

Introduction

A passionate belief in the right to social justice and equality for all people, irrespective of social class, race, gender or ethnicity, fuelled my research, which is the subject matter of this thesis. While cognisant of the difficulties, or perhaps even the near-impossibility, involved in trying to achieve a reasonable level of equality in all spheres of life, I feel strongly that it is worth striving for equal opportunities in the area of educational provision. The rationale behind this aspiration is my conviction, like Russell (1932) and Dewey (1966), of the importance of education as a lifelong process that has the capacity to confer on participants liberatory and life-enhancing experiences. I am concerned, therefore, that if some people are denied the opportunity of participating on an equal basis with other participants in the educational system, they will automatically be deprived of its long-term benefits, thus perpetuating the negative influence of their unequal treatment by educational institutions. This issue becomes especially relevant in the context of formal schooling, where there ensues a further problematic arising from the realisation that when a school treats its minority pupils unjustly, this also affects the quality of education offered to the other pupils. As Connell (1993) says:

An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage.
(Connell 1993, p. 15)

It could be seen, therefore, as serving the interests of all the pupils, whether they comprise the dominant majority or an ethnic minority, if the structures, procedures and climate of the school are premised on principles of equality and social justice. The process of endeavouring to live to such principles in my educational practice enabled me to generate a living theory of the practice of social justice as equality of respect for all. I explain the concept of a living theory of practice shortly. I chose to focus on equality of respect because of my conviction that it is a fundamental value that could inform practices of equality, such as equality of access and equality of participation.

Furthermore, equality of respect is frequently absent from pedagogic practices, as noted by Lynch (1999): 'Equality of respect is rarely shown for minority and marginalised cultures and traditions within mainstream education' (1999, p. 18).

The idea of equality, or of a form of levelling, evokes memories of a poem, entitled 'Death the Leveller', that I recall reading in an anthology of poetry from my secondary school days. At that time I was fascinated by the metaphor of the awesome power ascribed to death, which was portrayed as an instrument capable of reducing all to equal status. Now, having reflected on this idea from my current perspective, I have come to the conclusion that equality achieved in death is of little practical value and that what should be aimed at is some measure of educational equality during life, when it can be savoured and enjoyed, and when it can bestow a sense of self-worth and self-esteem on its beneficiaries. Among those who would benefit from some modicum of equality during their lifetime are those who are currently educationally marginalised, such as the socially disadvantaged, Traveller children and those with learning difficulties. I work as a Resource Teacher for Traveller children (RTT), and so my research is concerned with the quality of education offered to Traveller children within the schooling system.

Traveller children belong to an ethnic minority group who exist mainly on the margins of Irish society. Boldt *et al.* (1998) confirm the marginalised status of the Traveller community when they state 'Travellers have become recognised as a distinct group, although they remain marginalised to a large extent in Irish society' (1998, p. 8). Some Traveller children have learning difficulties, and there is also a tendency by the settled community to relegate the Traveller community to the lowest social class. The marginalisation that is frequently the experience of the Traveller community is apparent in the following extract from Dwyer (1974):

For generations they have lived on the fringe of society, tolerated by some, rejected and despised by many, accepted fully only by a few.

(Dwyer 1974, pp. 92-3)

O'Reilly (1995) describes the low esteem in which Travellers are often held when he refers to 'the long history of racism and rejection which has been the experience of all Travellers' (1995, p. 7). The implications of these additional categories of disadvantage for my research were that it became a multilayered and multifaceted enquiry into how to enable Traveller children to overcome some of the constraints on their learning that were positing education as a negative and oppressive experience for them. Instead, I proposed a view of education as including the possibility of transforming Traveller children's alienating experiences into life-enhancing and affirming practices, in fulfilment of my commitment to the achievement of social justice for all.

In this thesis, I am claiming that through my research I have generated my living educational theory of practice (Whitehead 1993), which is grounded in the transformative potential (McNiff 2000) of valuing Traveller children's culture and identity within the educational system. In describing my theory as a living theory, I wish to differentiate it from traditional propositional forms of theory. The latter are usually articulated in an abstract, conceptual form, whereas my living theory, which is grounded in my embodied values of social justice and equality, is communicated not solely in linguistic form but is also manifested as lived experience. I offer my understanding of my process of coming to know as I generate my living theory through the educative relationships that I formed with my Traveller pupils. In so doing, I claim that I have transformed, while still incorporating, linguistic analysis in order to reflect the human reality of my work. In the process, I have incorporated insights from conceptual theories into my living form of theory.

My aim of valuing Traveller children's culture and identity within the educational system is in sharp contrast to the current position in Irish educational institutions, where Traveller children, in common with other minority groups, are expected to adapt to a ready-made system in which the cultural norms of the majority group within the educational system are dominant. This situation can result in the marginalisation of Traveller children, and can engender in them feelings of alienation and oppression. I

offer evidence of this situation throughout my thesis. Conaty (2002) articulates the need for a change in the status quo when she writes of:

the urgent need for change in the education system so that schools may adapt to the needs of the marginalised as opposed to the expectation that the marginalised must always adapt to the needs of the school.

(Conaty 2002, p. 25)

It is also likely that the sense of exclusion experienced by Traveller children, as a result of their marginalised status, is one of the causes of their irregular attendance at school. It may be reasonable to assume that, by acknowledging the value and importance of Traveller culture, schools have the potential to change Traveller children's experience of education to a more positive and life-enhancing one. At a more immediate and practical level, such a stance by educational institutions could result in an improvement in the attendance rates of Traveller children at school, as well as an increase in the prospect of their progressing to second level schooling. I would regard such improvements as providing positive outcomes, from the point of view that, under the conditions of such affirmative action, Traveller children would no longer feel alienated from the educational system, and could begin to reap its benefits and to prosper from its potential to provide them with emancipatory experiences. These expectations are grounded in my values around people's entitlements to enjoy opportunities for self-fulfilling, liberatory and life-affirming educational practices.

One of my initial concerns around the issue of Traveller education, which surfaced when I worked as a mainstream class teacher, prior to taking up my position as RTT, and that inspired my current research programme, was that many Traveller children did not transfer to second level schooling, a situation that I found difficult to accept as it was in conflict with my values around equal educational opportunities for all (Sullivan 2000) and with my commitment to the concept of lifelong learning (Field 2000). In seeking to find ways of encouraging Traveller children to remain in the educational system, I developed an awareness of how institutions can operate to deny marginalised groups the resources to which they are entitled (Macedo and Bartolomé 2001), such as the services

of a learning support teacher or resource teacher. I realised also that there was little or no recognition of the fact that Travellers have a separate culture, and a separate identity, from that of the majority within the school setting. Gillborn (1995) recognises the link between culture and identity when he refers to ethnicity as ‘a people’s sense and expression of a particular cultural identity’ (1995, p. 84). Both Willis (1977) and Fagan (1995) describe how an educational system that reproduces the inequalities of society, and replicates its class system, contributes to the problem of early school leaving. I would argue that the lack of a fit between the culture of the school and the culture of the Traveller community has a similar effect on the retention of Traveller children in the educational system. I suggest that, by accepting the reality, and the value, of Traveller culture and thereby contributing to Traveller children's sense of cultural identity, schools can be instrumental in encouraging these children to remain in the educational system. The achievement of this outcome would reflect some progress in the fulfilment of my values around the importance of lifelong education.

In arguing for the recognition and acceptance of a separate cultural identity for Traveller children in educational institutions, I am attempting to live according to my ontological values of acknowledging difference and diversity. Such a stance would provide a positive framework for the legitimation and validation of the contributions Traveller children make to their specific educational experiences. All too often, the concept of difference can be interpreted as meaning deviance, and as constituting a negative force, or as existing outside of the boundaries of a normative perspective. At a time when Irish society is becoming increasingly multicultural, as indicated by the continuing influx of children of foreign nationals into primary schools in recent years, it is imperative that a more open and more generous attitude towards diversity should prevail. The phenomenal increase in the numbers seeking asylum in Ireland can be gauged from Tormey and Haran’s (2003) statement, based on statistics from the ‘National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism’ (2001), that the numbers have risen ‘from just thirty-nine applications in 1992 to ten thousand nine hundred and twenty in 2000’ (2003, p. 26). In spite of this dramatic increase, the furthest some institutions will move in the direction of diversity, is to agree to treat all cultures the same, as is evident from their policies of

multiculturalism and integration, which I argue is not treating them equally. It is subscribing to the metaphor of the melting pot, which does not grant recognition to the separate identities of the various cultures, but seeks to reduce them all to one common state, in a mistaken belief that the achievement of consensus is the ideal situation. This situation is at variance with my wish, in agreement with Berlin (1997) and Kristeva (2002), to value each group's culture and identity as equally valid, and so I submit that my practice of accepting and acknowledging diversity and difference is more congruent with principles of social justice and equality than a system that fails to grant recognition to the concept or the reality of difference. In this account of my research, therefore, I demonstrate how my living theory of social justice as the recognition of difference evolved from my educational practice that was grounded in my ontological values of justice and equality for all. Through this process, I am developing a different form of living theory (Whitehead 1989) that is grounded in my own capacity to theorise my practice, as I wish to work with a form of theory that has the potential for democratic involvement inherent within itself.

From these original concerns evolved my desire to improve the quality of the educational experience offered to Traveller children within the primary school system. I opted to become the Resource Teacher for Traveller children (RTT) in my school, as I envisaged that this would afford me the opportunity of working more closely with the children and of ensuring that they were not overlooked in the area of access to extra educational resources to which they have a legitimate entitlement. I formed a view that I would be able to live out my ontological values around equality and social justice by endeavouring to ensure that these principles formed the framework for the equitable accommodation of Traveller children within the educational system. Taking up this position would also provide me with the possibility of redefining the role of the RTT, from one that simply supplemented the learning support system in the school by providing this resource for Traveller children, to a more proactive one that ensured a high profile for Traveller issues and a greater awareness of Traveller culture. Through the expansion of my role in this manner, I would be able to generate my own living theory of Traveller education and to

reconceptualise the experience of education as a positive and enabling influence in the lives of Traveller children, rather than an oppressive and alienating one.

In undertaking my research into the issues that I have outlined here, I chose to use a self-study practitioner-based approach, within an action research framework, as outlined by McNiff (2002). This methodology enabled me to investigate my own practice in order to improve it. I reflected on my practice and in my practice, as suggested by Schön (1983), which resulted in ongoing cycles of reflection and action that are significant features of an action research methodology. The learning that emerged from the reflective process contributed to the achievement of improvements in my practice, the evidence base for which is contained in Chapter 5. Engagement with this process also enabled me to explain how I hold myself accountable for my practice, and to justify my actions in terms of my values of justice, equality and respect for all. I explain how these ontological values transform into the standards of judgement by which I wish my claims to knowledge to be assessed (Whitehead 2000). With regard to the use of ontological values, I am using this term relationally to link my way of being with my values. I acknowledge that these terms are often understood to be discrete. However, I understand them to be relational. In this context, I will demonstrate how my action, in providing a more positive and affirmative experience of education for Traveller children, was the outcome of the lived realisation of my value of social justice. As my research involved me in engaging in a critique of current educational provision for marginalised groups, and in positing a more democratic and more liberatory educational experience for them, it contains elements of a critical emancipatory approach, such as that recommended by McKernan (1996) and Kincheloe (2003). In the process of creating my own living educational theory, therefore, I incorporate the principles of emancipatory action research within this framework.

The methodology that I chose for my research differs from the traditional social scientific approach, as manifested also in the structure of the thesis, in that it does not offer a chapter devoted specifically to a literature review (see Whitehead and McNiff 2006). In self-study practitioner research, the process of identifying a research topic is not

dependent on establishing a gap in the research literature, as the research question often emerges from a practitioner's commitment to improving practice. The relevant references to the literature are interwoven throughout the thesis, in a coherent and integrated fashion. I demonstrate my critical engagement with the literature, therefore, through my in-depth discussions of the various issues as they occur throughout the thesis, and I explain how I have incorporated insights from existing propositional theories-in-the-literature in the development of my own living theory of practice. Because of the particular relevance of concepts of social justice and equality to my research, I examine these issues in detail in Chapter 3, as well as weaving them into other relevant chapters.

Outline of the main ideas in this thesis

This report on my research gives an account of my self-study and of how I challenged normative educational systems on the basis that they were prejudicial and discriminatory towards an ethnic minority group, namely Traveller children. Because of my values around equality and social justice I sought to develop a theory of education as an inclusive and intercultural force that valued all children equally. I use the term 'intercultural' rather than 'multicultural' on the basis of Kenny's (1997) distinction between the two terms: 'intercultural' suggests that the cultures of all groups are of equal validity, whereas 'multicultural' can be interpreted as presenting the dominant culture as the norm, and ethnic minority cultures as exotic. Fitzgerald (2003) makes a similar argument in favour of an intercultural approach, on the basis that in a multicultural setting, the minority group strives for integration and the superiority of the dominant group is affirmed, whereas an intercultural ethos suggests that both cultures can learn from each other. In promoting a model of education as inclusive and intercultural I hoped that the Traveller children would experience a sense of belonging and a sense of self-worth that would enable them to conceive of education as a positive and life-enhancing possibility.

In my research I show how, through facilitating the children to create and celebrate their own ways of knowing, I enabled them to take ownership of that knowledge, and how this resulted in an improvement in their learning, as well as in the emergence of a more

confident attitude in their approach to learning. In the process, I came to a realisation of the value of enabling children to contribute to their own learning, as opposed to presenting them with a body of ready-made facts to be assimilated. Freire (1972) is highly critical of the system of transferring knowledge from institutions to students in a manner that views the students as passive consumers of knowledge, which he describes as a 'banking' system of education, where 'the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing deposits of knowledge' (1972, p. 58). Shor (1993) endorses Freire's theory of education, when he says:

Traditional education orients students to conform, to accept inequality and their places in the status quo, to follow authority. Freirean critical education invites students to question the system they live in and the knowledge being offered them, to discuss what kind of future they want, including the right to elect authority and to remake the school and society they find.

(Shor 1993, p. 28)

A Freirean approach to education, therefore, appears to offer a more emancipatory and more participatory understanding of pedagogy. Consequently, I subscribe to this approach as being commensurate with my view that children should have an active role in their own learning and that this would enable them to perceive knowledge as a living, evolving force, produced through the interaction of pupils and teacher in an educative relationship. I would agree with Dewey (1966) when he states that 'education is not an affair of telling and being told, but an active and constructive process' (1966, p. 38).

A further positive outcome of encouraging Traveller children to become knowledge creators, rather than recipients of knowledge already constituted, was the resultant empowerment of the children. In the hierarchical systems that normally operate in educational institutions, the possessors of knowledge were often the power holders, who could exercise their authority and control over the learning situations in the institutions. Foucault (1980) makes an explicit connection between knowledge and relations of power. In support of this view Nias (1989), in agreement with Abercrombie (1981), mentions that there are 'two largely unchallenged assumptions about knowledge: that those in authority possess it and that learning therefore passes downward' (1989, p. 171). I

suggest, therefore, that in facilitating the positioning of the Traveller children as contributors to their own learning process, I also engendered a shift in the hierarchical power base. Positioned as knowledge creators, the children became power holders able to exercise control over their own learning. Such empowerment has considerable potential as a means towards the achievement of self-determination, not only for the Traveller children, but also for all disadvantaged and marginalised groups within the educational system. Challenging the epistemological perspectives underpinning educational provision could, therefore, have significant implications for existing power relations in schools.

Issues of knowledge, power and control are, therefore, central to my research. Bernstein (2000) recognises the effects that these concepts can have on the school environment when he refers to pedagogic discourse as:

a carrier of power relations external to school, a carrier of patterns of dominance with respect to class, patriarchy, and race.

(Bernstein 2000, p. 4)

Notwithstanding the importance of these issues, however, perhaps the most significant conceptual framework within which my research is located is that of social justice. I suggest that the importance of the realisation of social justice as an ideal to be systematically pursued cannot be overstated. Its presence as an active force in institutions could help to eliminate many of the inequalities currently perpetrated against the marginalised. My conception of social justice is of a principle that values the dignity and humanity of all people and that recognises the right of all to equal treatment. In the context of education the achievement of this right would require major changes to the current system, which tends to reproduce the inequalities of society in general (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). What I proposed, therefore, in my research was to develop a living theory of education as a process of transformation, rather than as reproduction, based on my understanding that this approach contains a greater possibility of achieving equality for all.

The essential differences between the Traveller community and the settled, or dominant, society appear to result from the dominant society's response to the existence of the separate culture and identity of the Traveller people. Problems arise when the settled community perceives these differences as signifiers of inferiority and define their treatment of Traveller people in terms of their own perceived superiority. A central theme of my research was my effort to change this perception of Travellers from 'different and inferior' to 'different and equal'. To achieve such a stance required promoting the concept of Travellers as an ethnic, nomadic group with its own economic system, cultural norms and social structure. In the context of education, Traveller children would then be perceived as belonging to an ethnic minority group with its own distinctive lifestyle, and its own valuable cultural identity. This situation has immense potential for the transformation of the dominant perception of Traveller children – from a position of being regarded as an inferior sub-culture within the school system to becoming a highly visible cultural force deserving equal recognition with the dominant cultural group. Lynch (1999) describes the devastating effects of having one's culture denied in educational settings:

If one's cultural traditions and practices are not a valued part of the education one receives, if they are denigrated or omitted, then schooling itself becomes a place where one's identity is denied or one's voice is silenced.

(Lynch 1999, p. 17)

However, while recognising the relevance of the concept of culture to my research, I am, nevertheless, aware of a sense in which Traveller culture could be perceived as a barrier to achieving the aims and purposes of my research. This caveat becomes particularly pertinent in relation to the fact that education beyond primary school level has not traditionally been a priority in Traveller culture. In my discussion of the concept of culture, I engage with Bourdieu's (1977) theory of the 'habitus', or system of inherited and reproduced dispositions. According to this theory, the social structures operating within a group's habitus contribute to maintaining a stance of homogeneity and conformity. Therefore, if the Traveller community's habitus does not include a tradition of progressing to second-level schooling, it would appear as though, in encouraging them to

remain in the educational system, I am attempting to counteract the effects of their traditional habitus. I wish to clarify this apparent anomaly by stating that my main concern is to raise Traveller children's awareness of the fact that there are other options besides their traditional ones, and then to allow them to make their own choices, with the benefit of informed consciousness of the possibilities available to them, and without posing any threat to their cultural identity. I endeavoured throughout my research to ensure that priority was given to the acceptance and recognition of the value of Traveller culture, and also took care to avoid lending support to any initiative that might result in a denial of that culture.

I have mentioned the values of equality and social justice as being the forces that inspired my research and therefore as forming theoretical frameworks within which I located my work. It is these values that caused me to seek equal access to educational resources for Traveller children and to promote the idea of the validity of Traveller culture and identity in educational settings. These values also helped me to formulate the criteria and standards of judgement by which I judged the success of my work. In this undertaking, I was utilising the idea of Whitehead (2000), when he states that values emerge in practice as the living critical standards by which we make judgements on our practice. The standards of judgement that I identified in this manner are contained in Chapter 1.

I am claiming that my research demonstrates that I have improved the quality of educational experience for Traveller children by ensuring equal access to extra educational resources for them, by encouraging them to regard themselves as knowledge creators instead of passive recipients of others' knowledge and by allowing them to make choices around their own learning. In implementing these strategies, I was operating out of my values base of social justice and equality. In this sense, I show how my ontological values transformed into my living critical standards of judgement. My research also demonstrates how I ensured that factors, such as irregular attendance at school or non-transference to second-level schooling, were not used as excuses to deny Traveller children access to learning support or resource teaching during their primary schooling. Through my work with an after school group, in which Traveller and settled children

cooperated in a spirit of intercultural inclusion, as I explain in Chapter 7, I fulfilled my commitment to the acknowledgement of diversity.

Among the contextual issues relevant to my research is the fact that I, as a practitioner researcher, could potentially bring certain biases and prejudices into my account of my work. The fact that I am aware of this possibility, and that any personal biases are mostly to do with my strong commitments to issues such as equality, social justice, cultural identity, knowledge creation, empowerment and freedom of choice, and to discovering how these principles can best be applied for the betterment of humanity, helps, in my opinion, to minimise any potential negative influences from them. Griffiths (1998) recognises the importance of acknowledging bias in research:

Bias comes not from having ethical and political positions – this is inevitable – but from not acknowledging them. Not only does such acknowledgement help to unmask any bias that is implicit in those views, but it also helps to provide a way of responding critically and sensitively to the research.

(Griffiths 1998, p. 133)

In making explicit the possibility of partiality of perspective, I suggest that my awareness around this issue helps contribute to a reduction in the potential for undue bias. Andereck (1992) expresses a similar view:

The researcher may not expect to be absent of personal biases, but an awareness of these biases is the first step in their control.

(Andereck 1992, p. 49)

I contend that a stance of neutrality would be almost impossible to achieve, as every researcher is approaching the research from some particular perspective. In this context, then, I suggest that foregrounding one's personal stance can result in a reduction of the effects of bias. Griffiths (1998) also argues that a stance of neutrality can be misleading:

A stance of neutrality claims that it is the only possible representation of truth and knowledge, just because it is (it claims) neutral. But bias comes precisely from that representation, because it has the effect of hiding, not eliminating, partiality.

(Griffiths 1998, p. 134)

I suggest that continuous reflection on my actions, during the course of my research, helped to maintain a critical stance in relation to my practice, which contributed to ensuring a balanced perspective overall.

It may seem as though I am overly biased in favour of the Traveller children, through seeking extra educational resources for them, and that this could be in conflict with my stated commitment to social justice and equality for all children. My reply to this apparent anomaly is, that what I am seeking for Traveller children is a level of equality of treatment through access to the same resources as other children, and to which Traveller children have a legitimate right – a right that did not appear to have any prospect of being implemented in my context until I took up the position of RTT and actively pursued my aims of achieving equality and social justice for Traveller children. There are theories in the literature to support the idea of giving more resources to the less well off in society, for the purpose of creating a more equitable situation. McLaren (1995) and Finnegan (2000), for example, favour the idea of exercising a preferential option in favour of disadvantaged groups, while Rawls (1971) suggests that an unequal distribution of goods, to benefit the less well off, is justified. I contend, in the light of such views, that my actions aimed at achieving greater resources for Traveller children could not be construed as unjust or inequitable.

The significance of my research

My work could be seen to be significant because it initially led me to question the quality of educational provision being offered to Traveller children, which resulted in the discovery of a considerable lacuna in this area. I discovered that the educational service provided to Traveller children was not on a par with that provided to other children, particularly in the area of learning support and resource teaching. Of significance also is my realisation that the separate cultural identity of the Traveller children must be explicitly and unequivocally acknowledged so that they can participate in the educational system on an equal basis with the majority group. Aronowitz and Giroux (1986) indicate what would be required in order to achieve such an emancipatory practice of education:

Teachers would have to develop forms of knowledge and social classroom practices that validate the experiences students bring to school. This means confirming such experiences so as to give the students an active voice in institutional settings that traditionally attempt to silence them by ignoring their cultural capital. This demands acknowledging language forms, style of presentation, dispositions, forms of reasoning and cultural forms that give meaning to student experiences.

(Aronowitz and Giroux 1986, p. 156)

The nature of the requirements identified here suggests that the task of achieving this situation could be a long and arduous struggle. Nevertheless, the articulation of my thoughts on the importance of recognising pupils' cultural identities, and the achievement of their realisation in my practice, helped me to generate a living theory of the transformative potential of valuing the culture and identity of Traveller children within the educational system. This living theory could equally have significance for the achievement of positive and life-enhancing influences, as consequences of valuing the particular circumstances of other disadvantaged or marginalised groups in educational institutions.

My research could have significance for colleagues to the extent of creating in them an awareness of the fact that children should be selected for learning support or resource teaching on the basis of educational attainment. Traveller children should not be excluded from this process, either because they are deemed to be irregular attendees, or because there is a perception that they may not progress to second-level education. The exclusion of Traveller children in this manner is tantamount to placing the onus of responsibility for the exclusion with the Traveller community. It also creates the impression that school authorities have low expectations of Traveller children, in contrast to the views of Bhopal *et al.* (2000), who stress the importance of all teachers having high expectations for Traveller children. Consideration needs to be given to the possibility that Traveller children might attend school more regularly, and might also continue to secondary schooling, if their educational needs were being met, through improved access to learning support and resource teaching. This realisation led me to conclude that a more equitable

situation could result from the use of educational criteria, such as the extent of children's learning needs, as the deciding factors in granting access to extra educational resources. The significance of these insights lies in their potential to influence other teachers towards providing a more equitable and more positive educational experience for marginalised or disadvantaged children.

I submit that my work has implications for Traveller education in general, and that it also has the capacity to inform policy in this area. My research demonstrates the importance of including all participants in the educational system on an equal basis, and shows the need to incorporate this ideal as a principle of practice, as well as using it as the foundation for informing policy. I agree with Young (1990) when she argues that social equality

refers primarily to full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society's major institutions, and socially supported substantive opportunities for all to develop and exercise their capacities and realise their choices.

(Young 1990, p. 173)

My living theory of the value of enabling children to be knowledge creators, rather than recipients of knowledge, and of the significance of their subsequent empowerment, has potential implications for the implementation of a more emancipatory model of education for all educationally marginalised groups – the socially disadvantaged and those with learning difficulties, as well as Traveller children. McLaren (1995) describes the conditions for such a model as a form of cultural politics:

To conceptualize curriculum as a form of cultural politics is to acknowledge the overriding goal of education as the creation of the conditions for social transformation through the constitution of students as political subjects who recognize their historical, racial, class, and gender situatedness and the forces that shape their lives and are politically and ethically motivated to struggle in the interest of greater human freedom and emancipation.

(McLaren 1995, p. 38)

The sense of self-esteem and self-worth of these marginalised groups could also be enhanced through the process of enabling them to take ownership of their own learning,

an opportunity that is not usually provided for them in the educational system, which, as Apple (1996) says, is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. Apple argues that:

The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a *selective tradition*, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge.

(Apple 1996, p. 22, emphasis in original)

I suggest that this selection process is normally carried out by those possessing cultural, political and economic capital (Bourdieu, cited in Robbins 2000), that is, by the dominant majority, and that minority groups are rarely consulted in this regard. My research, which seeks to alter this hegemonic situation, has significance for those whom educational institutions traditionally tend to exclude.

In relation to practice, my research has significance for educational practitioners through demonstrating the transformative potential of engaging in practices that are grounded in social justice and equality, and that are aimed at the improvement of the educational provision for marginalised children. My research has significance for conceptualisations of educational theory as a result of the emergence from my practice of a living theory of social justice as the acceptance and recognition of the separate cultural identity of an ethnic minority group. Of significance also, in relation to conceptualisations of theory, is the development of my living theory of justice as the acknowledgement of diversity, which evolved from my practice of recognising and accepting difference as I generated a living theory of inclusionary practice, through my involvement in an after school group, of which I give an account in Chapter 7.

Overview of the chapters

In this introduction I have given a brief outline of my research, stating the main ideas and theories contained in the thesis. I detail the main arguments and indicate how I arrived at these conclusions. I give an account of the ontological values that informed my research and show how these values are inextricably linked to the conceptual frameworks within which I conducted my research. I demonstrate how these values transformed into the

living critical standards of judgement by which I assess the validity of my work. In this final section of the introduction I will provide a brief outline of the contents of the various chapters of my thesis.

Chapter 1 contains an account of the background of my research, detailing the factors that formed the genesis of my research questions. It describes the reasons why I undertook the research, in terms of what I wanted to achieve and why I wanted to achieve it. In this section also I focus on the issues that aroused in me sufficient concern to want to change the status quo in my educational institution. I describe how my ontological values of social justice and equality made it untenable for me to collude in a system that was responsible for the denial of these values. Finally, I demonstrate how carrying out my research enabled me to generate my own living theories of the transformative potential of valuing Traveller children's culture and identity within the educational system, and of positing Traveller education as a positive and enabling force.

I give a description of the various contexts relevant to my research in Chapter 2. My personal context in terms of my teaching career, my values around equality and social justice, my specific interest in the children from the Traveller community and my passionate commitment to improving the quality of educational experience offered to Traveller children, are all factors that impinge on my research. The background to the Traveller way of life, with reference to how this evolved from their cultural heritage and how it differentiates their cultural traditions from those of the settled community, forms an important contextual aspect of my work. In the area of policy context relating to the Traveller community, I trace the development from the policies of the 1960s, which described Travellers as 'itinerants' and delineated them variously as vagrants or as poverty-stricken, to the policies of the 1980s, which for the first time described them as 'Travellers', having consulted the Travellers themselves as to how they wished to be named. I discuss the fact that this more enlightened view of the Traveller community still remains largely at the level of rhetoric, and show how, through the process of my research, I attempted to translate it into living practice.

I have mentioned some of the conceptual issues that were central to my research. These include equality, social justice, power and control, and interculturalism. Because of the importance I attach to these concepts, which are interwoven throughout my research, I have devoted a separate chapter to a discussion of these themes. Chapter 3, therefore, contains my theories around these issues and a description of how they influenced my work and became integral aspects of my own living theory of practice. I give priority to my central theme of social justice, and include an example of a practice of injustice, as perpetrated on Traveller men, through the use of the legislative process. I also discuss the views of traditional propositional theorists in my main conceptual areas. In the area of equality and social justice I refer to the ideas of, among others, Rawls (1971), Young (1990), Connell (1993), Drudy and Lynch (1993) and Griffiths (1998). I discuss the democratic, life-enhancing and positive views of Dewey (1966), McLaren (1999) and Zappone (2002), as containing the potential for a greater measure of equality and social justice. My analysis of issues of power and control takes account of the theories of Foucault (1980), Rabinow (1991) and Moss (1998). In proposing an intercultural approach to education, as opposed to a monocultural, oppressive perspective that often predominates in the educational system, I engage with the ideas of Kenny (1997), Berlin (2000) and Said (2002).

Chapter 4 contains an account of the methodology of my research. I explain that, as my research centred on an intention to achieve an improvement in my own educational practice, it necessarily required a self-study approach, which would enable me to interrogate my own actions, where these appeared to be in conflict with my stated values. In my research I critiqued current educational provision for marginalised groups, and sought to provide a more liberatory and life-enhancing educational experience for such groups. My research, therefore, is presented as my own living educational theory, which draws on the ideas of a critical emancipatory paradigm. In this chapter, I also include a description of the research design, outlining details such as data collection methods, ethical considerations and the various research participants. I indicate the extra precautions that I deemed necessary, for example obtaining permission both from the

children and from their parents, in view of the fact that the majority of the participants were primary school children.

I devote three chapters to the narrative of my research, to take account of three separate aspects of the research. In Chapter 5, I describe my role in providing learning support for Traveller children who presented with learning difficulties. I outline the manner in which I transformed my practice from curriculum driven to child centred, through locating a Traveller child's learning in her own culture. This resulted from my learning around the child's failure to learn from the standard curriculum that was based on what was, from her perspective, an alien culture. I also provide an account of how I located the learning of two Traveller children, who had difficulties in learning spelling from standardised spelling books, in their own culture, and demonstrate how this approach proved more successful for them. I also tell of my successful struggle to obtain a psychological assessment for a Traveller child with obvious learning difficulties, who had not been prioritised for such assessment by school authorities.

The data collection and analysis continues in Chapter 6 with an account of the strategies I undertook in order to promote Traveller culture as valuable and valued within the schooling system. The space that I provided in my classroom to enable Traveller children to discuss cultural issues, such as their experience of discrimination and prejudice, was significant in contributing to their empowerment and sense of self-esteem. This initiative influenced my learning around the nature and extent of the bias and prejudice experienced by Traveller children. At the same time, Traveller children were provided with the opportunity of articulating their experience of discrimination, of critically analysing this phenomenon and of rejecting it as a framework for determining their life chances.

Chapter 7 recounts the final stage in my research narrative. It documents the origin of an after school group in which I cooperated with Winnie McDonagh from the organisation, Traveller Education Support Options (TESO). The group began as an initiative to encourage Traveller children to continue to second level schooling, but later expanded to

include children from the settled community. The process of this expansion, which could be articulated as representing the interface of two different cultural traditions, provided me with the opportunity of developing a practice of inclusion as the acceptance and acknowledgement of difference and diversity. The after school group also created the opportunity for the voices of Traveller children to be heard in a public forum, when they were invited to participate in *Dáil na bPáistí*, a forum that facilitates the expression of children's opinions and brings their views to the attention of public representatives.

In Chapter 8, I discuss the findings of my research, as I draw together the various insights, outcomes and theories that emerged during the research process. My analysis of my findings is categorised under three main strands: structural and organisational issues, conceptual issues and pedagogical issues. I demonstrate how my data provided the evidence to support my claim to have improved the quality of education for Traveller children, and to have achieved a transformative influence in the lives of the children, through having their culture and identity valued in educational institutions. I was, therefore, able to theorise my practice as a space for the promotion of social justice as the recognition and acceptance of diverse cultural identities. Chapter 8 also describes the progress of my own learning as it developed through my experience of working with the Traveller children. It delineates how I was thus enabled to reconceptualise my practice as providing a more democratic and more equitable educational experience for Traveller children. Finally, in this chapter I indicate how, in changing my pedagogic approach in certain areas of my teaching, I demonstrated the transformative potential of more emancipatory pedagogies for enhancing the educational opportunities and life chances of marginalised pupils.

The final chapter of my thesis, Chapter 9, contains my reflections on what I judge to be the significance of my research. I present my claim to knowledge in terms of my contribution to new educational practice and to new educational theory. In relation to practice, I indicate how my living theory of social justice as the valuing of cultural identity may have significance for other practitioners working with marginalised groups. In relation to educational theory, I demonstrate the significance of a living theory of

social justice as the acknowledgement of diversity, and explain the educational value of this theory as distinct from, for example, a distributive theory of social justice, such as that proposed by Rawls (1971). I conclude my thesis by revisiting briefly, and drawing together, the various threads that were interwoven to form the fabric of my research.

Conclusion

One final point that I would like to make, before beginning the narrative of my research, is that my account of my research reflects my interpretation and my understanding of my educational practice. It is located in a particular context, at a specific moment in time, and involves an identified group of individuals. The participants in my research were children, whose lives are complex, constantly evolving and producing new meanings. My knowledge, too, is continuously reforming as I incorporate my new learning into my system of meaning. Consequently, were I to undertake similar research again, either with other children or with the same participants, the findings would reflect the individuality, knowledge growth and contextual situatedness of the new research participants. My findings from the present research, therefore, are not generalisable or replicable in other situations, though I contend that my research has the potential to have an educative influence on the learning of other practitioners similarly located. Ideas of generalisability and replicability are the conventional criteria for judging traditional social science research. However, I am arguing for a new living form of theory that engages with new forms of criteria and standards of judgement. I am locating my work within the new scholarship which, as Schön (1995) says, requires new kinds of epistemologies and new standards of judgement. Whitehead (2000) has responded to the call for innovative epistemologies by suggesting that the standards of judgement could be grounded in an individual's embodied values that underpin the research process. I engage with these new epistemologies in formulating my living theories from the lived reality of my educational practice, and ground my living standards of judgement in my ontological values of social justice and equality that are reflected in my practice. I put forward, then, my learning outcomes, my enhanced understanding of my practice, and the theories that I have generated from my practice in the process of engaging in my research, into the public domain in the hope that other educational practitioners may learn, as I did, of the

emancipatory and democratic prospect of transforming a potential for marginalisation and oppression into a possibility for inclusion and respect, through following the path of social justice and equality for all.