

PART SIX: THE BROADER SIGNIFICANCE OF MY STUDY – MODIFYING MY PRACTICE IN THE LIGHT OF MY NEW LEARNING

In answering the question, ‘How do I modify my practice in the light of my new learning?’ (Whitehead 1989), I am talking about more than changes in classroom strategies. I am considering the potential implications of my research for others in relation to the four major themes that have developed from my new learning. These themes are: first, I developed a critique of my own stance in relation to my pedagogy, as well as in relation to dominant practices of teaching children with specific learning disability (dyslexia). Second, I showed that the children and I could co-create knowledge. I understood myself as in relation with them, and they with me. I developed a dialogue of equals, which was a practice that celebrated human equality. This has implications for current systems of schooling, where children are regularly categorised and labelled. Third, I have grounded my relationships of equality in my ontological and Christian values. I have linked the idea of the value of the person with the idea that people must be free to realise and exercise their value. Fourth, I have come to understand that personal and social practices are informed and underpinned by specific ontological and epistemological values.

There are two chapters in this final section. In Chapter Ten I explain how my research has potential implications for other colleagues’ learning, and for new practices for teaching children with special educational needs (dyslexia). I indicate some of the potential implications of my work, in terms of how other people such as professional colleagues have learned from me, and what people may continue to learn.

In Chapter Eleven I tell how my research has possible implications for other fields of practice. This includes the potential relevance of my research to areas of disability, disadvantage, education policy and provision. I also explain how I am contributing to new forms of theory and how my thesis may add to the existing body of knowledge. In addition I am addressing the idea of why people should listen to what I have learned in my research. I am not offering my work at a prescriptive level for others to repeat. I am suggesting that

others consider if there is anything in my living theory that is of value for their own contexts or that they can improve and build on.

I conclude with a metaphor to explain the fluid, uncertain, yet fulfilling processes I experienced while generating my living theory of practice about how I learned to teach primary school pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia).

CHAPTER TEN: The potential significance of my study

10.1 Introduction

In this chapter I want to show how my research has potential implications for teaching colleagues. I then explain this process of influence in relation to how the insights from my research had significance for me, as a person, a teacher, and as a researcher.

As a person I have realised the importance of articulating and explaining my ontological and epistemological commitments as they relate to my teaching. As a teacher I have developed ways of teaching that I claim have relevance for providing socially just forms of teaching and learning.

As I researcher I explain the importance of theorising practice in (1) my reconceptualisation of metacognition; (2) my ideas on reflection in action; and (3) my approach to practice as a form of living theory. I show how the ability to critique one's own pedagogical stance has significance for teacher professional development for the teaching of pupils with special educational needs.

Finally I examine the potential importance of my work for the education of social formations (Whitehead and McNiff 2006) and for new practices for teaching children with special educational needs (dyslexia).

10.2 The potential implications of my research for teaching colleagues

During the processes of my research two core issues have had significance for teaching colleagues: first is the power of the individual to be an influence for educative change; and second, I have shown that knowledge can be mediated between teachers and learners by providing opportunities for the learner's voice to be heard. Here are some examples where teaching colleagues have written about their experiences of these processes and which I can claim as evidence that colleagues have learned from my research.

Evidence of the educative influence of being open to the voices of pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) exists in the following letter, which came from a teaching colleague following a presentation by Pupil J's report explaining his learning disability.

Just a note to acknowledge your report on dyslexia. I apologise for rushing off midway through the presentation a couple of weeks ago. I can say however that in the 15 minutes I spent listening to (pupil) J and his fellow presenters, I learned more about dyslexia than I had ever known before – shame on me! I promised J the opportunity of a 'proper' presentation in our own classroom not only for me but also for his 28 classmates. A few days later he sat in front of his class and I watched as he grew in stature before my eyes and those of his classmates as he explained to them in his own quiet way what he had discovered and learned. He had a rapt audience throughout and fielded questions from his classmates with confidence.

(12 March 2002 Correspondence from teaching colleague, original in data archive Appendix 2.5a)

The significance and the power of the learner's voice for educational change can be seen in another teacher's answers to the questions, 'What did you learn about dyslexia? What other questions do you have?' (Appendix 7.2) following a presentation of pupils' reports on their understanding of specific learning disability (dyslexia). The teacher stated that he had gained new personal knowledge that may influence his practice when he wrote,

I learned a lot about dyslexia. There were certain things I hadn't realised. I think I would do things maybe differently with dyslexic children in the class.

(2 March 2002 Correspondence from teaching colleague, original in data archive Appendix 2.5a)

I found that the new knowledge which resulted from the presentation of pupils' reports influenced school structures in terms of teacher understandings of and approaches to specific learning disabilities. Pictures 7.7 to 7.11 in Chapter Seven show a cohort of pupils presenting their reports on 'Explaining dyslexia to myself and others' in a mainstream classroom. The mainstream class appear to be engrossed in listening to and questioning the report presenters. The mainstream class pupils and teachers who were present responded in writing to the questions, 'What did you learn about dyslexia? What other questions do you

have?' (Appendix 7.2b). The Principal read their questions aloud. At the end of the session he responded as follows:

I see these people here, presenting their projects [reports] and telling very publicly how they feel about having learning difficulties. I feel very proud of them. I feel that they have other skills, which maybe I haven't got. I think they have great courage to be able to do what they are doing.

(Transcribed from video, original in data archive April 2003 Appendix 2.4f).

This and many other transcripts of conversations from my classroom are examples of the potential to position a resource classroom in a 'primary school as the foundation stone in the development of that learning society' (20 January 2002 my correspondence to critical friend, original in data archive Appendix 2.5b). I believe that my research offers a form of professional development and a possible pre-service approach, which would be in keeping with the Government working group policy document on preparing teachers for the 21st Century (Government of Ireland 2002). My research involved a reflective and caring commitment to theorising my professional practice; the government document recommends a similar approach to pre-service programmes:

All courses, course content and other experiences should be designed with the objective of preparing teachers who are competent, caring, committed, reflective and have a keen sense of their professional responsibilities.

(Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2002, p.155)

My claims that my research had significance for teaching colleagues have implications for dominant theories on specific learning disabilities (dyslexia) that work from a propositional perspective (Hornsby 1995; and Snowling 2000). I have demonstrated the benefits of insider research and this has grown from the new epistemology of practice that I developed during my research. The idea of creating a new epistemology for a new scholarship of educational enquiry that is of particular relevance to teachers has been developed by Whitehead (2000), based on Schön's (1995) idea of a new scholarship. I offer new understandings of knowledge that arose during my research as having the potential to influence how teachers teach.

The significance of my research in relation to my own learning is that I have changed myself. My research has had a major influence on my own learning in terms of practical, theoretical and personal knowledge. I discuss each form of knowledge in the following section. In doing so I first describe and explain my epistemological stance and then show how it has enabled me to generate a new epistemology of practice.

~How my new insights have significance for me

I attribute the changes that occurred in my practice first to how I have learned to theorise my practices and how to disseminate my new knowledge. Prior to my research my personal preference was for a logical, mathematical intelligence and learning approach (Gardner 1997). I have written about the difficulty I had adapting to other teaching and learning styles (McDonagh 2000). Stubbings (1997) points out that many teachers have difficulty teaching in ways that are not within their preferred learning style. Jung and Hull (1991) also found that those pupils who presented with the most difficult behaviours in class were the shadow of the teacher's own personality type and consequent teaching style. In this research I did not, however, follow the route of adapting to group learning styles such as linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal, and naturalist (Gardner 1993). I identified and engaged with pupils' individual ideas and ways of thinking in creating new and accessible knowledge with them (see Chapter Eight). I learned to change my practice of teaching by providing opportunities for pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) to identify their own learning styles and strategies. I changed my ways of teaching to accommodate their learning approaches. My choice of research methodology and the form of theory I engaged with facilitated the changes in my practice. I learned that by engaging with open-ended forms of theorising I was able to develop a more socially just practice.

A second, further significance of my research in relation to my own learning about theory was that I came to understand the ontological base for my epistemological stance. I identified and articulated my own view of knowledge and knowledge creation by starting with practice and generating theory from within the practice. I learned the importance of personal knowledge in my ways of teaching. This does not mean that I am ignoring other

forms of knowledge; I am reclaiming personal knowledge within my context where I found that dominant discourses about theory ignored it. I realised that knowledge was fluid and dynamic and seldom reified in relation to teaching and learning. What I am claiming here is important because I have integrated my ontological, spiritual and ethical values within practice-based knowledge. In doing so I have improved my own professional learning as well as developed new ways of enabling learning for pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). This is part of my original contribution to knowledge.

The personal, professional and political learning that came from trying to improve my practice includes an understanding of how I have contributed to theories of social justice by developing new approaches to the learning of those with specific learning disability (dyslexia). The significance of my research is also grounded in the argument that by engaging in forms of social action I have come to clarify and deepen my understanding of the complexities of my practice. I have contributed to a rigorous social knowledge base, which has the potential to inform and develop practice.

During the course of my research three key insights emerged. These insights were (1) my reconceptualisation of metacognition; (2) my understanding of reflection in action; (3) my understanding of developing theory from within practice.

(1) My reconceptualisation of metacognition

I explained in Chapter Eight my reconceptualisation of metacognition. This was part of what drove the changes in my practices and theorising through raising my own awareness of what I am doing. I have recreated my identity as a teacher, a researcher and a theorist through my critical reflexivity. I have asserted agency for myself in that I have challenged conditions of injustice in my context. In my choice of research methods I have acted with imagination, which was necessary to counter the conditions in my context. The conditions were both constraining and unjust. I have opened up a plurality of ways of knowing by recognising that each pupil and I have our own individual ways of learning and coming to know.

(2) My understanding of reflection in action

I have arrived at an important new learning for me by reflecting in action. My methodology makes specific use of the metaphor of a mirror for reflection (see Part Three). In developing an understanding of my own and my pupils' identity I use images of mirroring. Mirroring and reflection were integral to my process of testing ideas within my self-study action research methodology. By reflecting my actions against the values base of my research, I can justify the form of action research I chose. I have found a form of theorising that recognises the plurality of the human condition and in particular the pluralistic forms of the relationships within teaching and learning. Walker (2005) offers a description and explanation of this concept, which resonates with my research:

Through our speech and actions we reveal who we are, we 'appear' to each other, we 'present' to each other fulfilling what Arendt (1958) calls the human condition of plurality so that we learn and that we learn from each other.

(Walker 2005, p.103)

Through reflection I have also come to an understanding of learning difference and the plurality of learning processes and strategies.

(3) My understanding of developing theory from within practice.

The theorising of practice is sometimes seen as a new skill in educational contexts where teachers' craft knowledge has been undervalued and under-researched (Day 2005).

In the current educational climate of change, with its emphasis on teachers' continuous professional development, there is much to be gained from studying the craft knowledge of teaching, particularly from the perspective of the teacher.

(Day 2005, p.21)

I believe that I have achieved what Day (2005) speaks of from the perspective of an observer:

Privileged enough to observe successful teachers recognise their craft-knowledge at work even though they often struggle to define it coherently.

(Day 2005, p.1)

I am claiming to have demonstrated not only that I have articulated craft-knowledge but also to have developed new knowledge about learning and justice for pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and those who teach them. My research has shown how I am contributing to a new epistemology for a new scholarship (Schön 1995) by encouraging new ways of learning for myself and other teachers, which could contribute to their professional development.

Before explaining the potential significance of my research for others I want to make a final comment on the personal significance of my work. The importance of developing my living theory within a self-study action research methodology to me as a teacher, a researcher and as a person was that I experienced the transformative shift from experiencing myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989) where my practice denied my values, to experiencing my practice as celebrating the joy of change. The writing of this thesis is part of that celebration of the gifts that I have received from learning with and from my pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). Apple (1997) has articulated my sense of joy as follows:

The gift that I have received from them is the knowingness that there is hope for all and a way by which every child can be reached. This way is very simple. It is honouring the abilities that the child has and the space that the child is in at the moment.

(Apple 1997, p.307)

I have found that developing living educational theory has been a fulfilling process for me as a teacher, researcher and as a person. I have shown ways of improving professional learning and moving towards a more socially just form of teaching for pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). I have found that change in my research is not gained through conventional 'authority based consciousness but by cultivating imagination and creativity within each student' (Apple 1997, p.308) and within myself. By articulating my sense of

moral and ethical judgements, personal thoughts and societal concerns, I have changed and grown. I have established a supportive educational environment where my vision (see Table 3.2) became my reality and that of my pupils. Our experiences can spread hope to others who have learned to be helpless.

~Teacher professional development as grounded in the ability to critique one's own pedagogical stance when teaching pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia)

In producing this thesis as an account of my practice I am not offering it as a model of professional development. Instead I aim to help other practitioners to consider how they might examine their practice not only in the areas of supporting those with specific learning disability (dyslexia) but also in all areas of their work. This thesis is not a 'what to do' book. It is an account of what I did and why I did it. I present it as an invitation to others to reflect on their own practice and consider the benefits of theorising it, as I have experienced.

I want to identify the significant elements in my research that contributed to its success from my perspective as a teacher. I began my research from a position of learned helplessness in the teaching of pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). The community of learning that I developed with pupils in my school offered opportunities for the development of metacognition and social learning. I, as well as the pupils, raised my own levels of metacognition and social learning. Our interactions reinforced and confirmed me in my new thinking and new actions. In a similar way, the community of learning established within the university by my peer group of doctoral researchers (who became my validation group) and a college professor who acted as our supervisor developed relationships that reinforced and confirmed me in my new ideas about knowledge creation and theorising. Within this approach I gained the freedom and confidence to grow into my own voice in educational settings. I also gained sufficient confidence, when confirmed in my own ideas in these settings, so that I could contribute to more socially just forms of teaching and learning.

Often when teachers are asked to theorise their practice, they 'are tempted to reproduce the kinds of abstracted principles of theories that they feel are expected of them' (Van Manen 1995, p.47). In this way teachers often attempt to articulate in a conceptual manner active understandings of their work. This does not always produce useful practical theory because it frequently ignores the passions and intentions of teacher craft.

During my research I have critiqued my own stance in relation to my own pedagogies. I have also critiqued my stance in relation to dominant teaching strategies for those with specific learning disability (dyslexia). This critique is of current importance for the professional development of teachers of pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) because it addresses the core issues informing the new model of provision outlined in Circular Special Education 02/05 (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a). These issues, as I listed them at the beginning of this section, included (1) a whole-school approach and (2) providing appropriate learning for these pupils (Government of Ireland 1998; Day 2003; Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a). The idea of inclusion is implied in this dual focus and is also stated in the circular.

(1) A whole-school approach

In terms of a whole-school approach, currently there is a gap in whole-school policy for specific learning disability (dyslexia) (Day 2003). Tansey and Ní Dhomhnaill (2002) found in their study of the perceptions and practices of primary school teachers with regard to dyslexia that,

the majority of respondents worked in school that did not have a whole school policy on dyslexia though most (94.2%) perceived a need for one.

(Tansey and Ní Dhomhnaill 2002, p.17)

My research offers the potential to influence how future policy could be informed. My living theory has contributed to professional development and provision by offering individual and group interventions in a manner that best suited the abilities of pupils. My approach included supports that ensured that the pupils' needs were met not only throughout the school day but could be sustained outside school and into the pupils' future

lives. My contribution was informed by and is in line with the spirit of recent government decisions such as the Education of People with Special Education Needs Act (Government of Ireland 2004a); Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland 2004b); Disability Act (Government of Ireland 2005); and Circular Special Education 02/2005 (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a). My research methodology demonstrated ways to allow for in-class as well as out-of-class teaching support as Circular 02/2005 (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a) suggests. The changes in practice that occurred as I developed my living theory demonstrated the importance of a solid theoretical base in implementing change in education.

(2) Providing appropriate teaching

The individual and group settings in which my living theory was developed provided opportunities for personal reflection on learning by both teachers and learners (Chapter Eight); and for communities of learners (my pupils and I) to develop learning abilities and to create new knowledge together (Chapter Nine). These practices could inform how best to deploy teaching resources in the future. Circular Special Education 02/05 (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a) aims to ensure that additional teaching resources are allocated differentially to pupils in accordance with their levels of need. My research offers different ways of conceptualising learning and differentiation of learning. It provides new ways to involve teachers in the learning of pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). My new pedagogies offer a differentiated approach to learning in accordance with pupils' capabilities rather than their needs. In practical terms my research could help fulfil the rationale of Circular Special Education 02/05 (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a). There are however two significant differences between my approach and that of the circular. The circular focused on pupils' needs whereas I focus on individuals' abilities.

My research methods also allowed for the grouping of pupils with similar needs as appropriate in accordance with the rationale of the circular. Each cohort of pupils spanned an age range, whereas extra support provision previously happened on a class-by-class basis regardless of the individuality or similarity of pupils. I developed inclusive settings

for pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia); I have transformed the contexts of marginalisation that existed prior to my research. An aspect of marginalisation was that the delays in psychological testing contributed to the difficulties of ensuring that additional teaching resources were provided in a timely manner. I have shown how it is possible to lessen the need for psychological testing because I do not recognise the ideas of deficit testing where pupils are tested to find gaps or deficits in their learning. Instead I have focused on a capability model by celebrating pupils' abilities.

I believe that my appreciation of the need for practical justice in teaching has already had an educative influence on the educational experiences of those with specific learning disability (dyslexia) who participated in my research. I have also demonstrated how other teachers have been influenced by my work. I have evaluated my own practice and devised differentiated approaches so that learning is appropriate for my pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). My actions have contributed to a whole-school approach to providing appropriate learning for these pupils. A whole-school approach to providing appropriate learning for my pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) is part of the rhetoric of the Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998), Day (2003) and the Special Education Circular 02/05 (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a), and it has been enacted in my research.

The methodology of my research offers a comprehensive approach to the evaluation and change of teacher practice within the community of the school. This approach begins with the question, 'How do I improve my work?' (Whitehead 1989). It continues with a commitment to change informed by a checking of the ontological and epistemological positioning of the practitioner against his or her actions. It is a living and relevant way to theorise practice so that it may inform future practice and see how practice may inform policy and provision. It is a form of professional development that is grounded in the lived experiences of the teacher and is therefore of immediate relevance.

My work resonates with Zeichner (1999), who speaks of self-study research from teachers' perspectives and of how teachers have courageously exposed and then confronted the

shortcomings in their work and identified the gaps between the rhetoric and the reality of their practice. He praises the self-study genre of research when he states,

The self-study genre of research in teacher education is the one clear example of where research has had an important influence on practice in teachers' education

(Zeichner 1999, p.12)

10.3 The potential implications of my research for new practices in teaching children with special educational needs (dyslexia).

In this section I want to speak about the potential implications of my work, in terms of how other people such as professional colleagues have learned from me, and what people may continue to learn.

I gained new insights about knowledge acquisition from the dialogues and the learning relationships of individuals as they sought to understand their individual processes of coming to know. This can be seen in the following quotations from a critical friend.

You seem to wish to move in the direction of knowledge as a form of personal enlightenment that can be developed through a process of action and reflection, and refined through dialogical practices. I really like the idea that knowledge is created dialogically, that as people talk and critique, their knowledge develops, and this knowledge is embodied within their relationships.

(5 April 2004 Correspondence from Critical Friend A, original in data archive Appendix 2.5c)

That correspondence gives an accurate conceptualisation of what she observed in my practice. I have come to realise that there are links between the knowledge-constituted relationships described above and ideas about the education of social formations (Whitehead 2004a; Whitehead and McNiff 2006). Whitehead explains 'the education of social formations' as helping groups everywhere to 'understand how they can work

together in a way that will help them to improve their social contexts' (Whitehead and McNiff 2006, p.44).

I will now explain my understanding of the processes of the education of social formations in an example from my specific context. The example I choose is a case conference to develop an individual learning plan for a pupil with specific learning disability (dyslexia). At such a meeting teachers, educational psychologists and the pupil with his or her parents might come together with the common aim of improving the learning of the pupil. Although this group has a common aim to understand how they can work together in a way that will help them to improve the learning of the pupil, each person within the group is already part of a social formation that is linked to their different roles and understandings of specific learning disability (dyslexia). Educational psychologists, who work with pupils with dyslexia at primary school level, aim to diagnose and identify patterns in specific learning difficulty (dyslexia) and explain them within the rules of their profession. Pupils aim to find ways to cope within the rules of the education system. The aims of teachers are to identify learning opportunities and to teach appropriately within current policies and provision. The individual aims of each group member can leave us less open to the possibilities of working as a group with the common aim of the pupil's learning. This can lead to debates at case conferences where our individual previous perspectives can take precedence over the aims of the new social formation around the table.

In contrast to this I have found during my research an approach that did contribute to the education of social formations. This process began when I deconstructed my understanding of theories of learning for pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and offered a living practical theory of justice in learning and a reconceptualisation of metacognition. These understandings contributed to my development of a new epistemology of practice. I have disseminated my account of how I arrived at this concept so that it can be accessed by groups – such as teachers, researchers, academics, policy makers, psychologists, neurologists and members of the medical profession – who come together to improve the lot of those with specific learning disability (dyslexia). I believe my work has potential significance for them in that by accessing my account, others may consider my approach

and understand how it can influence their approaches. This belief is grounded in my new understanding of knowledge and knowledge creation and new forms of participatory working.

I also perceive links between my account, which explains my theorising of my practice, and my capacity to influence the education of social formations. Similar links have been made by McNiff (2006) and McNiff and Whitehead (2006). Examples of accounts that demonstrate the same capacity are O'Callaghan (1997), Abbey (2002), Delong and Knill-Griesser (2003), Rivers (2003) and Deery and Hughes (2004). Their accounts include descriptions of new forms of participatory working (O'Callaghan 1997); a teacher consultant's role in developing and facilitating interdisciplinary studies (Abbey 2002); the integration of issues of power and ethics in valid explanations of educative influence (DeLong and Knill-Griesser 2003); inclusive support for an autistic student (Rivers 2003); engagement with the politics of institutional knowledge (Deery and Hughes 2004). Although the contexts of these researchers differ widely – from school inspector to school of midwifery – they resonate with many issues in my research.

The significance of my research in relation to the education of social formations is that I have placed my account of new learning in the public domain to test the validity and legitimacy of my claims that I have influenced my learning, the learning of others in my workplace and wider groupings. By wider groupings I mean those who work with pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and who wish to learn how to act in ways that recognise others as able to think for themselves. I want to show how the new learning that I have claimed throughout can inform new practices that can influence sustainable forms of social growth and educational knowledge. I am linking the ideas of the education of social formations and the dissemination of research. When I discussed how I presented my research in three different public fora, my explanations have potential significance for others who wish to adopt a self-study action research approach to their practice.

The new knowledge that I am claiming evolved from within my practice. My understandings developed from critical reflections on my learning and my pupils'

developing understandings around specific learning disability. Pupils who participated in my research produced reports, documenting their personal understandings of the affective domain of dyslexia and how they learned in different ways (see Chapter Eight and Chapter Nine). This new knowledge was not part of the normal, national curriculum for these children (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 1999b) nor had it appeared in any previous research known to me. I claim that the children's personal embodied understandings became explicit in the process of making them public within a reciprocal learning activity with peers. This course of action also provided evidence that I was valuing the individual capabilities of my research participants.

By working together, in a spirit of openness, to make our personal understandings of learning for those with specific learning disability (dyslexia) explicit, the pupils participating in my research and I have confirmed each other as valuable individuals and also confirmed our capabilities within our relationships. The research episode of developing and presenting reports on pupils' personal understanding of specific learning disability (dyslexia) was grounded in values of openness and fairness and of love and respect for the capabilities of the individual. Dialogue towards empowerment as spoken of by Freire (1994) is shown to be relational in my research processes. My research account has challenged conventional discourses about dyslexia that are rooted in the values of dominance and control (Chapter 3). I have also challenged how children have been devalued by being prevented from participating in their own process of learning and knowledge creation (Chapter 7).

My research has challenged my own self-perceptions of teacher power, and I have learned the power of encouraging the children to see themselves as powerful in creating knowledge (McDonagh 2003). I have helped pupils to come to know in their own way. The research episodes and analyses above have led me to understand the transformative nature of knowledge and that it is personal yet exists in reciprocal relationships. I claim this new understanding and its practical significance, and I am explaining its theoretical importance. In future, I wish further to explore its significance in the dissemination of self-study action research reports.

10.4 Summary

One of the more significant aspects of my research is that I have created a living theory of what I know and how I have come to know. Within this metacognitive approach I have developed a new epistemology of practice. I have also demonstrated how the development of new epistemologies can influence the way that particular groupings live and work together, and what kinds of discourses they can use to negotiate how they do this. Consequently, I suggest that my research has made a contribution towards the creation of a new social order that is grounded in the recognition and valuing of the other.

I make this claim because I believe that teaching colleagues, the participating pupils and I have been influenced to make changes. I am not claiming that I caused these changes but that I have influenced myself and others to make changes.

The living theory of learning to teach for social justice that I developed emerged in response to our needs and my wish to improve my practice. Together we have offered a form of educational research grounded in values of equality, freedom, caring and respect for the individual with specific learning disability (dyslexia). The importance of my research is that it has influenced both practice and theory in my context to move towards a more socially just form of teaching and learning for those with specific learning disability (dyslexia).

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Reflections

11.1 Introduction

I have titled this chapter 'reflection' because it is a look back on my research. I had set out to challenge injustice, as I perceived it, in the teaching of children with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and it was some time into my research before I realised the necessity for a deep inner focus on myself in my practice. This was because, as Hartog (2004) also found, what I had to learn lay in the gaps between my espoused values and my practice prior to my research. I became aware that my practice was value-laden and I experienced myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead and McNiff 2006, p.32). My emergent awareness of my values (as I explained in Chapter Six) contributed to transforming my ontological commitments into an epistemological stance, which had a three-pronged influence: (1) on my new learning; (2) on the methodology by which I validated my claims; and (3) on the significance of my claims.

To describe my experience of this transformation, I return to the metaphor of the waves (Coehlo, 1992 and 1997). The metaphor positioned me as buffeted by waves of influence and as part of a tidal wave of learning. I have now gained a new understanding that I am not neutral in this fluid, water metaphor. I too have had an influence on others, on practices and on the social world.

I begin the chapter by asking myself, 'Am I contributing to new forms of theory and will my thesis add to the existing body of knowledge?' I check if I am contributing to new knowledge by

1. Evaluating what I have achieved in terms of the ontological and epistemological stance I adopted
2. Questioning what is the relevance of my research to other fields of practice
3. Scrutinising the living relevance of my key commitments to issues of freedom and respect for the capabilities of the individuals in my research

I address my questions at three levels and I use these levels to frame this chapter. First I consider the theoretical challenge of personal and social practices in teaching, which are informed and underpinned by specific ontological and epistemological commitments. I then consider teachers and pupils as co-creators of knowledge – a concept that I believe has not previously been researched in the field of pupils with specific learning disability. The two major claims to new living educational theory that I have made in this thesis are grounded in my ontological and epistemological values, in particular my respect for the capabilities of the individual. This grounding of my new living theory of social justice has the potential to be of significance for other marginalised areas in education – for areas of disability and disadvantage – and for educational policy and provision. In the second part in this chapter I tease out the potential implications of teacher and pupils co-creating knowledge for schooling where children are categorised and labelled. I have shown how the pupils and I have co-created knowledge. I came to understand myself as in relation with them, and they with me. This demonstrated a form of just practice because I was developing a dialogue of equals, which is a just practice in terms of human dignity. Finally I reflect on the importance of linking the idea of the value of the person with the idea that people must be free to realise and exercise their values. I relate this concept to the area of disadvantage in schools.

My living theory of learning to teach for social justice in relation to pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) also has potential relevance for future educational policy and provision because new legislation has been enacted which supports many of the values on which my research is based. My research offers both practical and theoretical insights for providers of appropriate provision for pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). A whole-school approach to providing appropriate teaching for these pupils (Government of Ireland Education Act 1998 and Day 2003) is now necessary because resource teaching has been withdrawn from them (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a). Under the increased general allocation of support staff to schools in circular 02/05, class teachers now bear responsibility for pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). So I am suggesting that my research is both useful and timely.

11.2 I am contributing to new forms of theory and my thesis will add to the existing body of knowledge

I am claiming to be contributing to a new form of theory because my research has addressed the theoretical challenge where personal and social practices of teaching are informed and underpinned by specific ontological and epistemological practices. I have critiqued dominant forms of theory and practice on the grounds that they have led to further marginalisation and domination of those who are already oppressed; a category into which I have, at times, placed my pupils and myself.

I have shown the development of my living theory of learning to teach for social justice throughout this thesis and I invite the reader to judge if I have done so in ways that demonstrate the realisation of my underpinning ontological and epistemological values. I list these values below and have summarised how some of my research actions can be related to them.

- I have developed freedom for pupils to explain and demonstrate their abilities to learn and freedom for me to develop theory from within my practice. I have produced evidence of this in pupils' presentations of their reports, such as 'Explaining dyslexia to ourselves and others', to peers and teachers; and in the changing roles for pupils and teachers. Examples of freedom in learning were Pupil B's comment, 'I've never had so much fun', talking to teachers about his understanding of specific learning disability (a fuller transcript of this conversation is in Chapter Seven) and the teacher's written comment in the previous chapter where he wrote 'I learned more about dyslexia than I had ever known before – shame on me!' following a pupil's presentation in his class. Throughout my research I was theorising my practice, and the examples above show my practice as generating new knowledge within the real-life teaching and learning relationships of reciprocity and freedom.
- I have demonstrated empathy for how and why others learn as they do. By sharing research methods such as reflective journaling and doing action research projects

alongside each other my pupils and I showed empathy towards each other. The pupils articulated their new awareness of others when they said, 'We all have different ways of learning.' Their empathy led to a growth 'in stature' and 'peer respect' (teacher letter quoted in Chapter Seven). Throughout these processes the importance of personal knowledge was highlighted.

- Justice was evident in the ways in which the new knowledge, gained during my research, was disseminated throughout my school. I would describe this as a form of educative influence. The pictures, in the previous chapter, from the video of pupils sharing their reports 'Explaining dyslexia to ourselves and others' with classes, trainee-teacher, class and support teachers and school principal is an example of the development of knowledge through dialogue. My facilitation of this shows how changes can come about through educative influence, rather than restrictive curricula or timed targets. My educative influence encouraged others to engage in more socially just forms of teaching. These examples are of a practical justice where all contributed to developing new knowledge in a non-coercive way.
- I have encouraged equality in exploring the nature of relationships between people which foster knowledge creation within the kinds of relationships that avoid dominance or oppression. The reflective group discussions between research participants – the pupils and myself; between the pupils who participated in my research and other pupils in the school; between pupils and class teachers as detailed in Chapter Seven, demonstrated an atmosphere of equality. These reflective discussions were a core research method and were based in a conceptualisation of knowledge as both dialogical and personal. They brought an equality to the pupil teacher relationship which was not evident prior to my research as I showed in the artwork of Pupil B where a teacher is hated and in my original pupil profiles and teaching of commercially produced programmes for dyslexia.
- I have demonstrated forgiveness, which I explained in terms of making allowances for others and accepting that I don't know the full story. This includes accepting that there is no one right way of knowing and the need for a constant search for fuller understandings, by constantly questioning my understandings. My

questioning is written into the text of this thesis in thought bubbles. It is in the reflective journals I have kept and referenced. Questioning has been a vital part of my validation process and has been the key to the reconceptualisation of metacognition and social-metacognition in my research. These reflections, though grounded in personal knowledge, are about interrogating all forms of knowledge.

- I have respected human dignity. I came to this research from a commitment to the dignity of every human. By celebrating the learning capacities of pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) I have come to two new insights that have changed my teaching and I hope will influence others. How I achieved this was by making space in my work for each pupil. A teaching colleague stated (see Chapter Five) that I ‘made space for the voices of those not normally heard to be heard’. When I was confronted with pupils who were failing to achieve in literacy terms I did not see this as an indictment. Instead I confirmed their humanity as best I could by finding new forms of voice for them. The art, their taped discussion, the oral presentation all demonstrate that there are many forms of knowledge that are valid within a school setting.
- I have valued wholeness. I felt that the wholeness of pupils was denied by the form of pupil profiles that I compiled about them in the early part of my research, in that I focused only on the pupils’ minds and not on their bodies and spirits. I attributed this to the form of knowledge that my profiles were grounded in. During my research, especially in the pupils’ action research into learning spelling and through their journals, I came to understand and theorise that there are many ways of learning. My research methods had at their core (see diagram in Chapter Six) personal knowledge and dialogical knowledge and have led me to an acceptance of a commitment to the reconciliation of a plurality of approaches to life and knowledge. In devising and presenting their reports ‘Explaining dyslexia to ourselves and others’ my pupils became accepted as whole humans within a whole school setting. In my research I have engaged with issues of how I come to know and how my coming to know was informed by how I helped my children to come to know.

- I have demonstrated service. My decision to do this research came from a commitment to serve others. I wanted to take action to help my pupils but this meant more than doing something for them. To me service meant working with others to help them to help themselves. In the diagram that I drew of my research methods (Chapter Six) the arrows that move to the sides of the page indicate that this work is continuous and will be even when my research finishes. An example of this can be seen in the Principal's comments (on video, original in archive appendix 2.4g) following my pupils' presentation of their report to a class when he cited pupils voicing a difficulty as a model to deal with educational difficulties and said,

And if you tell us what that difficulty is, someone will help. If you keep it all inside no one will know. And the problem will get bigger and bigger. So you have shown that the way to solve a problem is to share a problem.

(April 2003 video, original in archive Appendix 2.4g)

My conceptualisation of service was of action towards harmonising theory and practice for the good of others.

These eight values have developed from the embodied personal commitments that I explained in Part One as the Christian based commitments by which I attempt to live. The difficulties I experienced in harmonising my values and my practice initiated my research. I am claiming that I am now living towards achieving that aim of harmonising my values and my practice.

11.3 My research has potential implications for other fields of practice

A major theme of my research was the idea of pupils and I co-creating knowledge where children are categorised and labelled as having specific learning disability (dyslexia). My idea is premised on the concept of valuing the individual and has potential importance for other fields of practice. The other fields of practice that have relevance for resource

teaching are other forms of disability. In this section I articulate the possible relevance and influence of my research on those labelled with disabilities within our education system in primary schools (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a).

The focus of my claims about the creativity of the individual and their capabilities for personalised and metacognitive learning can be seen to have relevance for all those labelled with a disability. This is because my claims are grounded in ideas of ability and positive self-concept rather than disability. My research has particular relevance because of a major shift in Government provision for those with disabilities in schools in 2005. The Special Education Circular 02/05 (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a) categorises disabilities according to their rate of occurrence as low and high incidence disabilities within primary schools. The low incidence category includes physical and sensory disabilities; emotional disturbance and autistic spectrum disorders; speech and language disorder; moderate and severe learning disabilities; multiple disorders including assessed syndromes in conjunction with one other, low incidence disability (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a, pp.16-20). Resource teacher support has consequently been withdrawn from pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and mild learning disability. They are now included in the high incidence category of disabilities along with pupils, whose achievements are at or below the tenth percentile in English and Mathematics; and along with pupils with mild or transient learning disabilities resulting from identified speech and language difficulties or social or emotional difficulties (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a, p. 2). Prior to the issuing of this circular the latter group of pupils were taught by resource teachers mainly on a two-and-a-half hour allocation per week, and generally on a withdrawal basis (see Chapters One and Two of this thesis and McGee 1990 and De Buitléir 2002) or in special units or schools (McGee 2004, Nugent 2006). The change of provision gives only those pupils with low incidence disabilities resource teaching provision. Under an extra general allocation of teachers, schools were required to provide appropriate teaching for high incidence pupils without any extra professional development for those additional teachers.

According to the Department of Education and Science (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a) the core rationale for this change is

1. to make possible the development of inclusive schools;
2. to deploy additional teaching resources in a flexible manner;
3. to ensure that additional teaching resources are provided in a timely manner;
4. to ensure that additional teaching resources are allocated differentially to pupils in accordance with their levels of need
5. to allow for in-class as well as out-of-class teaching support
6. to allow for the grouping of pupils with similar needs as appropriate

(Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a, p.1)

My research is at the cutting-edge of this new system of provision because the implications of Circular 02/05 are that since September 2005 all school staff and not only the extra 2,500 resource teachers employed since 1997 (Dáil Question 806, 2005) have responsibility for these pupils. So my study of my practice has relevance for other mainstream class teachers and teachers appointed under the extra general allocation model who have recently been given responsibility for pupils with low incidence disabilities in addition to pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). To demonstrate this I provide practical examples below from my school of the influence of my living theory during the course of my research on pupils from each of the low incidence categories mentioned in 02/05. I describe practical changes for pupils with low incidence disabilities such as (a) physical and sensory disabilities; (b) autistic spectrum including behavioural and emotional disorders; and for pupils with high incidence disabilities such as (c) speech and language disability, and (d) mild learning disability.

(a) Pupils with physical and sensory disability

My ideas about capability teaching focus on ways of identifying individuals' learning abilities. Earlier in this thesis I described how I have implemented changes in my practice through a combination of reflections and dialogical methods of collaboration in the learning processes of the children participating in my research; I have told how I have generated a living theory of practice from within my teaching of pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia). The learning relationship between my pupils and me was created within an ethic of sharing and respect for the capability of individual learners.

My contribution to my own professional development during my self-study action research has influenced other resource teachers in my school to adopt many of my changes in practice and to extend them to all resource pupils during the years 2003-2005. For example, a second resource teacher provided opportunities for a child with a hearing impairment to experience his abilities in art. These changes in practice resulted in the hearing-impaired child receiving awards as well as national and local publicity for his artwork (Appendix 2.5f). Together the teacher and child also found ways to transfer his talents in visual perceptual skills to his ways of learning to read and write. Rather than being marginalised in a hearing world, this child was celebrated for his talents and enabled to learn literacy skills in easier ways. One of his paintings is framed and hangs alongside prints by Jack B. Yeats, Picasso, Renoir and other famous artists in our school corridor.



Pupil G's picture

Picture 11.1: Paintings on school corridor

My research suggests that educative influence is an effective form of professional development. For example, based on the influence of my work around voice, capacity and individuality, a resource teacher encouraged a visually impaired child in his singing abilities [he had an accurate ear], which he has transferred to help his memory skills in the rote memorisation of facts such as tables (Appendix 2.5i). In the validation of my own claims teachers have offered descriptions such as this of their own practice, which show that by listening, trying out and expanding on my ideas, teachers have been influenced to make changes in their professional practice within my school.

for appropriate forms of voice rather than acceptance of normative forms of communication within an educational context. The application of my approaches for those with behavioural and emotional disability was confirmed by the following comments from two resource teachers:

My practices are similar now to what you talked about. It is relevant for resource teachers but I think more needs to be done for class teachers. I think class teachers need to know a lot more, how to spot difficulties earlier so that children can get attention sooner.

(Questionnaire response from Teacher P., in data archive Appendix 2.9)

It is very relevant for learning support and resource teachers. In an ideal 20:1 classroom too!

(Questionnaire response from Teacher P., in data archive Appendix 2.9)

Teacher P acknowledged the benefits of my approach. However she is working out of a different epistemology when she talks of ‘more needs to be done for’ others whereas I suggest that self-study action research offers a methodology for teachers and pupils to act on their own behalf. The difference in what the teacher and I are saying is that I do not believe that ‘more needs to be done FOR class teachers’. I am suggesting that class teachers could learn from my self-study approach to take control of their own practice in order to improve and theorise those practices.

(c) Pupils with speech and language disorder

The artwork, annotated transcripts and reflective discussions produced during my research are some of the forms of communication I engaged in so as to enable the voices of the children who participated in my research to be heard. This has relevance for the teaching of pupils with speech and language disorder. Although speech and language therapists diagnose and use multisensory approaches to remediate perceived difficulties, they work within a medical model of disability and at times use compensatory approaches. When those with stammers, who are able to sing, are encouraged to use the slow pace of singing and the appropriate breathing techniques singing requires to help overcome their stammering difficulties, this I believe is a practical example of a compensatory approach.

My theory offers a different approach where children could develop their capabilities in other areas to help them overcome their disability. The difference between the compensatory approach of some speech and language therapists and my approach is that I am not devising compensatory strategies; instead I am enabling pupils to develop awareness of their own capability and also to devise their own compensatory strategies. An example of this was the pupils' self study action research project into their learning of spellings.

(d) Pupils with mild general learning disability

The categories of mild, moderate and severe general learning disability are assessed by psychologists and defined only by low levels of intelligence quotient scores (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005a). I have found that my approaches are least effective for this group of pupils because their reasoning and descriptive powers are not commensurate with their age (Scanlon and Mc Gilloway 2006). Metacognition, as I have redefined it, requires the ability to critique. Many pupils with mild, moderate and severe general learning disability may not be able to engage with my reconceptualisation of metacognition as personal and social critique of what and how one learns because of their limited IQ. Despite this, my research offers an epistemological and ontological approach that has relevance for these pupils. My living theory has been developed within a capability approach, which speaks to my values of human dignity, wholeness and service. Pupils with mild, moderate and severe general learning disability have innate survival instincts and capabilities and I believe that my freedom-for-development approach would encourage the building of learning on practical life skill needs (see Deirdre Walsh 2003). This is significant because a major focus of my research was to find a suitable and more just epistemological base for educational research and practice.

~An international perspective to my study

My research has highlighted the importance of linking the idea of the value of the person with the idea that people must be free to realise and exercise their values in schools. This has potential international implications for those placed at a disadvantage worldwide.

A constant theme throughout my research has been the creative relationship between my pupils and myself. Within this relationship I perceive my pupils as my equals and this is grounded in my ontological and Christian values. Similar to Arendt (1998), I see others as valuable simply because they are people. This ontological stance has allowed me to create links in my research between the value of the person and the idea that people must be free to build on their own capabilities. I believe that the methodology by which I arrived at my living theory of social justice in my teaching of pupils with specific learning disability (dyslexia) is of key relevance for the education of others marginalised as a result of social disabilities and who fall under the label of disadvantage within our school system.

My living theory of learning to teach for social justice can make a contribution to combat the marginalisation of those at a disadvantage in education at two levels; first I have removed issues of power from the teacher and pupil learning relationship by providing opportunities for the voices of all participants to be heard; and second my emphasis on a capability approach has provided the freedom to the marginalised pupils to develop as learners. In McDonagh and Sullivan (2003), Sullivan and I focused on ‘themes of social justice and equality which developed from our separate research contexts’ (p.1) as primary school teachers of marginalised pupils – disadvantaged travellers and pupils with specific learning disabilities. During our research and in our joint paper, we claimed to be ‘Making the invisible visible – giving a voice to the marginalised’ (McDonagh and Sullivan 2003). The term ‘the marginalised’ raises issues around empowerment and the question of who were valid knowers within our specific contexts. This led us to engage with ideas around knowledge creation both in theory and practice. Our work with marginalised children aimed to find ways to secure educational entitlement and transform disadvantage into opportunity. Sullivan (2006) claims to have achieved this and I, using a similar form of self-study action research, claim in this thesis to have done so too.

The explanation of the significance of my research to others at a disadvantage within the education system such as travellers lies in my emphasis on providing opportunities for those at a disadvantage to have a voice that can be valued by themselves and the institution

in which they are situated. This was achieved by providing opportunities for positive self-talk and reflection (see Chapter Seven). My research has shown that this can only be achieved when the epistemological basis of their disadvantage has been examined and, as Sen (1999) suggests, ‘constitutes participatory resolution of epistemological issues’ (p.142). In other words the marginalised require opportunities to join in a valuable personal decision making process. This does not require the undermining of the institution, culture or society that is the context of the marginalisation. Nor is it about financial input. It does require a freedom to develop a personal understanding, as I have explained throughout this thesis.

11.4 An ending

Treasure is uncovered by the force of flowing water and it is buried by the same current.

(Coehlo 1992 p.25)

Throughout this thesis I have used metaphors of water and waves. In this section I return for a final time to the words of Coehlo (1992) above. For me the quotation above speaks about the idea that when treasure is uncovered one should seize it; if not seized and used, the treasure can slip beneath the current and disappear. This metaphor can represent my research at several levels.

At one level the treasure chest of my self-study action research methodology was filled with innovative ways to changes practices and ways of thinking. This treasure held the key to the development of new forms of theory in which my practice as a teacher could be theorised and improved. The current represents forms of theory and logic. The waves that uncovered the chest were the personal insider forms of theory and fluid innovative logic that I chose. Propositional, outsider forms of theory would have provided ways to examine objectively what was happening in my context; however these forms of theory would not have facilitated changes in practice. They would have worked within a cause and effect form of logic. This would have stifled the innovative thinking that both my pupils and I engaged in. These traditional forms of theory and logic would have drowned my treasure.

At another level the treasure could represent my claims to my new living theory of learning to teach for social justice in relation to those with specific learning disability (dyslexia). The current represents forms of learning. The waves represent the influences of my learning and my pupils' learning. The uncovering of the treasure of my living theory occurred in the interaction between the waves of our learning. My learning influenced my pupils' critical learning and they influenced my critical learning. Together we tackled our learned helplessness which could have swamped our treasure and denied the development of our new living theories.

At the level of claiming to have generated new and original practical and theoretical knowledge the treasure can represent the significance of my study for myself and others. The current represents forms of knowledge. The waves that uncovered this treasure were the personalised learning and benefits derived from being involved with communities of learners. These waves included my openness to placing my methodology and findings firmly within my embodied ontological and epistemological values. I tested my new, original practical and theoretical knowledge against those practical and epistemological standards of judgement. The testing of my theory against living values maintained the living relevance of my research for the pupils who participated, for the wider educational community and for myself.