain together

**Mn:** The rain makes the rainbow. It always comes after the rain

**S:** The rainbow comes cos the sun has to dry up all the water

**Ao:** I know the all of ... most of the colours of the rainbow. There's purple, blue, yellow, green, red, violet and em ... I forget the rest

**H:** I agree with Ag, Ea and S – a rainbow is from sun and rain

**Ia:** I agree with Ao because I like the rainbows ... all the colours of them

**Ce:** On the rainbow, some of the rain comes into the sparkly stuff and when it goes in, then it comes back out sparkling and that's how rainbows always become bright

**Sh:** Well actually, it really comes from God. God knows that bright colours are nice to look at. It makes the world look nice and that's why he does it. It makes us cheer up after the dark, dark sky of the rain

**Ca:** First it rains, and then it's sunny and then a rainbow comes out

**Cn:** When it's really, really sunny after rain a rainbow comes

**F:** God gives gold and then gold gives a rainbow

**Eo:** When a rainbow is there it's not really there. It's just the sun reflecting the colours of the rain

**Ie:** I agree with Ao and Ea

*Teacher: Why?*

**Ia:** because I think they're very, very good questions

**Ce:** I think the sun is blocking the rainbows sometimes ... cos you can't really see it during the day because its out in space and the sun sometimes moves and then it comes out

**D:** I agree with F – he said the rainbow comes from gold

**Mh:** I think that when it rains and then the rain stops, then all the water evaporates into the clouds and then its stays up there and then it comes back down as rain. Then the rainbow comes into the sky ... its made up out of a bendy thing and the sun shines on it and makes it into all colours.

*Teacher: has anybody got any questions about rainbows?*

**AT:** Yes, me. I have a question. I want to know can you touch a rainbow.

**F:** You can't touch it because it's up in the sky

**Ie:** But if you were up in the sky **then** you could touch it

**H:** It's not real ... I think it's not real

**Sh:** It **is** real! You can **see** it!

**Eo:** No it's not real because you couldn't touch it – you'd burn yourself! But it is real because you see it

**Sh:** Yes, you're right, cos the rainbow is really hot. The sun is behind it like Ce said – and the rainbow blocks the sun – it's a circle really and it's up at the same height as the sun

**Cn:** In a forest somewhere there's a pot of gold and the rainbow comes out of it and shines up

**Ea:** I'm answering your questions about how do rainbows get made first ... well it takes very heavy rain and very bright sunshine together and very bright colours to make a rainbow. It comes after dark colours and it's very, very bright

**Sh:** Yes well ... but it **is real** though. You **can** touch it but you shouldn't cos it might burn you or it might break.



*Teacher: I'm interested in that word 'real' ... what do you mean when you say that something is real. So think about that for a while but first perhaps you could tell me if you have any ideas about why a rainbow is bent ... why isn't it a straight line, d'you think?*

**Ea:** I think how the rainbow gets bent is cos it used to be a circle – a very coloured circle ... but bits got way too hot and way too old and those bits they broke off and went rotten

**Mh:** Do you know if it didn't bend? Well it would try to land somewhere but it couldn't ever, ever land – cos it would be straight – so it would go on and on at both sides out into space, out apast space out past that place and the next place and the next place and out of the universe

**Sh:** Yeah and then if you were climbing on it you would go out, out, out of the earth and space and darkness and there wouldn't be an end and it would go out and out and out and never end ever and if you were climbing on it you'd never get down unless you got some kind of a slide in space to slide back down to earth

**Mh:** You can't climb on rainbows Sh...they're not real ... I mean they're not things you can climb on

**H:** I think rainbows come down from the sun when it shines and makes it hot after a rain shower.

*Teacher: I see that there are lots of people with their hands up who want to talk, so we will break into small groups for a while and talk in the small groups and then come back into the circle again after about ten minutes. Is that OK? Group indicates agreement.*

[Class breaks into small groups. Teacher walks about and listens, Circle reconvenes after a short 'chatting' time]

**AT** (Spanish Teacher): I have asked Sh this question: is there only one rainbow and if you see that rainbow here, will my parents who are in Spain also see the same rainbow?

**Sh:** Yes that's right and I said you'd see it if you are in the middle. But there's loads and loads of middles – everywhere has a middle and if you are facing to this side you see this bit and if you are facing to that side you see that bit and if you are at the back you only see the back of it and if you are at the front you see the front. But if you are in the middle you see the whole lot of the rainbow but because the earth is turning all the time then there are loads and loads of middles.

**Jk:** you know the way that Sh said that rainbows are in the middle of space. Well see the world goes round, its not the rainbow that goes round ... the world is moving all the time and it only looks as if the rainbow is moving.

**Ce:** Maybe when the world goes around and if the rainbow comes out when it's passing a country then that country sees it.

**Sh:** You see ... I **didn't** say the rainbow is in the middle of the **earth or in the middle of space**. I said the earth is down here and space is up there and the rainbow is in the middle, in between, and so you will always see the rainbow no matter where you are on the earth because there's loads of middle. The middle is always changing, there's always a different middle because the earth is **real** and it's moving but space isn't.

**Mh:** You know Sh, when you say there's only one rainbow ... I would disagree with you there, because each time there's a brand new rainbow.

**Sh:** Well **Mister!** I meant if the sun was finished with it and they had enough of it they would break it up and make a new one then

*Teacher: Sh .... perhaps you could reply to Mh without saying Mister – I think we agreed already as a group about things like this. It doesn't sound respectful or nice – OK?*

**Sh:** What? Oh ... yes ... OK ... sorry Mh

*Teacher: you said 'they' a minute ago – that 'they' would break it up ... who are 'they'?*

**Sh:** The sun and God – they're the ones that can make a rainbow

**Mh:** yes but Sh, the sun is not a person!

**Eo:** And I disagree with Sh and Ea about a rainbow breaking. I mean where would all the cracked pieces of a broken rainbow go? **I've** never seen them. Where would they go? I have never seen a rainbow die – ever!

**Sh:** I didn't say it would die ... it doesn't die – just break up – maybe the pieces are sharp enough to go in the earth!

**Mh:** Teacher ... you know when Sh said that the sun and God make rainbows? Well I think that yes, God makes rainbows ... cos the sun, Sh – it isn't **alive**. If the sun was alive, Sh ... you know ... it would be spinning and the earth would be spinning and....

*Teacher: and what might happen in that case?*

**Mh:** Nothing ... cos it couldn't happen ... cos the sun isn't **alive**!

**Cl:** You know you were asking about the bend in the rainbow? Well maybe it isn't bent ... maybe it just comes out like that. It sort of comes over like that and like that (motions an arc with his arms)

*Teacher: we've certainly heard a lot of really interesting stuff about rainbows today. Now has anybody got any way of explaining what 'real' means? Lots of people have been trying to answer that question for thousands of years. We heard a lot of talk earlier about whether a rainbow was 'real' or not. What does 'real' mean?*

**Cn:** In a forest there's a real pot of gold and far away in another forest there's another real pot of gold and it ... the rainbow reflects from them to each other.

**Mh:** When you see a person doing something in real life ... that's real. Apples are real, trees are real lots of things in school are real

**Ea:** Real means that something is there and you're not joking and you make sure you're not sleeping and you're really awake. A house is real. I know that this school is real because if not then everyone wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be able to hear each other and see each other and touch each other

*Teacher: That's really interesting – that you mentioned sleep, because I was just going to ask you how do you know that we are all really here. How can I know that I'm not just having a dream and you're all in it?*

**Eo:** Because simple! If you were dreaming Teacher, then surely sometime you would have to wake up and if you were just dreaming us up then you wouldn't **know** any of us when you wake up

**Ea:** yes and you wouldn't be able to hear us and we wouldn't be able to hear you and we wouldn't be able to answer any of your questions!

**Eo:** Yeah! That's a really, really good idea Ea!

**Sh:** Yes but Ea – what if all that was a dream too? What if you were listening in your dream and talking in your dream and answering questions in your dream?

**Ea:** well you would know that you weren't just hearing things in your head – you would actually hear **real** words!

**Eo:** Hey! That's a really good thought!

**AT** (Spanish teacher): Don't you ever talk in your dreams Ea?

*Ea thinks and smiles for a while and then she says*

**Ea:** Yes but AT ... when **you** hear something in your dreams – does your **whole family** hear it too – when they're sleeping in the same house as you I mean? **I** hear teacher and so can everyone in the room hear her too!

**Sh:** But Ea, guess what I'm going to say next? What if **they** were all in the same dream as well?

*[Pause while everyone laughs at the idea]*

**Mh:** You know when you were talking there a minute ago about real and not real ... well if something's real I think your eyes would be open and if they're not – if you wake up and open them then you know that it was a dream.

**Sh:** But Mh what if you were **dreaming** about opening them?

**Cl:** Ok if you **feel** something and it feels real ... what about that?

**Sh:** (laughing) Cl and what about if **that's** a dream – if you're dreaming that you're feeling something (he chuckles with laughter at his new game)

*Teacher: (holding up her pen): Is this pen real?*

**D:** Yes if it writes ... and if there's stuff like oil in it and it works and you can see what you've written

**Sh:** (Under his breath) ... unless you're dreaming about writing (giggles)

**F:** I think the pen is real. I think it is because I can see it and you're writing with it so you can feel it in your hand and you can see it.

**Ce:** Yes if you can see and feel something and touch it, then it's real

*(Sh: mutters 'could still be a dream though')*

**Eo:** I have a question about real: I have a Jedi Knight at home – Obi Wan Kenobi and its real. But actually there's no such thing as a real Jedi Knight – they don't exist – so how come there's a toy of them?

**H:** If the door wasn't real when you would try to open it, it would tear like paper

**Mh:** I have 2 things to say ... you know when you said ... and I think it was D or F or the 2 of them ... said your pen was real, well if we were dreaming we wouldn't be in school and we wouldn't be able to see that pen when you held it up

**Sh:** Unless we were dreaming about a pen!

**Ea:** First the person who uses his imagination tries to make something and he gets it wrong and he tries again and he tries again and again until he gets it right – maybe that's how Jedi Knights came – out of someone's imagination

**Eo:** Well I really don't think there **is** such a thing as a **real** Jedi Knight ... but then how come they're on TV and how come you can get their sabres in shops and there's a video of them and a computer game and toys and baddies of them and there's even costumes of them – so maybe they are real even though I don't think so ...

**Cn:** Maybe God made toy stuff first to practice and then they come – he made them come to life and he sent them down to earth to be real. Yeah, out of his imagination – first he makes them but they have to star off as babies and then grow and grow up

**F:** Well maybe in your dreams you can hear and see but you can't touch stuff really

**Eo:** God, I am going home today with just so many questions in my head! Millions!

*Teacher: well maybe that's a good place to end. I think its great that you're going home with millions of questions – that's what learning is all about asking lots of questions. I'm just wondering though .... Do you think anybody knows all the answers?*

Chorus of Noooooo!

*Teacher : No? Not even teachers?*

**Eo:** No cos even they ask questions

**Ea:** Yeah teacher, you're always asking us lots of questions!

**Ao:** And remember Eo, if you go home with a questions and you get an answer to it, you could always question the answer.

**Eo:** What does that mean – question the answer? Ao I don't get that ...question the answer? What do you mean????

**Ao:** It just means ask more questions

**Eo:** O God I have even more now!

*Teacher: my goodness! We've got a lot to think about going home today! Thanks everybody. Very well done!*

C.6. Freedom 07 February 2006

**Ky:** People deserve freedom: everybody is human, so in that way everybody is the same. It's not fair if one person makes another person do something they don't want to do. No one is more important than anyone else. I think freedom means that people should be able to do whatever they want, well, except bad things, of course.

**Ce:** I think freedom means that everyone is kind to one another.

**M:** Freedom is where you're allowed to do what you want. You shouldn't really want to do bad things, but to do good.

**Kn:** Well, I kind of think that freedom means that no one can kill people. You can't do bad stuff but you're free to do any kind of good stuff.

**Jk:** Freedom means that you can get away from your job for a while. Freedom means that you wouldn't be working all day you'd have some time. Freedom means do what you want but don't do anything bad: it wouldn't be fair. Freedom is everyone being fair.

**Ts:** Well yeah, maybe...I think doing whatever you want is freedom – even doing bad stuff except it's not good to do bad. But you're free to do it. You have to choose. Freedom is choosing.

**W:** Freedom is like...say ...if you wanted to go in a car, you can. I think that maybe there's like...free freedom and ...sort of ... freedom that's not free, like ..you know...you're free to do good stuff ...but there's freedom to do bad stuff too, but you're not really free to do that, because if you get caught you get punished. But nothing happens to you for using the good freedom.

**Cn:** Freedom would be like, say the government took money from you but then they should give you back some to go on holidays, free, somewhere, very, em, very....exotic, like say your mom and dad wanted to go on a nice honeymoon....to somewhere really nice but they can't cos it's too dear. Well freedom would be if the government helped them. Freedom is something anyone can give to anyone else.

**Cc:** Freedom means you get what you want. You don't have to be able to do anything special to deserve it.

**Cm:** Freedom for me means that there should be no slaves. People should be free to do whatever they want to do.

**Cr:** I agree with Ts that freedom is being able to do whatever you want but you shouldn't have the freedom to kill anyone. Or you shouldn't be able to take over the world and kill people. If there are generals or governors killing other people, someone should be able to stop them.

**Jk:** Teacher, I need to go next cos I'm bursting to speak! I think freedom isn't something you can give to someone. Even if you're emmm....a slave owner: cos that person ...the slave...might have freedom already inside themselves and ....you might be only giving them ...emmm ...sort of ...like... permission or something. Permission doesn't really mean the same thing as freedom. Like, say, if you gave us all the permission to jump up on the tables and shout, we would still sort of have to decide what to do, cos like, you might be after going nuts. (Laughter)

**Hi:** Yeah, I agree: freedom can be inside you. Freedom means you have to make your own choices of doing stuff....not all the time: sometimes you have to do other stuff that you mightn't want like work or school. And I agree with Jk, you would have to decide whether to do what the teacher said or not if it was something like jumping up on the tables, because that might not be very safe and the principal certainly wouldn't want it either.

**Dn:** I think freedom is something you need all the time but sometimes you need it more than other times, like if someone dies and you're very sad you need freedom to be alone, be somewhere all by yourself, to do your own thinking about things, you need sort of .....a place and ...time and that's freedom.

**A:** (English as second language) Free is.... I don't know..... It's maybe...you are free for to **think** everything, but not free for ...to **do** everything.

**K:** I agree with T that freedom would mean doing everything you want even the bad. Well, do you know when you were reading the story [Anne Frank]? Well, you said the Americans joined with Britain to help them against the Germans. Well, in a certain way the Americans when they joined in, they were helping England with freedom, but then that means that they were ....against....they were stopping Germany's freedom...if you take sides you have to.... sometimes you are stopping someone's freedom... well ...a bit...

**Jr:** I agree with Ts and with A too. You can think what you like but you can't always say what you think....freedom would be thinking and saying what you like... Real freedom would mean being free to do everything even if it is killing ...but that might make people do bad as well as good except...well... in a way there's a way to stop people from killing and that's inside you, God put it there. You can be free and not free in lots of other ways too...like if you're a child you're free to play on the grass but not on the road. So the road stops your freedom if you're a child. But a road can be a freedom to someone else ...like if someone was driving going away on their holidays...

**Gn:** I think freedom is to have our lives for ourselves, not to have anyone to own us. I agree about the killing part. Its something inside us that tells us killing is bad and its called shame. If we killed someone we couldn't live with ourselves.

**Dd:** Freedom means everyone has choices. They can choose what they want and what they don't want. Most people don't want to kill, it's very unlikely anyway. Something inside us stops us from killing others. We have that inside us all the time and it helps us to make choices.

**P:** I disagree with some people and I agree with others who said that freedom is doing whatever you want but only in a way. You can only have freedom if you're alone. Because if you were really free to think what you like and say what you like and do what you like it and there were other people around, it could be the baddest thing ever for them because you might want to do all bad things with your freedom... Freedom could be sometimes good but sometimes it could be the baddest thing ever.

**Mo:** Freedom is joy and peace, peace to be whatever you want and joy to play outside.

**L:** I think that freedom is free will. I agree with Dd about choice. Everybody should have choices. God gives us...allows us free will to do bad or good things. He gave us that choice but something inside us tells us when something is bad. It's the part of us that stops us from doing bad things to each other.

**Ca:** Remember back there at the start you were asking what makes us free? Well I think I know: it's probably God. But I disagree with P who said that too much freedom is the baddest thing. If God made it, then it can't be bad. God wouldn't make bad freedom!

Another thing...you know how we're free here to speak? Well everyone should be free to speak.... but not to *talk* when other people are speaking. But sometimes people give out to people who give their opinion and that's stopping freedom but...em... Say, em....if people here didn't listen, say they kept talking all the time....that wouldn't really be like ...freedom, it would just be plain rudeness and bad manners and then you'd have to give out to *them*. But that wouldn't be stopping their freedom, it would be stopping their rudeness and it would be helping other people's freedom...the ones what wanted to keep speaking and giving their opinion.

**Me:** *would the chatterboxes not have the freedom to be chatterboxes at all?*

**Ca:** It's not simple...I think you'd probably nearly need two rooms so: one for the talkers to be free and one for the chatterboxes to be free. (Sighs)...freedom can get you in trouble!

C.7. Once upon an ordinary school day 04 October 2005

*I read **Once Upon an Ordinary School day** (Colin McNaughton, Satoshi Kitamura)*

**Ey:** I really liked this story. I think it was good for the boy to have some fun in his life. His life was very boring and he needed some good plain fun.

**Ay:** I think it was quite a good story. Because first everything was ordinary and then it slowly began to go up and up like steps, up, up, up. Then when you think it's going to go down, it doesn't. That was really nice about it.

**Va:** I think Ey and Ay are right. Those things can happen, could happen, and did happen. I'm not really sure if the boy is getting any happier or if his imagination is running away with him.

**Ae:** I think its sort of like his life started off so ordinary. Then suddenly he got a big shock when the teacher burst into the classroom and then more and more amazing things started happening by the minute.

**Cr:** I think it's a very good story and I liked it because who knows maybe his future could have changed because of that day.

**AH:** I agree with Cr. He might have had thoughts that opened his eyes. If I had a day like that I'd have so many thoughts that I wouldn't be able to sleep. They'd be bursting out of me and I'd have bloodshot eyes next day from no sleep and thinking lots of stuff!

**Br:** I think it was a good story. It was a brilliant story with the dolphins and the flying.

**Me:** What bit did you like best of all, Br?

**Br:** I liked the dolphin bit best of all because he was going up and down like that with the dolphin (demonstrates with his arms).

**Se:** I find it very interesting. Everything was so ....ordinary, boring, grey, no changes...suddenly its all colour and everything changes and brightens up. That teacher brightened up his life. I agree with Cr because his life might have gone on being so boring, go to school then work, work, work for all of his life. It would have been really ordinary and boring. But that teacher brightened it all up with imagination and music.

**Sh:** I really think...I agree with Se. That child had no imagination at all. His life was so ordinary. He didn't know what to do with himself. He should have one to the Zoo or something.

**Pr:** I think at the beginning it was all grey and sad and at the end it was colourful and happy.

**De:** I think when he started off using his imagination all different stuff began to happen.

**Ds:** what I think happened was at the start he never used his imagination, he didn't even think he had any and then when he did ... it kind of livened up his life - his imagination did..

**En:** I think when that teacher came in it really made the boy's imagination grow and grow.

**L:** Well I was wondering what wouldn't...what would've happened if the same old boring old teacher arrived back...

**Sh:** If you didn't ever get to use your imagination then your life would be so boring and sad.

**Mre:** Everybody should get the chance to let their imagination go free...get the thoughts out of your head instead of having them just stuck. When he did let o his thoughts look what happened – all the whole thing looked different...all the colours, his life was brightened up. The teacher brightened up the boy's life by letting his thoughts go free...if you didn't ever let your thoughts out no-one would ever know what you had inside your head...

**Ax:** I agree with Se...what she was saying about working all his life and so boring and so ordinary. Maybe it would have been so boring that he wouldn't have even entered college. That teacher was fun. Every child should have a teacher like that. That boy really needed to have a teacher like that for at least one year of his life.

**AD:** I don't really have anything to say.

**Me:** Did you hear what Ax said about the boy needing to have a teacher like that for at least one year...do you think you'll ever have a teacher like that?

**AD:** yes...I did already ....Miss O'B.

**A H:** well to me it seemed like magic...like the teacher was sent by the gods or something to make the boy happy.

**Dn:** I think I liked the way the story just changed in the middle all of a sudden. At the start I was like 'Aw! Come ON'...I didn't think it was very interesting with all those 'ordinaries' all the time...then suddenly it went from being black and white to really colourful. I suppose that was when he started using his imagination. He had to let it go sometime...he wouldn't have liked his life at all if he didn't let his imagination go.

**B:** I think he did have an imagination all along. The teacher didn't give him an imagination, he just allowed him to use it by playing the exciting music...but like Dn said at first he wasn't good at it then... when he heard the music ...and he flew ...and he was cheerful and he wasn't bored any more.

**Hh:** I've been wondering that no one in all the people who spoke already thought how did he [the teacher] disappear like that in a puff of smoke? And I agree with Cr about his future being changed that day. His parents, we saw them at the start and they are just really, really ordinary and maybe that teacher changed their future too... cos maybe that boy ran home and he was all excited and he was saying 'guess what we did in school today?' and then when they listened to him they might have brightened up and that's what I mean about maybe it changed their future too.

**Cn:** Well I'm glad...I'm very glad that that teacher came in when he did, cos with that teacher the boy was changed. He could only see things black and white until that day and then that teacher lightened up his life.

**Mn:** I think that your imagination is like water. It's like water because it can be frozen and the only time it freezes up is when it's not running and being used. It freezes up if you don't use it.

**Interruption (Sh?):** yeah like if you always get wheeled around in a buggy your legs would get very wobbly and weak.

**Am:** I think...I agree with Hh about the magic...he just went off in a cloud of dust. And also if that teacher wasn't there he would've stayed like that forever, like what Mn said about water...he'd have been frozen up like that, never using his imagination forever.

**Ke:** I think the boy had a very good imagination all the time but he didn't know he had. It was there but he only discovered it that day.

**Lh:** I think the story was very exciting. It was the same as Ay said. It goes up in steps.

**AC:** I think that anyone and everyone has all different thoughts from each other...I agree with Lh and Ay too about the steps.

**Ag:** Well I thought it was very sad, then happy, then exciting, then it did go up in steps like Ay said and it kept on going...and everybody liked the boy after that teacher came in.

**MC:** I think the story was really good. It went from being sad and ordinary at the beginning then bits of the picture got colourful and then the pictures in his head kept on going and going and he dreamed a story.

**Dn:** If that story was a piece of music it would be like that (nods his head towards the one note coming from tin whistles next door) – all one note at the start and then it would get like all really exciting and the way the music in the book went.

**Bh:** I think he did have an imagination all along. The teacher didn't give him an imagination, he just allowed him to use it by playing the exciting music...but like Dn said at first he wasn't good at it then... when he heard the music ...and he flew ...and he was cheerful and he wasn't bored any more.

**Ag:** I think when the boy was thinking and when his imagination was running away with him and he was running away with his imagination...that was really great.

**Se:** You know, Teacher, sometimes I start off with no ideas in my head when we begin our talking, but afterwards I often have loads, because I hear all the different thoughts from all different kids'

**Me:** well time's up I'm sorry to say because I was really enjoying that conversation...I just wish that someone could've been here to witness that you all said these wonderful things...

**Ey:** Scuse me teacher...but we're here. You have 29 witnesses...

**Me...**Wow! so I have! Of course!

C.8. The Conquerors 21 November 2005

*Observer/participant MOC – school principal*

**AH:** That was a funny story. The general had conquered the whole world and he didn't really want anything else so why would he bother with the small country? His soldiers didn't hurt the people, they showed respect for them.

**Ds:** What I think is that he went to conquer a country that had no army. The people there helped the general's army to learn about them by just living with them without fighting. They didn't say 'you better learn our songs and learn to cook like us or learn to wear our clothes'. No they just went on doing their normal things and the soldiers began to imitate them after a while without realising it because it was such a peaceful country. And the people were teaching the army the nice things first - like jokes and songs...the easy, fun things.

**Cr:** If he didn't...if the general didn't conquer the others then they'd all be living different lives...they were changed by meeting the soldiers and the soldiers were changed by meeting them. They affected each other.

**Hh:** I think that the author was trying to make the point that you might think your country is the best but the story is saying that no army is nice. Conquering is not how you should go about your life. Let them live the way they want. Look how bad the earth is from people wanting to conquer each other...all because either they think they're the best or else the other country has something they want.

**AB:** The General didn't respect the little country. The only one he liked was his own and he didn't even respect his own people very much because he was always sending them off to fight. They could get killed. The little country was wise not to have an army. If you have an army you have to fight and they knew well they couldn't win. *He* had the bomb. *They* didn't.

**Le:** Well, I was thinking how that if the general conquered everywhere then all the countries would begin to be the same. They would all have the same language and the same food and the same shops and they would forget their own culture after a while and be just like pieces of the General's country. That would be so boring. He shouldn't have done that to other countries. He should have reasoned with them and said 'I need your gold or your oil' 'Do I have anything ye want? And that would have been fairer. Cos like, when all their gold or whatever is gone, he won't want them anymore and they'll just be wrecked after him and be nothing.

**Am:** I was thinking why did he conquer other countries? Did he not like them or something? They're allowed to be themselves. What makes him think he can just march in and take over? They should all have got together and ganged up on him.

**AD:** I agree with Ae that he didn't respect anyone.

**Ag:** I think that ...you know the little country? Well they kind of conquered him...the general...because he forgot his own songs!

**Sh:** Well I really actually agree with Ae. If you don't respect other humans its not fair to other humans.

**Ke:** I think that all the other countries want to be themselves and the general is stopping them by conquering them. If the generals country was like Rome then soon all the other countries would have to have leaning towers and other things like that. The general is changing their history by conquering them.

**Me:** *Is he changing their history or their future?*

**Ke:** History

**B:** I think both. He's changing their history for the people looking back and he's changing the future for them and for the people not born yet.

**Lh:** It's a good story but I don't understand why generals do that...march into other countries. He has enough stuff, he has his own country. What does he need more for?

**Bh:** It's a very good story but a few things puzzle me. I agree with Ae that he doesn't show respect for anyone. But he was foolish too: why did he go off and leave a bunch of soldiers



on their own. And it shows that good people can conquer by just doing good. They conquered him!

**AC:** I was kind of wondering as well: why did he learn all those things when he didn't really like the little country?

**Mn:** I agree with Ae that its all about respect or not having respect.

**Ay:** Well I think that all the different countries have their own way of conquering and the little country tricked him by having no army. The other day my Mum told me a story about the Romans marching to Scotland ...they thought 'Here's our chance! Boosh!' That's it, you're dead!' Because they had the cannon gun...the little country didn't. You can't argue with a cannon gun or a bomb.

**V:** I think that the point of the story was that you don't have to have a cannon take over another country. If you just learn their songs and stuff and enjoy their culture, you can be taken over by them.

**Pr:** I think that General was a very bad man.

**Dn:** I think that if he had taken over them his life would be different. He could get rid of his enemies very easily by liking them. The little country did that. They didn't fight. The influenced the general's army and then the army went home and influenced the people and then the people influenced the General.

**En:** I thought the point of the story was that you don't have to be the best army or the strongest country to take over another place...all you have to have is strong people. And that's what the little country had, strong people who didn't fight.

**MC:** I think that story is a bit funny. The army go marching in and come out singing. Why? They could have been all shot. The general had a bomb. That would keep them safe from other countries.

**Sh:** I think it was funny at then end. He thought he conquered them but they conquered his heart instead and he ended up singing their songs to his little boy.

**Se:** If he did conquer them it would be so boring. You would go to another country and they would all be exactly the same. You would go over to Africa and you'd be expecting to hear different music and different customs but everything would be just like your won place. Then you'd stop going abroad. ...there'd be no point! That would be so boring if all the world was the same. Every country should be different. That general is silly trying to make them all like his country. What's he going to do when he has taken over the whole lot? He needed a little fun in his life. That's what he got from the little country. They did him a big favour by not fighting.

**Mr:** I think that the small country was right to welcome them in instead of fighting. That way they won.

**MOC:** I have a question: Why did the big General want to conquer the small country?

**An:** I think it would be kind of silly if every country in the world was the same. It's not meant to be like that.

**De:** I think the general didn't do any of the work. He made the soldiers do everything and he took the best house for himself it said in the book.

**Ey:** I agree with De that the soldiers actually did do all the work but the general claimed all the glory.

**Ax:** I think the general didn't really think at all. Suppose someone in Japan thought they'd like the Eiffel Tower and they took it. What use would it be there? People want to see it in France.

**Cn:** I don't think he should have stayed there. He wanted to be better than every other country.

**Se:** Yeah...like he was saying to everybody...I can conquer the whole world. I'm the greatest. Just watch me do it.

**Pr:** I think I can answer Mr O C's question...I think he just wanted to be rich.

**Bh:** He wanted to take over the world. But other people were more powerful than he was even without using an army. Peace is more powerful than war in the end.

**Ay:** Well I think that just going around conquering isn't very useful and after a while when he's got everything he'll just get bored and another thing is what good is the money? He can't use it if it's from that little country. It won't work in his country.

**Sh:** I know the answer too- he wanted to be richer and richer and richer.

**Ag:** I agree with Pr and Ay. He just wanted more stuff. That's so stupid: If he had given the other countries a chance who knows what he might have got? But no he just had to go in ...Bang! Bang! And he wrecked all those countries over being greedy.

**Le:** I think he was after their gold. I agree with Pr and I disagree with Ay. He wanted their money or their gold and he could have converted it to his own money anytime he wanted.

**Cn:** That General was wasting his time. Eventually he'd have conquered everything all the way to the North Pole. Then what's he going to do?

**Ey:** I really disagree that anyone should go into a country without asking the people how they felt about it and just took over...and all just for more richness. And then if the people say 'no' he says 'I'm going to shoot you'. That's bullying. If you want more land you should ask and give them something instead.

**De:** That's why I think the story is good because the little country ends up conquering the general. And the general's army are friendly to the little country now so they're safe from attack now.

**An:** Where would he have got the money from that he robbed from them...where?

**Bh:** I think I have an answer to Mr O C's question; the general just wanted power. He just wanted to be the best, the most powerful man in the world. I disagree with Ey: she said that they should have asked and then the people would have said yes. I think that they'd have said no.

**Ey:** Well I think that instead of war and fighting the person who owned the land should be asked first. He might say 'That's my land. You can't have it. We've always lived here' and they should understand that. The general's army were so used to people fighting them that they never got to respect anyone's country and culture before. So when the people were kind to them they were kind back.

**An:** Why is everyone saying he took over the world? He didn't he only took over a small country!

**Hh:** I sort of disagree with Bh and Ey because if they let the army in once they would always keep coming back every time they wanted more land or more money.

**Ag:** I think that the conquerors were fair to the little country. But some kids reading that story might think that that's the right thing to do: to go around conquering.

**Bh:** The general was foolish. If he wanted everyone to be like him...then eventually everyone would be a conqueror and end up killing him and taking over his country. They'd always be waiting their chance.

**Ax:** I think people might have thought that the little country was foolish to let the general take over so easily. But they well knew what they were doing. They knew they couldn't conquer the general and they were quite well informed about him because they were the last country and they had seen what he always did to the countries that resisted so they taught him a lesson without a cross word.

**Ey:** I agree with Ay that the money would be worthless in his country so its all about power and like he's saying 'Right, I'm the general of the whole world. Give me everything you have'.

**Se:** I actually think that the little country did teach him a lesson.

**Am:** Why did he want more land? What's he planning to use it for?

**Lh:** Look at President Bush and hurricane Katrina, he didn't really care even about his own country and he's always looking for more land too and he doesn't mind the land he's got.

**Am:** I disagree with AH because if they gave him 4 cans of oil he'd be back for more when that's gone.

**Ey:** I agree with Am: If the Iraqis gave President Bush some of their oil he'd soon come back looking for the rest of it so the Iraqis said you can't have any and then Boom! he starts a war.

C.9. Yellow Bird, Black Spider 12 October 2005

**Ca:** I think the story is about being yourself and not just following other people all the time.

**W:** I agree with Ca. It's important to do your own thing.

**CF:** Yeah, maybe, cos like, if you're always just following other people like, without thinking for yourself, and just doing what they want you to do... that could... you could end up in trouble

**O:** Well ....I dunno...maybe...yeah .... but you need to decide whether what they want you to do is Ok...like if your friends were all saying 'come on lets do this' and it was smoking... that wouldn't be good; but if it was like 'come on lets all play a game of chasing' or something that would be different...you're really going to have to make up your own mind about what to do.

**Jk:** I kind of agree with O...I think the spider was being a bit too careful and a bit annoying so the bird sort of was trying to shock him...maybe...he mightn't really like ice-cream.

**Ky:** If you don't be yourself, who would you be? You have to be yourself and you might be a person that does things their own way or else you might be someone that just copies other people but you're always yourself. Your soul might be part of your mind and some people say that your thoughts come from your soul sometimes or from your heart and they could be from all of them and from your mind.

**Jr:** I liked the way the bird stood up for himself. I think your feelings might be in your soul...but maybe your soul is in your feelings ... oh I don't know!

**Crn:** What's the point of that book? I think its something like 'make your own life, don't wait for other people to tell you stuff'. I like that bird a lot!

**Kn:** The bird is a bit too cool. If people did that other people would mock them. The spider was just trying to make sure the bird didn't get in trouble.

**D:** I think it could be about having your own personality. The spider is very nervous – that's his personality. The bird is kind of cheeky. That's his personality. They probably don't get along with each other. Your personality might be part of your soul.

**Ca:** The thing about that book that was good was the ending. You don't expect that ending...it kind of shocks you.

**Kn:** I agree with all the people who said that your soul could be in your feelings and your mind and your feelings and your mind could be in your soul and I never knew anything about that before but I knew that I agreed when I heard it

**L:** The bird is sooo cool. The spider is a bit boring. Like, if you're like that spider you're always thinking should I do this? Should I do that? What will people say? The bird kind of people say 'hey, I don't care...this is what I like' ...what's wrong with that?

**Cr:** The best thing about the bird is his attitude. He's very sort of relaxed. He likes some things and he just goes and gets them. The spider would be scared or nervous to try anything new.

**Ja:** I think it's a really good story. The bird is really funny.

**Cy:** I like it because it has a surprise at the end. That spider was getting on my nerves. He got ...it was good enough for him to get eaten

**Ra:** It's a good story. The end was sad for the spider.

**Cc:** It's kind of like the bird is a human. He does things that ordinary birds don't do. He's not scared of anything.

**Gn:** Well...that bird is like a pop star. He is so cool and he smiles his secret smile and pop goes the spider!

**Ce:** the bird is trying to be different. He likes to show off. The spider is an ordinary spider.

**T:** yeah but the spider is trying to make the bird do what he wants not what the bird wants. He bugs him so much he ate him. He was tired of listening to him.

**P:** I don't know why we're all feeling so shocked about the bird eating the spider. That's what birds do...all the time they eat spiders and worms and cute things like ladybirds. So what's so extraordinary about eating a spider? I think it's because we're looking at that bird as if he's human. He's a bird!

**H:** I agree with Gn...he likes to show off and I kind of agree with P too about us thinking its amazing that he ate the spider.

**Jk:** well yes, ....if you think about it ....we eat cows, but you don't see their legs hanging out of our mouths like the spider in the last picture. That's why it's a shock cos we're juts getting used to the way the spider is going on at him...then ...wham!

**Ce:** I think he's very mean to the spider. He could have just hitten [sic] him a whack...he shouldn't of [sic] ate him.

**L:** If you nag someone as much as that spider you should expect to get eaten. Why did he have to go 'nah, nah, nah do this, don't do that'... on and on? He should have minden [sic] his own business and made a few webs and chilled out a bit.

**H:** I think it's good to do what you want and it's good to do what other people want too. Both of them were right.

**Crn:** It's only a story, right? I mean it's just meant to make us think, it didn't really happen.

**Me:** *Would you have thought, looking at that book for the first time, that we'd get so much talking and thinking from it?*

**Ca:** Definitely not! I was thinking at the start that we wouldn't have a lot to say about that because like T and was it M? ... I thought it was kind of like a baby book...but it's really very good.

## **Appendix D Examples of in-house evaluations of Thinking Times**

D.1. One of my evaluations from 3<sup>rd</sup> class

Teacher M Roche

Class 3<sup>rd</sup>

Date: 11-01-07

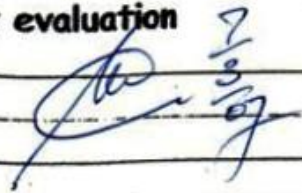
Topic: Brueghel's *'Winter landscape with Bird trap'*



(Note: I didn't provide the children with the actual title of the picture until afterwards)

- I think that this picture is very good because it makes you think about what it must have been like to live a long time ago in the winter with no central heating.
- They probably went skating to keep warm.
- I agree with C because they didn't even have waterproof clothes in those days.
- I'd say it was fun too though because everywhere is full of snow and the water is frozen like a skating rink.
- Children probably had more fun then because they were allowed to play in the snow and stuff.
- The people all look very friendly but the birds look sort of scary.
- I'd say the birds were starving because they didn't have peanuts for them in those days
- The children were having a great time. I don't even think school was invented.
- Its funny to think about what it was like to have no cars or telly or phones or anything. If you got stuck in the forest you'd die.
- What about if you were sick? Would a doctor be able to get there?
- The ramp thing looks fun (birdtrap). You could probably run up it and jump in the snow.
- No. I'd say you'd slide down it.
- The adults were very kind to the kids in those days.

Thinking Time - weekly evaluation

Teacher: M Lane	
Class: Rangy III	
Date: 16/2	
Topic: "What did friendship week mean to you?"	
Some examples of children's ideas:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We know that Staring &amp; staring are bullying. Now we know that we must look out for each other.</li> <li>• We learned alot about the different types of bullying. like exclusion. Before I thought bullying was about being hit / kicked.</li> <li>• Before this week I didn't realise there were so many kinds of bullying. Now I know I must tell if I see it happening.</li> <li>• Now I know that bullying can affect someone's whole life. I thought bullying was funny.</li> <li>• I learned that some bullies don't realise that what they think is normal is actual bullying.</li> <li>• I don't think bullying can be stopped. if you bullied before you can do it again.</li> <li>• Now we can be more aware. We should do this friendship week every year.</li> <li>• I've learned so much about "visual bullying".</li> <li>• Someone once said sthng about my mum - I wouldn't tell my Mum.</li> <li>• Bullies are only afraid that they'll get bullied themselves.</li> <li>• Bullying - u can change if u want to.</li> <li>• Friendship week caused confusion!</li> </ul>	
Teacher's comments:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bullies act like that to make it look like they're tough - but inside they are weak.</li> </ul> <p>This was one of the best thinking times I've ever done. For the first time every child contributed to the discussion. It was a subject that was very meaningful to them. The girls in particular seemed to be very affected by "visual bullying" - staring at each other and bad looks. The reflections of the past week was a very valuable / positive experience.</p>	

\* girls very affected by "staring" / "bad looks".

Very occasionally you experience a "moment" in teaching that you know you'll always remember. This has got to be one of those times for me. If this happens once every five years when doing thinking time, it validates the time spent each week ->

taking "time out" from the daily curriculum to do thinking time. A very memorable 30 minutes!

### Thinking Time - weekly evaluation

Teacher: M. Roche
Class: Naí Shóis
Date: 09-05-03
Topic: Feelings
Some examples of children's ideas: Excerpt —
• Animals have no feelings
• They do!
• If I kick an animal they'd scream.
• Well, maybe they have only small feelings!
• Actually animals have very big feelings about minding their babies!
• (o - I think you know everything
• Yes I do!!! Thank you R. J for saying that
• Don't even mention it!
Teacher's comments:
I loved the way this discussion was a blend of formal dialogue & informal chat. It shows me that the children have real understanding of how to conduct a discussion.

/e

D.4. Evaluation from DOS

Thinking Time - weekly evaluation

Teacher:	[Redacted]
Class:	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Date:	Wed March 26 <sup>th</sup> (2003) <sup>wa</sup>
Topic:	Why does the tide come and go?
	Some examples of children's ideas:
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>① The wind blows the tide in and out.</li> <li>② Big ships make waves that cause the tide to go in and out.</li> <li>③ Its like the moon - the moon goes in and out.</li> <li>④ The moon pushes the tide in and out</li> <li>⑤ The waves make the tide come in.</li> <li>⑥ Swimming fish cause waves and that causes the tide.</li> <li>⑦ Cause the moon is a magnet to the sea.</li> <li>⑧ When boats see the tide they know there is going to be a storm.</li> </ol>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⑨ <del>Teacher's comments:</del> The moon is a big magnet &amp; when it moves it pulls the tide with it.</li> <li>⑩ The moon is a magnet to the sea, this causes waves and the waves is the tide - big ships only cause little waves.</li> </ol>

~~Teacher's Comment:~~ Some children remained completely unaffected by the scientific explanation for the tide and continued to use "imaginative" explanations eg. "swimming fish cause the tide"

No ⑩ not only offers a complete scientific explanation, but the respondent went back to an answer offered about 15 mins. earlier (No. 2) and qualified it - "the ships only cause little waves".



**Thinking Time - weekly evaluation**

Teacher: R. [redacted]
Class: Junior Infants
Date: 10 <sup>th</sup> April 2003
Topic: "Too much Talk" by Angela Shelf Medearis
Some examples of children's ideas:
J [redacted]: "Why did the yam talk?"
E [redacted]: "Why were they running?"
C [redacted]: "I wanted to know why the water talked."
F [redacted]: "Why did the the one talk? No one thought of that one, did they?"
S [redacted]: "No."
K [redacted]: "Yes, J [redacted] did."
D [redacted]: "No, she thought of the water"
M [redacted]: "What's a yam?"
E [redacted]: "Why does the thing that m [redacted] said talk?"

(A) {  
(B) {

Teacher's comments: I read the story explaining first that I'd like to hear their questions at the end. Very eager at first to ask questions throughout the story. This settled down as story progressed. Enjoyed story very much. A lot of the questions related to why/how the different things spoke. Good listening was apparent, as illustrated by A + B above. When asked by teacher what they thought a "yam" was, answers varied from 'a sheep',

"a dog" ("you did not water me, you did not weed me. And here you come to dig me up!!) to a tree and a seed by drawing attention to contextual and pictorial clues, children's guesses became closer to the truth!!

## Appendix E Samples of children's responses to music and art

### E.1. Responses to Gasparyan



This music reminds me of ostriches in the desert and the big ostrich is dripping wet and so is the small one. I feel sorry for them. do you feel sorry for them? the song feels so sad. **they say Help!**

The music reminds me of ostrich in the desert and the big ostrich is dripping wet and so is the small one. I feel sorry for them, do you feel sorry for them? The song feels so sad. They say Help!



This music reminds me of a lion in the forest standing on a rock in the sunset

This music reminds me of a lion in the forest standing on a rock in the sunset.



This music reminds me of swans in a lake and birds flying for the winter.

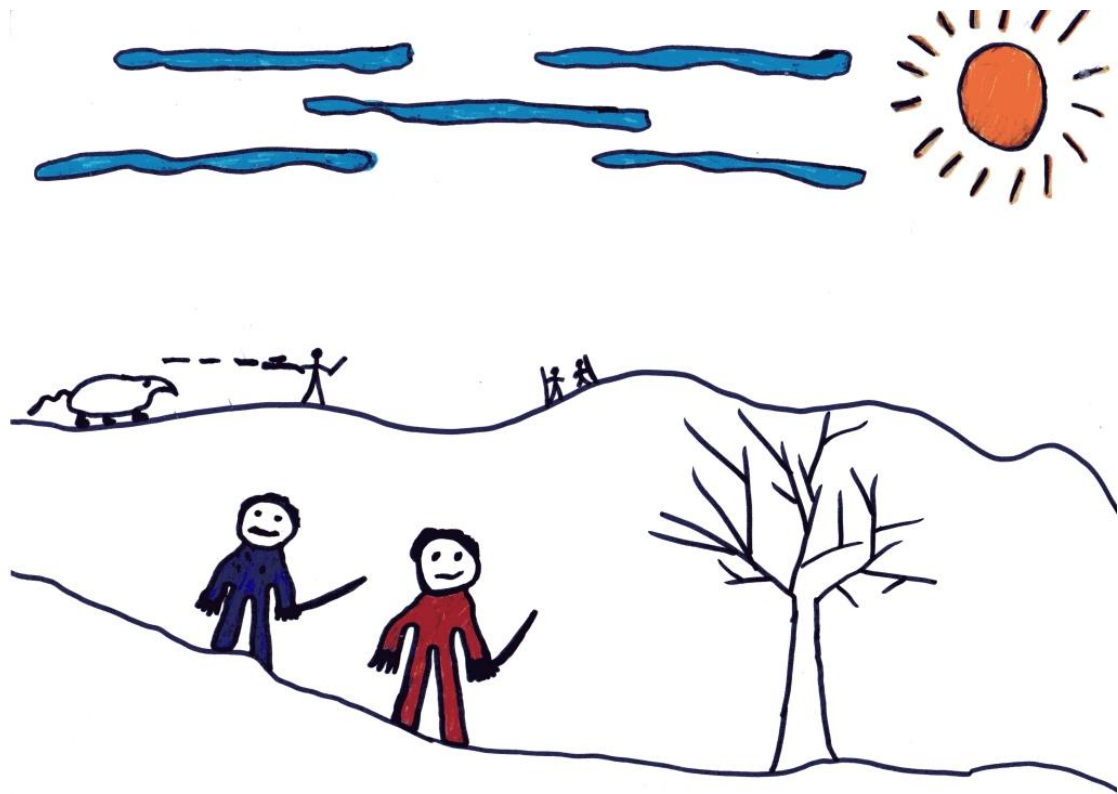
This music reminds me of Swans in a lake and birds flying for the winter.



This music reminds me of the foodchain. The animals are a tiger, a falcon, a mouse, a spider and a fish. I like it because it is calm.

This music reminds me of the foodchain. The animals are a tiger, a falcon, a mouse, a spider and a fish. I like it because it is calm.

E.2. Responses to Brueghel



Hi I AM A HUNTER  
My name is Henry. It is a winter morning and I am out looking  
for food for my family. I have been hunting for four hours I haven't  
caught anything. I hear a noise It must be something I look behind the  
branch I see it I see it It is people ice skating I must have a go  
but I don't have any food yet any way I'll do it. blee this is so fun.  
No! back I have to go home. I home all of my family ran down stairs.  
did you get anything no. Wear have you been ice skating ice skating  
you promised me that you would get something but I was looking for four  
hours and I didn't see any thing. Pleas forgive me pleas kids no dinner  
today I will go out tomorrow again. Col a dandle da Come on out of bed.



Hallo my name is Nicole. I am eight years old. I live in Iceland. I live with my mom, my dad, my older brothers and my older sisters. We live in a cottage near a pond. A few weeks ago the pond got frozen over. Yesterday my older brothers and sisters taught me how to ice skate. Now I can ice skate by myself. Earlier today I was out skating and I saw some hunters. They were chasing birds, rabbits and mice. I always feed the birds, rabbits and mice. I ran up the hill and told the hunters that the animals were my friends. They laughed and told me to go home. I ran home and got the food to feed them. The animals came over. Then I ran home again and got some bones for the dogs. Then I throw them and the dogs ran after them. Then the hunters ran after the dogs.

E.3. Poetic responses to picture of sunset



**This picture looks like a devil's arrival.**

**Making the pink think.**

**Stop, go or flow.**

**The mountain looks really black**

**As if it has plaque**

Once there was a sunset, no ordinary sunset.

The sea turned orange and the sky set on fire

. The fish turned gold, the squid and octopus turned

bronze,

The whales turned silver and the turtles turned orange in

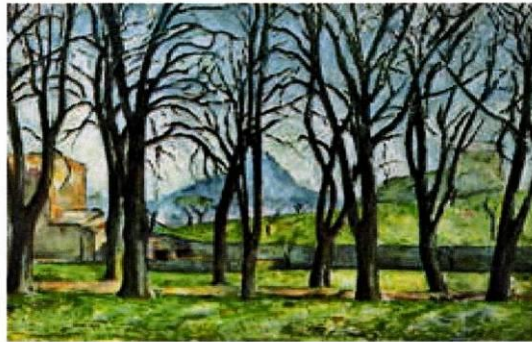
great glory.

Once there was a sunset  
Like no other.  
It was  
On the other  
Side of the mountain.  
Every one went  
To see what it was  
At first nothing was there  
Then  
BANG!!  
Happy New year's day!

I love it when the sky is red  
It reminds me of my nice warm bed.  
The sun travels behind the hills,  
And leaves the sky that its light fills.  
The water ripples beneath my feet  
Like a Roman Captain leading the fleet.  
The hills' shadows are on the waves  
They're so black they look like caves.  
A sunset is so full of glory  
It's the exact opposite of something  
gory.

I like it when the sky is coloured  
It makes me feel warm and cosy  
With the orange sea and the pinkish purplish sky  
And with the mountains afar  
It looks such a sight

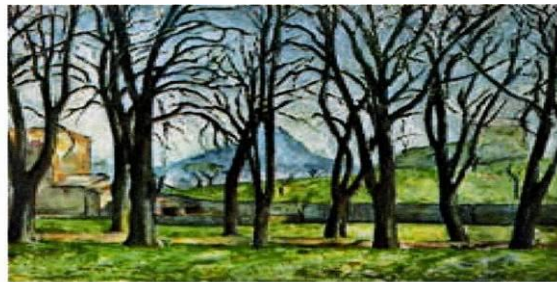
E.4. Written responses to picture of trees and Vermeer



The Forest of sound

When I'm sad or happy I like to walk through the forest of sound. When I'm sad I hear sad music. The sad music is low down soft and slow. In the Winter it's different to the music I hear in the Summer. This is because in the Summer there are more <sup>leaves</sup> and birds and more flowers. In the Winter the trees are empty and the birds are gone and flowers won't grow. When I'm in a bad <sup>mood</sup> the forest cheers me up. When I'm very happy I love going to the forest. When I'm just happy I like going through the forest <sup>and</sup> because the music and sounds are fast exciting <sup>and</sup> busy. It makes me want to dance.

Beautiful!



The magical orchard

Far, far away in a magical land lived creatures very rare and grand. There was a magical orchard in the centre of this land. Its fruit could cure all illness but it was guarded by a dark force. One day a chieftain fell ill so he assembled his best nine warriors, some supplies and set off. The journey to the orchard would be 200 miles and it would take a fortnight. They overcame many hazards including forest fires, unbridged lakes and goblin attacks. They spoke to the <sup>guardians</sup>, they got some fruit, gave the fruit to the chieftain and he got better.

The End.

Lovely!





## The weeping Girl

A few years ago there was a very poor girl called Maria, she was depressed and she <sup>looked</sup> on the bad side of life. Her hobby was art. She loved painting. When she was 18 years of age she became famous for her art. She moved to a flat in Holland. Everyday when she went outside huge crowds gathered round her. and After a few years ~~later~~ when she was 22, she was brought to court for no reason. After a while the judge said she was guilty and she was put to jail. The guards <sup>chose her</sup> to go into a dark cell, after a few weeks she started to draw pictures and day the guard

It love to hear what happened next, i - !  
well done!



## A Dutch Girl

I think this girl is Dutch she looks it. In this picture she looks miserable and sad, like one of her favourite things has just floated away from her. She looks poor <sup>at</sup> the same time as she looks like a princess walking down marble steps. Her green coat is too big for her so she probably found it. ~~so~~ That tells us that she might be poor. But she must have some money because of those earrings. She ~~couldn't~~ <sup>hadn't</sup> found them because nobody would let their earrings get lost.

Well done! R - s

## Appendix F Extract from RE teacher's handbook

F.1. Extract from Alive-O 5 Teachers' Book (Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics, 2001).

T1 L7

### Overview of the Week

Song: <i>Bless the Lord</i> Chatting before the story-poem Story-poem: <i>Oisín and St Patrick</i> Chatting after the story-poem Prayertime	Continue song Recall story-poem Chatting about Oisín and St Patrick Continue art Prayertime	Continue song Recall story-poem The First Monasteries Art: <i>The Book of...</i> Prayertime	Continue song Recall story-poem Chatting about the song Continue art Video: <i>Christianity comes to our Country</i> Worksheet Prayertime	Reflecting on the Week Prayertime
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### Day One



SONG

**Bless the Lord**



CHATTING

...before the story-poem

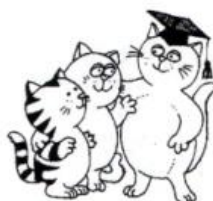
Have you ever helped someone who is very old? What did they look like? How did their hand feel to you? Can you describe their face/voice/hair? How did they walk? Did they use a stick? Oisín feels useless. Are all old things useless? Can you think of any things that become more and more precious as they grow older? What about old stories/old songs/old prayers/old times, etc.? In last week's story Oisín fell off his horse and went straight from being young to being old. How do you think he felt? How was his life different then?



STORY-POEM

**Oisín and St Patrick**

*See end of lesson.*



CHATTING

...after the story-poem

Let's look at Oisín's gods – what picture do we get of them? Let's go back through Oisín's lines and, as we do, put your finger on a line that you like and with your other hand put a finger on one that you don't like. (Allow the children some time to call out the lines they have chosen and say why they have chosen them.) Now let's go back and listen to/read Patrick's lines – put your finger on one that is similar to and another that is different from the lines describing Oisín's gods.

How do you think the Oisín in this story feels? Do you think he is right about his gods – that they will want nothing to do with him now that he is old and feeble? If you could talk to the Oisín in the poem, what would you say to him? What do you think you might do to help him? Do you

## **Appendix G Emailed responses from educators to 'a question about your schooldays'**

G.1. My email

*Subject: a question about your schooldays*

*Date: Wed, 25 Jan 2006 17:34:44 -0000*

Hello everybody,

Mary Roche here. Most of you know me but some may need reminding. I am a primary school teacher working in Cork. I am currently carrying out a study on critical thinking with primary school children for a doctoral degree with the University of Limerick. This study is following on from my MA in Education study into Philosophy with Children.

In my report I have referred to a discussion I carried out with my third class primary school students about 'what is the purpose of school?' I made the point that this topic is one that I was never asked to consider during my schooldays. In fact, I don't think I engaged in any real discussion of this topic until I began my post graduate studies. It was probably the theme of a lecture in training college (back in the 1970s) but there was no discussion of the topic and I certainly did not critically engage with it then.

I am sending out this email to all of you who are involved in the business of education at different levels: primary, post primary, and third level and I am going to ask you all the same question I asked myself:

**Were you ever given an opportunity to think about, discuss or engage critically with the question 'what is the purpose of school?' when you were in school?**

I appreciate the time you have taken to read this. If you choose to reply, may I have your permission to use your reply as data for my research report? I guarantee confidentiality: no names will be used.  
with best regards

Mary

G.2. Responses from PL

***Email received on 25-01-06 from PL – a critical pedagogue at third level college in USA and author of several books on critical pedagogy.***

I moved around a great deal as a kid because my father was a doctor setting up programs for child abuse and for kids with disabilities. It wasn't until I was a junior in high school in Amherst Massachusetts, U.S. that I bumped into a cool teacher who taught an alternative course on work, and a guidance counsellor who was an outcast amongst faculty, and was encouraged to think about the purpose of schooling, about labour stratification and cultural reproduction...about my place in the world.

Otherwise, schools played the typical role of reflecting the larger social order and keeping youth on the line. Resisters were always punished in one form or another. It's no wonder

conservatives in the U.S. moved from wanting to dismantle the Department of Education to taking it over -- in order to make sure that they can control young minds through the standardization of curricula and pedagogy in the name of No Child Left Behind. So much for education for civic responsibility. Hard to have any substantive, participatory democracy without the ability to make sense of the world around us. In that sense, public schools are doing the exact job that they have been designed to do. But like I did throughout my childhood, I'm using my energy as a professor in a teacher education program to combat this type of domestication. All the best

P L

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G.3. Response from S. W.

***Email received on 25-01-06 from SW (Canada), former elementary school teacher, third level college of education professor and author of several books on teaching***

Dear Mary:

Your question made me smile! When I went to elementary school (way back there in the days when dinosaurs roamed the earth), we sat in straight rows, DID NOT SPEAK, in fact, were penalized for talking. We sat and sat, waiting for the next teacher directive. We never were allowed even to question, lest that be taken as an affront to the teacher, the all knowing authority on everything. Children did not have opinions, or points of view -- so why on earth would anyone ask them?

So your question is easy to answer, although it is a sad commentary on what my education was like.

Each of us works for change in his or her own way and we do so, inch by painful half inch, across the years. And when we look back, some of us can actually see many teachers who prize, value and respect kids, and whose classrooms are models of humanity and regard, as well as educational excellence. Keep fighting the fight; it's worth it.

The orientation you have chosen for your doctoral work is, I believe, most difficult and most rewarding. For teaching, after all, is an act of self discovery when it is done

well. And that is where so much of the gratification lies for such a difficult and challenging work. Those discoveries, alas, are reserved for the few who would undertake such rigorous self examinations -- not for sissies. I am full of admiration for your quest and am cheering you quietly onward, from this rainy loft in downtown

V \_\_\_\_\_r.  
S \_\_\_\_\_

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G.4. Response from PD

***Email received on 26-01-06 from PD, former primary teacher, now college of education lecturer in Ireland***

Dear Mary,

No I never had an opportunity to discuss the purpose of school either at first or second level and yes feel free to use this information. Not only did I not have an opportunity to discuss it, I think any such question would have been viewed as disruptive by teachers and possibly would even have been a punishable offence.

With best regards  
P

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G.5. Response from P.A-LaF.

***Email received 29-01-06 from PA-LaF an elementary school teacher (USA)***

The answer is no. We were told why we were in school, but never was it discussed as an open question

ELEM to HIGH SCHOOL YEARS: 1959-1971 (1ST-12TH GRADES)

And never in college classes was this discussed as a class:

COLLEGE YEARS: 1971 TO 1978 (INCLUDING MASTERS DEGREE)

P

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G.6. Response from P.M-M

***Email received on 26-01-06 from PMM, University lecturer and former secondary school teacher (Ireland)***

Hello Mary

As far as I remember I was never given the opportunity to discuss this nor was it ever raised as a thinking point.

Best regards

P

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G.7. Response from B.S.

Hi Mary,

I must admit that, like you, I was never asked to reflect on the question, 'What is the purpose of school?' I think that, both from my own experience at school and from my experience as a student at a teacher training college, I gained the impression that school was a means of transferring as much knowledge as possible into the minds of more, or less, willing pupils.

I only began to ask myself that question quite recently, when I became aware of the inappropriate nature of the culturally specific education being offered to Traveller children. It would not have occurred to me, therefore, that children should be asked, or could answer, a question requiring such critical thinking. However, when I attended 'Dáil na bPáistí' with some of my Traveller pupils and heard one of them suggesting that the Traveller language, Cant, should be taught in schools, I realised that children are indeed capable of reflecting critically on questions such as 'What is the purpose of school?'

B

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G.8. Response from B.L.

***Email received on 29-01-06 from BL critical friend on PhD study programme***

As to your question I never remember being asked that question while in school. Then in the context of those times "where children were seen but not heard" the idea of asking children their opinion on anything would not have been considered other than as a joke. I don't think anyone pondered that question children or parents, teachers even because in some ways then the question seemed answered. The purpose of school was to learn to read and write and other knowledge that would help you secure a job. Where you finished in school determined your job. So for me even though I never was asked the question I think I believed the purpose of school was to prepare you for work.

B

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## **Appendix H Samples of reports by observers of Thinking Time**

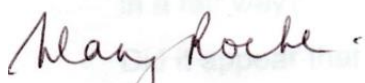
H.1. My request to colleagues

Validation for data collection October/November 2005

Dear 

On Mon 21<sup>st</sup> Nov 05 you observed a Thinking Time with my class.  
I'd be grateful for any comments you could make regarding the experience.

Regards



H.2. Observation report by CO'C

Thinking Time gave all the children the equal chance to speak – there were no correct or incorrect answers – so I think this helped each and every child to 'shine' – shine brightly.

There was great respect shown by everyone involved and this respect was shown to each and every child and to the teachers. Their opinions were valued and the children knew this.

I had to remind myself a number of times as to which class I was listening to. I tried to think of another 3<sup>rd</sup> class that I have had experience of – I realised that the children in Mary's class really knew how to think *and* express themselves. I was also amazed at their ability to remember what others had said and integrate this with their own opinions.

Mary I hope this makes sense. Thinking isn't that easy – but your class made it look very easy and, most of all, enjoyable.

COC 14 November 2005

H.3. Observation report by D.M.

Thinking Time provides a forum that allows less academic children to shine. The children were very engaged and comfortable in the circle. It was a democratic setting and the teacher's role was not autocratic or managerial. Children were being given opportunities in a fair way and the children seemed to feel safe and free in the setting and they were able to contradict each others comfortably without confrontation. The children's ideas were very structured and surprising and not what I would have expected to hear from young children. The dynamic of the circle was very inclusive. I feel that the sessions are beneficial educationally for the children because listening to and responding to points in turn and articulating your point of view logically (however contradictory) without tension or aggression is of huge social importance.  
DM 8 November 2005



H.4. Observation report by S.D.

Mary

I found the session very enjoyable. The children seemed very interested and at ease in the group. They were attentive when others were speaking and used the ideas of others to expand on their own thoughts.

Giving children the option to do a 'hands up' in the later part of the session is a very good idea, in my opinion. Some children are more comfortable than others at expressing an opinion or speaking to a group

SD 14 November 2005

H.5. Observation report by YO'F

On Friday the 6<sup>th</sup> of February I sat in our class to do an observation on cognitive development, the age group was mainly 5 year olds but there are a couple that are 6. Mary (teacher) told the children a story called Dear Green Peace, a story of a little girl called Emily who wrote to Green Peace to tell them she had a whale called Arthur in her garden. The children loved the story.

Mary then said we are going to talk about pets, ones the children have or would like to have or whatever.

To be honest what happened next was the most amazing conversation I have ever heard in a group of children in all my years dealing with or caring for children, They started talking about their goldfish and their birds their friend's pets and granny's and cousins pets, then one child said that his dog made a plan to catch his cat because he tried to kill his goldfish that led the children to talking about whether animals think and have their own language.

This then led on to a conversation about human thoughts and brains and if a brain was taken from one child and put into another child would the second child that got the brain know all the memory and thoughts of the first child.

They thought about it and discussed if their brain slept or not, did their skin stay awake while they were asleep, they felt it had to how else would they turn in the bed at night

I was blown away at the way these very young children sat for over an hour and listened to each other, I was enthralled at the whole conversation it was a most thought provoking morning .

1 // [redacted] 9/2/06

H.6. Observation report by A.T.

**An observation of a Thinking Time discussion**  
***Mary Roche's Senior Infant Class 6 February 2004***

The first thing I want to say is that it was one of the most interesting things I have ever seen in my life. It was very exciting to see how five and six year old children have such deep thoughts about such difficult and abstract topics as the soul, thinking/thoughts and death.

The most incredible thing for me was that we started speaking about pets and we finished speaking about thinking and dreaming.

I think some of the children's ideas were incorrect but I delighted in the way they reasoned to arrive at these conclusions.

Sh. [redacted] was the child who most impressed me. All the ideas he had were developed and reasoned perfectly. He never said 'Yes, because yes' or 'No, because no'. He explained very well what he thought about each concept and gave reasons for his argument.

Another thing that was very interesting was that the children could sustain listening and speaking for around one and a half hours. There were some of them that weren't listening all the time. They were listening, speaking; then they lost concentration for a few moments; then they started again to listen and to participate in the conversation. I think that it is very difficult for them to concentrate for so long on the same thing, but it was amazing how a lot of them could.

I also think that although the children had all the discussion responsibility, the teacher had also a very important role, because she must know how to direct the discussion by asking some questions, because if not, the topic might veer off in different directions and it could have been a disaster. The teacher had also to listen very carefully without speaking for a long time. This is a difficult skill for a teacher to learn because normally a teacher is the one who does most of the talking in a classroom. In *Thinking Time* the teacher must use her power wisely and discretely so that the children have control of the discussion.

There were some people (me included) who thought that the time the children were speaking for was very short – I could have stayed listening to them for hours and hours, speaking with so much passion about what they think.

A great experience.

Mary Roche 23/2/04  
[redacted]  
[signature]  
24-2-04