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Section 1

Setting out on my epistemological journey

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

I now begin my story.

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Chapter 1

Background to my research

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

How and why my research question evolved

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

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

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

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

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

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

> The discussion lasted 35 minutes. Most children became engaged in discussion. Only C, S and R failed to contribute. C. tended to get up and walk around at times, but it did not seem to distract the others. There were no interruptions, and no noise from next door. (RD 16-01-02)

The children are getting used to the idea of Thinking Time and are now able to prepare the room for the circle (Video link: Preparation for circle). CD insisted on holding her teddy for the duration of the discussion. (RD 05-02-02)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My experiences as a student and student teacher

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

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

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

> as action research and ensuring that there is sustained interactivity between both teachers and researchers … This sort of work offers promising possibilities for collaborative research between practicing teachers, teacher educators and educational researchers.
>
> (T. Day 2005 pp. 27-8)

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

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

> … to describe and explain the experience of those who are members of subordinated, marginalized, or minority groups, those who are powerless and (often) victimized (both intentionally and unintentionally) by members of dominant groups.
>
> (Tappan 2001 p.3)

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

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

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

The evolution of my methodological stance

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

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

The evolution of my research question

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

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

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

Thinking Time

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

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

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

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

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

> [Thinking Time] becomes a community of enquiry or community of persons-in-relation, speakers and hearers, who communicate with each other under conditions of equality and reciprocity and with a willingness on the part of the participants to reconstruct what they hear from one another and to submit their views to the self-correcting process of further enquiry.
>
> (J. Russell 2005 p.5)

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

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

> During a discussion on 'school', based on the story 'Once upon an ordinary school day' (McNaughton 2004) some children made insightful comments that displayed critical awareness about the importance of children being free to imagine possibilities.
>
> M: Everybody should get the chance to let their imagination go free … get the thoughts out of your head instead of having them just stuck …
>
> A: … That teacher was fun. Every child should have a teacher like that. That boy really needed to have a teacher like that for at least one year of his life.
>
> M: I think that imagination is like water. It's like water because it can be frozen and the only time it freezes up is when it's not running and being used. It freezes up if you don't use it.
>
> B: I think he did have an imagination all along. The teacher didn't give him an imagination, he just allowed him to use it by playing the exciting music…
>
> S: … sometimes I start off with no ideas in my head when we begin our talking, but afterwards I often have loads, because I hear all the different thoughts from all different kids
>
> Along with my pleasure at the richness of the children's thinking in general, S's comment struck me as interesting. (RD 04-10-05, full transcript in Appendix C.7.)

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

> P: It's fun … we're thinking about solutions for all kinds of [problems] and for all kinds of reasons and that's school work!
>
> CO: It actually gives your brain energy in it.
>
> CF: One it's fun – children like it: and two, it brightens up your mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

No 'right' answer

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

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

> Me: (handing over the microphone) Yes? What do you think?
>
> Laughter from group
>
> CF (smiling broadly): Well there's no right answer, and it's great! Cos you're allowed to think freely and no one else is allowed to boss you around and it's just … great! (RD 21-04-06) (Video Link: No right answer).

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

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

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

> H: …when other people say something your ideas change and you actually start thinking more … when you read a story by yourself and you don't do any thinking about it then you don't get the point sometimes, unless they tell it to you, but in Thinking Time you get the point and other people's points as well.
>
> J: Thinking Time reveals thoughts. You might have a thought at the start, but by every person speaking you might change it slightly each time and you might end up with something totally different at the end. (RD 21-04-06) (Video Link: Listening to others' thoughts).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of the dialogue is present. The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge new understanding. It's something new, which may or may not have been the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the 'glue' or 'cement' that holds people and societies together.
>
> (Bohm 1998 p.2)

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

> Contrast [dialogue] with the word discussion … It really means to break things up. It emphasizes the idea of analysis … where the object … is to win and get points for yourself … but a dialogue is something more of a common participation in which we are not playing a game against each other but *with* each other.
>
> (Bohm 1998 p.2 my emphasis)

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

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

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

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

I have scheduled my Thinking Times to take place on a Wednesday straight after mid-morning break. Wednesdays suit because the children have settled down after the weekend, there are no extra-curricular events like speech and drama classes to work around. I will recommend Wednesdays to colleagues - from 11.30 to 12.15p.m. (RD 06-02-02)

I never asked myself the question: What about my students' thinking (or my practice) during the rest of the week? I also failed to examine the nature of the power relationships in my classroom whereby I would control classroom discourses and would make decisions about when to 'grant' my pupils the freedom to speak or the prescriptive nature of choosing a day for colleagues to 'do' Thinking Time also.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

New school, new practice: beginning my action reflection cycles

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Eo: What's so good about straight lines anyway?
>
> On another occasion, following a classroom discussion, he said:
>
> Eo: I am going home today with just so many questions in my head.
>
> Ao: If you go home with a question and if you get an answer to your question you can always question the answer! (RD 27-02-04; Appendix C.5.)

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

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

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

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

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

Key issues of my thesis

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

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

> The discoverer is filled with a compelling sense of responsibility for the pursuit of a hidden truth, which demands his services for revealing it. His act of knowing exercises a personal judgement in relating evidence to an external reality...
>
> (Polanyi 1967 p.25)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> This represents a subtle but crucial shift in emphasis – one that is not openly discussed as often as it should be – from student needs to student performance and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school.
>
> (Apple 2001b p.185)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Preliminary findings of my study

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 2

Problematic Contexts: Why was I concerned?

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

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

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

> These young men and women … went to a residential training college [run mainly by religious orders of priests and nuns] which was conducted on remarkably authoritarian lines.
>
> (McCarthy 1968 p.21)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Most teachers … become so professionally estranged in their workplace isolation that they …do not often compliment, support or acknowledge each other's positive efforts…strong norms of self-reliance may even provoke adverse reaction to a teacher's successful performance.
>
> (Rosenholtz 1989 p.107)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Early misgivings

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

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

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

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

An initial concern about silence

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

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

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

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

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

My next concern: beginning to question my own logics

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

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

> The greatest enemy of understanding is coverage. As long as you are determined to cover everything, you actually ensure that most kids are not going to understand.
>
> (Brandt 1993 p.3)

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

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

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

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

1. Receptiveness to language	2. Competence and confidence in using language	3. Developing cognitive abilities through language	4. Emotional and imaginative development through language

Figure 2-1: Table: Strands of English Language Curriculum

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

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

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

The child should be enabled to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From problem-solving to problematising

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

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

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

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

Developing conceptual frameworks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 3

Methodological issues: How could I address my concerns?

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

Chapter 3 Part 1

Explanations and justifications

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intellectual elitism and the exclusion of practitioners

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

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

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

> … mainstream journals and their publishing practices are congenial to the interests of center knowledge while proving recalcitrant to periphery discourses; … academic writing/publishing functions as an important means of legitimating and reproducing center knowledge.
>
> (Suresh Canagarajah 2002 p.60)

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

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

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

> The view that education is simply another market commodity has become normalised in policy and public discourses. Schools run purely as businesses are a growing phenomenon.
>
> (Lynch K. 2006 p.1)

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

> … become colonizers…. [They] know and own part of people's world about which people themselves know very little. … It means that there are now people who can claim to know you and understand you better than you understand yourself: there are experts there to interpret your world and to speak on your behalf. They take away your voice by speaking about you and for you.
>
> (Lynch and O'Neill 1994, in Lynch 2001 pp.243-4)

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

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

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

Holding myself accountable for my practice

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

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

Separating the knower from the known

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

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

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

> … existing research gatekeeping systems tended to construct children as dependent, in need of protection and as 'human becomings.'
>
> (Balen et al. 2006 p.29)

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

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

> What is our image or understanding of the child? What is our image or understanding of institutions for young children?
>
> (Moss 2002 p.439)

These understandings would appear to resonate also with Korczak:

> … the teacher-researcher should not treat the child as a research object or as a means in what Buber (1947) called an "I-it" relationship. The purpose of research should not serve any interest except that of the child, who should be treated as a unique human being that deserves full respect. "Children . . . are people – not people to be, not people of the future, not people of tomorrow, but people now . . . right now . . . today"
>
> (Korczak, 1914/1967b, p. 254, cited in Efron 2005 p.148)

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

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

> When children are seen one-sidedly as dependent, vulnerable and malleable, the idea that they may have perspectives beyond their immediate existence is simply ruled out. The same holds for any notion of the child as in a preparatory stage since such a conceptualization would frame their present subjectivity as oriented to a not-yet-existing future.
>
> (Haavind 2005 p.149)

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

> Emphasis on the child as an individual should not be interpreted as disconnection from the child. Rather, relational qualities help constitute individual performance. When children are equipped with the abilities to represent themselves and to explore options, figure out plans and make decisions on behalf of themselves, these capacities have been confirmed through a web of interrelation.
>
> (Haavind 2005 p.144)

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

Towards a living theory of practice

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

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

> Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man [sic] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from men. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without men, but men in their relations with the world.
>
> (Freire 1972 p.54)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A vignette from practice

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

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

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

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

> The questions that strike me now that I didn't think of asking P are:
>
> a) Why should the idea of little children in dialogue be 'amazing?' What assumptions are being made here about the idea of children engaging in dialogue?
>
> b) What is considered to be 'normal' classroom practice so that my practice looks 'amazing'? (RD 23-07-04)

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

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

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

> M commented that I seemed to allow two children in particular a lot of speaking time. She wondered if this was unfair to the other children.
>
> I explained how both children Sh and Eo, were struggling 'academically'. While they were obviously articulate and intelligent and showed this in the video, I explained that I knew from their performance in traditional workbook activities, and from my thirty years of classroom experience, that when standardised test time came around they would 'fail'.
>
> I explained how I felt that such technically rational assessment procedures were unjust because they failed to recognise the whole intelligence of a child, while marginalising those whose learning strengths did not match those valued by the assessment. (RD 23-07-04)

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

> In another section of the video a child struggled to articulate a thought and took some time to speak. C asked me why I hadn't intervened to help him.
>
> I replied that I felt he would get there by himself and I wanted to let him try at least.
>
> C asked me why I felt that this was important.
>
> I explained that I have made a conscious effort to give children time to think. In the past I didn't always wait long enough for children to answer. I have tried to improve my practice in this respect. (RD 23-07-04)

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

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

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

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

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

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

> C said that she felt that this was an extremely important explanation because it provided an insight into how I work towards including all children democratically as active and equal co-participants with me.
>
> The others agreed that the episode shown certainly tested my claim that in my classroom children have freedom to speak, freedom from coercion, freedom to be silent and that I provided adequate description and explanation for my actions. (RD 23-07-04)

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3 Part 2

Practical issues

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

> I have toyed with the metaphors of a journey, a garden, 'buying the thingamygig' and 'hunting the snark', but that which most closely embodies the development of this undertaking, with its dead ends, confusions, shifts in focus and occasional fruits of publication, is the unusual, but nonetheless extremely successful growth of the banyan tree.
>
> (Mellor 1998 p.467)

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

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

> The finding of the questions was itself more important than the questions themselves. … I eventually came to accept that my struggle in the swamp was the method, not a path to find a better method … I was struggling to find a methodology ... which I could 'own' – which did not fragment the complex whole of my own lived experience and my values.
>
> (Mellor 1998 p.462)

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

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

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

> I notice that I seem to be taking it for granted that it is significant and important to show that children have the freedom to agree or disagree. I need to explain *why* it is important to me to show that a child has disagreed with me. Critical questions might include:
>
> Who is traditionally allowed to disagree in a classroom? Why do I feel that the idea of a child disagreeing with a teacher is so noteworthy? Why do I think that this is significant? What does this tell me about perhaps, inherent assumptions around power in the classroom? (RD 25-05-06)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Let's see if I've made it a little clearer for myself: I knew I ought to be writing about my practice and I knew I wanted to write about critical thinking but what was happening was that I was trying to link them artificially…
>
> I now see that I ought to be writing about my practice in relation to issues about critical thinking and I ought to be writing about critical thinking insofar as it relates to my practice – not in isolation from each other. (RD email to J 16-07-05)

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

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

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

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

Research design

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

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

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

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

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

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

- **Did I identify my concerns?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Me: Isn't my practice reflected in what the children are doing and saying? So why is talking *about* my practice somehow wrong?
>
> B: look at what you're doing now in relation to Thinking Time etc…what's different? Why not write about *that*?
>
> Me: But I've been *doing* that…I've written about all the new learning I've had since I started to think more critically…in fact J says I now sound angry and polemical! But that's probably because I feel I've been hoodwinked for years – I never realised any of this stuff before.
>
> B: Well that's new then…so is that new learning changing any part of your practice?
>
> Me: … Yes, I am more critical of the curriculum and I see how I need to somehow encourage the children to begin to ask those questions too. It's not enough to just do Thinking Time… that's so obvious to me now.
>
> B: What is *so obvious*?
>
> Me: I can show that I do things differently because *I'm* different now… ….I am thinking more critically about curriculum, education – that's what's different! Me! (RD conversation with BL 16-07-05)

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

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

> … I would appreciate your advice about a piece of writing, some of which you saw during our tutorial in UL. It's the piece where I talk about teaching children to be critical thinkers as opposed to teaching critical thinking. (RD email 17-07-05)
>
> 'My particular area of interest for this thesis is in the area of teaching young children to do critical thinking or, more correctly, encouraging them to *be* critical thinkers. … 'teaching critical thinking' has overtones of a transmission pedagogical model whereas 'encouraging students to be critical thinkers' is more in line with my values because I do not seek to indoctrinate but to invite children to think for themselves. … Throughout I show how I have now transformed my own thinking and have become more critical in that I have developed from being an unquestioning follower of rules into a more critical stance.' (RD excerpt from work emailed to J. 17-07-05)

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

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

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

Developing the capacity to articulate the potential significance of my research

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

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

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

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

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

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

> This is the first time in five years that E. has actually been happy going to school each day…. You brought out the best in him and saw him as a person in his own right. (Extract from letter from parent 25-06-05)
>
> You share experience. During my first year out of college I learned more and gained more valuable insights into what education is all about from working in a partnership with you than I did in my four and a half years in college … and the things I learned could not be written down in a text book. (Extract from letter from colleague D 22-02-05)
>
> Thank you for being a very kind teacher. You are not bossy. You make school fun. I liked being in your class. (Extract from end-of-year card 30-06-06)

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

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

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

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

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

> 'I think that willpower is just something that you need to do and you're trying to do it, so Teacher, you could be right or you could be wrong.' (P) (RD from video of Frog and Toad's 'Willpower' 26-04-06).
>
> 'I disagree with Teacher because it mightn't look funny on someone else: it might only look funny on him.' (D)
>
> 'I disagree with Teacher because the story said "*you* look funny in the swimsuit", not "the swimsuit looks funny on *you*".' (DB) (RD from video of The Swimsuit (Lobel 1992) 22-05-06) (Video Link: I disagree with Teacher…).

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

> Questions of validity are fundamentally important in all research which is concerned with the generation and testing of theory.
>
> (Whitehead 1989b p.47)

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

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

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

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

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

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

- In relation to my claim, have I identified the standards of judgement I use to establish what counts as evidence for my claim to knowledge and how did I arrive at them?

- In relation to my methodology, can I demonstrate that my work is authentic, just and trustworthy, and have I made my enquiry methods transparent and subjected my claims to my own critique as well as to the critique of others?

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

> Generalisation in the sense that an experiment replicated in exactly the same controlled conditions will have the same results a second time round seems a nonsensical construct in the hurly burly of social interaction. However, I do believe it important that action research projects have an application elsewhere, and that action researchers are able to communicate their insights to others with a useful result.
>
> (Lomax 1994 p.118)

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

> To the extent that a community can be shown to be sharing a form of life in their research activities I would say that the approach was generalisable.
>
> (Whitehead 1989b p.7)

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

> Mary has influenced me educationally in a number of ways but especially through thinking time. I've observed thinking time in her classroom … There was no rigid structure and children participate in 'free-thinking' [with] no pressure to give a right answer … they were very at ease. The child's opinion on a topic was given equal status to that of the teacher …
>
> … The best example of free thinking I experienced in my class was when a child who was a cardiac baby [sic] was asked who she thought invented time. She said 'I think doctors invented time. They gave me more time to live when I was a baby.' (RD extract from JM's letter 24-02-05; full letter in Appendix B.1.a.)

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

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

- I claim that I now know that I cannot teach 'critical thinking' but rather have to develop my capacity for thinking critically so as to encourage others to think for themselves

- I claim that I ground this understanding and my practice in my ontological values of care, freedom and justice

- I claim that I have improved my practice and transformed my pedagogies so that my practice is now more commensurate with my values

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

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

- Have I adequately articulated my values?

- Is there evidence that I am attempting to live my articulated values in my practice? Does my practice evidence values of freedom, care and justice in action?

- Is there evidence that I have improved my understanding of the educational contexts in which my practice is located?

- Have I problematised and reconceptualised my practice in line with my ontological commitments?

- Is there evidence of change in my logics and in my practice over the period of the study?

- Is there evidence of an enquiring and critical approach to an educational problem?

- Was my enquiry carried out systematically, in an ethical way?

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

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

Ethical considerations: Negotiating permissions and access

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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