# CHAPTER THREE — MY EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL VALUES

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*Chapter preview*

*In this chapter I set out my educational and social values. These are the values that inspire my life's work. I explain how I strive to live my values in my practices, and how this thesis, as I account for myself, can be understood as an account of my own living theory of inclusional practice. I identify my values as my living standards of judgement, and I ask that my work and the account of my work should be judged in relation to those standards.*

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In this chapter I give an account of the values that inspire my life's work. In Chapter 2 I outlined how these values are frequently denied through the lack of political will in delivering the rhetoric of the policy statements in practice. While existing policy statements abound in high-sounding rhetoric, and espouse the principles of democratic education and progressive thinking, recommending the kind of practices that will ensure a sustainable social future through education, the rhetoric is simply not fulfilled in practice. I have offered examples to reveal the large gap that exists between the theory and practice of Irish education policy, and have given some indications about what I think may be the reasons for this gap. In this chapter, I outline the specific reasons for my critique, by offering my own values and philosophy of education, to show that, while my values would appear to be commensurable with the values that underpin state policy, I also theorise my values as the guiding principles for my action. I do not stop at the articulation of abstract and high-sounding rhetoric, but show how the rhetoric transforms into action. Like Raz (2001) I believe that a value remains an abstract linguistic entity until it is transformed into real-life practice that gives meaning to a person's life. Like Whitehead (2002, cited in Potts 2002), I believe that 'flowing from the experience of living contradiction the desire to live our values more fully in our practice stimulates our imaginations (our originality of mind) to create possible ways of acting that might satisfy this desire' (p. 8). And like Aronowitz and Gadotti (1991: 189), I seek to explore 'the

emancipatory possibilities of teaching and learning as part of a wider struggle for democratic life and critical citizenship.' Furthermore, I understand my values as of different kinds, and each kind is in a dynamic transformational relationship with the others. In this chapter, therefore, I show both how my values give meaning to my life, and I also articulate the nature of the dynamic transformational relationship between my values, which gives meaning to the kind of theory-generation process I am engaged in as I develop my living theory of inclusional practice.

I therefore organise this chapter as presenting my ontological, epistemological, and social and political values, and I explain how these form the grounds for my living educational theory of inclusional practice. I first address the question, 'How do I understand education?' as the starting point for a discussion about my values.

## How do I understand education?

As I proceed, I will explain how I have come to understand that the core values of my practice have shaped the teacher I have become. Like Alexander (1995), I believe that 'the most basic test of the rightness of one's teaching is the degree to which it is true to the educational values, which the teaching claims to manifest' (Alexander 1995: 304). Like Dewey (1966), I do not regard education as a preparation for the future. Education is growth, the continuing reconstructing of our experience, undetermined by any outside aim. Such unlimited growth can lead to endless possibilities. The educational process has no end beyond itself. Its aim is not optimum scores in state examinations, preparation for the workplace, or maximum storage of facts. The only goal of education is more education. Like Dewey (1938), I, too, view education as a process, which is life-affirming, and invitational in nature.

To take this stance, however, means that I need to define my understanding of education, and for this, I return to my ontological values. I agree with Bullough and Pinnegar (2004) who say that in a self-study, a consideration of one's ontological values is a necessary

starting point. This starting point, however, transforms into other new values-based forms, and in this chapter I explain how my ontological values transform into epistemological values, which in turn transform into social values, and how these then transform into political values.

I begin with my ontological values.

## My ontological values

My ontological values are to do with how I perceive myself in the world, and especially how I perceive myself in relation with other people. In my work as a teacher, this has implications for how I see myself in relation with the children I teach. The values that most readily spring to mind are those of valuing the uniqueness of the child, and caring for the child.

### Valuing the uniqueness of the child

My core values around the children I teach are grounded in the idea that I see each and every one as unique, each with the potential of making their original contribution in life. In this I draw on the ideas of Arendt (1958), who speaks of the child's natality, the very condition of their humanity that makes such a contribution possible. My work is around how I can enable children to realise their natality. I believe that educational encounters should respect the dignity of the individual, recognise the importance of personal choice, the significance of personal responsibility and the joy associated with creativity (Rogers and Freiberg 1994: 123). Within my practice I aim to create opportunities for children to exercise their creativity of mind and spirit. I aim to reconceptualise practice as teaching for understanding (Gardner 1993), while allowing children to explore their capacity for knowledge generation. I resist the imposition of a system that insists on conformity and a standardised curriculum, and thereby denies the talents and abilities of individuals. Traditional technicist approaches to education that perpetuate the dominance of linguistic

and logical intelligences serve to diminish the flow of creativity and development of the individual and dehumanize children. Like Chomsky (1986), I believe that human creativity is at the heart of human nature, and, as a teacher, I believe that such creativity can flourish best in conditions that encourage the free development of the person (Chomsky cited in Hill 2001). However, because my work involves interacting with many children at the same time, and I have to ensure that the conditions for one person's creativity do not impinge on the conditions for another's, I have to ensure that the free development of one person's creativity is seen in relation with the development of another's freedom also to be creative. In this way, I have to transform my values around valuing the uniqueness of the child into my social values of care and respect for the other (Noddings 1992). This implies, in terms of my research, that I have had to find ways of valuing each and every child within a context where I am encouraging the development of the creative capacity of each and every child in relation with others who are trying to do the same. In this way I encourage diversity in children's educational experience. However, and drawing on the ideas of Berlin (1998) and Kristeva (2002), I appreciate that I have to ensure that one person's freedom does not become an injustice to another. My practice has therefore aimed at showing how I value the uniqueness of all by providing the conditions of freedom for their personal growth, while encouraging them to value others' uniqueness by providing the same conditions of freedom for personal growth. This means drawing on the capacity of each and every child to value and respect the other's capacity, to regard themselves as in relation to the other, so that each singularity is perceived as equal to all other singularities (Kristeva 2002), and to see the other as the same as oneself in one's struggle to articulate one's originality and critical engagement as the outward sign of one's uniqueness. My practice becomes an inclusive practice, not only one-way, in which I include all from my perspective as the 'authority' in the classroom, but from the perspective of all including all, from reciprocal and mutual perspectives. Together we interact with learning in a fluid, dynamic, dialogical and inclusional manner, interpreting curriculum as organic, emergent and living, while generating knowledge in the relationality that exists between us. All learners are

acknowledged as knowers because if education is to enable people to control their own discourses as suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2005a) then it 'must be informed by a model of democracy that promotes participative and inclusional values' (p. 4).

The goal of education, as Russell put it, is to give a sense of the value of things other than domination, to help create wise citizens of a free community in which both liberty and individual creativeness will flourish (Russell 2002). The aim is 'the education of individuals who are well integrated, free and independent in their thinking, concerned about improving and enhancing the world, and eager to participate in making life more meaningful and worthwhile for all' (Barsky 1997: 11). I want to educate for a good society, which for me means people coming together on an equal footing, to negotiate their personal and social goals, as outlined by Chomsky (1996). Therefore, through theorising my practice in this way, I can show that my practice is one of inclusion, of all by all. Furthermore, because I have departed from a propositional form of theory, I can say that I have transformed Habermas's (2002) propositional theories around the inclusion of the other into a living theory of inclusion that recognises the inviolable uniqueness of the other as a core condition, with implications for social practices that ensure the freedom of the other to explore and develop their unique capacities for originality and critical engagement.

**Caring for the child**

The child's experience of education should be concomitant with Dewey's view of education as 'a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating process' (1966: 10). If I am to encourage a context where each and every child feels valued, I need to show that I care sufficiently that each child is worth valuing. This means that I need to develop pedagogical relationships that are grounded in a value of care. I wish to provide a safe space that makes learning a personal creative experience. I need to respect my students as potentially autonomous learners (Lomax 1994a: 8), as complex human beings with whom I share my life of learning. All people should, I believe, be afforded the opportunity to

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live their lives in a just way, to enjoy their capacity to live productive lives within the context of loving relationships (Fromm 1976). Perpetuating practices of exclusion is unjust and unacceptable (Lynch 1999, Zappone 2002) and contradicts my values around caring, dialogical and inclusive relationships. For me valuing each child means having an attitude of unconditional positive regard for each pupil (Kilmeade 2004: 27), while accepting their natural differences in talents, skills and interests as integral components of human nature all of which contribute positively to social progress (Chomsky in Hill 2001). Drawing on the work of McNiff (2002a), I aim to 'create contexts of care within which people can learn, appreciating that their learning is often best enabled through loving relationships …' (p. 2).

Yet learning is not always done in conditions of nurturing. From my experience, especially through the experience of doing this research project, I have learned that some of my best learning has happened in conditions of conflict, when I struggle to live my values often in the face of the outright hostility of those working from a different values perspective. Through my experience of trying to resolve the contradiction, I learn. I learn how to deal with the situation, and more importantly I learn that conflictual situations are themselves contexts of creative tension that can generate important new learning (Farrell 2000). Like McNiff (2003b, 2006b), I have come to see that conflict is an essential prerequisite to transformational learning, where the learning from the experience of being in conflict transforms into new learning about oneself as a socially and politically-constituted human being. Conflict, however, does not imply violence. Hampshire (2000) spoke about the need for conflict in achieving a better social order that is grounded in justice. Achieving such a social order inevitably means conflict, which frequently manifests as a conflict of values (Sowell 1987).

Consequently, in my desire to provide safe caring spaces for learning, I also deliberately introduce tensions. I require children to think for themselves, and not to depend on me for their answers. I insist that they go through the struggle of learning to be independent. I do

not always help them out when they make mistakes, because they need to experience the resolution of their mistakes for themselves. Caring, for me, as manifested in loving relationships, is not a context for the exercise of sentimentality, so much as a context for the encouragement of hard thinking, problematic theorising, joyful (though sometimes painful) exploration of the potentials of one's own ideas. My capacity for care is manifested in my own self-discipline as I stand by and  watch as my students  work it out for themselves, and  I do not interfere, but insist that they do it for themselves. I do not view them as empty vessels to whom I should transmit knowledge. Rather I encourage engagement with emergent and creative processes of coming to know and developing one's potential (Russell 2002).   These underpinning ontological values now transform into my epistemological values.

**My epistemological values**

I value enquiry learning, both for myself and for the children I teach. Within my experience, in their desire to prepare children for second level education and external examinations, many schools in fact focus on knowledge acquisition, with scant attention paid to the processes by which children learn. Pupils in Irish schools tend to be taught a set body of knowledge in a didactic authoritarian style. Such linear teaching, and the normative narrow forms of assessment that test the efficacy of the teaching and learning, favour a particular section of our pupils (usually the mathematically and linguistically talented – see Gardner 1983), and present learning as the memorisation of facts to be regurgitated on demand. Tannenbaum states that 'Lip service is paid to developing worthy self-concepts, attitudes and values, but in reality little time is given to affect, with subject matter dominating the curriculum' (Tannenbaum 1983: 397). Children are expected to conform to the norms of a standardised curriculum, and remain voiceless in a system that only seems to value them as future contributors to our economy (Greene 2003).

I do not believe that the acquisition of purely factual knowledge is a viable goal for education in a world where the only constant is change. Imparting a body of knowledge which will be obsolete in a relatively short space of time is rather futile. 'Changingness', a commitment to process rather than static knowledge (Rogers and Freiberg 1994: 152), is for me more commensurate with my epistemological values around enquiry learning.

Knowledge, in my view, is what is created when we learn, a belief that highlights the importance of process. 'Classroom knowledge is social and relational in character, created and recreated in the daily encounters of the classroom' (McDermott and Richardson 2005). Viewing knowledge as a static bundle of facts implies a view of learning that sees children and their learning processes as static objects with little opportunity for participation or engagement. It precludes student involvement and voice, while deskilling the teacher. I have come to the conclusion that a view which holds curriculum as standardized and 'given' is a strategy used by those in power, to perpetuate the existing status quo and exclude those who fall outside the dominant norms. Marginalised children, including Traveller and Special Educational Needs children, are frequently denied inclusion and justice in such a system that fails to recognise diversity in knowing or diversity in culture.

Traditional practices in Ireland tend to operate to limit the self-determination of marginalised groups. Knowledge itself is used to control the nature and delivery of education provision, especially in relation to a market-driven economy, within a context of established power relations that include the already privileged and exclude the others (Apple 1990, 1993). This situation denies my values of enquiry learning, and how enquiry learning can lead to individuals' autonomous choices about self-development and self-determination. For me, 'education is an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu' (Cornbleth 1990: 5). Yet this interaction can happen only when critique is encouraged, and this is the element to which I now turn.

**My epistemological values around challenging and questioning**

Being critical of authorised knowledge, and the social structures that maintain authorised knowledge, means challenging the status quo. This involves critique of dominant normative models of pedagogy and methodology, the constructed concept of intelligence, the enshrined position of 'the curriculum', established forms of assessment, and the nature of knowledge. I critique all these aspects in relation with my students, by developing critical pedagogies that encourage them to challenge and question, by adopting personal critical practices based on non-normative concepts of intelligence and knowledge, and by including emotional/affective aspects within my practice as well as encouraging the cognitive dimensions of learning.

Challenging the traditions of schooling, the hidden curriculum of control, or what Grace (1978) calls 'the taken for granted and unchallenged social world within which teachers sometimes operate' (p. 217) can be destabilising at a personal level. However, the traditions of schooling need to be challenged, because they serve to deny appropriate responses to the needs of marginalised children**.** Institutional prejudice, in reproducing the inequalities of society and replicating the social class system conflict with my epistemological values of enquiry learning and their political manifestation as denying equality, justice and inclusion. All too often, children remain silenced and ridiculed within a system that negates their diversity, and their capacity to come to know on their own terms. My commitment to pluralism and inclusive philosophies is frequently denied by the traditions of schooling that accept only official knowledge and dominant cultural norms. My passion around these issues is inspired by the personal experiences of seeing the limiting influences on the self-determination of marginalised children, and raises for me concerns around provision for the preparation of initial teachers and also for the continuing professional learning of experienced teachers, who, according to Jones and Yonezawa (2002: 245–254) need to examine their own politically and personally charged perceptions of students. My own research has led to an increasing depth of knowledge about how pedagogy works in shaping power, identity, social relations and inequality in

the classroom. I have come to understand how pedagogy operates outside the school in the production of knowledge, values, subject positions, and social experiences, and I understand clearly how pedagogy has to be seen as a moral and political practice rather than only a technique or method.

The ontological and epistemological values I have set out so far now transform into my social and political values in relation to educational provision.

## My social and political values

I believe profoundly that all children, regardless of social class or ability, should have equal access to educational resources and equal opportunity to benefit from them. I am committed to promoting equality and democratic practices through the dismantling of ideas and practices that support exclusion and alienation through the application of categories of alterity (McNiff 2006b). These values influence my pedagogical practices and create more inclusive and relational ways of living, which in my view are the foundations of social justice.

I believe that education is embedded within social relationships and processes (Young 2000: 16). A view that inequality is inherent in our social class system and maintains that existing inequalities in education merely reflects the structural inequalities in society itself, needs to be challenged, on the grounds that the current system of education provision 'reinforces and reproduces inequality rather than merely reflecting it' (INTO 1994: 13). Like Lynch (1999) I understand that students continue to experience injustice and exclusion even though education laws and policy appear to be committed to formal equality and equal opportunity for all. However, such debates around equality, inclusion, and justice tend to focus on a distributive model, without examining the institutional structures that perpetuate the systems of exclusion and injustice that they are critiquing. Drawing on the ideas of Young (1990, 2000), I believe that the issues of marginalisation,

inequality and injustice require more process-oriented and relational conceptualisations. Claims to impartiality serve to feed the cultural imperialism operating in schools by allowing the particular experience and perspectives of privileged groups to parade as universal (Young 1990: 10), and legitimates authoritarian hierarchies within the education system. While distribution of educational resources is obviously important to educational opportunity, opportunity has a far wider scope than distribution (Young 1990: 26). A technicist interpretation of fairness, which insists on identical teaching and resources for all, within the education system, suppresses difference by identifying it with deviance or devaluation.

It is the structures of dominance that need to be critiqued, rather than simply the distribution of the dominant good (Young 1990: 17). More attention needs to be given to the social structures and processes that produce distribution rather than on distribution itself. Current discussions on justice and inclusion focus on the justice of the distribution of educational goods and resources rather than on the justice of decision-making power and procedures. By changing the existing educational and institutional hegemonies that control educational policy and practices, wider access to inclusive practices can be secured. Securing justice requires giving everyone an effective voice in negotiating goods and defining their own needs, particularly members of groups who have been historically marginalised (O'Hanlon 2003: 11).

**Equality of respect**

Yet to achieve equality in access to debates about who has power over issues of distribution implies the exercise of equality of respect, and this is a real sticking point in Irish educational contexts. Minority and marginalised cultures and traditions are seldom shown as much respect as established cultures and traditions. Cultural reproduction serves to maintain homogeneity and limits some individuals' potential. Power is used by the dominant group to maintain the status quo with marginalised and oppressed minorities limited by their inherited positionality. Marginalised groups can be left continuously

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struggling to acquire the respect that should be accorded to them as a consequence of their humanity (Lynch 1999: 18).

Inequality of respect is evident within the organisation of schooling in relation to the structures of decision-making, the organisation of curriculum selection, and pedagogical relationships. The structure of the learning environment and its hidden curriculum of pedagogic practices may defeat any egalitarian objectives schools may uphold, either through support programmes for equality of access, participation or outcome, or through curriculum reform (Lynch 1999: 18). Dominant conceptualisations of curriculum perpetuate particular cultural traditions at the expense of others, and so reinforce images of what is or is not culturally valuable in a given society. By denying, denigrating or omitting the cultural traditions and practices of some groups, schooling becomes a place where one's identity is denied or one's voice is silenced (Lynch 1999: 17). The values of the dominant group become universalised in the schooling process. There is neither accurate nor adequate portrayal of marginalised group culture. Rejection and devaluation of one's culture and perspective becomes a condition of participation (Young 1990: 166). Such forms of hierarchical power are, in my opinion, exclusionary, and they deny my belief in the equal moral worth of all people. In school, the marginalised are forced to comply with rules and policies in which they have no say. Traditional education orients students to conform, to follow authority and to accept inequality and their places in the status quo. In its 'colonialistic characterization, schooling helps develop coloniser-colonised relationships between individuals and between groups in society' (Carnoy 1974: 19). Pupils are rendered powerless in their own education. Positioned as the Other, their difference is reconstructed as deviance and inferiority.

This situation entirely denies my social and political values around the inclusion and participation of all and has prompted me to take up a position on the margins as 'a site of resistance' (hooks 1991). Like Lynch (1999: 27), I believe that dialogical relationships are crucial in fostering the development of effective policies of equality, and these have to

provide opportunity for all students to participate in their own learning. Through the development of my own conscientization (Freire 1996) and growing awareness of my own situatedness, I hope to give voice to the minorities to speak of their experience, and I use my influence to achieve what I see as the transformational potentials of education.

**Inclusion and participation**

I regard pupils' participation in their own learning as vital, and I see curriculum as the main entry point to that participation. Once again, however, there is slippage between the rhetoric of curriculum policy and the practice. Children are actively prevented from participating as agents in their own learning (Aronowitz and Giroux 1986) because of the dominant focus on technical rational forms of knowledge. They are positioned instead as recipients of propositional knowledge. This situation serves to reproduce social, political and economic inequality. School continues to act as 'an arena of indoctrination' rather than as a 'cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation' (McLaren 2003: 70). I share Freire's (1996, 1973) and hooks's (1994) ideas about a form of education where students are freed from domination through the development of their own critical awareness, and, by learning to problematise existing knowledge, they recognise anti-democratic forms of power and learn how to fight substantive injustices in a world marked by deep inequalities. Similarly, inclusion proposes that children with disabilities or special educational needs are entitled to the same range of opportunity and experience as their peers and should therefore be educated in the same physical location. The goal of inclusion is not to erase difference, but to enable all students to belong within an educational community without prejudice. Inclusive education is often presumed to provide equality of opportunity and experience, but this remains an illusion as long as a school does not embrace the philosophy of inclusive education or understand that inclusion often demands a re-think of the school's strategies, values and beliefs. Unless a school is willing to engage with inclusive relationships, it will remain stuck in exclusionary practices (O'Hanlon 2003).

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Such a vision is however dependent on teachers who wish to challenge the status quo. Like hooks (2003) I believe that the classroom should be 'a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership' (p. xv). Florence (1998) suggests that by linking liberatory theory with practice, and empowering students to become full participants, progressive educators may make education more meaningful for students, while effecting some degree of social transformation. I believe I have developed such a practice, and in Chapter 5 I outline how I have developed such a practice and what the consequences are for a participative form of teaching and learning.

So I now need to consider the relevance of the ideas I am expressing here, and say why they are so important for my thesis. I do this by showing how, to tackle issues of injustice at the surface level of social practices, I need to go back to basics and consider the form of theory that is used to inform these practices. I therefore go back to the beginning and consider how theory may be reconceptualised, and thus I begin to show how I am creating my own living educational theory.

**Creating my living educational theory of inclusional practice**

According to O'Hanlon (2003: 112–3), every educational professional or teacher is responsible for influencing inclusive practices. Through their professional roles, talk and ways of acting they demonstrate attitudes to inclusive practices. This is what I try to do. Every day I witness children being segregated or excluded because they are 'seen to challenge the curriculum, academic outcomes and management strategies of mainstream classrooms and schools' (O'Hanlon 2003: 13). Currently, inclusion appears too often as a political and ideological construct that needs to be interpreted through its demonstration in the real world of the classroom and the school. My research aim is to show how I make it a reality in my classroom.

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As I set out my research account, my living theory of practice, generated from within my living practice and judged against my critical living standards of judgement, drawn from my values, I claim to be generating a living theory which differs widely from traditional propositional theory. Propositional theory remains an objective, empirical approach, while a living theory perspective positions me, the practitioner-researcher, at the heart of my own educational enquiry. My research account therefore becomes an account of the descriptions and explanations I offer as I address the question, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989). I explain how I hold myself accountable for my potential influence in my own learning and in the learning of others. I judge my claims that I have developed an inclusional form of practice against the values I have identified above, and I ask:

Do I show how I am realising my ontological values of valuing the uniqueness of the child, and demonstrating care in my dealings with all children?

Do I show how I am realising my epistemological values by encouraging enquiry learning and critical thinking?

Do I show how I am realising my social and political values by practising in an inclusional way, so that all children feel valued, regardless of their culture, ethnicity and background?

In general terms, do I show the kind of commitment that Young (1990: 3) speaks about, that social justice demands 'explicitly acknowledging and attending to those differences' in ensuring that education caters for recognition of culture, special educational needs or disadvantage? Do I show concern similar to that expressed by Lynch (1999: 17), that 'if one's cultural traditions are not a valued part of the education one receives, if they are denigrated or omitted, then education itself becomes a place where one's identity is denied or one's voice is silenced'?

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By articulating these kinds of questions, I am identifying my own standards of judgement by which I wish my practice and my research to be assessed. I am showing how my standards of judgement are grounded in my values, and therefore how my values can be transformed into living standards of practice and judgement, as they emerge into living realities. In offering my account for public scrutiny, to test the validity of my claims that I have generated a living theory of inclusional practice, I am asking whether my research account may be seen as containing the living evidence of the realisation of my values in relation to my living standards of judgement.

I explore these issues further as I continue to test the validity of my research claim. Before then, I need to explain how these ideas about demonstrating validity form part of the methodology of this research, and I do this in my next chapter.

**CHAPTER FOUR          METHODOLOGY**

> *Chapter preview*
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> *This chapter outlines the methodology I used for my action enquiry, and the reasons for my choice of methodology, in relation to the values I have set out in Chapter 3. The chapter addresses the research questions, 'What could I do about the situation? What were my options for action?' I explain how I planned and designed my research, and indicate how I was especially careful in issues of ethical considerations.*

At this point I outline the methodology I used in my research, and explain and justify why I choose to use this methodology. Because I am working in a self-study action research tradition, which is grounded in a logic of question and answer (Whitehead 1989, 1998), I consistently ask questions about the processes involved in my learning and actions, both of which are mutually influential, and in a dynamically influential and transformational relationship with my personal life world, which is itself in a dynamically influential and transformational relationship with my social world (see McNiff 2006b). In addressing the question, 'What can I do about my concerns?', which is the focus of this chapter, I outline the methodology I have used in conducting my research, and the different elements involved in ensuring that it is methodologically rigorous and ethically valid. In articulating the claim to knowledge that has evolved through the research, I can say that I have generated my own living theory of an inclusional practice, which incorporates my living epistemology of practice. I have generated what McNiff and Whitehead (2002) refer to as an I-theory of knowledge (see also Chomsky 2000), which was already located within my tacit form of knowing, and has emerged in practice as a personal form of knowing and acting. Living theory rejects the epistemological hegemonies of many traditional research methods. It is grounded in the personal knowledge of practitioners as they 'systematically relate their work to their values, and draw on those values as the standards of judgement by which they evaluate  their  work' (Whitehead 2006d, Whitehead and McNiff 2006: 34). I will  throughout  explain  how my values  held at an

ontological level transform into my living standards of practice, in relation to how I offer an account of my research and also of my life work.

First, I explain what kind of methodology I have chosen to adopt throughout, and I justify my choice.

**Why action research?**

This thesis is an account of my self-study action enquiry into my teaching practice. I have adopted throughout an interrogative stance, characteristic of action research, as I have enquired into my professional practice as an educator. I wished to adopt a methodology that was commensurable with the values that inspired my practice, as I have outlined in Chapter 3, because I wished to ensure that my research was conducted using a methodology that was suitable to the processes of enquiry and the form of theory I was aiming to generate. Human inquiry, in my understanding, can be understood as generative and transformational (McNiff 2002b), allowing new learning to emerge from previous learning, that already holds within itself its own potentials for improved learning (Whitehead and McNiff 2006: 41).

The idea that practice can be the grounds for the generation of new theory, which in turn feeds back into new practices, is at the heart of the living educational theories that practitioners generate as they study their practice and engage with questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989, 1999), or, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' (Whitehead and McNiff 2006: 44). This kind of question acts as the starting point for my research, as I seek to improve the quality of educational provision for disadvantaged and marginalised children. I do this to ensure that their experience of an inclusional form of education will be emancipatory and life-enhancing, and will reflect my own values of social justice and equality. I wish to realise Whitehead's view that

'each living theory is an account of learning in relation to the values used by the individual to give meaning and purpose to their lives' (Whitehead 2005a: 18).

I wish above all, like Whitehead and McNiff (2006: 44), to develop an ethical educational culture that is free of colonialist impulses, allowing pupils to develop their potential. I wish to create an empathic environment where we would care in relation with each other, take care in our own ways of being, knowing that we must embrace our connectedness with each other and the rest of creation, knowing that it is my responsibility as an educator to respond with thoughtfulness and compassion (McNiff 1999: 51) to the needs of my pupils. Like Ward (2006) I believe that 'teachers do not just act as agents of academic development but also as agents of physical, moral and spiritual development, emotional and mental health and social welfare' (p. 3).

I adopted a self-study action research methodology because I did not wish to subscribe to an overall propositional framework, which tends to be the traditional normative methodology in Irish Higher Education contexts, and in much of the post-industrialized knowledge-creating world. I have however clearly incorporated the insights from propositional theories into my own living educational theory; for example, I have incorporated insights from the work of Rawls (1971), Young (1990), Griffiths (1998) and others into my own living theory of an inclusional practice. In rejecting propositional forms of theory which 'constitute a repressive canon that in turn transforms into a technology of control' (Whitehead and McNiff 2006: 45), I have sought to identify my ontological and epistemological values, and to show how I aim to live those values more fully in my practice. I explain how I aim to use that knowledge of practice for wider socio-cultural influence, and I explain how my ontological, epistemological and methodological values are interwoven in a dynamic transformational relationship that are also in a dynamic transformational relationship with the cultural norms of the society of which I am a member. I further explain how my choice of methodology has been influenced by, and further influences, the values base of my practice, and have come to be

synthesized, transformed and articulated as my living critical standards of judgement. Further, and drawing on the work of McNiff (2006a), I explain how I can demonstrate my practice to be good quality. This is especially important, given that debates are currently in process about what counts as legitimate educational research, and how the quality of practitioner research can be judged (Furlong and Oancea 2005).

So, in continuing to offer justification for my choice of self-study action research, I now offer my understanding of how self-study action research should be my preferred methodology, and I now outline some of the different aspects of self-study action research that I find attractive and useful for my study, and why it was impossible for me to choose any other methodology.

**The practical basis of action research**

The purpose of any research is to generate new knowledge and theory, and this is essential for improving learning and practices. 'Teachers and teacher educators need educational theory in order to understand and explain our professional practice' (Whitehead 1995: 114)**.** Theory, in Whitehead's opinion, should comprise the descriptions and explanations that practitioners offer for their living practices. He suggests that the theory emerging from the self-evaluation of one's practice should be a living form of theory, differing from traditional forms of theory, which are usually presented as abstract linguistic concepts, rather than as an articulation of the values base of the practice, and which are embodied in one's practice and embedded in a particular social context. In presenting my account of practice, I hope to demonstrate how I can contribute to new practices and new theory.

The basis of my action research is my attempt to live in the direction of my educational values. I am committed to values of justice, inclusion and equality, but find these values are denied in most of my work contexts. Marginalised children are expected to conform to normative standards and normative measures of intellectual achievement, as measured

by standardised tests. I struggle to practise in a way that is congruent with my values and assess the quality of my work in these terms. Therefore, while seeking to live my values in my professional practice, I often experience myself as a living contradiction in that my values are often denied in my practice (Whitehead 1989). Whitehead claims that 'propositional forms of theory are not capable of containing a description and explanation for the educational development of an individual who exists as a living contradiction (Ilyenkov, 1977) in their practice' (Whitehead 1994d: 2).

As a teacher I needed to find a form of educational theory that would relate directly to my educational practice while drawing on insights from the traditional disciplines that have until recently constituted educational theory. My study was therefore conducted within a self-study action research approach, which enabled me to engage in continuing cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Furthermore, this 'systematic process of observe, describe, plan, act, reflect, evaluate, modify' (McNiff 2002b: 56) is a generative transformational process that is capable of incorporating the uncertainty and unpredictability of many teaching and learning situations (see Appendices 3D and 3E).

**The transformational nature of action research**
In contrast to traditional research approaches, action research assumes that people will change over time. It involves critical engagement with and awareness of one's teaching, and deliberately uses this self-critical awareness for ongoing improvement. Drawing on the work of Kemmis I believe an action research approach facilitates research and 'action aimed at transforming situations to overcome felt dissatisfactions, alienation, ideological distortion, and the injustices of oppression and domination' (Kemmis 2001: 92).

I find this conceptualisation persuasive in enabling me to account for my work. Drawing on the work of Laidlaw (1996), I believe that the creation of my living theory is an account of my efforts at 'making meaning and purpose in my life as I try to improve what I am doing in the name of education' (Laidlaw 1996: 20). In explaining how I hold myself

accountable for my practice while trying to live in the direction of my values I aim, like Whitehead (1999) to develop a scholarship of educational enquiry that has significant implications for the education of social formations. I am contributing to a new knowledge base for teaching that communicates the idea of educational theory as a form of dialogue that has profound implications for the wider social context (Kilpatrick 1951). As I engage in my inclusive practices I believe I am contributing to the formation of a good social order. This demands a particular kind of educational practice and theory that will allow people to work together to change our logics and practices, so that we can change our social situations. Emancipatory critical action research enables the practitioner to develop a critical and self critical understanding of their situation, which is to say, an understanding of the way in which both particular people and particular settings are shaped and reshaped discursively, culturally, socially and historically (Kemmis 2001: 92).

My process of a systematic action enquiry made public constitutes my educational action research, which carries with it the potential for far-reaching sustainable social change.


**Action research and my living 'I'**

In my research, my living 'I' is the centre of the enquiry. I am both subject and object of my research, which proceeds through cycles of action and reflection in a dialectical engagement with the social world. These cycles frame my evolving research journey. In my thesis, I explain how cycles of action in my classroom led to periods of intense reflection on the action and the learning that it generated, and how this process of reflecting on my learning led to new actions, and ultimately to my being able to articulate my claim to my improved knowledge of practice. I could not have done this through traditional forms of theory, grounded as they are in a logic of binary divides (Whitehead and McNiff 2006), and which assumes that theory will be applied to practice. Drawing on the insights of Polanyi (1958), I can say that I have passionately participated in my own acts of knowing.

I have learned also from Eames (1995: 14), who suggests that dialectical forms of knowledge can embody the shifts and contradictions of real experience and present them as an organic unity. Eames suggests that a dialectical dialogue may be a more appropriate means of communicating professional learning to others, than a traditional propositional approach. A dialectical process has the potential to create wider  understandings  and agreement, and  yet remains open to  challenge.

**Action research and my values**

The main appeal of action research is that it is a values-laden methodology that is commensurable with my own values of justice and democracy. Values cannot be communicated through a propositional form, but are embodied in my practice, so that their meaning emerges and can be communicated in the course of their emergence in practice. Using an action research methodology enables me to reflect on and problematise my practice. It provides the 'form of practical enquiry aimed at generating wisdom about how to realise educational values in action' (Elliott 1989: 84)**.** This is a key point, because if I claim that my inclusional practices are morally informed, I need to use a methodology that also has a moral imperative at its heart. This view resonates with the idea put forward by Carr and Kemmis (1986) that 'In so far as education is a practical value-laden activity, it seems that any educational theory worthy of the name cannot rest content with providing value-neutral theoretical accounts, but must be able to confront questions about practical educational values and goals' (p. 99). As McNiff states: 'Action research is a deep commitment undertaken by responsible practitioners to hold themselves accountable for their own ways of living and working. I as a practitioner acknowledge that I have to accept the responsibility of my own actions, if I am to improve the world'  (McNiff 1995a: 24).

This idea of a value-laden methodology has particular relevance for my research, in that the embodied values of democracy and social justice evident in my educational relationships inform the living  critical  standards of  judgement I use for  evaluating  the

quality of the research. My embodied values which are clarified in the course of their emergence in practice are transformed in this process of clarification into communicable standards of judgement.

Noffke (1997), McNiff (1999, 2005a) and McNiff and Whitehead (2005a) also highlight the need for a moral dimension to action research and the inclusion of a researcher's personal values, which underpin their commitment to improvement in the research process. Propositional research methodologies and the application of abstract theories to my practice could not afford me the opportunities to examine my values and work towards their realisation in my practice. As a teacher-researcher, I believe that my educational values are central to my work. Values form the difference between educational research and research about education, a difference that derives from the intention to improve practice' and that 'allows us to remain true to our desires to live our values in our practice' (Lomax 1986: 42; see also Lomax 1990). In contrast positivist research according to Kincheloe (2003) is of little help to practitioners because 'it assumes that research exists only to describe and help make predictions and, of course, has no value dimensions. It is unequipped to evaluate educational purposes or to assess various strategies for improving schooling' (pp. 80–81).

The values that underpin my research methodology are directly compatible with the values that underpin my work, in that I am seeking to improve my own educational practice and the quality of educational provision for pupils who have been victims of institutionalised oppression, a situation with which I closely empathise. I have deliberately maintained a democratic, inclusive approach. By positioning myself as the object of my enquiry, in relation with the children whose educational experiences I am seeking to improve, I avoid positioning myself as the external knower/observer, a position that is characteristic of more traditional research methodologies. In avoiding the traditional subject-object positioning, I am aiming to accord an equality of respect for all

research participants, while honouring my ontological commitments to the other in my attempts to establish a context in which social justice is practised.

**Justice for teachers as educational theorists**

In undertaking practitioner research I am encouraged by McNiff's development of the idea of practitioner as theorist (2002b) and teacher as theorist (McNiff and Whitehead 2005b) while remaining aware 'that for the most part researchers ignore teachers and teachers ignore researchers right back (Zeichner 1995: 154). I hope to reinforce the view that teachers create their own knowledge out of their practice (McNiff *et al.* 1992). I am aware that, in choosing to use an action research methodology for my research programme, I was aiming to secure justice not only for my pupils but also for myself as a practitioner educational researcher. I am aware of the debates about the institutional separation between teachers and higher education researchers (see Schon 1983). While many teachers may accept this distinction and do not see research as part of their role, others like myself challenge it and seek recognition for ourselves and for the teaching profession.

Teacher research is still denied research status by many institutions, as they practise gate-keeping and argue that 'while teacher research can be useful it does not substitute for educational research of a more conventional kind' (Hammersley 1993: 441). The voice of the legitimised educational researcher is valorised at the expense of the teacher. Personally I have found that teacher action research, 'directed towards greater understanding and improvement of practice' (Bell 1993: 7), is of greater benefit to me as a teacher than research of a conventional nature. It allows me to improve my practice through self-reflection, to collaborate with my pupils in order to develop an enhanced classroom environment with greater learning opportunities for them and for me, to examine my values and work towards their realisation in my practice, and to act as both innovator and implementer in influencing processes of change and improvement. Many writers, including Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990), Elliott (1991) and Zeichner (1983,

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1993) raise issues about the control of knowledge and deplore the absence of teachers' voices from the literatures on research on pedagogical practices.

The injustices run deep. While teachers may be recognised as competent practitioners, they are still not regarded as competent theory generators, a situation also exacerbated by the insistence of recognised researchers such as Whitty (2005), who raise questions about whether research should retain its usual propositional form. New debates have emerged in recent years about how practice-based research may count as a legitimate form of educational research, provided appropriate criteria and standards of judgement are proposed to show how and why this should be the case (see Furlong and Oancea 2005). Considerable work has now been undertaken in this regard (Whitehead 2004a, 2005a, 2006a and b, Whitehead and McNiff 2004, 2006)**.** Such developments are essential if teachers' research is to inform policy. However, in the struggle to establish practice-based research as a legitimate form of educational enquiry, it is not only a case of persuading the established educational research community to regard teachers as legitimate educational researchers. Teachers need to do this for themselves, too, and overcome the deep internalisation of popular discourses which suggest that they are incapable of doing research or of thinking for themselves (see McNiff and Whitehead 2005a, McNiff 2003a, Chomsky 2000) and should regard themselves simply as implementers of policy. Teachers must avoid developing their own discourses of derision about the importance and significance of research and theory (Ball 1990). On the contrary, I am claiming, like Zeichner and Noffke (1998: 13) that 'research done by teachers should not be seen merely as an extension of the current knowledge base but rather a challenge to existing forms of knowledge'. This I believe is a core significance of my own research in that I am able to contribute to a new knowledge base that focuses not only on describing educational practices but also seeks to improve them.

This brings me to a key point in my understanding of the importance of action research, and why I chose it as my preferred methodology. The kind of theories that practitioners

can generate using an action research approach actually transform knowledge from its traditional propositional form to a dynamic relational form that holds promise for the future of humanity and the sustainability of the planet, as I now explain.

**Action research for a sustainable knowledge base**

Catherine Snow (2001) called for the development of a new knowledge base for the teaching profession. It was time, she said, for teachers to be able to communicate their learning to other colleagues, and for their learning to be recognised as the basis of their professionalism. Teaching, she suggested, should be a profession that is informed by the practical accounts and insights of teachers, and the profession should be informed by professional debates about teaching. What is currently missing, however, according to Snow, is the means for the systematic dissemination of teachers' accounts of their professional learning so that they can learn with and from one another. Such a knowledge base has now been established, to which my colleagues and I are already contributing. The published accounts of the work we have undertaken as part of our doctoral studies at the University of Limerick are continuously flowing through web space, and can be accessed from www.jeanmcniff.com/criticaldebates, as well as MA dissertations and PhD theses. I hope my thesis will shortly join this validated knowledge base.

Through my account I am hoping to offer my descriptions and explanations about what I claim to know and how I have come to know. My theory of practice is an account of how I have tried to transform my practice into a form of praxis. While my living theory of practice differs significantly from traditional conceptual theories, it is no less valid. I believe its importance lies in its capacity to show how studying my practice has enabled me to generate my own practical theories, and to regard myself as a legitimate knowledge creator and not just a skilled technician. I am hoping to influence policy through the production of this account. Current Irish educational policy is that teachers should apply expert knowledge to their own practices, and their professionalism is judged in terms of

how successfully they do this. New discourses however are being heard, about how teachers' professional practices can be valued, and how new policies can be based on the insights of teachers (Joan Whitehead 2003).

So I am claiming that my research is enabling me to achieve several goals. I am showing how I am contributing to new practices, especially in relation to inclusional and democratic forms of relationships. I am rejecting a view of education as a means of maintaining the status quo, as a characteristic also of traditional propositional forms of research, and, through the generative and transformational approaches of action research, I am working to transform my thinking and myself as the embodiment of new theories of pedagogical practices (Whitehead and McNiff 2006). I understand the educational system within which I work as a vehicle of social change. A system built on a theory of cultural democracy, acknowledging the issues of power in society and the political nature of schooling would provide a space for  optimism and  possibility for our  nation (Soto 1998: 165). Such a view is necessary if education is to function as a means of transformation in the lives of the most disadvantaged groups in society.

**Practical issues of my research**

I now wish to outline some of the practicalities of undertaking my action research.

I used action research as my preferred research methodology. I adopted throughout Whitehead's (1989) action plan, using the following questions as my methodological framework:

> What is my concern?
> Why am I concerned?
> What do I think I can do about the situation? What will I do about the situation?
> What kind of evidence can I generate to help me make some judgements about what is happening?

How will I ensure that any judgements I come to are reasonably fair and accurate?

How will I modify my practice in the light of my evaluation?

<div align="right">(McNiff and Whitehead 2006 : 3)</div>

In asking this kind of reflective question, I came to perceive a gap between my espoused values and the extent to which they were being realised in my practice. For example, I valued the participation of students in their own learning yet I continued to teach in a linear, didactic fashion. Questions of the form, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989, 2000) enable me to address the slippage.

**Research design**

My research was undertaken in three main contexts, which changed over time, as I outline here.

My first research context was as a mainstream teacher. My early research was undertaken in response to my underlying dissatisfaction with my current practice and a desire to improve it, to render it creative, spontaneous and responsive to pupils' needs. I became increasingly aware that I was engaged in didactic forms of teaching, focusing on a technical rational form of knowledge, preparing children to assimilate vast quantities of unrelated and largely irrelevant facts that they would regurgitate at examinations time. A managerial emphasis on standardisation, efficiency and control ensured the exclusion and marginalisation of pupils from their own learning processes. Pupil apathy, disinterest and a sense of academic failure created a group of learners who displayed little or no engagement with curriculum content. A focus on bureaucratic concerns had resulted in curriculum time and staff being organised in a way that actually created a 'barrier to diversity, cooperation and flexibility, with the consequence that learning became of secondary importance' (Holley 1997: 7).

My classroom practice therefore was a direct contradiction of my values of justice,

democracy, inclusion and respect for the heterogeneity of pupils. There was little interaction amongst learning partners. Achievement was measured in terms of a narrow band of abilities, which favoured linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences (Gardner 1983). I wished to move from this situation of teacher dominance to a situation based on the more emancipatory values of respect and equality. I wished my practice to reflect the contributions of all learning partners (see Appendices 3 and 4).

My second research context was my work with Traveller children. I became acutely aware of the injustices perpetrated upon Traveller children by an education system whose cultural norms are vastly different from those of the Traveller population. A growing awareness of the discrimination and oppression experienced by these children motivated me to pursue my research. My research participants included Traveller children, whom I taught as a mainstream teacher and those who formed part of my caseload when working in my capacity as a support teacher.

My third context included children that availed of my services in my capacity as a support teacher for pupils with special educational needs. My concerns included a lack of respect and recognition for these children as persons, inadequate institutional facilitation of their needs, and system failure to recognise their disability. Disability was defined in terms of functional deficiencies, and children's own views on their situation and experience were largely ignored (Lodge and Lynch 2004: 86–88). This grouping consisted of between twelve and fourteen pupils per year. The needs of the members of the group were very diverse.

I regarded all contexts as related, linked by issues of injustice and marginalisation. The underlying concerns were identical. Children were disadvantaged because of cultural background, intelligence profiles, or socio-economic status. They were regarded as the Other (de Beauvoir 1974) outside the social and cultural norm. Traditionally there has been a fear of otherness in Ireland but we now inhabit a pluralistic society where

difference continues to become a growing reality (Tynan 2002) and requires a response from education professionals. My vision for these children was, and continues to be, a search for justice in and through education. Although my research developed as my contexts changed, it articulated throughout the need for education systems to recognise and respect the dignity of the individual and their creative capacity for knowledge creation. I believe that teaching methodologies and the organisation of curriculum can and should support such a vision, and I examine the role of critical pedagogy as I work to create my own living theory of practice. This view has real implications for current scenarios in education, where children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Traveller children, are forming a large part of mainstream classes. The inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream teaching is now mandatory. However, inegalitarian assumptions are deeply ingrained in our ways of thinking and are encoded in our laws, policies and practices in ways that silence discussion about their very existence, and the barriers to such change cannot be underestimated (Lodge and Lynch 2004: 102–3). Innovations that challenge an established culture tend to be resisted by the established culture, which will use its power to maintain its own status and privilege (McNiff 1995b: 2).

I wished to create opportunities for equality of access and equality of opportunity for all these children who had been marginalised in their own ways and for different reasons. My over-riding aim was to 'create lifelong and autonomous learners, students who value learning as an empowering activity, who want to learn independently and who have self-determination, self-direction and respect' (Fisher 1995: viii).

The challenge however was how to convince my colleagues that such marginalised children, in particular children with special educational needs, actually did have the potential to make their own significant contribution to the school and to the wider social world.

**Gathering data**

In line with my chosen action research methodology, I began to monitor my practice and gather data about what I was doing and whether I was influencing children's learning. Through observation and conversations with the children I noted instances of unjust or inequitable treatment, instances of exclusion, of meaningful learning experiences, of significant events, in an effort to live out my values of justice and equality. I encouraged children to critique all aspects of the school environment and their experience in school. I introduced a range of pedagogical interventions in an effort to promote a more positive, participatory and socially just model of education. I made every effort to encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility for their own learning as well as a sense of belonging within the school community. I developed initiatives for them to function independently during the hours they spent in school. I continue with these initiatives, and some have been developed by my teaching colleagues (see Appendices 14D and 15).

I gathered data over the course of the five years of my research. The data was about myself, since I am the focus of my enquiry, and I carefully monitored whatever I was doing in relation to the children I was working with. I also monitored what they were doing in response to my work with them (Appendix 3).

I used the following data gathering methods:

        Field log

        My reflective diary, pupils' reflective diaries, and reflective diaries of critical friends

        Commentaries from all participants on audiotape, and also as recorded in my field notes

        Semi-structured interviews with children, parents, and colleagues

I also collected data from the following primary sources:

        Research literature

Feedback from all research participants

Department of Education and Science circulars and policy documents

Curriculum handouts and policy documents

I collected data of both a quantitative and qualitative nature. This was done mainly through interviews with parents, colleagues and children, personal and colleagues' reflections and observations, a review of pupils' achievements on their test scores, recording of conversations sessions, collection of photographs and charts.

In my journal I recorded the progress of my research, as well as my thoughts and reflections on it. Throughout my data collection I was able to monitor and document my cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (McNiff a2002b, Carr and Kemmis 1986).

**Research participants**

As previously noted, I wished to ensure that my research would display and honour my values of equality, participation and social justice. In choosing an action research methodology I included all participants in the research as equal in status and worth. I included myself as a participant, and not external to the research field, in line with the thinking of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) who speak of action research as research with rather than research on others. In chapters 5 and 6 I explain how I involved the children in their own action enquiries, and encouraged them to perceive themselves as included in their own learning.

Other research participants were colleagues with whom I worked in a variety of schools. These included mainstream class teachers, a Resource Teacher for Travellers, a member of the Visiting Teacher Support Service, and Learning Support teachers. These colleagues were involved in a variety of roles. I will report in Chapter 8 how I have managed to influence the learning of some of these colleagues, so that they also have adopted

emancipatory practices in relation to Traveller children and children with special educational needs.

Some colleagues acted as critical friends. They also acted as co-presenters of topic work. Having outlined the aims and objectives of my study, I invited my colleagues to observe and participate in my work at different points. Colleagues visited from time to time, for varying periods of time, and made notes of their observations of class discussions and group interactions. My critical friends maintained research journals. (Comments and extracts are available in Appendices 7 and 9C)

The companionship of a critical friend, MS, was particularly significant throughout. She regularly required me to re-evaluate my opinions and face the reality of my actions. She helped me to achieve a critical perspective even when this challenged my favourite assumptions (McNiff *et al.* 2003: 85). I showed her my writing at regular intervals.

I convened a validation group, who provided critical feedback on different aspects of my research. Some critical voices among my colleagues were especially valuable, since they challenged every aspect of my research. This form of critique however made me pay close attention to issues of methodological rigour, and ensured that I articulated my critical living standards of judgement in such a way that as little ambiguity as possible would interfere with the processes of validating my claims to knowledge.

Parents also participated in the research from time to time. They acted as learning partners to support their children's learning, and aided in the provision of resources. They gave input lessons, class presentations, and participated in the provision of validation letters to support my claims to have improved the quality of my teaching in relation to my and their children's learning.

**Ethical considerations**

I was aware throughout that action research carries its own burden of ethical responsibility. The ethical considerations of action research are however different from those of traditional propositional forms of research. Alderson (1995: 60) suggests that the empiricist tradition displays a low level of concern for ethics. People are treated as objects of the research, not as worthwhile individuals in their own right. An unequal power relationship exists, and ethics, if interpreted as concerning the power to control information and decisions (Alderson 1995: 75), are given lower priority. On the other hand, action research does not regard participants as inferior but as equal participants in a community of practice (Wenger 1998), and aims for the 'democratic involvement of the people on whom it impinges' (Bassey 1990: 17). Action research does not privilege the voice of the researcher above the voices of other participants, as is characteristic of traditional forms of research.

I believed that action research offered me to the opportunity to challenge the structures and constraints within which my teaching was located, and liberated me from existing power relationships and organisational inertia. It offered me the opportunity to open up and create spaces in school, through which it would be possible to ask critical and worthwhile questions (Smyth 1991: 121). By deconstructing relations of domination and control, I attempted to transform my practice.

My research involved children, and as such needed to be conducted within stringent ethical parameters. The main points I considered were as follows, in line with the recommendations of McNiff *et al*. (2003).

*Permissions*

I negotiated permission to do the research from the following persons:

    My principal

    The Board of Management

The parents of pupils involved in the research

The pupils involved

Interested colleagues

All gave their written permission. These written permissions have been retained in my research archive (Appendix 2). All were informed of the nature, purpose and scope of my research. All received an ethical statement (Appendix 1) prior to the commencement of my research.

*Confidentiality*

I aimed to uphold the principles of anonymity and confidentiality in all aspects of my research. In my reports I used participants' initials rather than their full names. I promised to dispose of all data when the research was completed. No real names are used in this thesis, unless participants have expressly given their written consent – I have used fictitious names to refer to participants – and any documents of a confidential nature have been maintained in my archive but not made public within this thesis.

*Withdrawal from the research*

I promised all participants the right to withdraw from the research at any stage if they wished, whereupon all data involving them would be destroyed.

*Truthful feedback*

I encouraged freedom of opinion and expression, and I promised honest feedback to all questions and issues raised.

**Research locations**

The research took place within the practice context of my classrooms. This varied from working within a mainstream class situation to working in a designated resource room.

My research as a mainstream class teacher covered the years 1997–200x. I later took up a position as Resource Teacher for Travellers, which lasted from 200x–200x, where I experienced the same issues of exclusion, injustice, lack of democracy and the right of children to participate in their own learning and knowledge creation. The same issues surfaced during my work, from 200x to 200x, as a teacher for children with special educational needs.

While much of the data refers to children's experiences within the mainstream classroom, children also referred to incidents which took place in the wider school environment. Unstructured school time provided sites for the discrimination and marginalisation experienced by the children. The way that institutionalised oppression and marginalisation permeated the entire experience of schooling, as manifested through school policies of curriculum and pedagogy, proved a source of deep distress for the children. I deliberately tried to extend my own understandings of children's experiences by learning about the children's home lives, and their social and cultural backgrounds. Conversations with parents, both within and outside the school environment, were also a source of invaluable information and insight for my research.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have aimed to offer a rationale for my choice of research methodology, and to outline some of the key aspects of that methodology that informed my choice. I have explained some of the underpinning values of action research, not least its emphasis on the need for a critical perspective on one's own learning and actions. This view of the need for critique becomes the focus of the next chapter, where I explain how I developed new learning about my own critical pedagogy.

**CHAPTER FIVE        DEVELOPING A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

*Chapter preview*

*This chapter is an account of the implementation of my action plan. It addresses my research question, 'What did I do?', and outlines the strategies I began to develop to find ways of living my values of justice and inclusion in my practices. The specific action I took was to learn about and engage with the literatures of critical pedagogy, and experiment with my own critical pedagogies, as a feature of trying to exercise my influence in ways that were educational for the children and for myself.*

In this chapter I explain what I did in response to my identified concerns. I have described in earlier chapters how my main concerns around my practice were to do with how children who, in my view, were valuable unique singularities (Kristeva 2002), were systematically homogenised as deficient, and were rendered invisible as disposable people (Bales 1999). Because I was now engaged in my systematic enquiry, I began to read critically, and actively sought out those texts that enabled me to critique existing practices that I found abhorrent, especially in relation to how discrimination is systematically factored into everyday practices and how the structural prejudices operating within the school inform teacher attitudes, curriculum choice and delivery. I brought the insights from my reading to bear on my practice, and I was able to note how I was now acting in a more critical manner, both in terms of my pedagogical practices with the children, and also in how I began to understand pedagogy and curriculum in more general terms.

At this point, then, I will set out some steps I took towards becoming critical, and explain how this has influenced my practice in such a way that I feel I am justified in claiming that I am engaging in a living practice of social justice.

**To begin at the beginning**

In the late 1990s I became so frustrated with my current situation that I decided to take action to change my circumstances. I was in a school context that suppressed children's and teachers' capacities. I was required to teach in a transmission form, via didactic methods (Bourne 1994: 2), and to transmit what Schon (1995) refers to as 'school knowledge', the knowledge contained in the curriculum, held in the minds of teachers and communicated by instruction to pupils. This denied my values around the need for children to create knowledge through personal experience and enquiry learning (Piaget 1926). In spite of the recommendations of the New Curriculum (Ireland, DES 1999b) and its antecedent documents (Ireland, DES 1995a and b, and *The Education Act 1998*), to engage in collaborative forms of teaching and learning, which 'facilitates the child's social and personal development and helps her appreciate the benefits of cooperative effort in addition to her academic learning' (Ireland, DES 1999a: 17), I found myself locked into a cultural system that denied the value of *changingness* (Rogers and Freiberg 1994) and focused on a banking model of education (Freire 1996) so that teaching and learning became a matter of memorising unrelated facts to be regurgitated at exams. I realised that I was deskilled (Apple 1993), and demoralised. Like Fraser (1998: xi) I believe that 'democracy, empowerment and academic rigour can be realities in the curriculum of today's schools', yet I was not achieving a situation where these aspirations could be realised.

I have already offered possible reasons for the situation (in Chapters 1 and 2), which I will revisit briefly here. A central issue is how curriculum and pedagogy are seen as factors in the delivery of the kind of saleable knowledge that will continue to promote education as a market asset to yield a direct economic benefit (Dunne 2000), a situation in which educational outcomes are seen as quantifiable products and teaching an activity whose sole criterion of success is efficient delivery of technical rational knowledge (Apple 1990, Ball 2004). Ball suggests that such commodification of knowledge implies

that pedagogic relationships and values become marginalised and that students become active consumers but passive learners (p. 5).

Teachers are persuaded to develop linear forms of teaching to meet the mandates of imposed forms of assessment, and pupils are categorised into narrow bands that fail to recognise diverse forms of potential so that 'lip service is paid to developing worthy self-concepts but in reality little time is given to affect, with subject matter dominating the curriculum' (Tannenbaum 1983: 397).

For those children who do not fit in, there is no alternative to failure within the existing hierarchically-organised delivery system. This system creates a situation where children fail to learn, a particularly offensive form of oppression (Giroux 1988), which allows children to be cut off from all forms of learning, especially those that might be emancipatory or life-enhancing. They learn to conform, not to flourish. Students are seen as subjects to be colonised, to be forced into a normative way of thinking – the assumption of the school's normative context being that 'norm' is best. My experience of working in my then current school, and later in a range of schools, was consistently of working in a context fraught with 'impediments that exist because of power relationships and organisational inertia' (Smyth 1991: 18), contexts that demonstrated 'divisiveness, are ruthlessly competitive and are a struggle for success' (McVerry 2003: 7). McVerry also notes that the difficulties within a traditional Catholic context are rendered 'even more dismal when we ask if we are forming young people committed to an equitable and just society' (p. 7), given that such traditional religion-oriented contexts aim for belief and obedience, rather than critical engagement. Believing that education could be more than a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another, Oldfather *et al.* suggest that what is needed is 'a fundamental shift of the dominant epistemology in our society and in our schools to one based on trusting, listening to and respecting the minds of all participants in schooling' (Oldfather *et al.* 1999: 313). Such a systemic change is needed to deal with the effects of injustice, a view supported by Apple and Beane who

suggest that '[d]emocratic educators [should] seek, not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in schools, but to change the conditions that create them' (Apple and Beane 1999: 13).

The action I took in the mid-1990s was to engage in a masters programme that encouraged my own professional learning by requiring me to undertake my self-study action research (Cahill 2000). I found that I was encouraged to engage with the literatures of critical pedagogy and curriculum, and to explore ways in which my reading and growing capacity for self-critique influenced my everyday practices. I was experiencing myself as encouraged to develop curriculum as a set of learning encounters (Alexander 1995: 259) and to experiment with new pedagogies by exploring my own freedoms and capacities for creativity (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998). However, my experiments with freedom did not meet with unqualified enthusiasm from my colleagues. Here is a story of what happened.

Christy was in fifth class. For the last six years, teachers had taught his class money. However, Christy could still not recognise the value of any coins or notes. On going to the shop he would hand all his money to the shopkeeper and ask if it was enough for whatever he needed to buy. The year before at a visiting fair he had paid €20 for a candyfloss costing 75 cent. No change was offered and he was unaware of the injustice that had been done to him. At Christmas he got into an altercation in a shop. Wishing to buy a present costing seven euro, he offered his money consisting of seven coins, which amounted to €4.72. Believing he had paid for the item he became quite aggressive when he was prevented from leaving the shop with it.

Having made several attempts to teach Christy money I was discouraged by his lack of interest. 'I don't do maths,' he maintained. However, given my new entrepreneurial stances towards finding learning opportunities, I noted that some fund raising activities were being organised for charity fund raising. I knew that Christy was interested in the

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charities involved, so suggested that he might like to take part. 'Yes,' he said, 'I will do a bun sale.' 'You will have to learn money to do that,' I pointed out. 'OK,' he responded. For weeks, under my guidance, he worked with play coins and notes. We then went together to seek permission for him to work in the school shop from time to time. The sale came, and at the end Christy counted out a profit of €58.15, and no errors were made in giving change. (This practical strategy has since been adopted by two of my colleagues in the senior classes who find it particularly useful and motivating for children who have mathematical difficulties.)

This simple story illustrates how I began to learn how to tap into my pupils' existing capacities, knowledge and interests to motivate them to find ways of developing their strengths. I began to explore the potentials of what Barnes (1976: 81) calls 'action knowledge' that is used to 'cope with the exigencies of everyday living.' However, I also learned what kind of reaction I could expect from colleagues who wish to remain within the safe confines of established knowledge (Conway 2002). When I told the story to some colleagues, their responses were, 'We just can't teach one child in one class. What about the twenty to thirty others?' My developing view was that I do not see twenty or thirty 'others', nor do I see them as a crowd to be controlled. I see them as individuals, and I began to see myself as a learner, in partnership with them. We are not consumers of existing knowledge, but creators of our own knowledge, in an educative relationship that respects the contributions of all and motivates pupils to participate constructively in their own education. I agree with the views of Alison Cook-Sather (2002: 3) that authorising student perspectives is essential for the reform of education towards a more collaborative process and can only be achieved if teachers use their power to help students exercise theirs. The lack of creativity inherent in prescriptive pedagogies impinges on students and teachers alike forcing a growing number to teach and learn as they are told (Haggarty 2004). By refusing to be moulded and controlled and by rejecting the efforts to patrol my thoughts and behaviours, through curriculum or school tradition, I can improve my educative relationships and influence. I am aiming to create improved conditions such

that dominance and oppression can be conquered and transformed (McLaren 2003: 73).

In problematising the givens of the school's dominant theories I began to develop deep insights about how knowledge can be controlled in traditional schooling. I saw that the dominant form of Eurocentric knowledge was structured, white, and middle class, which excludes those who are different in terms of race, gender, physical or mental capacity and singular ethnicities (Giroux 1997). For many students this version of knowledge may be irrelevant but the institutional arrangements serve to impose the normative curriculum upon all students. All pupils and teachers are expected to conform, to submit to an imposed curriculum, which is justified as a necessary element of an ordered structured learning environment. Such institutional arrangements facilitate the 'politics of oppression and the imposition of values/practices that prevent full participation in our educational enterprises' (Lomax *et al.* 1996). The dominant modes of describing and managing education are today couched in a productive form. Education is most often seen as a technical exercise (Smith 2000). This dominant model focuses on students receiving and learning others' constructions of their world, without providing adequate time and space for questioning or dialogue (Rath 1998: 8). By rejecting the imposition of expert theories upon their teaching, by viewing teaching realities (as they exist in the school context) as contestable and open to challenge, teachers can, I believe, reclaim the power to develop theories of educational practice and use their power to effect change and to break away from being what Foucault (1980) labelled as 'normalised.'

In many instances, I saw, textbooks spoke to normative experiences and were frequently in direct opposition to many children's lived experiences. However, like Berry (1988), I believed that the normative culture could be challenged, and that knowledge could be critically reconceptualised by learners in light of their critical engagement and experience. I could contribute to that reconceptualisation by developing critical pedagogies that liberated the learner (Claxton *et al.* 1996) and encouraged them to see themselves as

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active, informed citizens who had much to contribute to social evolution, regardless of their starting place in society. What mattered was where they ended up.

So now I tell briefly of my explorations of the literatures, which enabled me to reconceptualise several aspects of my practice, especially in relation to how curriculum and pedagogy are theorised, as interrelated components in the communication of knowledge. I also tell how I reconceptualised myself from being a deliverer of knowledge to a supporter of knowledge creation, and how that involved learning to liberate myself as well as learning to liberate the learner.

## Reconceptualising curriculum and pedagogy

In his *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*, Bernstein (2000) makes this point:

> Education is central to the knowledge base of society, groups and individuals. Yet education also, like health, is a public institution, central to the production and reproduction of distributive injustices. Biases in the form, content, access and opportunities of education have consequences for the economy; these biases can reach down to drain the very springs of affirmation, motivation and imagination. In this way such biases can become, and often are, an economic and cultural threat to democracy. Education can have a crucial role in creating tomorrow's optimism in the context of today's pessimism. But if it is to do this then we must have an analysis of the social biases of education. These biases lie deep within the very structure of the education system's processes of transmission and acquisition and their social assumptions.
>
> (Bernstein 2000: xix)

I begin my discussion by showing how forms of curriculum, which may be understood as a key device in the communication of knowledge (Apple 1990), can act as what Bernstein refers to as 'the very structure of the education system's processes of transmission and acquisition and their social assumptions.'

In Ireland, the still dominant view of curriculum is of a package of existing, approved knowledges that should be communicated to children as willing consumers of knowledge. Drudy and Lynch (1993) analysed clearly how issues of power and control permeated education systems in Ireland, still a deeply patriarchal and religious society, to the extent that knowledge was controlled by school management structures, which in turn reflected the patriarchal structures in society. Drudy and Lynch also raised issues that, if knowledge is socially constructed, the question then becomes one of whose knowledge is reflected in the school curriculum (Apple 1993). Curriculum, according to Apple, is always part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge produced out of the cultural, political and economic conflicts, tensions and compromises that can organise and disorganise a people (Apple 1996: 22). Schools then function to present this knowledge to students as discrete facts to be memorised and tested. Such a reductionist, technicalising and deskilling approach to education is criticised by Kincheloe (2003) who suggests that advocates of technical standards are arrogantly asserting that they undisputedly possess the one correct interpretation of the world and that the job of teachers is to meekly pass this information along to the student (Kincheloe 2003: 8). Can this accusation be refuted in relation to the Irish Curriculum?

In spite of the previous 1971 New Curriculum's recommendations that child-centred learning should be promoted, and the insistence of the Department of Education and Science in 1999 that the Revised New Curriculum encompasses the philosophical thrust of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* and reflects the thinking and aspirations of the National Convention on Education (Coolahan 1994) while incorporating 'current educational thinking and the most innovative and effective pedagogical practice' (Ireland, DES 1999a: 2), reports suggest that the education system still continues to embrace technicist approaches to learning (see the report of the Department of Education and Science, Ireland, DES 2005c). According to Lynch (1999) the notion of learning still seems to be firmly linked to ideas about the importance of textbooks, examinations and rote learning.

I would like to consider the issue of how textbooks serve as a key device for the delivery of the curriculum as a means of reproducing existing official knowledge (Apple 1988). An insistence on the completion of textbooks that communicate the interests of the dominant social groupings can constitute what Dohrer (1998: 99) critiques as an exclusion of minority groups, and so denies children exposure to a range of cultural voices and creates gaps in their cultural literacy. Through texts, reality is repackaged. Through a curriculum that represents the interests of the dominant social groupings, non-core groups are rendered 'Other' (de Beauvoir 1974), and controlled mainly through the exclusion of their interests in the curriculum. This view, communicated as it is through the theoretical resources of the literature, has been a reality in my classroom experience. At the same time as being required to teach from texts that do not encourage a development of critical consciousness among teachers or students, a situation that in my view is steeped in injustice, I experienced myself as silently acquiescing, and so colluding in and contributing to the injustice.

Boorstein (1981: x) sees textbooks as 'a special test of freedom' in a free society. In Ireland, textbook development is more business than education driven, and teachers have to take some responsibility for the situation. We allow publishers to create the curriculum to embody and perpetuate the status quo without questioning the particular vision of culture presented. During my teaching career, and prior to taking up my academic studies, it never occurred to me that I should be examining texts for racial, cultural or ethnic bias. I simply did not see it as my responsibility to bring such a critical perspective to an analysis of the content and purpose of textbooks, especially in relation to what Sleeter (1991: 98) describes as a condition that legitimises the status of white males, to the exclusion of other groups. My journey towards becoming critical led me to see that textbooks are a key contributing factor in the control of knowledge. I came to see that, as a teacher, I was 'an active agent of education who must defend its values' (Dohrer 1998; 119). Drawing on the work of Chomsky (2000) I came to realise that ideas and knowledge can be created by elites who develop a propaganda system in our cultures,

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normative or domestic. To counter this and to influence the quality of learning for all I must ensure that knowledge is constructed and negotiated, nurtured through dialogue and interaction amongst students and teacher. Engaging in reciprocal dialogic relations in this manner with my pupils is consistent with Buber's (1937) belief that relations should be based on a life-affirming 'I-Thou' encounter in preference to a propositional 'I-It' model. Such dialogic relations 'change the role of the teacher from merely the-one-who-teaches to one who is himself [*sic*] taught in dialogue with the students' (Freire 1996: 67). The locus of the learning process is shifted, signifying an altered pupil-teacher power relationship in the classroom and the broader social canvas (Aronowitz 1993).

However, my decisions to exercise my agency in education quickly got me into trouble within my school culture that largely insisted that all pupils, including SEN and Traveller children, should follow the class texts, discuss only the prescribed questions, and speak 'proper standard English.' By insisting on such slavish obedience to the published text, teachers are forcing children of minority groupings to assimilate the identity of the powerful majority, just as surely as the English colonisers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries forced the subjugated indigenous peoples of Ireland to adopt English as the standard language, to anglicise traditional Irish names, and to adopt anglicised forms of knowing.

I came to the point where I refused to use texts that communicated a majority view of knowledge. As such, I positioned myself as an outsider and troublemaker. Troublemakers are in a difficult situation in Ireland, where invisible structures are in place to punish those who transgress. Any teacher would find it almost impossible to gain employment as the conservative patriarchal management system closes ranks against her. A teacher's career ambitions can be ended as she is relegated to the least visible role in the school. Consequently, in spite of teachers' personal articulations of their experience of the denial of children's rights in mainstream educational settings, few teachers are prepared to act on their commitments alone. This can be seen in the difficulties experienced in filling

positions in disadvantaged schools or in finding resource teachers for Travellers. A high percentage of these positions are staffed by unqualified personnel or left vacant. The contempt with which many teachers in these positions are treated by their colleagues is testimony to the devalued position they hold in professional circles.

I am one of those teachers. However I continue my battle, inspired by words such as those of Soto (1998: 165), that 'Education that is built on a theory of cultural democracy and acknowledge[s] the issue of power in society and the political nature of schooling provides a space for optimism and possibility for our nation.' This is my aim in undertaking my research and making it public. I am showing how it is possible to celebrate the capacities of children with so-called 'special educational needs', by explaining how such children can come to help themselves; to show how such practices can be endorsed and legitimised by teachers who have the will to pursue their own action enquiries; to reconstruct curriculum as a means of emancipation for children who have been so labelled; and to encourage the development of a conversation of humanity (Geras 1995). This can be done, but it can be done only when educators collaborate, when we as 'insiders who know what oppression is and feels like speak out for educational reform' (Walsh 1991: 16, cited in Soto 1998). I learn from Fehr (1998; 181) that 'You can act against oppression or you can be the oppressor, or you can abet the oppressor by being silent.' I am aiming to challenge and transform the influences of coercive forms of power that impose oppression, inequity and totalitarianism, that violate human rights, and that continue to silence those who hope for educational equity and freedom for their children. In adopting critical pedagogies I can ensure that 'the learning process is negotiated.' Such pedagogical approaches contribute to efforts to 'redistribute power not only in the classroom, between teacher and students, but in society at large' (Cook-Sather 2002: 6).

**Pedagogy and curriculum**

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that issues of curriculum and pedagogy are intimately connected (Bernstein 2000). However, it does not make sense to talk about what is communicated without saying how it is communicated, or without identifying the purposes of the communication of specific knowledges. Apple (1993) is clear about this when he asks, 'Whose curriculum is this anyway?'

> With all the rhetoric about teaching and professionalism, about enhancing teachers' power and about raising pay and respect, the reality of many teachers' lives bears little resemblance to the rhetoric during this period of conservative triumphalism. Rather than moving in the direction of increased autonomy, in all too many instances the daily lives of teachers in classrooms in many nations are becoming even more controlled, ever more subject to administrative logics that seek to tighten the reins on processes of teaching and curriculum. Teacher development, cooperation, and 'empowerment' may be the talk, but centralization, standardization and rationalization may be the strongest tendencies …
>
> (Apple 1993: 119)

The 1999 Revised New Curriculum claims to offer opportunities for change that focus on the creation of lifelong and independent learners (Ireland, DES 1999b), and forms of pedagogy and collaborative working that will see all learning partners in dynamic interaction (MacGilchrist *et al.* 1997: 52). It outlines the importance of collaborative learning, which 'facilitates the child's social and personal development and helps her appreciate the benefits of cooperative effort in addition to her academic learning' (Ireland, DES 1999a: 17). The details are as follows:

- The involvement of the child as an active agent in her own learning;
- The fostering of higher order thinking and problem-solving skills, through a variety of strategies including collaborative, peer, group and individual learning;
- First-hand experience – actively engaging the child with the immediate environment and those who live in it;

- A coherent learning process that accommodates a variety of elements, emphasising the interconnectedness of knowledge.

<div align="right">(Ireland, DES 1999a: 14–17)</div>

As such it acknowledges that the actual process of learning can be more important than content. It urges a shift from didactic methods towards child-centred learning, advising the 'accordance of equal importance to what the child learns and to that process by which she learns it' (p. 10). The role of the teacher is outlined as one who provides suitable learning situations, and who guides and stimulates the child in her pursuit of knowledge. Yet, according to Conway (2002), in Ireland teachers are still locked into didactic methods and a transmission model, which fosters a narrow teaching style in which enquiry learning and open questioning by pupils are not encouraged. In practice, many classrooms still employ authoritarian and didactic teaching methods. Alarmingly, educational discourse has been 'notable in its inattention to and resistance to problematise curricular concerns' (Conway 2002: 62), a situation which, according to Conway (2003), denies 'the ability of teachers to reflect on, sift honestly and to discard what is irrelevant to our real work … [this] is probably the single most important skill that we possess' (p. 22). Unless we use this skill, we will become lost in bureaucracy 'preoccupied with policy, planning and peripherals', with little time or energy left for the actual job of teaching.

The situation that Conway is describing here was my reality for much of my teaching life. I felt I was literally imprisoned in a stifling education system that blocked the creativity of my pupils and myself, as we were required simply to conform to the existing education culture and not question its form in any way, a situation which is not uncommon in many education contexts, according to Zeichner and Liston (1996). My liberation commenced, as noted earlier, with the beginning of my academic study programme, and especially when I came into contact with the literatures of critical pedagogy. I came to see 'critical pedagogy as a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship

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among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation-state' (McLaren 1999: 51). I believe such pedagogies can help create 'classrooms and schools where rich learning opportunities increase students' life chances' and so create more just and democratic educational practices 'in the face if intense pressure to evaluate success based on students' performance on high stakes tests' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999: 22).

Critical pedagogy, according to Kincheloe (2004), assumes that 'the classroom, curricular, and school structures teachers enter are not neutral sites waiting to be shaped by educational professionals' (p. 2). On the contrary, they are highly politicised contexts in which it is possible for teachers to exercise their agency in order to achieve their values and realise their educational goals. Through my engagement with the literatures of critical pedagogy, I found ways of emancipating myself from the shackles of my own internalised helplessness in the face of institutional oppression, and I learned how to talk back (hooks 1989), on behalf of myself and my children. Especially, and drawing on the work of Claxton *et al.* (1996), I came to understand that teaching and learning are inextricably interrelated, and that any teaching incorporates in itself an implicit theory of learning.

According to Claxton, learners' priorities, beliefs, affective responses and learning strategies are at the centre of a framework for learning. This is of special importance in the area of special needs education. Learners are seen as tacit decision makers, 'choosing their stance of engagement towards learning on the basis of their interpretations and perceptions' (Claxton 1996: 3).

Claxton's ideas had special relevance for the development of my own critical pedagogies, speaking directly to my experience. I came to see learning as a child's ongoing decision-making process of whether or not to engage with her own learning. This was well borne out in the case of Biddy, a Traveller child who had gone through three years of school

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without any evident learning having taken place. She had, I believe, engaged in what Claxton terms 'an intuitive cost-benefit analysis', by deciding not to engage in any reading activities. It is of course not accurate to say that she had not learned anything. In Claxton's terms, her withdrawal from reading was a defence mechanism, her choice from a deliberately developed repertoire of strategies for dealing with learning (or not learning, in Biddy's case). On this view, Biddy had viewed the risks involved in learning as far outweighing the rewards, and so refused to engage. I learned later that her actions were, as Claxton (1996: 4) notes, 'underpinned by a host of views of the world and … residues of past experiences,' because Biddy held traumatic memories of learning to read at home, taught by an older sibling who was not a trained teacher and resorted to violence. Her failure to read had led to physical punishment and labelling as 'stupid'. The experience had left her traumatised.

It was episodes like these that led me to believe, when I came to work as a support teacher, that unless a child is ready and willing to learn, no amount of teaching can enforce learning. When the student is ready and willing, then they are also able to learn. Sadly, many children with special educational needs, and Traveller children, have opted out before they reach resource teaching. Following years of failure and repeated put-downs by family, teachers, other pupils, and the rest of the educational community, at high personal cost, they decide they are unable to learn and so become unwilling to learn. Claxton's view is that the experiences themselves become blocks to learning. My goal as a teacher became how to dissolve the blocks, how to dis-inhibit learning, and how to encourage children to give learning another try. The story of Tia that follows illustrates some of the strategies I used to enable me to do this.

Tia, one of my special needs children, displayed classic avoidance strategies when faced with any task which held the possibility of public failure. She made herself ill before her turn to read aloud in class. She was absent on Fridays, the traditional day of the test. Once, when her class teacher held over the test until she was present, Tia threw such a

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tantrum that she struck out at another child and was marched off to the principal's office, all the time demanding to be sent home.

With such elaborately developed defence strategies, Tia was effectively blocking valuable learning opportunities. Tia is typical of many children who come to me for resource teaching. They are popularly called by the staff 'the can't do brigade' or 'the can't learn / won't learn squad.' In many instances, the child's withdrawal of effort manifests itself in a variety of ways, in that the child will hurl abuse at the teacher, demonstrate cynicism for all class activities, act the class clown, and become openly defiant and aggressive. These reactions are often a means of self-protection, and they tend to be abandoned in a small group/individual setting outside the mainstream classroom. Not surprisingly, tasks which have sparked a tantrum in class are often undertaken in the resource room without protest. However, subduing the child, or achieving quietude and acquiescence is not the purpose of resource teaching. While the provision of resource teaching may mean a quieter life for the class and the classroom teacher, it can bring isolation from peers for the child in question. This was the case with Tia. Whenever any refusal or problem arose, Tia was immediately sent to the resource room to do her work there. I was most uncomfortable with this state of affairs. Sending the problem out of the classroom was not a long-term solution to the problem.

My responsibility as a resource teacher was to work out an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for Tia in collaboration with her parents. As part of the plan, the child is also invited to choose any goals or targets that she feels comfortable with, and to identify strategies for achieving them. However, Tia chose not to choose any strategies, so I chose for her. I began to invite another child to accompany Tia and work with her in the resource room. I would choose the second child carefully, bearing in mind that the strategy should benefit the second child as much as the child who was in special need, in this case, Tia. Initially I supervised the work closely, to ensure that no copying or bullying went on. Occasionally, the second child turned out to be Chloe, who enjoyed working

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with Tia and of her own choice adopted the role of helper. Over time, friendship began to blossom and Tia began to interact with Chloe, even in the playground (Appendix 13).

This may sound a simplistic example of developing understanding, yet it helped me to come to appreciate that I need to 'acknowledge the situatedness of cognition and learning' (Lave and Wenger 1991, cited in Claxton 1996: 13). 'The cognitive resources and affective stances that are deployed … are dependent on aspects of the immediate situation' (p. 13), which may seem peripheral to the task but which can have a dramatic effect on the stance that learners adopt. Happily, over time and through the use of many simple strategies such as the one outlined above, Tia came to perceive herself to be part of the class group, yet, before my involvement with Tia, I simply had not appreciated the degree of complexity in encouraging a learner to return to an engagement with their own learning. Through this and many similar encounters with children with special needs, I came to critique the idea of pedagogy as a set of techniques. I know colleagues who claim to have taught the same lesson for the last twenty years. To maintain this attitude in the face of the diversity and originality that is each and every child is an act of gross negligence and injustice. As teachers it is our business 'to prepare all young people … and not just the traditionally bright or academically inclined for this world' (Claxton 1996: 6). As teachers, our responsibility involves educating young people who can and who wish to engage with learning in whatever guise it may present itself, and to find ways of putting those who have alienated themselves from their capacity for learning back in touch with it.

**Learning how to learn from my practice**

One of my key learnings, as I developed my understanding of my own practices as a critical educator, is that children need to be encouraged to learn how to learn, a feature that is commonly called 'transfer of learning' yet whose processes are, I believe, commonly misunderstood. My partner is a good example of a misunderstanding of the

concept. 'I attended school for thirteen years,' he will tell you, 'and I never learned anything useful for my life. I didn't learn how to cook, run a house, measure for floor covering or curtains, how to decorate, garden, change a tyre or hang a picture.' His education was entirely focused on academic work, and left him singularly unprepared for life on his own. His teachers, however, may argue that many necessary skills were taught, but he just didn't apply them or transfer them to his real-life setting. Perhaps they were working on the understanding that skills would automatically transfer.

My appreciation of the nature of the transfer of learning has been enhanced through my increasing engagement with my own learning. Learning through actually doing, discussing and reflecting on the learning, and applying the learning to a variety of contexts, is vital for children with special needs. Some theories go so far as to suggest that there are generic skills that can be transferred to different situations, but their application entails picking up detailed contextualised knowledge (Perkins and Salomon 1989).

Within my capacity as a resource teacher, I strive for 'the active engagement of learners, the primacy of their learning experience, facilitation (as opposed to transmitting knowledge) and making sense of their experience through reflective dialogue between facilitator and learner' (Wallace 1996: 19). Wherever possible I engage learners in real-life experience, and I also use role-play to provide them with a safe space in which to practise beforehand. For example, I work with children with poorly developed social skills in a role-play setting before moving into real life settings. Tanya was such an example.

Tanya greeted her peers with a thump on the shoulder, while she ignored adults. This form of greeting led to complaints from peers and teachers alike. The complaints, and Tanya, reached my door. I decided to visit the home, and there witnessed the ritual of siblings' thump greetings, with no greeting between adults and children. Neither parent

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greeted me, as one might expect. The most inviting comment on my arrival was, 'I suppose one of them's in trouble again.' Mother then promptly turned back to her TV viewing. I was left with the unenviable task of helping Tanya to learn new behaviours, using a range of techniques that included role-play, on the understanding that children like Tanya need to practise their performance in a protected space before coping with the task in the real world where mistakes can be costly. And the disabled/disadvantaged child will need further support to facilitate the transfer into real performance. This must be further supported by creating opportunities to practise new skills regularly while giving feedback on their performance, a process that is explicated in typologies such as Kolb's experiential learning model (1984).

In my experience, the theory of situated cognition, which suggests that 'knowledge required for action is intricately linked to the context in which it is learned,' is especially true for special needs children (Brown *et al*. 1989, cited in Wallace 1996: 18). This emphasises the need for reflective processes, where teachers and peers join the learner in making meaning out of whatever has been experienced. Kolb's theory identifies aspects of learning experiences, and also the need to identify learning styles. However, it does not ensure transfer of learning to new situations. Schon's (1983) ideas about thinking about what one is doing, and taking action in relation to the new thinking, helped me to understand the nature of what I was doing, as I sought to enable children to transfer their learning from one situation to a new one. I found that enabling them to practise their performance in a protected space, and talking about what they were doing as they were doing it, enabled them to develop their confidence and competence before undertaking a task independently in the real world.

It was also refreshing to encounter the work of Wallace (1991), who brought conceptualisations about experiential learning into discourses about teaching. The introduction of such discourses has direct relevance to the rolling-out of the policy of the Revised New Curriculum (Ireland, DES 1999b), which, when it appeared in schools, was

also accompanied by a plethora of official documents, circulars, in-service days and a media campaign, all of which pointed to the need for teachers to change their practices radically. Yet what was never emphasised was a need to show how the values underpinning the New Curriculum actually could be understood as educational values, nor how these may be the same values that underpinned many teachers' practices. According to Wallace (1996), the starting point for any modification that is intended to lead to improvement should be the learner's own concrete experience of their own performance, and in this case, the learner is the teacher. Learning then takes place in the stages that occur between the challenge and the ability to integrate new skills and information into the teacher's practice. I firmly believe that, had such a model been implemented, Ireland would have had a new education system, not only a new curriculum. In current discourses, the Revised New Curriculum emphasises content and getting teachers from their existing performance to develop practical ideas about how they can implement required changes, without also encouraging teachers to reflect on their own values or practices, or find ways of developing new practices as the realisation of those values. While much emphasis is laid on descriptions of new practices, little attention is paid to developing the capacity of teachers to explain those new practices or offer justification for why they are doing so. This contradiction is reflected in still dominant inspection practices, where an external inspector inspects teachers' work in relation to their efficient delivery of the curriculum, while the teacher is not required to offer any kind of rationale for their practice, nor is invited to become a participant in the discourses about an evaluation of their own work. In my view, critical awareness and reflection is essential to develop an informed view of how practice can be improved, grounded in articulated educational values. The development of such critical awareness can enable teachers to learn to question assumptions embedded in the normative system and perhaps come to find ways of influencing the system by showing the significance of the changes they bring to their own practices.

Such ideas have become a key focus of my research. In Chapter 9 I explain how the teaching profession in Ireland needs to move away from a desire to please the Inspectorate, and find new ways of celebrating its own capacity for the modification of its own practices in the interests of influencing the quality of educational experience for teachers and their students. I explain how such practices can re-invigorate the teaching profession, and make it into an activist profession (Sachs 2002) that can influence future directions for human striving.

In the meantime, I return to my own practice, of learning how to become critical in order to inform my own learning, and I return to my school situation, where I was learning how to learn, mainly how to cope, and find opportunities to bring my new learning into my new form of critical pedagogy.

**Experimenting with my new learning**

I have recounted earlier how I struggled as a mainstream class teacher, who was confronted, as are many other teachers, with the demands of a rigidly authoritarian system, a system that effectively denied my values of kindness and care for children, and a respect for each child's capacity to learn and create their own knowledge. At about the same time as I began my formal programme of study that led to the award of my masters degree, I also changed jobs from being a mainstream teacher to becoming a resource teacher. This meant I was resource teacher for children with special educational needs. My new learning was an invaluable asset in helping me to make the shift successfully.

From engaging with my own learning through my formal programme of study, I began to cope in my new role. I learned how to avoid being the target for all related complaints about Travellers in general. I learned to ignore snide remarks about my 'do-gooding'. I began to settle into my new role, and also came to understand that what I was doing as resource teacher was what I had been doing as a mainstream classroom teacher, except

that I was now in a new context which carried with it new expectations, that I would sort out problem children so that they could be returned in their new repaired form to their mainstream classroom. I became overwhelmed with the injustice and futility of such expectations, and how I was lending myself to their underpinning ideologies.

It took me some time to learn how to accept my fears and uncertainty, how to question my practice to find connections between my existing knowledge and experience. I recognised that my new situation as resource teacher gave me increased opportunities to start from the learner's viewpoint and needs. My new position afforded me the time and privilege of being able to think more about how, why and what I taught (Brown and McIntyre 1993).

I believe my new practice began by my questioning my implicit beliefs about learning. My role as deliverer of knowledge had no relevance to the children. Neither did they accept me as an enforcer of discipline. Initially I was at a loss how to cope, having spent fourteen years as a mainstream teacher straitjacketed within the dominant system, where attitudes to teachers from the wider public were generally positive and where formal education was valued as a vehicle of social mobility. Now, as a resource teacher, I was not generally held in high regard, nor was the kind of context I was now in seen as a vehicle for social mobility. Certainly, I felt, teaching had to be adapted to local conditions, but I had never before questioned the value of education itself. The realisation of the significance of my socio-educational positioning led me to question my beliefs and values. I realised that my approach to teaching would have to accommodate my pupils' different approaches to learning. I had to let go of my habitual approaches to teaching. I realised that standardised tests and materials were inappropriate and that I needed to look beyond current practices and traditions that often help to perpetuate multiple forms of oppression in schools and society to improve the educational experiences of marginalised students. A more emancipatory model of education, based on active participatory and inclusional practices, with children as knowledge creators rather than passive recipients,

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would enhance opportunities for currently marginalised groups. It is this kind of education, 'education as the practice of freedom' (hooks 1994), that has the potential to transcend socially constructed categories and labels such as Traveller, disabled or disadvantaged. It will support the discourses of power that can contribute to sustainable social evolution. Critical pedagogical practices are necessary if teachers are to implement curricula aimed at empowering students to contest the injustice of the dominant school culture.

My reasoning at the time was that I could provide a haven for my students to learn according to their own learning styles and preferences, and I would similarly adapt my practices to my own preferred pedagogical styles. I wanted to create a safe space for the pupils to learn, where, taken out of their familiar mainstream contexts where they were forced into normative roles which carried specific social expectations, they would be free to think and learn in new ways. Rather than encouraging them to be 'producers, whose role is to get right answers' I wished to encourage them to be 'thinkers … and give them a feeling of what it is like to think creatively, originally and constructively instead of defensively and evasively' (Holt 1964: 27). Here we could develop a particular kind of teacher-student relationship. There would be an opportunity to develop self-esteem, to explore knowledge, and to share respect and hopefully develop positive attitudes. This would be a chance to throw off the cloak of failure and begin again. I hoped to replace the imposed curriculum with student-chosen material. Learning would stem from a variety of methods, not solely from teacher input. Instead of viewing learning as the accumulation of isolated facts, I hoped it would involve exploring attitudes and beliefs. Knowledge would be seen as provisional, not absolutist. Rather than pretending that knowledge and learning are culturally unbiased, it would be accepted that both are. We would no longer accept a curriculum package (arranged as a list of objectives), designed to be delivered anywhere. The learners in this model would not be objects to be acted upon. They would have a clear voice in the way that the sessions evolved. The focus would be on interactions rather than on pre-specified goals, which may lead both educators and

learners to overlook learning that is occurring as a result of their interactions, but which is not listed as an objective (Smith 2000). Rather I aim for an approach in which the curriculum itself develops through the dynamic interaction of action and reflection. Like Grundy (1987: 115), I believe that 'the curriculum is not simply a set of plans to be implemented, but rather is constituted through an active process in which planning, acting and evaluating are all reciprocally related and integrated into the process.'

This, then, has been a story of the beginnings of how I became critical. In my next chapter I begin to recount how I developed such new practices, and how these led to new learning. I explain how these new learnings themselves became new theories for me, and how, collectively, they began to inform what I then began to see as a living theory of practice, which is grounded in my capacity to enable children to develop their capacity for learning.

In the next two chapters, therefore, I offer some descriptions of my new practices that focused on enabling the children to begin to think critically about how they could improve their own practice, as powerful knowers and agents in their own learning.

**CHAPTER SIX**

**NEW CRITICAL PRACTICES, NEW CRITICAL THEORIES**

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*Chapter preview*

*In this chapter I explain how I began to take action within my context, in my efforts to develop critical emancipatory practices that would ensure justice in educational practice. Because I was now researching how I was doing this in a systematic way, I began to gather data to show the situation as it was and as it was transforming through my developing understanding of my practice. The chapter contains small case studies of what I did, and how my new learning contributed to what I have come to understand as a form of sustainable social evolution.*

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I said in Chapter 5 that I moved from being a mainstream class teacher to the position of resource teacher, a position that incorporated the teaching of Traveller children, many of whom also had special educational needs. While I was still working as a mainstream class teacher, I began to study for my masters degree, a programme that required me to think critically about my practice, and to engage with the literatures of critical reflective practice. Engaging with the literatures, however, inspired me to think about changing my pedagogical practices, so that they demonstrated my emerging capacity for critical engagement with learning, especially my own learning about how to teach in democratic ways. During my current PhD study programme I also changed jobs, and became a resource teacher for children with special educational needs, and this move itself made me re-assess my own pedagogical practices.

In this chapter, therefore, I recount how these life and work changes began to interact, and encouraged me to modify both my thinking and my actions. My reflection on the changes led to the generation of my emerging theory of practice that was rooted in the practice itself. In the chapter I recount key experiences, and explain how my reflections on my practices enabled me seriously to re-think certain elements of what I was doing, and also what the literature was saying, and so come to propose new ways of thinking and acting.

I explain how these new ways of thinking and acting should themselves be seen as living theories of practice, and in Chapter 8 I will explain how I validate my claims to be practising in a way that enables children to learn.

Here, then, I set about describing and explaining what I did to enable children to learn, and how this involved my learning how to teach in new ways that encouraged them to learn. I offer stories about my encounters with different children, and the learning that arose from those encounters, for them and for me, and how, together, we began to generate our own theories about how we are together, and about how we can learn from being together. I explain how my pupils became my teachers, in the same way that I was formally positioned as their teacher. If my job is to enable them to learn, they did the same for me. My theory of learning is in keeping with McNiff's (1993) belief in the importance of remaining a learner in the classroom.

I offer three case studies. The first is about a group of children who became engaged in a special project about Egypt. The events reported here occurred while I was still located in mainstream teaching. I then continue with two stories from my practice as a learning support teacher. My second case study is about Pat, and my third about Laney. The fourth case study, about Nell, which is so important that I place it in a separate chapter, appears as Chapter 7. Throughout I comment on the nature of my learning, and how learning from one situation enabled me to improve my learning so that I could influence the improvement of new situations.

**Case study 1: A story of mainstream class practice**

My first study, which focused on trying to understand the nature of my practice as a budding critical educator, was undertaken in the context of mainstream class teaching, where I tried to increase pupils' participation in their own learning, and in so doing to create a participative, collaborative learning environment. Above all, I wished to develop

a curriculum that would be relevant and meaningful for all learners, in particular those disaffected pupils in my classes.

At this time I had been redeployed to a school where bureaucratic demands required didactic teaching styles from all teachers, so I had to conform. I became aware however of a group of learners who displayed little or no engagement with curriculum content. The 'synchronisation of purpose' (Hallinan 1997: 5) required by school policy contradicted my belief that learning should be a participatory, proactive, collaborative process (Bruner 1966a).  My values of learning through enquiry learning and interactive activity were utterly denied.

My class consisted of three very different groupings which, according to other colleagues, could be designated as the good students, the weak students, and the hopeless cases. One of my colleagues explained the situation to me as follows:

'Group A are the good students, achieving well in class, competent and obedient. Group B students are also obedient, but they experience learning difficulties and are below average IQ. However, they try their best and are willing to please. Group C are neither competent nor obedient. They are neither interested, nor engaged in the learning process. … I've seen generations of them in my time.' (Journal entry; Appendix 14)

I definitely observed the differences in the groups, and differences in their individual and group behaviours. Groups A and B interacted socially, but group C was excluded. Occasionally some members from A and B would display a passing interest in C, but generally preferred to remain in their own grouping. Group C maintained its own identity, and did not attempt to mix with anyone from groups A or B.

My job was to deliver the curriculum, which in this case was a standardised accumulation of specific knowledges, all of which could be assessed using the same assessment

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measures. Pedagogy consisted of a 'transmission model' (Gipps 1992 in Bourne 1994: 24) which fostered teacher dependency and dictated a narrow teaching style in which exploratory activity and open questioning by pupils was not encouraged. My practice became that of a warden, attempting to prevent disruption from group C. The class atmosphere was negative and oppressive with little positive or purposeful interaction. I very much wanted to shift from a didactic style to a participative, collaborative model of teaching and learning, which would encourage students to recognise their diverse forms of achievement. Consequently, I was faced with the problematic of the imposition of a didactic system of pedagogy on the one hand, and the pupils' refusal to engage with interactive forms of learning on the other.

Nor was it a case that the students were not intelligent in themselves. They were, but all, regardless of grouping, demonstrated the same disregard for learning. In the case of some, it was apathy. For others, it was a matter of hostilities throughout the day. Rachel, from group C, seemed intent on fulfilling the stereotypical pictures that other people, such as my colleague above, communicated to them. The daughter of a single parent, Rachel had little if any support from home. Three older sisters, the eldest of whom was seventeen, were single mothers, living at home with their children. The home culture displayed a lively contempt for school and society in general. Rachel subdued whatever academic talent she had in her efforts to act as class clown. Like Rachel, Hazel, from group C, had displayed promise in her early school years and it was reluctantly acknowledged by her previous teachers that she had considerable ability. She had suddenly stopped achieving and seemed deliberately to score poorly on tests. 'It's a crime,' cried one of my more sympathetic colleagues. 'Waste of a good brain on her! Her mother was the very same. … Be careful there,' she warned me. 'They are smart enough to do real  damage.' (Journal entry)

And so it went. Erica, from group C, who performed at an average level in junior classes, chose to stop trying. She was withdrawn, never joining in the disruptive activities of

pupils like Rachel and Hazel, yet silently and sullenly watching from afar. Ann-Marie, from group A, the daughter of wealthy and ambitious parents, was well behaved but displayed limited interest in, and lack of enthusiasm for learning. Denise, a member of Group B, was a diligent worker. Although viewing school as a necessary evil she completed tasks given and also worked hard in her Learning Support classes. Her parents were interested and supportive.

I believed that education as manifested in this classroom had no reference to the individual needs, interests or abilities of these pupils and prevented their meaningful participation. I decided therefore to develop innovative pedagogical strategies. Because this fell into my research brief, I negotiated my intended change of pedagogy with the school management, and also with the parents of the children in my class (see permissions letters in Appendix 2).

My first strategy was to abandon a transmission form of teaching and aim to include all in their own learning. I hoped to develop strategies to increase participation, increase pupil-teacher interaction, increase motivation and student responsibility for learning, encourage independent and group work, and encourage team, collaborative and cooperative learning strategies.

My first step in seeking to identify my research concern and gather some evidence to show that I had reasons for my concerns, was to tape record a conversation with my pupils. The entire class took part, sharing their views on their experiences of school. They spoke consistently of the following (all extracts are taken from the tape recorded conversation. The transcript of the tape is in my data archive):

'School is a drag, a real pain.'

'Lessons have nothing to do with real life.'

'It's boring, boring, boring.'

(Taped interview; Appendix 5A)

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They were unanimously vocal in their condemnation of school and teachers. Groups B and C also expressed hostility towards pupils in group A, who were seen as 'goody-goody, licking up to the teacher' and making life more difficult for 'us slow ones.' Group C saw school as 'out of date, stupid and like a prison.' Group A felt that group C 'had no brains' or 'were too lazy to do anything.' Both A and B envied C their street credibility and freedom from parental demands. They felt it was cool to refuse to behave in class. Group C, offended by these comments, insisted, 'We're not stupid. We just won't let teachers tell us what to do.' (Taped interview)

I introduced the idea of different forms of learning and different kinds of intelligence (Gardner 1983, 1993). I pointed out that such different ways of knowing are not generally recognised or accepted in dominant forms of education or society. Ann-Marie insisted that neither Rachel nor Hazel was smart in any way. Hazel declared that she 'didn't want to learn any of that stupid stuff,' maintaining also that 'I could learn much better than you if I wanted to.' (Taped interview). I saw this as an opportunity, and quickly challenged Hazel to demonstrate that she could learn (see Appendix 5A).

I then announced that students could choose the content and method of our next unit of study and be responsible for their own learning. Denise expressed her frustration declaring, 'I find it very hard to learn things even though I try my best!' (Appendix 5B). I challenged Denise to find methods of enhancing her learning, perhaps by using strategies consistent with her own learning style. The only conditions I made were that in our next unit of study:

- They would have to incorporate a varied means of learning
- They would have to work in teacher-chosen groups
- Parental permission and involvement were mandatory

We then signed a learning contract and agreed a set of rules. It was generally decided that

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we would do a project using a mix of individual, class and group work (see Appendices 6A and B). Methods, form of presentation and sequences of study would be decided by the class. I would work to develop resources and strategies that would provide equality of opportunity for the pupils, regardless of their intelligence strengths (Gardner 1983, 1991). We decided to experiment with learning models drawn from Multiple Intelligences Theory (Campbell 1994). I then reorganised the existing groups A, B and C into new learning sets, with each learning set consisting of a mix of pupils from groups A, B and C.

Our first group sessions were disastrous. I had invited a colleague, who had agreed to act as my critical friend, to observe the first lessons. In my learning journal I wrote:

> Group work was a total disaster. Nothing was achieved. Members argued and did not focus on task. Some did not participate and spent their time messing. Noise levels were totally unacceptable. Rachel, Hazel and friends were very disruptive. (Journal entry).

I felt overwhelmed by this lack of control and progress. Perhaps the children really were not skilled or responsible enough to work effectively in this way. My critical friend wrote, 'I think teacher will have more difficulty adjusting to the new strategies than the pupils.' (Appendix 7A)

I decided to try again, this time in a more organised fashion, appointing a chair person, encourager and reporter in each group, while giving them a focused, achievable task (see Rules, Appendix 6B). We re-arranged the furniture to facilitate group work, and I moved from group to group as they worked. After a few sessions, improvement was evident, particularly in terms of the acceptance of other people.

The chosen topic was Ancient Egypt. Each group researched an aspect of the topic, and

my critical friend and I observed each group in action. I had to remind myself not to teach each group as I visited. I was uncomfortable with what I saw as time-wasting activities, and commented to my colleague, 'I could teach all the facts in one fifth of the time.' 'Stop interfering,' responded my colleague. 'Anyway, just because you are teaching doesn't mean they are learning.' (Appendix 7B)

I began to appreciate my own dilemmas. While sincerely believing that my practice should be rooted in my own educational values, I was nevertheless influenced by dominant theories of pedagogy that say pupils need to be taught and that knowledge is a static commodity. Even so, I persevered, but progress was minimal, and I grew disheartened. I wrote in my journal, 'We reviewed group work today, asking each group to give a summary of their findings. It was pitiful. This work is a total waste of time' (Journal entry). In retrospect, I see this as ironic, because the project was about encouraging the students not to be disheartened and not to give up on themselves. Yet here was I, giving up on myself and on them.  It was also ironic that I was worried about content and knowledge acquisition, and the curriculum standards, when I was supposedly encouraging meaningful learning through real engagement. This kind of reflection re-focused me towards process and I began to seek some means of evaluating both aspects (content and process) of our work.

I sought advice from the students themselves, encouraging them to tell me, honestly and without fear of reprisals, what was going on. I asked them to write their evaluations in their diaries. Here are some extracts from what they wrote in their diaries.

> 'Teacher keeps telling us to get working, but I don't know what she means.'
> 'This was supposed to be fun. It's a trick to make us learn.'
> 'I can't learn in my group because Rachel keeps messing about all the time.'
> 'I won't do anything. The goody-goodies in the group can do it. They are the only ones teacher really likes.'                                   (Extracts from children's diaries)

This was my turning point. I realised how unlike my values I was. I had failed to guide my students in their new learning strategies. I had failed to win their trust or establish a sense of equality. Group C now felt consigned to failure. I had damaged attempts at democratic participation. I needed new management skills if we were to achieve honest feedback and shared trust.

So I decided to take action in relation to my own learning. I set up an anonymous suggestions box, a facility to submit unsigned written work, a group spokesperson and a class council. I told the class I was doing this to curb my own teacher outbursts. I promised to respect any free expression of opinion.

To cut a very long story short, we set about developing group work skills. I ensured that my teaching was responsive to students' needs. I focused on encouraging them to learn skills (such as the effective use of indices, reference books, alphabetical ordering and so on) that would be useful for future independent learning.

Group observation continued. I noted that while working, members of former group B sought teacher assistance and approval frequently, demanding a lot of time. Pupils from group C were characterised by their lack of involvement and/or disruption of their learning sets. I had to intervene here to ensure that groups involved them and encouraged them to help each other. I designed further activities and roles for former group C members to ensure their acceptance and limit further damage to their self-esteem.

Gradually inter-group conflict seemed to diminish as members of previous groupings took on the identity of their new learning sets. Jigsaw group work was invaluable, nurturing positive inter-dependence and the inclusion of the Other (Habermas 2002). This more holistic group approach was educational in itself as pupils learned the skills of listening, turn-taking and respect for others' opinions. They began to learn the importance of co-operation and the value of peer / collaborative learning.

We worked on a multiple intelligences model, using various intelligences as gateways to new units of learning. Individual children discovered their talents for different forms of knowing. For example, SR was a 'weaker' child, displaying disruptive tendencies and anti-social behaviour, and absorption into a group proved difficult as her concentration span was limited and her reading and writing skills were very poor. Socially group work was good for her but success at tasks was limited. Recognition of her other intelligences proved a means of allowing her experience success in the school system, as the following story demonstrates.

We had composed a song about Tutankhamun and had chosen 'Glory, Glory' as our tune. Class voting had chosen the four best verses. We were well into the song, when SR interrupted saying. 'They're no good.'

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher | Why? Do you not like the words? |
| SR | They don't fit. |
| Teacher | What do you mean? |
| SR | They don't fit. |

Others began to get annoyed. I sought an explanation but words failed her.

Teacher      Can you explain in some other way?

Her frustration grew. Some wished to dismiss her views but her own set supported her.

Child D      Do it for them.

SR began to sing and demonstrated that the 'fit' was wrong. Others were surprised. 'Gosh, you're clever,' said Hazel.

SR offered to help others at lunch time to work on making the words fit. She visibly grew in stature.

Hazel said, 'We'll help her. I'm good at words.' (Journal entry. The song is included in Appendix 8C).

I believed that pupil motivation and participation had increased through the acceptance of different learning styles and strengths.

I continued to record students' preferred activities and avoidance of other activities (Appendix 8A). I mandated that each group had to engage in each activity at least once a fortnight. This allowed them to 'demonstrate their abilities, competences and strengths in ways comfortable for them' (Durkan 1997: 7). The children's diaries indicate that they loved it. 'I love doing the charts to go with Rachel's writing, but I hate the writing,' wrote Denise. The pact they made between themselves ensured that Denise and Rachel did their own preferred activity.

It was not always rosy, however, as evidenced by Rachael's comment: 'I hate when Ann-Marie comes to help me. She knows everything and she gets cross when I can't read something.' (Journal entry)

As time passed I noted an unprecedented surge of motivation and enthusiasm. Students brought in models, books and other resources, with notes from parents about their eagerness for study at home (see Appendix 9A for parents' notes). This was a significant development, because the class had not before shown a capacity for contributing to one another's learning in this way, and I sought to capitalise on it by encouraging the students also to take on teaching and mentoring roles for one another. I suggested pupils create activities such as wordsearch, puzzles or riddles for each other. At this they dug in their heels.

> 'You're the teacher,' maintained Rachel. 'It's your job to make them. Teachers know everything.'

Hazel contributed, 'You're getting paid. We are not doing your job for you.'

Another insisted, 'We couldn't do that stuff. It's too hard.' (Appendix 7C)

In my view, their previous experiences had limited their belief in their own capacities and conditioned them to accept certain roles, and not others. However, they rose to the challenge and many useful activities were produced (Appendices 8B and D). There was general progress, in terms of increased interaction and participation. They seemed to grow in confidence, and began to analyse and evaluate their own learning. My classroom became 'a place where there was greater interest, participation, motivation and enjoyment, where teachers became learners and new gateways to learning [were] found' (Hanafin 1997: 1).

I was also delighted to receive feedback from parents in relation to their pleasure in their children's improved learning. Rachel's mum wrote to me, saying,

'She loves group work. It's the first time she was interested in homework, and she seems to be making friends.' (Journal entry)

SR's mum wrote that the realisation of SR's strengths in the area of music 'turned her inside out' (Journal entry).

Denise's dad wrote, 'She is more interested in her work … she comes home each day to tell us something new she has learned. The different approach took a little pressure off her and she is more confident and open with her thoughts and ideas' (see Appendix 9A). Her learning support teacher at the time commented, 'I believe this work was of particular benefit to the children I work with … The security of knowing their opinions would not be ridiculed, helped growth of self confidence. I have rarely seen such enthusiasm amongst weaker children.' Denise herself wrote, 'Working in groups was the best. We

each learned something different and then told everyone else about it.' (Comments and letters are in my data archive, and in my learning journal. Samples are in Appendices 9A, B and C.) I believed these benefits were in keeping with a classroom practice that allowed students to take on the role of a social being while moving from individualistic to co-operative classroom endeavours (Bennett and Dunne 1992). Within the group, through the use of active and enquiry-based learning, the pupils reflected on, analysed and evaluated their learning by sharing it with others. Freedom of expression, within an ethic of mutual respect, slowly grew.

Some colleagues' comments were encouraging and supportive. Following lunch break a supervising colleague told me and Colleague N that my class 'had been great'. The children had told her they were 'in Egypt and had lots to do.' They had convened in groups and worked continuously. 'Imagine that! Even Rachel!' (Journal entry).

And critical friend MS reported that,

> 'Many individuals finished their own activity and sought to join other groups. They negotiated access and tasks without interference from the teacher. During lunch break, children continued with their work.' (Journal entry; Appendix 7D).

I believed that the children had benefited socially, and participation had increased, although I remained unsure about the educational value of our work. While I had records of activities and achievements, I had little evidence to support my claim that those activities had what I understood as 'educational value'. I therefore began searching my data for evidence of such educational value, and this is where my own learning deepened considerably in terms of how I judge my practice and therefore what I come to define as my living standards of judgement.

I had asked colleagues to comment on our work, and a visit from Colleague IM led her to

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say, 'Children only stopped working to explain their tasks. They really understood what they were doing. They were highly motivated.' (Journal entry). On another occasion, she commented, 'Improving pupil participation was of major urgency in this class and has been achieved very effectively. Children have grown in confidence … participating well in class activity and discussion' (Appendix 9Cii). At the same time, colleague X's (the Learning Support teacher) observations of our work led her to say of Denise, 'Denise has really blossomed. She is so confident now. She feels her opinions count too. Imagine her taking charge of a group! As for Hazel, group work has forced her to tolerate others and listen to them. She can't be as bossy as usual. She has even learned to wait her turn.' (Appendix 7E)

I also searched my data archive for other data that showed some degree of evaluation. I found parents' responses yielded an amount of feedback. Some parents said it was the first time they had seen their children motivated and looking forward to school. Parents insisted that their children learned a great deal and that they themselves were learning too. 'School was never this much fun when I was going … It isn't just information … good practical knowledge … it involved me as a parent in her education.' (Appendix 9A).

Not all parents were as enthusiastic however. Parent Y said, 'What will ye do with it? Get back to real teaching and finish the books!' An affirmative and vocal endorsement of our work was forthcoming on parent day. Unfortunately colleagues' reaction to parental endorsement of our work increased managerial pressure on us to return to the conformity of a transmission model of pedagogy. This accentuated the necessity of justifying our work with regard to content transmission and the value of the learning strategies.

Interestingly, most parents had commented on content and process, insisting that factual knowledge did accompany the new learning strategies. The major difference seemed to be the new-found motivation and participation of the children. And the children themselves continued to express enjoyment of it all. 'I really enjoyed it. It was fun because it was

different from our normal school work,' and 'It was sort of like living like the Egyptians,' and 'Everything we did was brilliant.' (Children's evaluation, Appendix 9B)

It was from working with my data, while deciding how I was to evaluate my work, that I began to articulate the standards by which I came to judge my work. I was looking for data that would show that the children had not simply been involved in activities but that the involvement in those activities had itself generated the capacity to learn.

My data revealed such instances. When I sought to protect Ann-Marie from the too difficult questions of a visiting teacher, she responded, 'Oh teacher, that's OK. We looked that up ourselves' (Journal entry). Ann-Marie had overcome her lack of enthusiasm for learning. Following that experience, the same colleague's diary included the following:

> The class were hungry for information. Their level of attention and observation was super. They noticed traditional dress in the background of photos. They commented on the European dress of others. They asked about social class today, and following a discussion, Anne-Marie commented that ancient Egyptians were more tolerant of women than modern ones.'
>
> (Diary entry, MS; Appendix 9Ci)

I felt that such comments were indicative of what I had come to see as the educational content of the learning. I began to articulate my understanding of my own practice as a 'set of personal transactions between teachers and learners [with] learners generating personally significant and meaningful outcomes for themselves' (Elliott 1998: 101). I believe I was practising what Gardner (1993) called 'teaching for understanding', that is, enabling the learner to experiment with their knowledge in appropriate situations. I believe I could have taught the content to my pupils in a didactic fashion, but the quality

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of their learning experience would not have been equalled. The learners had control over their own learning, and I believe gained understanding, and not simply facts**.**

So how did I begin to articulate the ways in which I came to make judgements about the quality of my practice? In other words, how did I come to articulate my living standards of judgement (Whitehead 2004c, 2005a, 2006b, 2007)?

I came to realise that my values had to stand as the criteria by which I judged my work, and my articulated standards of judgement were whether or not I had realised my values in my practice. What had emerged for me during this experience was that busy activity / work was different from meaningful learning. It was plain from my data that the children had been involved in meaningful activity, but I was more interested in whether they had been involved in meaningful learning, of the kind that would encourage them to exercise their critical capacity to make choices about what they would or would not learn. This is the kind of data I began to find in my data archive, and I therefore selected those data to stand as evidence of my claim to knowledge that I had enabled children to exercise their critical capacity and to think for themselves. My values around critical engagement and encouraging children to think for themselves therefore became my standards of judgement. I want to emphasise that my standards of judgement were not around whether or not the children were gainfully occupied, but whether that gainful occupation actually promoted critical engagement. The standards of judgement that my school tended to use, about completing the textbooks and ensuring that all children were gainfully occupied, were actually of a different order than the values I came to identify by which to judge my practice. I realised that I worked from educational values and educational standards of judgment. I had known this all along, of course, but I was now able to articulate it for myself, and to theorise it in my own terms. Although I was aware of the theories of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and Bruner (1966a and b) and appreciated their understanding of the need to scaffold the learning of the child to a new stage of development, I felt that I had gone beyond scaffolding, and had enabled the children actually to come to think for

themselves and make their own choices about how to choose. This I believed to be of great importance since, drawing on the work of Berlin (1969), I understand humans as choice-makers, and so the capacity to develop the use of their potential capacity for unlimited creativity is often a matter of choice.

Once I began searching my database with my now clarified standards of judgement in mind, I found plenty of evidence to support my claims that I was indeed encouraging critical thinking and critical engagement with learning. Of particular significance were the comments from my teaching colleagues about how the children had developed in confidence around choice making. College MS wrote: 'The interaction between partners displayed respect and democracy. A positive work ethic and pursuance of a common goal developed, uniting the students in their efforts' (Appendix 9C), while colleague Y commented, 'Exceptional work. The children displayed tremendous confidence' (Appendix 9D). The children themselves attested to their capacities. 'I didn't think it would be so good,' said Rachel. 'I learned that I could do it, so I did it.' My practice had, I believe encouraged pupils to 'actively construct their knowledge ... with greater emphasis on social interaction, communication and interdependence in the development of thinking and learning' (Bennett *et al.* 1997: 128).

I had set out to foster a spirit of collaborative learning, in line with my value of democracy. I found that my value around enquiry learning overlapped with my value of democracy. By enabling the children to enquire into their own practice, to find their voices and their own minds, I managed to establish democratic practices. Ensuring that all are able to speak for themselves, and think for themselves, is in itself a democratic practice. For me, democracy is in the practices of enabling people to speak for themselves. I believe I did this.

Indeed confidence and voice grew to such an extent that pupils wished to share their work with the wider school community. A presentation for parents, pupils and teachers was

their chosen method. I too felt that a class presentation would serve to display the content/facts accumulated as well as showcasing the skills and capacities acquired during the learning process.

Class representatives sought permission to display their work from the principal. We discussed possible forms of presentation and decided on the allocation of sections of work. Charts, graphs, drawings, photos, models and magazines were included. Much work was refined and re-done as the children identified their own quality control measures.

Each child took part in the presentation, which involved activities across the range of intelligences (Gardner 1983, 1993). Teachers, other pupils, and parents were invited to review our work and offer feedback in oral and written form. All assessments were positive and supported the view that among other benefits purposeful interaction and collaboration were evident. In my view, pupils had displayed the ability to work independently, understood their work and displayed an ability and willingness to discuss it.

So this was the work I undertook with one class. I now go on to show how this learning informed new practices, and how my learning and action began to take on the form of action-reflection cycles, as new learning informed new practices, and these new practices became the grounds for new learning. I now tell the story of Pat..

**Case study 2: Working with Pat**

Pat was an important teacher for me, making me acutely aware of the need to change from implicit theories of teaching and learning, in my efforts to help my pupils do likewise. Pat made me realise that teaching is itself a learning role. She came to me, in my position as a support teacher, as a child who was failing in the classroom because of

negative attitudes and refusal to engage in new learning experiences. Drawing on my readings from researchers such as Aronowitz (1993), Claxton (1996), Giroux (1997), and Kincheloe (2004), and I came to see that my role was to identify any inhibiting implicit theories that students may have when challenged with new learning experiences, and then to support them to overcome this and formulate new strategies rather than remain inhibited by their negative attitudes. My role, at its most effective, seeks to facilitate learning rather than teach prescribed content.

With Pat, my first task was to identify what the knowledge problem was. I focused on maths work over several months, prompting her to explore her learning and find ways of developing new learning strategies. When Pat stopped and refused to, or was unable to go any further, I would intervene. A typical form of questioning would be: 'What has gone wrong here?' or 'Tell me how we should do this?' I was constantly probing Pat's existing understanding and trying to find ways of enabling her to develop better understandings.

Following several months of this type of work Pat was achieving well in the support context but was still failing miserably in class and at home. There had been an improvement in maths, but it was context specific. Formal testing indicated low achievement and Pat still demonstrated lack of confidence and interest in her studies and in her capacities. I had expected success, and was experiencing failure. I began to question my intervention.

In my journal I wrote:

> Why is Pat not achieving? She appears quite confident in her sessions with me. I felt she was doing really well. She appears motivated and anxious to learn. Ms. P. however reports that within class Pat will not or cannot attempt tasks given. Her score on the latest standardised tests shows no improvement. Ms. P. reports that her homework is awful and Pat seems incapable of explaining her work strategies.

Pat and I have undertaken the work suggested by Ms. P, working through carefully graded steps, while attempting to keep up with the class programme. I have re-taught any concepts that were causing difficulty. Is there something in my practice that is helping / hindering her progress? Is it locational? Does she feel more confident in the resource setting? Does she need more support / concrete materials in class?

(Journal entry)

I tried a variety of strategies and interventions including working in the class with **Pat** and observing how she functioned in the class situation, before the painful truth slowly dawned. It wasn't my inspirational practice that was enabling her to achieve a modicum of success in my resource room. My practice was actually a source of her (and my) failure. I was constantly leading and prompting her, constantly moving her on, missing opportunities to identify and explore sources of difficulty. When I should have been moving her back to find the root of the problem, I was focusing on moving her on. I came to realise that moving back, listening and attending to a particular difficulty are key practices of support teaching. I came to the realisation that I had to stop teaching, not to lead or prompt, not to talk constantly and interrupt the child, not to listen exclusively for the answer I wanted to hear. Too often I had jumped in to re-teach the whole process, while failing to help Pat recognise and overcome the precise difficulty. I rendered her dependent on my intervention. A structured teaching approach was necessary to build confidence but Pat needed to assume increasing responsibility for her own work and effort, in order to survive in any given learning environment (Westwood 1997).

Like Brown (1996) I learned that I had to develop new strategies that focused on helping a learner understand and appreciate what they could do. I began to ask new kinds of questions, such as 'How did you do that?' I began to use simpler numbers and examples, and used non-maths questions to explore a concept in maths. I began using counter examples and counter suggestions to test the strength of a belief, such as 'What would

you think if such-and-such happened?' or 'Why do you think that is happening?' I asked Pat to explain her procedures to me as she worked through the examples step by step. This afforded me the opportunity to identify the exact point of confusion and allowed me to teach from there. Discussion revealed information about levels of confidence, flexibility of thinking and underlying knowledge.

I invited Pat to appreciate her own knowledge and ask me questions about her learning, such as, 'Tell me something you know' and 'Ask me a question that you think may help.' I was all the time urging Pat to develop an awareness of her own learning and a realisation of her autonomy as a learner. I learned that one of the most important things I could do was also to become aware of my own capacity for learning, as I was trying to enable the children to become aware of theirs. Drawing on the work of Claxton (1996), I realised that educators should engage in a process of critical reflection upon our outmoded implicit theories of learning, because while these remain tacitly installed in our minds, neither the necessity nor the possibility of a different view of learning can be seriously entertained (Claxton *et al.* 1996: 45–56).

This comment was true for myself, and for Pat. It took time for her to realise that getting the 'right answer' was not the most important thing. She would be visibly upset if the answer was not right and would tear the page from her copybook as she did not want any wrong answers in it. 'Just tell me how to do it!' she would demand. 'I don't know why it's wrong. Just tell me the right answer!' (Journal entry).

Over time, Pat learned to accept that making mistakes was part of the process of learning. In later diary entries I was able to record comments from Pat of the kind, 'I am learning about how to do maths' (Journal entry) and 'I know that I will get to learn this' (Journal entry). At the same time, I also was learning that learning takes time and emerges from previously less adequate forms of learning. New theories emerge from theories that we

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discard in light of better understanding. My diary entries about my own learning contain the following:

> I now know that I was impeding Pat's progress. I treat her as an incompetent learner and make her increasingly dependent on me. I am so keen to help and support her that I've removed the possibility of failure for her. I assumed that she needed to experience success only. I forgot the vital link between effort, persistence and success. Is it possible that my wish to succeed in front of my colleagues is driving me to take over Pat's learning? I can't be responsible for her learning. I can only facilitate it. (Journal entry, 11th April).

> Pat needs to develop self-management skills, to develop an internal locus of control and recognise that her own actions influence her success and failure. She needs to learn how to learn, not just how to find the correct answer to particular problems. (Journal entry, 22nd April).

> I now realise that explicit modelling of effective ways of approaching / solving a learning task is vital for Pat. She needs abundant opportunities to practise and master new strategies across a wide range of new concepts. My aim should be meta-cognitive instruction. I have valued achievement over learning. I must change her perception of the cause of her success in school. (Journal entry, 16th May).

I began to appreciate that new learning has to arise from challenging and changing previous forms of learning. This view is also found in the literatures of critical pedagogy. Brown, for example, states that 'Our kids do not make errors comfortably. They are concerned about getting things right …' (Brown 1996 : 221). So are their teachers. Changing habituated responses and behaviours can be very difficult. Without an awareness of the nature of the underlying assumptions which drive our behaviour, it is

almost impossible. I came to realise that learning to teach was a developmental process, and this belief then helped me to adapt my teaching, and see it as a continuum as part of the continuum of living. All too often, however, many teachers and their students assume that there is an implicit theory of learning to which the professional educator is prone, that sees learning as happening in orderly formal contexts being associated with effort, work and discipline, and proceeding according to prescribed curricular norms leading to preconceived assessment outcomes (Claxton *et al*. 1996: 45–56). Such attitudes can preclude learning opportunities found in many spontaneous, unstructured activities. It aims to limit learning to formalised school time and activities, and disconnects learning from life. Learners, and their teachers, can come to associate 'learning' with classrooms, regimentation, rules and school uniform. This is the view to which many classroom teachers subscribe, as I have explained throughout, where learning is limited by entrance examinations, the completion of textbooks, deadlines and standardised testing. The resulting pressures do not necessarily encourage a holistic view of learners or learning. The task of the teacher becomes one of forcing the children to conform to the teacher's expectations of learning. For many, this can result in increased anti-learning attitudes, and a refusal to conform to teachers' expectations.

**Case study 3:  Laney's story**

Laney was my second important teacher. Laney taught me to question.

Laney questions everything in life, and is encouraged to do so by her mother, who tries always to provide answers to Laney's incessant stream of 'whys?' Laney questions why she has to eat breakfast, why it is necessary to go to school, why her friend's mum died, why dad has to go to work. She brings her whys into school. There she is met by disapproval. She is told that her why questions are red herrings, that she is being cheeky, or simply 'trying to annoy the teacher'. I received a complaint from a class teacher that Laney had asked 'Why do we have to wear indoor shoes?' My journal entry records the

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teacher's comment that Laney is 'being smart'. Another journal entry reads that a classroom teacher interpreted Laney's question, 'Why do we need to write out our tables every night'?' as 'questioning my authority.' My view is that Laney was asking honest questions, trying to make sense of her own experience of schooling, and exercising her capacity for originality of mind and critical engagement. I did not see her questioning as threatening or a bid to undermine the teacher's authority. I saw it as an extension of her enquiring behaviour at home, an exploration of her own implicit theories of how the world works. Laney was however designated as a student 'with special needs', on the understanding, as Atkinson explains, that she does not 'conform to the expectations of learning that [such students] perceive their teacher to have' (Atkinson 1996: 230). It then becomes a breakdown of trust between an outraged teacher and a bewildered student, but also becomes a matter of honour for a teacher who has an implicit theory of learning as learners' need to learn official knowledges, which, in accordance with the teacher's implicit theory of teaching, it is the teacher's responsibility to impart.

From my work with Laney, I learned that it was my responsibility to understand and accept her, and to develop a relationship based on mutual trust and respect, **which** Atkinson says is a necessary condition for successful learning to take place. In the situation of Laney and myself, it was learning for both of us, and how we could develop the kind of relationship that would enable reciprocal teaching and learning to take place. We both needed to identify the origin of our respective failures, she to learn how to learn subjects and skills, and I to learn how to teach her to learn such things, and so avoid our respective 'shutting down' and giving up on each other. Too often such shutting down can lead to misbehaviour on the part of children, as manifested in disrespectful and anti-social activities, and misbehaviour on the part of teachers, as manifested in unjustified authoritarian and verbally violent practices.

As a support teacher, I refused to engage in such practices. I refused, and through my studies and research, I enabled myself to engage in democratic and non-violent practices,

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such that I encouraged children also to learn not to shut down and give up on themselves.

Above all, I learned that successful support teaching could not be achieved by imitating what was commonly considered good practice in mainstream class teaching, even though the pressure to do so was immense. And this led me to reflect that perhaps mainstream class teaching ought to learn from the practices of support  teachers, for it is often support teachers who achieve the most spectacular results, given that they are working with children who have already been designated 'failures' in one way or another. I had to resist the enticements of being seen as a success in the eyes of my peers, to resist the belief that 'my acceptability as a colleague and a co-professional depend[s] on being seen as competent in their eyes' (Claxton *et al.* 1996: 5), and come to accept the power of my own personal knowledge (Polanyi 1958) that I was doing what was right for my practice, which was about helping children who had been labelled as failures to see that they were actually glorious successes, provided this was seen through an appropriate lens.

In this chapter I have recounted how I worked with children in three different contexts, and learned from them all in different ways. My greatest challenge, and triumph, however, was still to come. This I recount in Chapter 7, where I introduce Nell.