Introduction and Overview

Outlining the main ideas of my thesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

I begin with my values.

My values

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

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

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

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

> We understand our ontological values as the deeply spiritual connections between ourselves and others. These are embodied values, which we make external and explicit through our practices and theories.
>
> (Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.86)

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

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

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

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

- Why do I form a circle with my students and provide opportunities for dialogue? (Video link: Dialogue in a circle)

- How do I encourage my students to exercise their critical faculties and think for themselves?

- Why do I resist being prescriptive or didactic and instead seek to provide opportunities for my students to learn about their world through their own capacity for enquiry?

- Why do I endeavour to encourage my students' aesthetic responses to music and art through providing them with opportunities to respond in ways that honour their different intelligences?

- Why do I view worksheets as occasions for dialogue? (Video link: Worksheet dialogue)

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

My epistemological values

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

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

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

Issues of validity and values

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

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

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

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

The potential significance of my study

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

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

> … suspicious of the theorists' presumption to guide educators in their practice, and he resented the view of teachers as passive transmitters of knowledge, authorized from above. He mocked the pretentious "expert" whose theoretical principles have limited value for the daily struggles of teachers
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> (Efron 2005 p.146)

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

> …[He] appreciated that the uniqueness and mysterious nature of the human soul requires subjective, context-related, and intuitive perspective … Korczak's ideas are still relevant to the current educational discourse and may stimulate new insights into the role of the educator as a researcher and knowledge producer who is an active advocate of change and reform
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> (Efron 2005 p.146)

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

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

> … abandon the quest for some naïve concept of realism, focusing instead on the clarification of [one's] position in the web of reality and the social locations of other researchers and the ways they shape the production and interpretation of knowledge.
>
> (Kincheloe and Berry 2004 p.2)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My claim to knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Have I taught in ways that acknowledge my students as creative independent knowers, capable of original and critical engagement?

- Is there evidence for my claim that I have developed my own learning along with my students?

- Have I made a difference for good in my institution through the exercise of my educational influence?

- Have I contributed to the learning of others through living towards my values of justice and freedom in my educative relationships?

The broad aims of my research therefore became:

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

10

- an improvement in my educational practice and the realisation in my practice of my values of care, freedom and justice, along with the development of my own critical awareness

- a realisation of some of the stated aims of the Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999)

- the promotion of a culture of respectful dialogue in my classroom: a development of my students' confidence in their ability to speak to a group of their peers and the development of their capacity to critique

- a contribution towards the development of a critical community of enquiry in my institution as I assist colleagues in their efforts to establish an environment for critical dialogue in their classrooms.

Organisation of the thesis

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

- I identify a concern when my educational values are denied in my practice

- I offer examples of situations to show how these educational values are denied in my practice

- I imagine and implement a solution to the situation

- I evaluate the outcomes of the implemented solution

- I modify my practice in light of the outcomes of the implemented solution

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

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