

## **PART FIVE: ENSURING THAT THE CONCLUSIONS I HAVE COME TO ARE REASONABLY FAIR AND ACCURATE**

### **Chapter Nine: A discussion of my new learning – Testing my living theories**

#### **9.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I explain how I carried out systematic validation processes to test the validity of my claims to knowledge. I use an example of how I tested my living theory of learning to teach for social justice. I explain how my validation process involved getting critical feedback at all points of my research, in relation to whether I can claim with justification that I am living out the Christian values as I stated them earlier in this thesis. This requires ensuring first that I have solicited feedback from all relevant participants in my research. I speak about how this feedback is related to the Christian values, which are the same as the ontological values on which my research is based. I complete this chapter with a description and analysis of another new learning for me in relation to significant new understandings about the methodology of self-study action research from my experiences of disseminating my research.

#### **9.2 My systematic validation process**

I begin with a practical example of my validation process. In Chapter Five there are five pictures (Pictures 7.7 to 7.11) of my pupils presenting their reports on ‘Explaining dyslexia to myself and others’ to members of our school community. The video from which these stills were taken was part of the feedback about their self-study action research projects into how they learned spellings and about their new understandings of specific learning disability (dyslexia).

Before the presentation we gathered in my classroom. Anxious whispers from my pupils reflected their concerns. Concerns about the reactions of the pupils in the mainstream class:

‘What will they think?’ ‘I’m nervous.’ ‘They will love your piece about George Washington’s difficulties in school.’ ‘I think that they will really love the bits about the famous people. I did.’ ‘Will they be surprised at how many ways we know to learn spellings?’ When we returned to my classroom after the presentation there was a flurry of excitement as the pupils described the mainstream pupils’ reactions to the report. ‘They said that they didn’t know there were so many ways to learn spellings.’ ‘A, B, and C (names) said that they wanted to try a different way of learning spellings now.’ ‘They never knew till we told them.’ ‘They said that they didn’t know how hard it was for us to learn too.’ ‘They never knew there were famous people who weren’t good at school.’ My pupils claimed that they had ‘explained dyslexia to themselves and others.’ Their presentation, together with the questioning and class discussion that followed it, provided feedback on their claim to have gained a new, personal understanding of dyslexia.

In Chapter One I articulated the standards of judgement by which I would judge the quality of my research. Now I want to summarise the validation processes I used to test the validity of my research claims. For example, in Chapter Seven, I presented data and articulated how these data showed my commitment to justice. Then, using the literature, I explained how the form of my actions demonstrated my belief in self-efficacy and in the capacity of the individual. Accordingly, the process of judging my claims to new knowledge required first the articulation of my values and a report of their existence at a conceptual level in my new practices. In addition my new practices were explained in relation to my values. The most critical standards were that my thesis demonstrated my values in action as part of my living and reconceptualised practice. So what did this look like in reality? My validation processes required getting critical feedback at all points within my research process.

### **~Getting critical feedback at all points of my research**

In Chapter Seven I included correspondence from a critical friend that provided evidence that my values were being lived out in my practice as both a teacher and researcher. This was part of how I tested my new understandings against the critical responses of others. There have been examples in the last two chapters of the many people from whom I received critical feedback. These included my participating pupils, the pupils’ peers in

mainstream classes, teaching colleagues, critical friends, resource teachers from other schools; tutors, programme co-ordinators and workshop directors with the Dyslexia Association of Ireland; doctoral and university colleagues and those from the academy who attended educational conferences at which I spoke about my research. The importance of this variety of validation sources was that people from both inside and outside my research were critiquing my work. All these people were reasonably familiar with various aspects of my context.

I had to be somewhat opportunistic in finding ways of getting feedback. My methodology was not tidy or linear so I cannot describe it as a series of developmental stages, or even as a narrative with a beginning, middle and end. Each data-gathering episode developed its own momentum. That was why I found triangulation such a vital process of comparing my perceptions with the perceptions of others (McNiff and Whitehead 2005, p.67). For example, I have already told how I have placed my comments on my pupils' work alongside comments from an art therapist and resource teacher in order to compare our views (see Tables 5.2 and 8.4). The experience of placing my new learning before academic colleagues at conferences was harrowing but interactive forms of presentation were most informative. I was overjoyed that teaching colleagues confirmed my research findings during my pupils' presentation of their projects to them.

Their validation and my data are in my data archive, which I have listed in Appendix 2. This archive includes my reflective journals and my pupils' journals; my correspondence with my supervisor and critical friends; validation correspondence and audio tape-recordings from pupils, teaching colleagues, two critical friends, members of my validation group, and audience members at conference presentations; questionnaire responses from pupils and teachers in mainstream classes and from resource teachers, the Dyslexia Association of Ireland Workshop Programme Co-ordinators and Directors. In keeping with my theme of finding appropriate forms in which to facilitate participants' voices, my archive also includes tape and video recordings and photographs, pupils' reports and artwork. Data from my practice of teaching includes pupil profiles, individual pupil educational plans, and pupils' record sheets of their learning from commercial

programmes, and lesson plans for lessons that were observed by other teachers (see appendices 5.2a and 5.2b).

Another critical feature in my validation process was that I required not just evidence from others that I had changed my understanding and my practice, but I also wanted evidence that these changes had been critiqued against my values. There are further examples in the remainder of this thesis of how this occurred in my research.

**~Justifying that I am living out the values articulated at the beginning of this thesis**

I am talking about how my claims could be related to my values. For example, in the previous chapter, I told how dialogue provided a way of coming to new understandings about teaching spellings for children with specific learning disability (dyslexia). In the course of our conversations and action research projects, I afforded participating pupils a freedom to come to understand their own abilities to learn – to value talents that had been unrecognised previously. The values of freedom and capability were embedded in my research actions and in the new learning that followed. The pupils and I were learning together and our actions embodied these values.

In order to justify my claim that I am living out the values that I am expressing throughout, I want to explain how I understand our learning together as the embodiment of the values of freedom, equality, empathy and respect for the capability of the individual. In practical terms I have shown in the two previous chapters that my pupils and I have addressed our marginalisation and learned helplessness by finding our voices, and within our fluid relationships we have celebrated our capacities to learn.

I now want to show that our learning constitutes values-in-action, and these values live in and are the justification of my research claims. I speak first about my understanding of our changing relationship during the course of my research. This includes the idea that the pupils became co-constructors of knowledge. Next I want to explore the relationship between this learning relationship and my core research values and in particular to issues of development as freedom (Sen 1999) and the concept of development as freedom in education.

I am claiming throughout that I can show the relationship between my pupils' learning and my own learning. Specifically,

- 1) I have helped the children who participated in my research to come to know in their own ways.
- 2) I have found ways to help children come to value what they know and how they know it.
- 3) I have reconceptualised curriculum as a knowledge generating exercise in which pupils can participate, as well as teachers. In this way I have arranged the conditions of learning for my students in terms of offering them fuller participation in creating their own knowledge.

To elaborate:

1) I have helped the children to come to know in their own ways. This was achieved when the pupils and I acted within a relationship of reciprocity. Our learning was interdependent; I gained new insights from pupils' ways of learning and I modified my ways of teaching; the participating pupils gained new insights within my new ways of teaching and modified their ways of learning which in turn informed my thinking. We acted and learned in a reciprocal relationship. I found that effective learning for those with specific learning disability (dyslexia) included personal, procedural and dialogical learning. These ideas and practices developed as individuals created their own knowledge. I have demonstrated how I have come to understand, apply and extend the processes, skills, attitudes and knowledge by which the pupils in my research improved their learning capacity (Pollard 1997 and McNiff 2002). Throughout this entire process I was attempting to live towards my values of empathy, compassion, equality and freedom as set out in Table 5.1.

2) I have found ways to help children come to value what they know and how they know it. Together with the pupils I have developed new understandings of specific learning disability (dyslexia) that identify pupils' capabilities in learning. I have explained in Chapters Seven and Eight how I have worked with these pupils to use their singular abilities. I have combined the educational enabling of these pupils within a learning

environment where metacognition and personal knowledge were united with the social creation of knowledge. I found ways to help children and myself come to value what we know and how we know it. We have re-established the power of the learner within the learning process.

Freedom, human dignity and social justice are the central values on which I base these claims. I have removed many obstacles that hindered my pupils' learning. I have recognised and facilitated the freedom of individuals with specific learning disability (dyslexia) to learn in ways that suit their individual needs (see Chapter Eight). To explain why it was necessary to provide freedoms of this type in order to allow the developments of the pupils' learning and my learning, I have referred to the work of Sen (1999), who says,

It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom. To counter the difficulties that we face, we have to see individual freedom as a social commitment.

Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency.

(Sen 1999, p.xii)

I have allowed pupils opportunities for freedom of action in bringing their new understandings of dyslexia to other pupils and teachers in the school. I have established pedagogical practices that permit the pupils to decide how they will learn spellings. I have changed my teaching so that pupils can expand their capabilities and value their abilities, as they recorded in their learning diaries. In facilitating my pupils' actions, my work is commensurate with the ideas of Sen (1999) that

the expansion of the 'capabilities' of persons to lead the kinds of lives they value – and have reason to value.

(Sen 1999, p.18)

I am claiming to have moved from a situation where marginalisation led to learned helplessness and when learned helplessness was tackled in a traditional approach, as explained, for example, in Kerr (2001), which led to further marginalisation. In Chapter Seven I explained how this situation applied to both my pupils and myself and how I interrogated it. My research set up a counter cycle of confirming capabilities that led to the development of personal confidence and competence, which in turn led to a willingness to contribute to others' knowledge (see Chapter Eight). Sen (1999) tells of similar negative cycles where 'economic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom, just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic unfreedom' (p.8). He tells, but does not demonstrate as I have done, how this cycle can be broken in a two-way relation between

- 1) social arrangements to expand individual freedoms and
- 2) the use of individual freedom not only to improve the respective lives but also to make the social arrangements more appropriate and effective.

(Sen 1999, p.31)

My research links issues of freedom, human dignity and social justice, which were included in the third aim of my research.

3) I have reconceptualised curriculum as a knowledge generating exercise in which pupils can participate, as well as teachers. The pupils and I actively participated in addressing justice and epistemological issues by finding ways to exercise our voices in a system which was dominated by propositional knowledge. I have explained how I invited pupils to participate in creating their own knowledge. I was conceptualising social justice as the freedom to contribute. In practical terms this meant pupils taking responsibility for their learning according to their personal ways of learning.

My research was based on ideas of emancipation through the acquisition of knowledge (Freire 1994). I built on Rawls's (1971) ideas of justice as fairness and developed a practical living theory of learning to teach for social justice, which has some similarities with Young (2000), where my practice was shown to exhibit the values on which I base my understanding of justice. Young (2000) speaks of 'being able to engage in the world and grow' (p.184). Young's work describes self-development within communities. My work

offers a similar perspective and speaks of social justice where the individual is afforded opportunities to develop the confidence and freedom to contribute to social justice for himself or herself as well as others. The values that can be used to justify my claim are those of service to others in the interests of the greater good.

### **9.3 The importance of our new ways of learning to issues of development as freedom in education**

My research aimed to establish socially just practices. I am now claiming that my research has the potential to develop new forms of discourses in professional education, by conceptualising practice as theory.

First I need to articulate my understanding of freedom as a condition for making a contribution to practice discourses. For this I draw on the work of Sen (1999). I speak about not only academic or economic development, but also about ideas of the relationships between individual development, social development and freedom. In this way freedom and development are dialectically and practically linked and as such form an important context for my study of how I helped my pupils to improve their learning experiences. In justifying what I have done I am asking whether I have lived towards my values of freedom, compassion, human dignity and service.

What I believe has happened in my research is that first, pupils have contributed to my learning as a teacher and second, I have contributed to their learning. For example, the dialogues and actions that arose from my questioning of my practice as outlined in Chapter Seven show that I was actively engaging with ideas around equality, freedom and respect for the wholeness and capability of both the individual learner and myself. I have shifted the locus of power in learning to the individual in order to create a new reality of learning where my children were not devalued because of their learning differences. I claim that the pupils and I are creating our new understandings of how learning occurs in relationship with others.

I have learned during my research programme that the policy rhetoric of inclusion, which values individuals with specific learning disability (dyslexia), can be realised through my practice. This practical realisation has been a transformation of my ontological belief in the capacity of all humans to learn, regardless of age, intellectual capacity, or ability to read, into a living practice.

Sen (1999) writes of the quality of life being assessed by our capacity to exercise our freedom. I have shown in my research that the quality of my pupils' education and my pedagogy can be assessed by the degree of our freedoms to learn in ways that value the development of the individual. In Chapter Seven I have demonstrated how I have facilitated the freedom for pupils to voice their preferred ways of learning, and this has contributed to pupils' development in terms of self-esteem and identities. Similarly in Chapter Eight I have demonstrated how I have facilitated the freedom for pupils to evaluate their own work and to learn in their chosen learning styles. I claim that these freedoms in turn have contributed to pupils' academic achievement in learning spellings.

Sen (1999) speaks of development as the everyday realisation of the lived capacities of humans. However, his form of theorising is propositional. His theory of development as freedom is about what people are able to be and do – a celebration of the uniqueness of individuals. His theory goes beyond a distributive theory of justice and justice as fairness (Rawls, 1971) and also beyond Griffiths's (1998) theory of justice as practice because these theories are limited by using a propositional form of logic and by focusing on resources rather than on individuals' capacities. My theory of developing capacity is a living form of theory, through which I can offer explanations for what I have done, while incorporating Sen's propositional ideas. I can show how I have endeavoured to enable the pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) to transform their capacities for thinking and learning. Quotations from the pupils themselves and their teachers support my claim that I have achieved this (see Chapters Seven and Eight).

In order to develop a capability approach for me as a teacher, I have engaged in dialogue with pupils and that dialogue in turn has led to self-development. The evidence for this

claim is that both my pupils and I have addressed our learned helplessness and found ourselves as capable knowers and learners. I now understand myself as a practitioner who is capable of improving and theorising her practice. I have developed a relational process of teacher agency, which has not only developed my own thinking and practice but also developed how I can influence others, specifically the pupils participating in my research, to act for themselves. My approach has been informed by the thinking of Young (2000) whose ideas about inclusive forms of justice include the proposition that personal individuality can be achieved through a positive interaction between individuals and their society. Young envisions a democratic world order, where knowledge is developed with others. I am offering my living theories about an inclusive approach to knowledge generation, which unites personal knowledge, and metacognition, and socially developed knowledge.

I have demonstrated that educational research can be grounded in a form of knowledge that values learning and the development of the person. Furthermore I believe this is a necessary condition for educational research because, as I came to understand, social facts cannot be isolated from the domain of ontological values and these values in turn inform the epistemological stance one adopts.

### **~Conceptual issues around developing theory from practice**

I have explained how I developed a living theory of teaching and learning that is inclusive of others' views and ways of learning. I have also explained how I have developed my own living theory of learning to teach for social justice, in which my teaching celebrated the potential learning of the children with specific learning disability (dyslexia). I did so within a context and background that was largely grounded in propositional knowledge and placed little value on personal knowledge. I have explained that the philosophical and values base of much of the reported research in the field of specific learning disability (dyslexia) ignores personal knowledge and the human perspectives of both the learners and the teachers. I am claiming to have transcended the tensions in this by offering a form of living theory and logic, which is grounded in my values of respect for humans and their capabilities.

My initial research aim was to enable pupils to move towards achieving their potential. My research has enabled me to modify my practice in terms of how I can develop new forms of pedagogy that will enable the children to be in control of their own learning and to shape their identities as capable and competent learners.

I have developed a new living theory of practice, which is my explanation for how I have come to improve what I am doing for the benefit of myself and the children in my care. Throughout my research there have been two strands: my learning and my pupils' learning. My learning is reflected in my pupils' learning. For me, self-study action research has influenced changes in my own thinking about educational knowledge and how it is created, in that I have become actively critical. I gave an example of this in Chapter Eight when I explained how my ways of teaching had changed from propositional to dialogical forms of teaching for knowledge creation. Apart from thinking critically about my teaching, I have actively demonstrated how I created it in the ways that I helped children develop new knowledge about their own learning.

I developed a practice in which the children I taught also became self-study action researchers investigating their concerns, as in the learning of spellings, as documented in Chapter Eight. In addition they researched their cognitive ability for learning in their learning journals (See Chapter Eight and Appendix 2). I am claiming that my ways were more enabling and more just than traditional forms of research into specific learning disability (dyslexia), as explained in the background to my research (Part Two). The insights that I have gained have been at personal and substantive levels, including ideas about organisational processes to do with teaching and learning. In addition to this I have gained further important insights from the processes of disseminating my research, as I will now explain.

#### **9.4 Further key learnings from the dissemination of my research**

I presented my research in the three formats below at educational conferences:

- Traditional forms of paper presentation
- Collaborative research presentations and
- Interactive symposia.

I have found that more traditional forms of oral paper presentations tend to use a propositional form of logic (Dunleavy 2003). By contrast, an interactive symposium can often imply sharing research with colleagues, students, communities and broader publics. It 'usually requires opening up the research to discussion and critique on many levels so that the work may continue to develop' (Berry 2004). Such interactions reinforced the findings of my classroom research that personal knowledge can be created through dialogue and have transformative potential. My experience and understandings of making my research public in interactive symposia at educational conferences has led me to a new understanding of my research within the context of educational networks of communication for a new scholarship of educational enquiry through practitioner research (Whitehead 2004a and McNiff 2004).

*Traditional forms of paper presentations: Reflection-in-learning / reflection-in-action*

In McDonagh (2002) I presented my research reflections on how I teach. These reflections resonated with the pupils' reflections on how they learned spellings in that both were reflection-in-learning, which mirrors Schön's (1995) idea of 'reflection-in action'. I presented my 2002 paper in a traditional didactic format within a group session of papers followed by some clarification questions from the audience. One question, later, over coffee, remains with me today. It was, 'How did you come to link the theories to your practice?' That question was significant for me in that it held a key to my new epistemology – one that positioned personal knowledge as relational. Winkler argues for the linking of reflection and theory when he says,

Teachers' experiences – and practical knowledge derived from it – are not sufficient to develop teacher expertise. Theoretical reflection in turn produces qualitatively different insights about teaching and learning, which can provide teachers with conceptual tools to establish new links between what they know and what they do.

(Winkler 2001, p.438)

Winkler has adopted a common perspective that theoretical reflection can be viewed as an exercise in matching one's practice to pre-existing propositional educational theories. The question about how I theorised my practice moved my work to a new level. By testing my

data against epistemological and ontological values-as-standards, I provided evidence of theorising in my practice. The question aided the development of new (for me) knowledge about my practice and also challenged my ways of thinking and presenting my learning.

I have adopted a metacognitive position; the generation of new knowledge in my research included dialogue with my own thinking. This critical questioning also highlights the usefulness of community enquiry to aid and critique one's reflections – a feature that tends not to be present in traditional forms of paper presentations.

*Collaborative presentations: How I think and learn*

When I presented audiotapes and videos of my research practices at the 2003 Collaborative Action Research Association Annual Meeting, researchers in the discussion that followed identified unhesitatingly and unequivocally that teaching colleagues in my workplace had learned from my pupils' theories of how the pupils learned (McDonagh and Sullivan, 2003). A video tape of these discussions is in my data archive (see Appendix 2.4e). During this collaborative presentation my co-presenting colleague and I discussed and found similar conceptual and philosophical frameworks within our different and individual fields of research. Our collaborative discussions in drawing up the paper gave us an opportunity to explore our educative influences on each other and in our individual contexts. During these discussions we also created new knowledge together. To enable the audience to critique our work we asked the following two questions:

Has our presentation shown that we have contributed to improved educational practices?

How can our work contribute to educational theorising?

The audience responded that we had improved educational practices. They did not attempt the second question. We concluded that our collaboration in developing this paper presentation had contributed to the development and validation of our own living theories but had not contributed to their dissemination. So I now consider the potential significance of interactive symposia for the dissemination of self-study action research.

*Interactive symposia: new understandings about research epistemology*

I begin with an account of an interactive research symposium at which I presented my work. At the Critical Debates in Action Research Seminar (2003) at the University of Limerick, I presented a paper (McDonagh 2003) that included pupils' artwork and their voices as they explained their experiences of dyslexia. Papers at that conference addressed specific critical and current issues in action research such as issues of validity, forms of theory, location, voice, legitimation, ICT and institutional implications. The interaction following the formal presentation of the papers took the form of an open forum on each topic. Discussion circles included presenters, invited key speakers and participants. The discussions initiated here were continued through email. The following quotations demonstrate the transformational influence of presenting practitioner research in a dialogical format because, as a university lecturer said,

The combination of the children's voices and your reflections on their learning opened the doors of your classroom and pushed out the walls – a way for other educators like myself to be in your classroom and learn from the lived experience.

(22 June 2003 Correspondence see Appendix 2.5f)

### **~An epistemology where personal learning occurs through reciprocal interactions**

I found a form of knowledge generation in which the researcher takes responsibility for his/her own learning within group settings. This concept is similar to Wray's (1994) and Slavin's (2003) strategy of individual responsibility within group learning. I took part (McDonagh 2004a) in an interactive symposium, which provided an example of this. The discussant wrote about this process of presentation as follows:

Self-study does not end with the production of a written report or artefact – these are but one part of the process of self-study. Self-study work compels those that are working within it to share what they do with their colleagues, their students, their communities and broader public domains and to open up the work or discussion and critique so that the work may continue to develop. This group is taking their work forward in exactly those ways, and I applaud them for taking the notion of accountability seriously. This is a necessary act, and at the same time, a courageous act because in laying out your work to us there is considerable risk involved, you make yourselves vulnerable in the process. It is much easier to speak about the need for vulnerability than to actually engage in it, in the ways you have.

(Berry 2004)

(To note: the group, referred to above, brought together nine individuals' presentations of self-study action research and spanned all sectors of education from teaching to teacher education and policy making across many continents. Each participant had multiple links of influence to the others in the group that added to their web of learning togetherness. Their papers were web-accessed and participants' ontological commitments and practices were discussed by all present during the interactive presentation format.)

So I argue for the interactive symposium as a new form of generating knowledge in research – as an important feature within self-study action research. I do so because I believe it encompasses all the key processes for metacognition and social metacognition as I described them earlier. I am committed to it since metacognition is about understanding and developing one's own learning. In addition, the use of metacognitive processes in research places a value on the uniqueness of the research within a new scholarship of educational enquiry (Whitehead 1989) and further positions the interactive symposium within a new epistemology (Schön 1995).

Some of the implications of my dissemination of my work can be understood as the centrality of people and their social interactions in the generation of living educational theory, and living theory as grounded in people's capacity to theorise their individual and collective work as a form of social renewal. Both these elements are interrelated and mutually influential.

## **9.5 Summary**

I have considered the importance of my learning and my pupils' learning to issues of development as freedom and have explained my ideas on freedom in education as contribution. I drew on Sen's (1999) ideas about freedom as development and I show how this provided a framework for my attempts to build pupils' capabilities and confidence.

I concluded this chapter by explaining how I developed my living theory from within my practice and generated important new insights from how I disseminated my theory to

a wider audience. In the next section of this thesis I consider the potential educative influence of my research. I now move into a discussion of wider professional debates and possible directions in which my research has potential to influence future practice and research.