Concluding chapter: The end is a new beginning

The next chapter, Chapter 9, concludes my research document. However, it is neither the end of my story nor the end of my epistemological journey. In a sense when I end this chapter I begin a new phase of my practice – that of living faithfully to my articulated values and continuing to reflect on and improve what I do.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

The potential significance of my research

In this final chapter I outline what I claim to have achieved, and what I know I have learned. I also state what I believe is the significance of my practice, at a practical and a theoretical level.

I am claiming to have achieved the following at a practical level:

- I have begun to live my values of care, freedom and justice more fully in my practice
- I have encouraged and supported my students to realise their capacity for originality and critical engagement
- I have contributed to the improved subject knowledge of the children that I have taught
- I have contributed to the transformation of my institution through transforming my practice
- I have attempted to realise some of the principles of the 1999 Curriculum in my practice

I know I have learned the following at a theoretical level:

- I have reconceptualised my own practice, and influenced others to reconceptualise theirs
- I have developed my capacity to make judgements about the quality of what I am doing as a practitioner and a researcher, and influenced others to do the same
- I have improved myself as a person: having begun to think about what 'good' means, I am now closer to realising the vision of the good teacher I wish to be.

I now organise this chapter into two parts that deal with the two aspects of my claims to knowledge.

Chapter 9 Part I

I am claiming that I have realised my educational values in my practice. For example I developed dialogic pedagogies that contributed to the improved subject knowledge of the children. As I have shown throughout this document, developing these pedagogies meant, that as I supported and encouraged my students to think for themselves, I also increased my own critical awareness as I engaged with ideas about knowledge and critiqued the growing technicisation underpinning much of the rationalisation of the school day .

Releasing the Imagination

Borrowing from Greene (1995), I am claiming that I have contributed to the children's content knowledge through releasing their imaginations. Like Greene (2001), I have tried to ensure that my students experience an 'aesthetic' education, a mode of education intended to make possible informed, aware participation in works of art. This is not, Greene contends, 'the kind of undertaking geared to the transmission of pieces of knowledge or specific skills to passive learners' (p.110). I claim that through thoughtful and critical pedagogies I have opened doors for the children to learn from artists and their work. By visiting galleries; listening to music and responding in pictures, dance, drama, writing or verbally; by sitting outdoors to draw from observation the children have unlocked new perspectives for themselves and identified new alternatives. I claim that by employing dialogical pedagogies I relate to my students as thinking human beings who can make meaning for themselves and engage in multiple vantage points. By giving my children the space and opportunities to engage in silent dialogue with themselves as they gaze at a piece of art or with others as they explore art together, I embody my values of care, freedom and justice, and communicate those values through my practice. I show the realisation of these values in the following photos. In Figure 9.1 the children are silent, but from the expressions on their faces it is clear that they are in communion with themselves, and thinking deeply, while in Figures 9.2, 9.3 and 9.4 they are engaged with each other.

Figure 9-1: Photo of students deep in thought in an art gallery

Figure 9-2: Photo of students engaged in dialogue planning an art topic

Figure 9-3: Photo of two children in one-to-one dialogue about art

I believe that in teaching the way I now do, I 'hold open the world for a child' (Macdonald 1995, cited in Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.92). I have faith in my own capacity to nurture dialogical ways of knowing that enable my students and myself to be aware of how we learn to think for ourselves. I agree with Greene when she says:

> It may be our interest in imagination, as much as our interest in active learning, which makes us so eager to encourage a sense of agency among those with whom we work. By that I mean consciousness of the power to choose and to act upon what is chosen … a willingness to take initiatives, to pose critical questions, to play an authentic part in ongoing dialogues …
>
> (Greene 2001 p.110)

The dialogic pedagogies that I have now put into place in my classroom find resonance in Bakhtin's ideas about the creation of knowledge. Holquist (2002) suggests that for Bakhtin, nothing *is* in itself.

> Existence [for Bakhtin] is sobytie sobytiya, the event of co-being; it is a vast web of interconnections each and all of which are linked as participants in an event whose totality is so immense that no one of us can ever know it. That event manifests itself in the form of a constant, ceaseless creation and exchange of meaning.
>
> (Holquist 2002 p.41)

This idea makes sense to me. In relation to my students' learning, and as Bakhtin suggested, there was possibly 'a constant ceaseless creation and exchange of meaning' (Holquist 2002 p.41). When the children were busily researching information for their projects, it seemed to me that they were engaged in the co-creation of knowledge in dialogue with each other or with their own thoughts. What matters most is that, in all these learning situations, the children have opportunities to think for themselves and are not just relying on received wisdom from textbooks.

Figure 9-4: Photo of children in dialogue about sculptures in a gallery

When a child is in dialogue with others in a knitting circle, (Video Link: dialogue and knitting) or in conversation with a man who has come in to demonstrate his love for the feel of wood under his hands, or who, having spent time engaging with works by Picasso or Miro, has responded with a drawing of her own (Figures 9.5a, and 9.5b), she has not been told what to say, do, or think. She relies instead on her own originality of mind and capacity for critical engagement.

Figure 9-5a: Photo of students' responses to Picasso

Figure 9-5b: Photos of students' responses to Miro

Included also in my data is a video clip showing the children engaged in dialogue as they collaborate on filling out some Halloween worksheets and worksheets based on the human skeleton and another clip that follows, showing the children cooperating with each other on a creative writing exercise based on Brueghel's 'Hunter in the snow' and 'Winter landscape' (Video Link: worksheet collaborations and creative writing). In Appendix E. there are also several examples of the high level of individual creative responses of the children to the music and artwork of others. Several research reports

into Irish classrooms decry the dominance of worksheets and workbooks (Greaney and Close 1989, Government of Ireland 2005a, Murphy 2004).

> The classroom approach and methodology appears to remain teacher-directed and focused, with pupil activity consisting of the widespread use of worksheets and textbooks … rather than on guided discovery, activity …
>
> (Murphy 2004 p.256)

There is an understanding amongst such reports that workbooks and worksheets are employed as passive and mindless drills. My video shows how even worksheets, if employed dialogically with several children exploring together, can in fact be rich opportunities for exploration and dialogue.

It mattered little to me that my students' learning from their various dialogical experiences was not quantifiable empirically as per my monthly progress reports (see Chapter 5). What was significant, I felt, was that my students were learning in ways that were life affirming, and the learning opportunities were appropriate to each child's unique way of knowing. I was delighted that the children learned that often situations occur for which no right answers are to be found, and that learning needs to be problematic. I felt that I had found pedagogies that encouraged them to problematise content knowledge as well as their own learning processes. Thus their main subject knowledge became knowledge of their own capacity to learn and to think critically.

The next episode demonstrates this clearly. It shows that the children learned to reflect on their own thinking and evaluate it in the light of new thinking. On 22-11-05 I gave them 'booklets' composed of the transcripts from four Thinking Times dating from early September 2005 to the end of October 2005 to read and discuss. In my diary I recorded that

> The children were immediately engrossed and spent the first few minutes quickly scanning the pages for their own contributions. When they found their own name they read their own contributions several times and eagerly showed them each other. Only then did they read through the transcripts.
>
> The children then evaluated their own thinking.
>
> C: Actually it's kind of good to read these again. I wouldn't say what I said there again now though, because when you read what other people said you'd kind of get different feelings about what to say.

> K: I think the discussion on Yellow Bird was pretty good. I'm kind of amazed at myself…at what I said. It's actually quite sort of … grownup.
>
> J: I remember after doing that Thinking Time I kept thinking about my feelings and my mind and my soul and wondering about it and stuff. I like what I said here. I'd still agree with it.
>
> P: I still agree with what *I* said. It often strikes me when we're on about what the frog said and the toad said and the spider said and…look they're not human! Why are we getting so excited about them? – They're animals for God's sake! …not even real animals…they're made up for a story!
>
> J: Yeah but P… the point is what's it about … what's the author trying to tell us? … We don't believe the stories, we…think about what the point is. (RD 22-11-05)

I believe the data clearly demonstrate that the children can be critical about their own critical thinking. The data suggest that the children respect the discussions and take them seriously. P's contribution is very true to form: he regularly shows that he is one of the deepest and most lateral thinkers in the class, and he often states after some time in discussion that the suspension of belief he needed to go along with a fiction story has just collapsed. For example: 'I mean … he's a toad! Why would he need a swimsuit? Frogs don't wear swimsuits!' (Video Link: I mean… he's a toad!). In the actual transcript of the 'Yellow Bird, Black Spider' story (Archer and Archer 2004) he had said

> P: I don't know why we're all feeing so shocked about the bird eating the spider. That's what birds do…all the time! They eat spiders and worms and cute things like ladybirds. So what's so extraordinary about eating a spider? I think it's because we're looking at that bird as if he's human. He's a **bird**! (RD excerpt from transcript of Yellow Bird Black Spider 12-10-05; Appendix C.9.)

P recognises that children's fiction is steeped in anthropomorphic imagery. And he is not a fan of the genre. However, J's response to him, as they evaluated the transcripts, shows that J has grasped that the exercise in discussing such stories is an exercise in thinking critically.

> Reflection 1
>
> The episode shows me the significance of carrying out research in my own context.

> As the teacher-researcher, I am in a position to evaluate what happens at a different level to that of an outside researcher and can learn from it so as to improve what I do in a caring and just way.
>
> I know my children in a way that I doubt an outsider could. We share a 'communicative past' (Mercer 1995 p.61).
>
> I 'know' their 'communicative history' as well as their 'communicative present' (op cit).
>
> I knew how P disliked fictional stories, and so in an effort to be caring and just to him and to other children who did not engage with fictional material well, I ensured that we also discussed scientific concepts and history and mathematics – topics he chose and in which he engaged deeply. (RD 22-11-05)

I offer the data above as evidence that the children have reached a high level of metacognition as well as critical awareness. These data and my theorising of them also contribute to my arguments about the power of teacher-practitioner self study as a methodology for generating a living theory of practice (see Chapter 3).

The children also demonstrated critical awareness around day-to-day school issues: for example, when the children's creative writing ran overtime, or when they didn't want to stop researching because the clock said 10.30 a.m. and it was time for something else, they were demonstrating critical engagement. They declined to interrupt the flow of knowing of which Bohm (1998) spoke, or to break Bakhtin's (1981) idea of the 'wholeness' of the learning situation. Through working with the children, I also came to see my teaching as a holistic practice, and I linked this with my values of care, freedom and justice. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to the feeling of absorption in creativity as 'flow' while Pirsig (1974) calls it 'wholeness' and links it to care:

> When you're not dominated by feelings of separateness from what you're working on, then you can be said to 'care' about what you're doing. That is what caring really is: 'a feeling of identification with what one's doing.'
>
> (Pirsig 1974 p.290)

The idea of wholeness also permeates the philosophy underpinning the living nature of the theory I am generating. Bohm's (2004) idea of the whole world as 'shades merging into one' (p.10) also has resonance for my methodology, because a living form of research involves a flow of inclusional and dialogical practices. Practitioner-researchers like me can take a long time to realise that there is no template, no 'set

menu' for the methodology – in fact no reified 'methodology'. They learn to go with the flow of a living practice in relation with others.

In developing my living theory of practice, within the context of my institution, I had to learn to allow dialogical practices and the technical rationality of my existing school system to coexist. I had to learn to live with competing epistemological logics. I cannot, and should not, change institutional structures overnight. For example, it is not within my power to have an open-ended arrangement about using the computer lab or the PE hall. These resources have to be fairly divided between classes. I have had to incorporate the logistics of everyday school life into my practice, in the interests of a caring and just level of access for all, to limited resources.

Neither can I adopt a maverick approach to when the learning support, language support and resource teachers can work in my room with the students who need help. In terms of assessing my practice for planning and progress reports, I also had to be resourceful in developing inclusive ways of showing what I was doing, and hope that there would be adequate evidence of learning taking place. I deliberately developed creative ways of showing children involved in dialogical practices, by including CDs and photos of different class-based activities with my progress reports to the principal.

My children and I learned much from the work of my colleagues in my university study group. From M's sharing of her work on 'travel buddies' and East-West projects (Glenn 2006) I got the idea of setting up pen pal activities for my students with children in two schools in Arizona (2004/5; 2005/6), and in Portland Oregon (2006/7). Figure 9.6 provides a flavour of what happened when letters arrived.

Figure 9-6: Photos of students reading & sharing US pen pal letters

> A cheer goes up when the letters arrive. First the children are quiet as they absorb their own letters, and then a buzz breaks out as they share letters. (RD 16-10-04)

The pen pal project was a huge success. As well as the social learning involved in communicating with each other and with children from other cultures, my children learned about geography, through an investigation into the topography and climate of Arizona, and, more critically, about the fact that their Irish reality was very different to that of the children in Arizona. For example, my students wrote about Gaelic football and hurling, assuming that their pen pals would know what they were talking about. They also learned about the differences in language and meaning between American English and Irish English:

> S: My pen friend thought "hurling" meant being violently sick.
>
> M: God! Look at this. She thinks we all live in cottages on a hillside!
>
> CM: My pen pal asked me if I ever saw a leprechaun!
>
> G: The Saguaro cactus flower is the national flower of Arizona: what's ours? (RD 16-10-04)

Likewise the children in the USA laughed at some of the assumptions my students made about life in a desert region. When the American children told my students that they were doing a 'big project' on early American elementary schooling (Figure 9.7), my children were anxious to do a history project too, and they decided to do one that would demonstrate the antiquity of Irish culture.

Figure 9-7: Photo of Arizona pen pals' schooldays project

> We are about to wrap up the 'Pioneer Schooldays' experience and will send a group picture in our pioneer clothes in front of the first territorial governor's "mansion"-- a 3-room log cabin about 150 years old. That's ancient for us white folks out here! (RD email from teacher: P.ALaF 21-01-05)

My students linked their history project with the Religion programme and investigated the effect of the arrival of Christianity on 5th Century pagan Celtic Ireland. As part of this project E constructed a church (Figures 9.8). Her work was meticulous and led to a significant learning episode for me and a challenging once again of how children are often failed by an education system that does not recognise their multi faceted intelligences (Gardner 1983). Other children then followed her example and constructed a monastic Round Tower, some toilet roll Viking raiders, a Viking long ship, a Norman castle and some Tudor toilet roll lords and ladies.

Figure 9-8: Photo of E's church with 'action man' St Patrick

E paid incredible attention to interior detail and her finished church was a considerable demonstration of her architectural, construction, and artistic skills. With her permission, some children then decided to add electric lights to the church, which was inaccurate chronologically and historically, but their efforts proved informative for me, as the next excerpt shows:

> A group of children who were good at physics asked E. if they could 'electrify' the church. They set to work with the electricity kit. They had great fun stripping and cutting wires and arguing about what bulb and battery should go where. But after half a day they were no nearer providing light in the church although they had become expert wire-strippers.
>
> I asked E to help them. After all it was her church. She was not strong at physics but I knew she was a good manager of people, with excellent organisational skills and tactful interpersonal intelligence. She allocated tasks, organised the tidying up of the kit box, delegated a team to clear the floor and work area, and within an hour the bulbs were lighting. (RD 17-02-05)

E is a child who attained a low score in both English and Maths standardised tests. According to the technical rational logics of the tests, she is a 'slow' learner. However, by my criteria, grounded in my inclusional logics and based on my observation of her real-life abilities, she is a superb artist, actor, dancer, architect, engineer, manager, communicator and a sociable, popular student. I am not alone in recognising this. It must be noted that E has been fortunate: her multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983) have flourished throughout her career in our school. The kinds of pedagogies I was developing were built on the recognition that children like E must have opportunities to demonstrate their critical intellectual strengths. These pedagogies thereby contribute to a more just and inclusional form of educational practice.

Two children (C in my class and V in Arizona) did a co-operative science experiment comparing the quality of wild water and tap water in Cork with that in Arizona. The experiment was entered in the Arizona State Science Fair.

> V's teacher here. We have just made a video of our class science fair projects and we are so pleased with how V and C's project has turned out. What's even better is that our principal -- a former high school science teacher -- has told me it is one of the best projects he's seen in years. V made this great "stacking" graph showing the differences between the tap water sources and the "wild" water sources for each country.
>
> Looking at the graph, we see that the boys' hypothesis was correct -- Arizona's wild water sources are very different from what comes out of the tap. Cork's tap water -- when taken as a whole -- is very similar to its wild water sources. We will be sending you all that V has written and displayed and I will take pictures of his board and email them to you.
>
> As a teacher, this kind of learning really is exciting! (RD email correspondence from Arizona teacher P.ALaF 20-02-05)

Considerable critical awareness was generated also when my students grappled with the multicultural reality of why the American children said 'Happy holidays' instead of 'Happy Christmas' and why, despite their multi-ethnicity, they did not have to learn a compulsory second language like Irish. The Arizona/Cork communication culminated in the teacher of the 3rd grade class spending two days in my classroom sharing her knowledge about life with scorpions, snakes and cacti in Arizona with the children.

> I can be at your school on that Thursday or Friday. I am so very, very excited. We are sending to you this week: a wooden model of a scorpion for your class to put together, scorpion information handouts for all students to read and color, and step-by-step directions for drawing an accurate model of these creepy arachnids. Is that ok? I would be glad to help students put together the model. (Extract from email correspondence with P.ALaF 25-05-05)

Almost three years after the initial correspondence began some of the students are still corresponding with their pen pals.

From C, a colleague involved in researching her practice with children who have Specific Learning Disabilities (Dyslexia), I became aware of the possibilities of asking children to become critical of their own learning (McDonagh 2000, 2002, 2007). This resulted in several projects whereby I encouraged my students to present their learning to others. On different occasions, they explained the principles behind the phenomenon of 'dancing raisins' to an Infant class, discussed the possible existence of aliens, and demonstrated butter making and magnetic car design. (Figures 9.9 to 9.12 below.)

Figure 9-9: Photos students presenting creative writing & science experiment

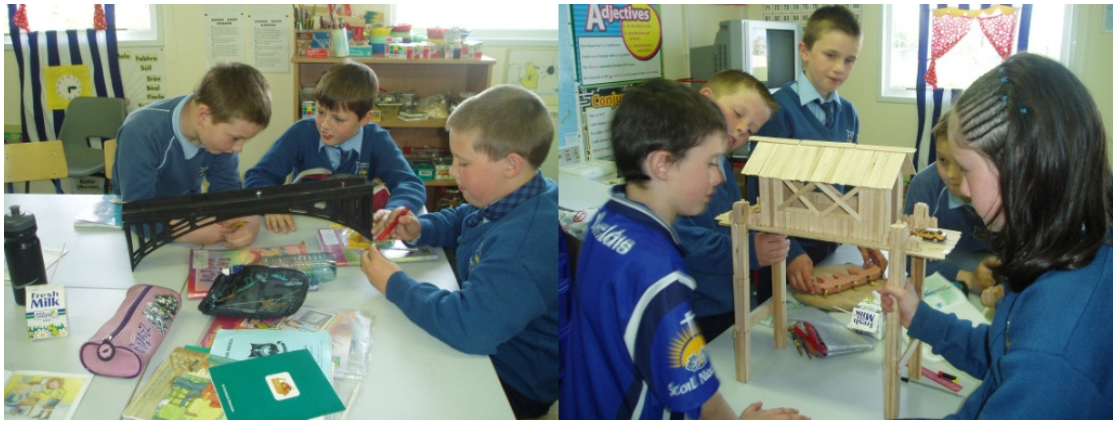

Figure 9-10: Photos of bridges made by students during science

Figure 9-11: Photos of bridges demonstrated by students for science open day

The students also demonstrated their learning to their parents and to children from other classes at a science open day as shown in the photos below: Figure 9.12.

Figure 9-12: Photos of students demonstrating butter making & magnetic cars

These are some of the ways in which I have been able to contribute to the children's content knowledge. Significantly, they and I have come to an understanding that content knowledge is related to individual processes of learning. Occasionally they are able to articulate this, as in many of the excerpts I have included throughout. I have definitely learned how to articulate this, and the importance of doing so. I am critically aware of my own processes of learning, and I encourage my students to develop this capacity also.

I am also claiming that I have enabled my students to exercise their capacity for originality and critical engagement. As well as encouraging them to exercise critical awareness in relation to the subject areas in the curriculum, I have, through focussing on making time available for discrete classroom discussion, also encouraged them to be aware of their capacity for originality and critical engagement, and to articulate this awareness.

> My 3rd class and I had a discussion on animal rights on 27-02-06: I read 'Oi! Get off our train' (Burningham 1991) and 'Zoo' (Browne 1992) and then asked the children to discuss their thoughts about animals' rights.
>
> Me: Should all animals have the same rights? For example should rats and Labrador guide dogs deserve the same rights?
>
> A: Well, the guide dog is doing a job and he's useful so I'd put him in a different group to the rat 'cos they are just troublesome and if you get a bite of a lady rat you can die …
>
> A: I think all animals should have the right to freedom, like us. They shouldn't have to stay in cages for their whole lives. At least we get left out free at 18.
>
> Sh: I've been thinking about rights and I don't think that every single animal should have rights. Some should have rights, not rats, snakes, crocodiles, maybe not wasps. If you made a line you could put those on one side, because they have sharp teeth and they can bite you. Then on the other side you could put lions and tigers and cows and dogs and cats and rabbits and bears. They deserve rights, they're good. (RD 27-02-06, Appendix C.2.)

Here are two excerpts: both following a reading of 'The Story of Anne Frank' with two 3rd classes

> B: I was thinking … well … the way we all think can't be forced on us … like we might think it's right to be Catholics but we couldn't **make** someone **be** a Catholic, we could bring them to the church but we couldn't force them to believe. You have to **be** one to really believe … and you can't make anyone else **be** one unless … they believe … for themselves (RD excerpt from transcript of Anne Frank 06-02-06 with SB's class, Appendix C.3.)
>
> K: I agree with T that freedom would mean doing everything you want even the bad. Well, do you know when you were reading the story [Anne Frank]? Well, you said the Americans joined with Britain to help them against the Germans. Well, in a certain way the Americans when they joined in, they were helping England with freedom, but then that means that they were … against … they were stopping Germany's freedom …if you take sides ... it means that sometimes you are stopping someone's freedom … well … a bit …
>
> P: I disagree with some people and I agree with others, who said that freedom is doing whatever you want, but only in a way. You can only have freedom if you're alone. Because if you were really free to think what you like and say what you like and do what you like it and there were other people around, it could be the baddest thing ever for them because you might want to do all bad things with your freedom ... Freedom could be sometimes good *but sometimes it could be the baddest thing ever*. (RD: transcript of 'freedom' 07-02-06; Appendix C.6.).

The children demonstrate here, I believe, that they have grasped fundamental aspects of freedom, and they have begun to be aware of the development of their own ideas. Like Berlin (2002), P has come to see for himself that total positive freedom could be 'the baddest thing ever'. The children recognise that freedom means having choices but that one person's freedom should not impinge or take from another's, and they recognise that freedom, like faith and critical thought, cannot be forced upon people.

I did not teach the children about freedom, nor did I teach them how to use their capacity for originality and critical engagement. I read them an abridged version of the story of Anne Frank and invited them to discuss the story. Their comments in the full transcripts (Appendix C.3. and C.6.) show considerable diversity in sophistication. Here I have chosen those that I felt were particularly striking in their simple and heartfelt wisdom. The children involved are aged eight or nine years old. They arrived at these explanations of what freedom means for themselves. The significance of my practice here is that, by providing opportunities for critique, I believe I have created a critical

community of enquiry within a caring, free and just practice in my classroom, and that this is evidenced by the children's words.

My educational influence in my workplace and in the wider domain

I am claiming that I have contributed to the transformation of my institution through transforming my practice. I did not set out to take this aspect as a core feature of my research. It became a value-added aspect, in that through my educative influence, I began to contribute to the education of my colleagues, and so came to contribute to the transformation of my institution.

As reported earlier from my appointment in 2001 I was involved in providing in-house professional development in the area of teaching for improved critical thinking in my institution. I now expand on what I wrote earlier, about how I engaged colleagues in informal conversation about my classroom discussions, and how my enthusiasm seemed to have influenced others to try the practice for themselves. Thirteen out of fourteen colleagues responded to me when I asked for evidence that I had been invitational in my approach to helping them try classroom discussion for themselves. Testimonies included the following:

> Thinking Time has been a foundation stone for educational policy in our school since 2001. Mary has *changed my way of thinking as a teacher*. Thinking Time permeates the school day. It encourages children and teachers to think, communicate and interact in a different way. (RD Extract from letter from SO'L 28-02-05)
>
> It is my belief that because of Mary's educative influence on the majority of the staff of fourteen teachers, they have been imbued with enthusiasm for the spirit and culture of thinking time … I lecture part-time in a third level institution … because of *Mary's influence I now give two lectures out of a series of ten on critical questioning and thinking*. (RD extract from letter from MC dated 22-02-04)
>
> You don't push your views on anyone: you speak with obvious pleasure and enthusiasm and share your delight in your children's ideas. (RD comment by DW 18-02-04 (see further examples in Appendices B.1. a. - B.1. m.)

Gradually, as the school grew, I was obliged to put professional development in Thinking Time on a more formal footing and I began to provide workshops and presentations for colleagues in my own school and for a neighbouring school. My approach was largely invitational, conversational and non-coercive (see evaluations

below). I began by articulating my values about education and I showed videos of discussions, and then spoke about my own experience in classroom practice. I read simple stories such as 'Something Else' (Cave and Riddell 1995) and invited comments. Colleagues who experienced this provided positive (and sometimes poignant) feedback:

> I wish I'd heard this long ago, when I could have done something about it. (RD comment by BD during summer in-service course July 2004).
>
> I have been teaching all my life: I am ready to retire. Why am I only learning this now? This way of encouraging children – people!!! – to think would have made such a difference to my teaching … it's so simple and so powerful. (RD extract from conversation with MR following workshop Aug 2004)

On 16-11-02 I was invited by the local Education Support Centre to conduct a workshop for teachers (Roche 2002d). I presented my ideas about Thinking Time in my usual way, through video and participation in a thinking circle (using the story 'Zoo' Browne 1992). The participating teachers completed evaluation sheets in which one of the questions was:

Q3. Which aspect of this workshop most appealed to you?

The answers I received included:

> The practical experience of a thinking time was helped by the videos which gave insight into the process. You have a lovely natural communication style – you are concerned for your subject, the children, and your audience of teachers who need your enthusiasm and support.
>
> I like the idea of allowing the teacher to be at the child's level in the discussion and the idea of the teacher and all the pupils listening to one child and that child isn't wrong.
>
> I loved the spirit of openness and willingness to participate which was evident in the group. (RD 16-11-02; Appendices B.4.a. to B.4.c. and B.5.a. to B.5.g.).

These responses were encouraging and affirming, and showed me that, like me, many teachers seek ways to encourage children to be more participative in classrooms. The evaluations in general show an awareness by teachers of different ages and levels of experience of the need for more dialogue in school.

I also provided a workshop for colleagues from my PhD study group and members of the University of Limerick Department of Education and Professional Studies (Roche 2002c). Colleagues agreed that the experience provided powerful learning:

> I was amazed at how powerful an activity the thinking time circle is at promoting a depth of engagement … I can only imagine the huge potential within philosophising with children for children's personal and social development … I believe that the environment you create is critical to the richness of thinking and engagement … I believe also that you are, through your thinking time, a mediator and gateway to children's innate knowledge and understanding. (RD email from MG 18-10-02)
>
> I would have loved thinking time when I was a child: I was a non-sporty child, always thinking and pondering. This would have been so liberating and so wonderful for the 'me' I was back then: to have the space to explore feelings, thoughts, ideas – but that need was not appreciated at that time. (RD comment by TG, University staff member 12-10-02)

The weekly practice of classroom discussion is now embedded in school policy. Teachers joining our staff receive professional development in the form of being invited to sit in on my classroom discussions and those of other teachers. I provide support in the form of workshops, a file of ideas and a bank of resources of stories, poems, and pictures. Teachers evaluate their discussions by keeping transcripts of what the children say, and adding their own observations and/or learning from the discussion.

ML, a teaching colleague, organised her weekly Thinking Time discussion with her 4th class around the topic 'What did friendship week mean to you?' on 16-02-07. She knew I was finishing my thesis and offered me a copy of her evaluation from her monthly progress records file, because she said 'this activity was so significant for me and I think the evaluation might be useful for you' (RD 05-04-07). Her complete document is included in Appendix D.2. as an example of how colleagues now use their evaluations of Thinking Times as opportunities for reflective practice. Her actions showed me that my studies are respected and are recognised as having relevance for others in my institution. In her evaluation ML had written:

> Very occasionally you experience a 'moment' in teaching that you know you'll always remember. This has got to be one of those times for me. (RD 05-04-07 written evaluation by ML; Appendix D.2.)

Evidence of my influence sometimes occurs when I least expect it. Corridor discussions with colleagues have been a rich source of data and learning for me. I now concur with Adger (2002) that 'professional talk is not icing on the cake of professional development. It is the cake.' (p.28)

> In the corridor today R said, 'I ended up having a conversation about feminism with Junior Infants! We started out talking about wearing summer clothes … and next thing I knew we were into a discussion on feminism!'
>
> S. replied, 'That's what I don't get: how do you know when to interrupt the discussion … and go with the new idea?'
>
> R. replied, 'I don't know really: I suppose from listening to Mary. I've heard her say so many times: go with your hunches – you'll recognise a 'good topic' when you hear it … … Mary often speaks about the need to look beneath the surface and the givens …' (RD 12-05-03)
>
> Today MK gave me some transcripts from her eight year olds. I was very struck and heartened by the examples in the transcript that show the children recognising multiple viewpoints … (RD 15-01-04)
>
> At a staff meeting today the principal spoke publicly about his delight in reading Thinking Time transcripts from the teaching staff. He referred to a teacher's comment in her evaluation that 'the discussion represented one of those rare teaching moments that only happens once or twice in a career.' (RD 20-03-07; Appendix D.2.)

I outlined earlier how I have also presented my work to teachers from outside of my own institution at workshops, in-service days and summer professional development courses and how teachers have been encouraged to try Thinking Time in their own contexts. A young trainee teacher recently spent some weeks in my classroom as part of her teaching practice. During this time she participated in several classroom discussions and was impressed with what she witnessed. She later wrote:

> I have picked up loads of ideas during my teaching practice … I liked your classroom discussions most of all though and I can't wait to have a class of my own to do that …
>
> I like the way they listen so nicely to each other and the way they build up on each other's ideas … they don't get upset at all when people disagree with their ideas. They seem to sort of say, 'Hmmm – she disagrees with what I said … maybe she has a point.' Or 'He thinks that and I think this … that's interesting.'

> I also like the way that the teacher and the children are sort of on the same level of importance in the discussion and there are no right answers or wrong answers. It's very fair, and very democratic … they really are thinking in those discussions.
>
> I've been amazed at some of the thoughts they've had and I found myself thinking 'that's an interesting angle … I didn't see that myself'. (RD extract from transcript of conversation from SC RD 08-12-06; Appendix B.1. j.).

In an email (received on 05-02-07) she subsequently wrote:

> I am starting my last placement after midterm break …I am so looking forward to trying out a thinking time with the class. I have even been telling my own class in college of how well it works. Hopefully the class teacher will be open to me trying it too. I'll keep you informed about how well it goes. (RD personal correspondence from SC 05-02-07)

The following is an extract from an evaluation written by a colleague who, some years ago, was influenced by my practice to try Thinking Time in her own context in a school that shared a campus with my former school. I had not known that I had influenced her practice or that she had continued with the methodology of classroom discussion to which I had introduced her, until she related an incident that occurred recently during her new status as a postgraduate student. She subsequently agreed to write about the incident and gave me permission to use it in my thesis:

> I am currently studying for an M.Ed and was recently asked in a seminar run by Dr --- to describe a powerful learning experience. I immediately thought of the first time I used Mary's version of classroom discussion.
>
> … I have used this format of classroom discussion since that first 'try-out' over ten years ago. I have found it to be an enriching and empowering way of 'being' with my pupils and only wish I had known of it much earlier in my teaching career.
>
> This version of classroom discussion has, in my opinion, had a significant, positive effect on the dynamics in my classroom. It fosters a warm, respectful and supportive relationship between the children and between the child and myself.
>
> The children, I think, learn to think for themselves and blossom in a classroom climate that encourages 'free' thinking and non-teacher-led discussion. (RD excerpt from written evaluation by MO'S 02-10-06 full evaluation in Appendix B.2.)

The data presented here demonstrate that one teacher can have an influence for good in the living practices of others. I can now claim, for instance, that my educative influence has influenced the practice of MO'S (above) and that she is now educatively influencing her students. Drawing on the work of Whitehead & McNiff (2006) I believe that in sharing my enthusiasm for and belief in dialogical practices I have had an educative influence in the learning of others. The others have not been coerced into adopting 'my' practice. They have not 'applied' my practice to their contexts. They have chosen to use the learning from my influence to create their own living practices in ways that are appropriate for them.

Chapter 9 Part 2

My claims to knowledge at the level of theory

I am offering new understandings that will contribute to the development of educational research and educational theory. I begin with explaining how I have reconceptualised my practice, and enabled others to reconceptualise theirs. This capacity for reconceptualisation has emerged through the process of doing my research and generating my living theory of critical practice.

My reconceptualisation of practice has taken a range of forms.

Reconceptualising my relationship with my students

I now understand my relationships with my students to be grounded in our common humanity. The relationships are dynamic and constantly evolving. I have no way of knowing, when I sit into a circle for a discussion, how the conversation will evolve. I do know that our interaction will be spontaneous, creative, and life-affirming for all (Figure 9.13)

Figure 9-13: Photos video still from discussions with 3rd classes

I have no planned responses when I talk with my students, other than to allow them to critique and discuss whatever story, poem, picture or topic has been chosen. Our interactions evolve dialogically in response to the ideas and the spontaneous contributions of each member of the group. There is no seeking of closure or right answers. I do know, however, that if I were to stand outside the group and direct or control it from without, in an authoritarian manner, and seek a product called 'knowledge' which could then be turned into 'activities' that my children call 'school work', it would not work. It 'works' because I am in the circle, as one-in-relation-with-my-students, enjoying the exciting co-creation of ideas, sharing our knowledge with each other, and just 'thinking with one big head' (Murris 2000 p.262).

Shor (1992) explains that traditionally, school knowledge is assumed to be produced separate from students, who are asked only to memorise what the teacher orders. Consequently, the act of knowing is often reduced into a transference of existing knowledge, with the teacher as specialist in this transference. In this way the qualities of critical reflection, problematising, and uncertainty, which are all qualities needed for learning, are ignored in favour of absorbing others' knowledge. I believe that I have produced evidence to show that in my classroom knowledge is vibrant, organic and in constant creation and re-creation and co-creation as my students dialogue with each other and with me (see Figures 9.14 and 9.15 below).

Figure 9-14: Photos of students in dialogue with each other

Figure 9-15: Video still of me in one-to-one discussion with a student

Like Noddings, I now see education in its widest sense as being central to the cultivation of a caring society. Noddings (2002) defines education as 'a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation' (p.283). The orientation of schooling systems in most advanced capitalist countries, Noddings argues, is a functionalist one with an emphasis on skilling to fulfil the future needs of business and the economy, whereas, she posits the view, as I do, that school needs to be about learning to live in relationship with others. I share her concern and her commitments. Relationships are what make life pleasurable or, if they are in turmoil, unbearable. While some attention is paid in the Irish Primary Curriculum to personal, social and life education (for example in the Social Personal and Health Education syllabus) it seems inadequate when set against the demands of Noddings' theory of care. She has argued

that education from a care perspective has four key components: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. When I look at my evidence, I see that I am demonstrating all four concepts in action.

My improved self-understanding

When I began problematising my practice during the early part of this study, I came to realise that I was a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989a), in that I held values that were systematically being denied by the structures of the institution I worked in. My commitments were to a form of educational inclusion wherein I value each person as a unique and 'concrete other' (Benhabib 1987) and wherein I see myself as one-in-relation with others (Bateson 1972, McNiff and Whitehead 2006, Whitehead and McNiff 2006). This meant that I felt uncomfortable with the idea of silent children listening passively as I 'delivered' lessons and changed my pedagogy accordingly to fit more closely with the values I held (see for example Figure 9.16 where children can be seen collaborating with enjoyment as they complete an assignment).

Figure 9-16: Photo of a group in dialogue as they work in pairs on an assignment

I now believe that I understand my practice at a deeper level. I see the relationship between my practice and the 'creation of good social orders' (McNiff and Whitehead 2006 p.255).

Drawing again on the work of Korczak, whose practice as an educator embodied his deeply held humanitarian values, Efron (2005 p. 146) states that Korczak wrote

> "Thanks to theory I know, thanks to practice I feel. Theory enriches the intellect; practice colours feelings, trains the will" (Korczak 1924/2001 p. 47) … Armed with knowledge of one's own specific circumstances, the educator picks and chooses the particular practice that is most appropriate. This is a

> personal and professional process, Korczak asserted, in which the practitioner is distrustful of both others' and his or her own opinion. "I don't know, I search, I ask questions … By deepening I complicate … Every 'elsewise' is a new stimulus for the efforts of thought" (Korczak 1924/2001 p. 48).
>
> (cited in Efron 2005 p.124)

Efron also suggests that Korczak's work is relevant for current thinking about the role of the practitioner researcher in current educational discourse:

> In many ways, Korczak's concept of the role of practice in forming a teacher's personal theory of teaching was a precursor to the current notion of teacher's knowledge ... [he] valued teachers' personal, experiential, situational, and relational knowledge. His belief in the personal practical knowledge (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) draws on the teacher's "own knowledge, passion, beliefs and in accordance to the specific contextual circumstances in which one has to act" (Korczak, 1978, p. 305) and was the starting point for his educational body of thought.
>
> (Efron 2005 p. 147)

This has relevance for my work. By becoming critical enough to challenge uncritiqued norms and to encourage others through my educative influence also to do so, I now see that interrogating my practice so as to form a 'personal theory of teaching' (Efron op cit p.147) influences what I do at the micro level of my practice, and also has potential for influencing macro or global social order. I understand, as McNiff and Whitehead (2006) point out that the future begins 'here and now' (p.255), and that, by living my values, I am beginning to improve my classroom practice and institutional practices. I also believe that I am influencing the education of others with whom I am in relation, just as they are influencing me and others. I also understand more about my values and, through trying to put them into practice, and justifying them to critical friends, I have begun to reconceptualise both my practice and my understanding of the conceptual frameworks of my study.

> Self-understanding deepens when professional actions are articulated and defended with colleagues and research participants.
>
> (O'Hanlon 2003 p.99)

Reconceptualising my understanding of freedom

Rather than saying my students should be free to think for themselves I deliberately frame the freedom involved as freedom from the constraints of not being afforded opportunities to do so. I consider that there are issues of power and powerlessness

involved in the frequent asymmetrical relationships between students and authority figures.

I do not believe that I 'confer' freedom on my students. I do believe that unless I as a teacher exercise care and justice in my relationships and refrain from restricting opportunities for students to talk in classrooms, my children cannot exercise their positive freedom in developing their capacities for thinking for themselves. Negative freedom from restrictions to autonomous critical thinking precedes the positive freedom to think for oneself. By deliberately developing dialogical pedagogies I have begun to live those ideas in practice.

My living theory of practice has evolved to the point where I now have balance and equilibrium between my authority role as teacher, my relational role as caring adult and my democratic role as 'just another person in the classroom' (Figure 9.17).

Figure 9-17: Video still of a student & I relating to each other through dialogue

I used to see my role as deliverer of a curriculum, evaluator of how well I had delivered it, and assessor of how well the children had received it. Because of the nature of the syllabus and the number of children in the classroom, I saw myself as chief talker, manager and authority figure. I saw my role as making children conform. I spent a lot of time organising children and preparing worksheets. I was uncritical about what kind of learning this would encourage and what sort of socialising was taking place.

My values of care and freedom and justice told me this was not a right way to teach, but I had no strategies until I began to articulate my values take action. Winter (1998)

suggests that action research is about seeking a voice 'with which to speak one's experience and one's ability to learn from that experience' (p53). I have been empowered through my research to reconceptualise my identity as a critical practitioner and I have learned to speak with a confident voice. I have critiqued and problematised my role and I have made changes to how I taught, giving rise to the kinds of dialogical pedagogies described throughout.

This has involved reconceptualising my own philosophy of education, moving from a focus on denial to enablement. This for me is good practice. I now understand that in order to live a moral life I have to try to do whatever is possible to enable my students to realise the greatest amount of freedom to exercise their capacity to think for themselves. This is a just and democratic form of education, rooted in care for my students. I have also had to look at whether there is incompatibility between my values of freedom and justice. I have had to examine whether I am setting my students up for tension with the Irish secondary system which, according to many commentators, discourages critical engagement. I bear Holmquist's (2006) warning in mind:

> As … students this week dutifully regurgitate the information they have been told to memorise, it may be a mistake to equate this with learning. Straying from the point, asking too many questions and exploring alternative avenues of thought aren't rewarded with high points … what is rewarded is the ability to do well in exams. There is a danger that by programming students with a predetermined curriculum, students are learning how to parrot not to learn. This makes them vulnerable to letting others tell them what to think on a whole range of philosophical, moral and ethical questions.
>
> (Holmquist, Irish Times 09-06-06 p.15)

Reconceptualising my ideas about care

I ask myself, am I exhibiting care for my students when I teach in a way that honours their freedom to think for themselves? I believe I am. My data base contains evidence that students who do a weekly discussion programme based on Thinking Time by and large exhibit self-control and dignity, demonstrate critical awareness, show care and respect for each other and for their teachers, and this has been validated by observers of discussions and by parents. (Appendix B.)

> 'One of the things that amazed me [about the video] was the fact that children I would have thought of as timid were actually well able to speak their mind, but they did so with respect and kindness for each other. All the children acted really responsibly towards each other, even when they were disagreeing with others. And they disagreed so nicely with you too and it didn't sound cheeky!' (RD excerpt from conversation with H's mother following Thinking Time video 06-06-06)
>
> 'C watched as I put up a bathroom shelf. She said "Dad, that's far too high." I said it was for medicines so it had to be high. She looked me right in the eye and said very politely, "I disagree with you, Dad, because it's actually too high even for Mum."' … 'I was amazed at a four-year-old using this language and it didn't sound rude or anything. I wish I had learned to speak up for myself in school. In interviews I go all embarrassed and clam up. If I'd been given the chance to speak like C in school, who knows where I'd be now?' (RD excerpt from conversation with CD's father during parent-teacher meeting February 03)

Reconceptualising my practice as an exercise in justice

Without developing dialogical pedagogies, I would not have learned how intelligent E was, how articulate A was and how sensitive C was. Children like Eo might never have had the opportunity to challenge norms such as straight lines and Ao might never have known that she was critically aware enough to 'question the answer'. Children like R might never have realised he loved music enough to dance and roar like a mountain king; C would not have been exposed to the thrill of having his hypothesis about the comparisons between Cork's and Arizona's water quality tested and submitted to the Regional finals of the State Science Fairs. The children might never have looked critically at their experiences of Irish sport and Irish Catholicism and questioned if the reality of lived experience of children in other countries was similar. I am claiming that, while I have not been directly responsible for these achievements, I have played a part somewhere.

I have developed my capacity to make judgements about the quality of what I am doing as a practitioner and a researcher, and enabled others to do the same.

This now brings me to speaking about my capacity for making judgements. If I am making claims of the kind above, I need to demonstrate that I am capable of making judgements, and to test these claims against identified standards of judgement which inform my evidence base. This becomes the focus of the next section.

Judging the quality of my practice and my research

In this section I show how I have learned to judge the quality of my practice and my research, and I explain that I use the same standards of judgement for both domains (Whitehead and Whitehead 2007).

Throughout, I have stated that my ontological values of care and regard for the other act as my living standards of judgement. These are my values, that is, what I value, so I regard them as good. I therefore judge my practice in terms of what I hold to be good, because my values reflect my commitment to who I am and how I understand myself in the world (see also Whitehead and McNiff 2006 p.82). One of the most profound personal significances of my study has been in relation to how I now understand the relationship between my practice and my values. I realise more clearly that I am in relation with others, experiencing a sense of our common humanity and life on this planet.

As I endeavour to make meaning of this relationship for myself, I try to hold myself accountable for my actions. I try to ensure that my practice is informed by my moral standards and by my values of care, freedom and justice.

Like Benhabib (1992), I believe that

> … each [individual]is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents and capacities.
>
> (Benhabib 1992 p.159)

I have come to a new understanding of my role in facilitating classroom discussion in that I now see it as a moral undertaking that allows me to see my students as co-participants, co-researchers and the people with whom I work and share my classroom.

I believe that my early teaching practice was lacking in fulfilment of these values, because I had not examined my practice reflectively, nor checked if I was living in a way that was commensurate with my values. Once I did so, I came to see that I was dominating my classroom with teacher-talk in an effort to deliver a content-based syllabus to my students.

Through engaging with literatures of classroom interaction (Barnes 1992, Burns and Myhill 2004, Haworth 2001, Mercer 1995, Norman 1992, Wells 1999, Wood 1992) I

have learned that I was far from unusual in allowing my linguistic competence (Wood 1992) to occupy the space my students need to explore their own thinking through dialogue so as 'to impose their own relevance' Haworth (2001 p. 382).

> Because of the teacher's claim to prior knowledge of the subject content, and right to control the pacing and sequencing of its transmission, pupils rarely managed to impose their own relevance outside the teachers' frame of reference … resulting in very low level of pupil questions … and pupil statements.
>
> (Haworth 2001 p.382)

I have reflected in this document on episodes of past practice that reveal my best teaching self and I hope to project that self into future teaching situations (McDermott and Richardson 2005 p.31). I have also reflected on episodes where I failed to live towards my values or where I experienced myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989a). Through reflection and meta-reflection I have come to see the learning potential of such episodes for transforming into improved practice. I believe that I have transformed my practice insofar as I now live more fully in a relational and dialogical way. The evidence I have produced throughout this thesis supports this claim. I have not taught my students what to think nor tried to change their thinking. I have not tried to impose closure on their thinking or confine it to being a subject called 'critical thinking'. I have learned to 'let the other be' and explore how I can best provide contexts where they can exercise their imaginative and creative abilities dialogically as they learn to be critical thinkers, and make judgements on their own capacity for critical engagement. The samples of children's work in Appendix E and the samples of transcripts in Appendix C show, by their variety and uniqueness, how my students demonstrate a significant capacity for critical and creative thinking. The children's voices as they sit in their discussion circles provide, perhaps, the strongest evidence of all (Video Link: the children's voices). (Figures 9.18 to 9.20).

> C: Yeah, maybe, cos like, if you're always just following other people like, without thinking for yourself, and just doing what they want you to do… you could end up in trouble. (RD 12-10-05 from 'Yellow Bird Black Spider' (Archer and Archer, 2004); Appendix C)
>
> E: You need to think your own thoughts just like you need to be yourself. You need to have fun too though. Thinking in a circle with your friends is fun. It helps you to be better at thinking on your own afterwards. (RD 12-10-05 Comment by E during conversation about doing Thinking Time following 'Yellow Bird, Black Spider' discussion)

S: If you didn't ever get to use your imagination then your life would be so boring and sad. (RD 04-10-05 'Once upon an ordinary school day' (McNaughton 2004); Appendix 3.7.)

Figure 9-18: Video still of a student enjoying herself as she voices her thoughts

Attentiveness in dialogue

As I have learned how to encourage children to think for themselves, I see that an important practice is to be respectful and attentive to what my students are saying and to develop a just and caring relationship with them. This has meant adopting an ethical stance. Listening is itself an ethical stance toward the other, according to Bingham (2006 p.337). Many data transcripts and videos throughout this document incorporate evidence of my attentiveness to my students' thoughts and voices. Observers of these videos and discussions have attested to this aspect.

I was struck by the relationship you have with the children in the circle – there's no strong teacher role visible, no discipline or control. I mean you are in control but it's not obvious, it's more like you're friends talking and listening to each other and enjoying the process into the bargain! (RD 11-11-05 O's comment following observing a discussion)

Figure 9-19: Video still of attentiveness in dialogue

Following the viewing of some Thinking Time videos by my students and their parents on different occasions, several parents commented about my practice:

> I don't think a teacher ever really talked to me as a person when I was in school. That's one of the most surprising things that struck me about the video – you're really listening and talking to them. You're not *teaching* them … well, not like the teachers in our day! (RD extract from conversation with TMcC 25-05-06)

I invited parents to write their evaluations of what they had experienced as they watched their children take part in discussions. One parent wrote:

> The videos of your classroom discussions were a revelation into the mind of a child in today's world …How much things have changed from the formal 'shut-up and listen, repeat after me' process which was, as often as not, followed by corporal punishment for failure to achieve. The rigidity of my time in education in primary was one with some dour teachers and iron discipline with little or no attention to life study …features of your classroom discussions greatly impressed me: the freedom of the children to behave as individuals, as equals, with you, in a group discussion … the fact that the children were free to participate in, to discuss and expound, to disagree with others (including teacher) and even change their minds was fascinating to observe.
>
> The democracy of the group discussion allowed opinions to be presented without reserve or embarrassment which can only aid the children … I feel that this concept should be broadly accepted in the primary educational system and form a necessary part of the curriculum. (RD correspondence from P.L 06-06-06; Appendix B. 7. b.)

Parents who viewed videos of my children participating in discussions used words such as ‘equality’, ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ (see Appendix B.7. a. – B.7. f.) and said that these qualities were visible in our discussions in how the children behaved towards each other (see Figure 9.20).

Figure 9-20: Video stills of students listening to peers

Their testimonies are evidence that the children and I are ‘concrete’ others to each other in the discussions and treat each other with respectful attentiveness.

Developing my own critical awareness

From a position where I understood education, intelligence, learning and teaching in propositional terms, I have come to view my practice as a dialogical engagement with others, with knowledge, with the literatures, and with myself. I cannot disentangle who I am from what I do, and I now understand that I cannot change others, nor do I want to try. This was not always the case. I may have set out to improve my students. Gradually I have come to realise that I can only change myself.

As I became familiar with the literatures of critical pedagogy I initially adopted a polemical stance and rejected all technical rationality. Then I saw that this stance was itself a form of closing down thinking. Through their articulation of their critical awareness, my children helped me to see that I was adopting a too narrow perspective and had to re-evaluate my stance. I now see that to be inclusive I need to incorporate all forms in my thinking, though not necessarily in my practice.

Beginning to realise the potential of my research as contributing to social betterment

My early draft writing aimed to communicate how I influence children to think critically in the interests of contributing to social betterment. In 2005, as I reflected on my data, I saw my practice from a different angle. I began to see that what I wanted to do was to contribute to social betterment, and one way to do that was through encouraging children to think for themselves. I therefore had to establish the link between what I was doing in class, and the social order. I reasoned that if I wished to contribute to the development of a good social order, I needed to be clear myself about my meaning of 'good', and ensure that my practice was good, on those terms.

I read the work of Russell, Popper and Alasdair McIntyre and saw how my work resonated with some of their ideas. I recognised too, for the first time, how a living theory of practice such as mine, as I hold myself accountable for my actions, could also be seen as contributing to a more peaceful and productive world (Whitehead 2000). I now recognised that my practice was about trying to ensure that any influence I exercised in the lives of my students was educative, and that I should be able to offer my account of how I exercised (and judged) that influence for public critique, to show how I hold myself accountable. This for me was how I came to conceptualise my 'good'. My practice could be deemed 'good' if I could show how I was living my values of care, freedom and justice, and if I could make the account of practice available for public critique. My practice could be understood as good if I showed how I had struggled to improve it, and could now show how I had improved, bearing in mind that I could improve even more if I tried (see also McNiff 2007). I have produced evidence throughout to show this struggle, and I can show how this has enabled me to influence my students so that they, too, cheerfully engage in their own struggle to be good.

My evidence resides in places where I have described the gradual development in critical thinking of my students from discussing why Humpty Dumpty was sitting on a wall, to the morality involved in Goldilocks' actions, to whether or not Jack was a hero and up to the point where Eo challenged school norms (Roche 2004a p.6). I have subjected my ideas to the critical scrutiny of others, and received feedback of the following kind:

> What Mary is doing here is exactly what Russell (1932) said was the work of educators, that is, encouraging the development of thinking in young people, the citizens of tomorrow, rather than producing passive, obedient followers.
> (McNiff 2004 p.7)

I have been contacted by people from the west Coast of the USA and from Australia who have read and been influenced by my MA dissertation:

> On 17-08-06 RS wrote: Hi Mary! … Did you know that your dissertation has been referenced on the P4C-list, the international discussion group? Congratulations! I'm forwarding the original to you. (RD email correspondence from RS 17-08-06).The forwarded original had been sent on 16-08-06:
>
> I am currently enrolled in a PhD program at the University of Queensland. I want to train some teachers in Philosophy then track their progress and any change in pedagogy over 12-18 months… So far I have only been successful in uncovering three research projects looking at change in pedagogy following implementation of Philosophy [One of which is] Roche, M. (2000). How can I improve my practice so as to help my students philosophise? Masters thesis University of West England Bristol, available at
>
> http://www.jeanmcniff.com/maryrochema.pdf 14/5/06 (extract from email from RS 16-08-06)
>
> DK wrote from Washington State USA: I am working on my doctoral dissertation proposal on Inquiry Dialogue in the Kindergarten. I intend to do action research this spring to investigate how I can best implement a classroom context for inquiry dialogue with kindergartners … My research will in some regards be a continuation of the work by Mary Roche (2000). (RD email from J 31-01-05)

I offer these extracts as evidence for my claim to have influenced people in the wider academic field.

My potential contributions to new forms of educational theory

Whitehead and McNiff (2006) say that 'research is always undertaken with social intent' (p.45). When I began my studies, my 'social intent' was narrow and primarily focussed on my own classroom. Through developing my ideas in practice and reflecting on them, and engaging with literatures of critical and radical pedagogues, I have grown into a more confident critical researcher voice. My diary records the moment when this dawned on me:

Reflection 1
I read Marge Piercy's (1971) poem 'Unlearning to not speak' last night, and I recognised how all my life I have been a talker, but I've never really understood until now, that I have a voice and perhaps I have never really used my 'I' voice to try to make a difference in how education might be a liberating and profoundly caring endeavour, instead of a technical system for categorising people into discrete corrals. (RD 05-06-03)

I began to experience some satisfaction as evidence grew to show that my work had begun to influence others institutionally and in the wider domain. Citing Polanyi (1958 p.381) who worked towards encouraging people to think in ways which centuries of technical rational thinking had 'taught them to distrust' and who worked towards understanding the world from his own point of view 'as a person claiming originality and exercising his judgement responsibly with universal intent' (Polanyi 1958 p.327), Whitehead and McNiff (2006) suggest that it is in learning to engage in lively dialogue 'where they test their own living theories of education, and test those theories against the critical responses of others' (pp.45-6) that researchers engage in the generation of new knowledge, and can use their influence to challenge the repressive canon that often transforms into a technology of control.

I believe that I have demonstrated that through 'lively dialogue' I have begun the process of testing my own story as my living theory of education (see McNiff 2007). I am showing through this account the live processes that have enabled me to generate and test the validity of my own living educational theory of dialogical practice. I cannot say my study is over, because in a sense I have only just begun the process of examining my practice and my values through writing up this thesis. I believe that my understanding of my practice will develop throughout my working life as I continue to examine what I do, why I do it and how I can do it better.

Mary Roche

31st May 2007