

## **Chapter One: What were my concerns? Examining the background and contexts of the research**

*Knowing, then, begins with the shattering of illusions, with disillusionment.*

(Fromm 1979, p.47)

### **Introduction**

This thesis tells the story of my learning journey as I developed my living educational theory (Whitehead 1989) in the form of an emergent epistemology of practice. This epistemology is of the form that I now know what I am doing in my practice and I know how I have come to practise in this way. This was, and continues to be, an emergent process for me as my thinking developed and as my embodied ontological values became clarified in the course of my research and were eventually transformed into my living critical standards of judgement (Whitehead 2005a). In this first chapter, I will outline my concerns and explain how my concerns changed as my new epistemology began to emerge and how I developed an ability to engage in thinking critically.

The ‘shattering of illusions’ can be a distressing occurrence, one that can cause confusion and disorientation, but, as Fromm (1979) says, it can pave the way towards coming to know. This thesis is an account of my learning journey and in this chapter I am describing and explaining my initial stages of coming to know, as my illusions were shattered. The illusions to which I refer are located within the normative discourses of education and are perceived as being the everyday acceptable way of thinking about education. I am alluding here to the hold technical rational thinking has in education (Thomas 1998), to the unquestioning way in which many educators, including myself, conduct their lives without critiquing the norms (Apple 2004), and to the ‘dumbing down’ and hegemonising processes that frequently exist in education systems (Chomsky, 2000). McLaren (2003) talks about hegemony as

*the maintenance of domination not by sheer exercise of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school...*

(McLaren 2003, p.76 emphasis in original)

McLaren sees hegemony as a 'struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their oppression' (2003, p.76). I believe that unknowingly I was part of this hegemonic process, wherein I was perpetuating education processes from the past, by engaging in educational practices that closed down the learning process for many students. I am referring here specifically to Gardner's (1993) ideas around how western culture prioritises logical and linguistic intelligences more than others to the detriment of other intelligences such as bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial intelligence and so on. Freire (2003, p.58) describes this as the 'banking concept of education', where knowledge is bestowed by those 'who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing'. Projecting a state of ignorance onto others is a form of oppression, according to Freire, and I will explore this issue in greater detail in Chapter Two. He considers that bank-clerk teachers (and I consider myself to have been such) are frequently well-intentioned but they fail to see that they are serving to 'dehumanize'. I now believe that my own attempts to perpetuate the dominance of linguistic and logical intelligences did serve to dehumanise others, albeit unintentionally.

McNiff (2005) talks about how, frequently, the very discourses people engage in, are based on illusion or fabrication and that basing their beliefs on such illusory foundations can cause instability or even devastation. Often, such beliefs are so embedded in people's minds that seeing them clearly as the fabrications they really are, can prove to be very difficult. Russell (1971) explains how universal education has increased opportunities for propaganda as education itself is a propagandist process and the power of the press for those who are increasingly literate makes whole populations susceptible to the influence of the press. Russell's argument is even stronger in today's world of mass media and communications. I will outline in this chapter, how much of my professionalism was based on the belief that knowledge was external to the knower (see Capra 1997), that the teacher was the transmitter of that knowledge (Skinner 1978) and the student was the empty vessel waiting to be filled (Locke, 1690). At the outset of my research programme,

I believed that such technicist approaches to teaching were not only the best but were, in fact, the only way to teach and learn. The shattering of this illusion and the subsequent learning that occurred for me are the key issues that I address in this chapter. I will discuss these issues in terms of the background to and contexts which pertain to my research. I will explore these contexts in the following terms:

- (i) Personal and professional contexts
- (ii) The forms of injustice which are inherent in contemporary Irish systems of education
- (iii) The changing focus of my research
- (iv) My inability to engage in critical thinking
- (v) My lack of awareness around my ontological values
- (vi) My complacency around issues pertaining to education

Before exploring how the contexts outlined above inform my research and how they inform my emergent epistemology, I would like now to give a brief outline of my epistemological stance at the outset of my research so as to illuminate how my new epistemology emerged in the various contexts outlined below.

### **My epistemological stance at the outset of my research**

Before I embarked on my learning journey around my intellectual and spiritual growth that has become my area of research, I saw my role as a teacher as one who transmitted a commodity called knowledge (see Apple 2004; Ball 2004; Brown 2002; and Lyotard 1986). I was an agent (Clandinin 1986), finishing textbooks and filling in workbooks; fulfilling the intentions of what I understood to be curriculum. I now realise, that instead of engaging with the curriculum, I was probably fulfilling the desires of the publishers of various textbooks and workbooks, or at a more sinister level, fulfilling the desires of those who see education as a business and students as human capital (Apple 2001). Now that the articulation of my living educational theory is in process, I have become aware that the traditional rational forms of imparting knowledge, that have been inherent in the Irish education system, inadequately address the multiplicity of learning needs of many people (see Conway 2002; NCCA 2005; OECD 1991). I believe that learning can be enhanced when it occurs through the dialogical relationships between people and that it

has the potential to address the multiplicity of learning strengths and needs of many people (see Gardner 1993; Goleman 1996) as outlined throughout this thesis.

Since beginning my learning journey, I have come to see that I now understand knowledge as being something quite different from the view I held before; not as a commodity but more as a process (Dewey 1938) that is fluid, organic and emergent. Bohm (2004) describes dialogical ways of knowing as a 'stream of meaning' that flows through people such that a new understanding may emerge. I have tried to attune myself to an epistemology of wholeness, interconnectedness and context as suggested by Miller (1997). I have also seen my own role shifting from being a teacher who transmits factual knowledge to that of one who tries to attune to the wholeness and individuality of the children in my care while nurturing their strengths and addressing their needs. This shift in my thinking has provided me with the capacity for generating my claim to knowledge which I outline below. As I embarked on my research process, the content and form of my living educational theory was as yet unknown to me. It was only as I engaged in the process of my engagement with a living educational theory approach to action research that my own living theory emerged.

### **Painting the landscape of my work**

In this section I will outline the background and contexts, which are pertinent to my research. Crowell (2002, p.14) suggests: 'Who I am and how I teach is woven together by the tapestry of my life's experiences and, I believe, by the ultimate quality of my commitments'. If I were making a tapestry of the story of my research I would use many different colours and shades, textures and techniques to represent the various nuances of my story. Because this is a tapestry of a real, living and organic story, the loose threads are never tidied away neatly; they are always unfinished and sometimes unravelled. Action research embraces the unfinished nature of its narratives, as each 'ending' is the new beginning, with a new set of questions (Said 1994). McNiff *et al.* (2003) call this the 'paradox of the ideal' where 'we imagine the way things could be, but as soon as we have an answer, new questions arise' (2003, p.71). I believe that my own narrative will never be completed as an active living story. Instead this thesis will be presented as the best

possible understanding at that given time (McNiff 1993), while the act of living and understanding continues.

I will now address some of my concerns as noted earlier, in terms of issues pertaining to the background and contexts of my research under the following headings: (i) personal and professional contexts, (ii) the forms of injustice which are inherent in contemporary Irish systems of education, (iii) the changing focus of my research, (iv) my inability to engage in critical thinking, (v) my lack of awareness around my ontological values and (vi) my complacency around issues pertaining to education.

### **(1.1) Personal and professional contexts**

The fact that I was raised in a rural village, that I have taught in both urban and rural settings, that I am involved in teacher professional development programmes, that I am a parent, that I am a reflective practitioner, together with the many other aspects of my living, all give shade and depth to my story. This thesis deals mainly with my learning as a primary school teacher. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) use the metaphor of a landscape to describe the professional locus of teaching, and they refer to the multi-layered professional lives of teachers, where moral, historical, personal and epistemological worlds merge.

I have been teaching for over twenty years in primary schools. I have spent some years teaching in both urban and rural settings and both senior and junior classes. In more recent times I have worked in a rural school and it is mainly this setting that provides the context of my research. My school is geographically remote and designated as 'disadvantaged' by the Department of Education and Science because of the high rate of unemployment in the area. The families whose children attend our school are mainly small farmers or part-time fishermen, where often there are financial strains, but despite this, they manage to ensure that their children are well cared for. Most, but not all families own a car, which is a necessity in remote rural areas such as ours. The school building is now over one hundred years old, having been modernised and extended in 1997. Many of the original structures are still in place, which help to retain the sense of

history in the building, but items such as the new heating system and the satellite link to the internet are welcome modern improvements. Many of the children who attend the school are the descendents of the people who attended the school when it was first built and there are many sets of cousins in all the classes. The sense of continuity and history is almost tangible in the building and in more fanciful moments you can nearly hear the voices of past schoolteachers and their pupils echoing around the walls. The leak in the roof of the corridor on very wet days serves to remind me of the century of teaching and learning that have gone on in the school despite not having the well appointed classrooms that the school now has.

The children are cheerful, bright and fun loving. Generally there are few discipline problems in the school. With the advent of modern communications and greater ease of travel, their interests are very similar to those of their urban counterparts: soccer teams, pop stars, grand-prix drivers and Gaelic football. The students still have a keen interest in the things that are particular to country living such as sheep and the lambing season, the bogs and the turf-cutting season and fishing and the salmon season.

I am now presenting my claim to knowledge, in the form of this thesis, as it has emerged from my practice in teaching in the environment outlined above.

## **(1.2) The forms of injustice which are inherent in contemporary Irish systems of education**

I have learned from reflection on my practice and through my engagement with the literatures that dominant technicist forms of knowledge as I understand them today, do not necessarily lead towards a just form of education. Thomas (1998) talks about the ‘artificial simplicity’ of technicist thinking that reduces people’s understanding of the social world to that of the physical and the quantifiable. In this ‘reduced’ understanding of education, the teacher’s role frequently is to transmit knowledge and so therefore the student is frequently in a passive mode (Jonassen 1991). Issues such as passivity, the taking of small steps to an overall measurable learning goal in the form of an examination, and rote learning (Skinner 1978) are symptomatic of objectivist approaches

to learning (Jonassen 1991). I believe that frequently, an over-emphasis on such approaches close off possibilities for freedom of thought and creativity for many students. I will explain this belief in the following manner: first, education can be a dispiriting process for many students. Lynch (1999) talks about the tight system of control in education that ‘creates great injustices and frustrations for those who cannot find a sense of achievement within it’ (Lynch 1999, p.276). Second, these injustices and frustrations are kernel to my concerns. Many children, whose learning strengths are not of a logical/linguistic nature, are being denied an adequate education in an education system that prioritises maths and languages. Lynch continues, ‘...different forms of knowledge and relatedly different forms of ability do not have parity of esteem within schools’ (1999, p.276). Lynch’s point is that our education system gives priority to children who have mathematical and linguistic skills while largely ignoring children who have good social skills or who are talented at gymnastics, for example. The Education Act (1998) includes the following objectives:

...to provide that, as far as is practicable and having regard to the resources available, there is made available to people resident in the State a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of those people...

...to promote equality of access to and participation in education and to promote the means whereby students may benefit from education...

...to promote best practice in teaching methods with regard to the diverse needs of students and the development of the skills and competences of teachers.

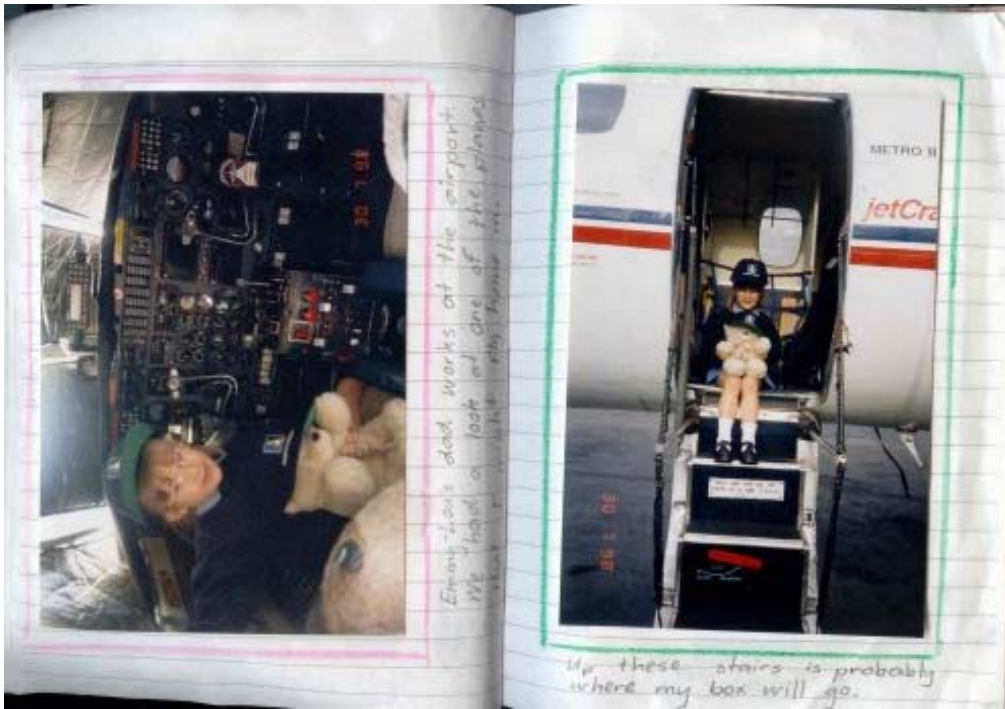
(Ireland, Department of Education and Science, 1998, Section 6)

Therefore, it can be seen that while the state is obliged to ensure that all children receive an education, and that equality of access and participation is meant to exist, I believe that this obligation is frequently only observed at the level of rhetoric. The reality for many students is that their needs are not catered for. Not only do students not have an opportunity to participate in learning environments to suit their learning strengths, they also ‘lack a medium of self-expression which is sympathetic to their intelligence’ (Lynch 1999, p.274). The classroom often mirrors the culture of its society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and examples of freedom and self-expression being denied in classrooms

abound (see Devine 2003). In my practice as an educator, I frequently perceive the dominant role of technicist assumptions as curtailing one's ability to think for oneself and to be creative. As an Irish educator, I am aware that the national examination system draws on linguistic and mathematical skills mainly (see the report of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA 2005). There exists also a popular perception of the teacher as the 'knower', inspired by our points system that pressurises our secondary schools and our over-dependence on 'finish-the-textbook' styles of teaching (Carr and Kemmis 1986) and that are all examples of how traditional technicist approaches to education can diminish the flow of creativity and development of the individual. These normative behaviours that are inherent in our education system can close down opportunities for learning for many people whose learning strengths are not linguistic or mathematical (Gardner 1993) (see Chapter Two). I believe this to be a form of injustice because if, as O'Hanlon (2003, p.8) explains, 'teaching is an ethical activity', it is ethically wrong that the learning needs of some children are not adequately addressed by our education system.

### **(1.3) The changing focus of my research**

Some years ago, I watched my class of six year olds share and experience the excitement of learning about other cultures, and as I reflected on it, I learned much from their learning (see Glenn 2000). They were partaking in a Travel Buddy exchange wherein they exchanged a soft toy with a class in a school in another country. The soft toy was to be shown around its host country and the pupil or their parent filled in a diary and took some photographs of their experience of 'entertaining' the soft toy. The students then exchanged e-mail messages to update their partners on the latest adventures of the soft toy. At the end of the exchange, the cuddly toy returned to its own classroom with a diary full of interesting entries and photographs (see Fig. 1.1 below).



**Fig. 1.1** A section of a *Travel Buddy* diary

Fig. 1.1 is an extract from our Travel Buddy diary. In 1997 my class sent a teddy bear which the class named Seán to Australia. The following year, Seamus, the leprechaun, went to France and then Lorcan (another soft toy) went to the United States. I began to realise for the first time in nearly twenty years of teaching, that children, and their teachers, could engage in such deep learning experiences from being involved in dialogue with one another. Examples of extracts from these Travel Buddy exchanges can be accessed at <http://www.iol.ie/~bmullets/patty.html>. Through such conversations via e-mail and through reading diary entries, my class learned that when it is Spring in Ireland, it is Autumn in Australia. They learned about killer box-jellyfish, lemon trees and the need for sun hats in the schoolyard (see Appendix A). They learned how in France, people sometimes eat frogs legs and the grapes grown in vineyards are then made into wine. They ‘taught’ their partners by bringing their Travel Buddy to their farmyards, to milk cows and to see the new born lambs. One Travel Buddy got a beautiful golden cloak hand stitched for him to ward off the chilly winter winds, while another went to a wedding and yet another was brought on a trip to the Aran Islands.

The practical knowledge I accumulated at this time was manifold. The children became 'virtual' travellers to these other communities. The children commented on this: Rose (Field notes 3/11/99) said, 'It's like they're really there with you, like on the phone to you.' Leo replied, 'It's better than the phone. You'll know that they'll remember what you said because they can keep it and read it later'. The sense of geographical isolation that was a feature of our school became less important. Susie commented on 26/01/00: 'In our learning circles we get to know things about the world'. Ann Marie's comment (Field notes 26/01/00) was 'It's good to tell other children what films we watch. Then we can compare the things we are interested in with what they are interested in'. Parents, grandparents and other members of the community took part in making the project a success. These young children were excited about literacy through the reading and writing of their e-mail messages. The children began to show signs of being easily motivated also. They often pleaded for a 'go' at writing their e-mail, or writing up their Learning Circle project. They would never before have pleaded for an opportunity to hand-write their news, or stories. Norah, whose handwriting would not be as neat as her friend Susie's, also commented to me that she loved writing on the computer, because it always came out neatly (Field notes 4/01/00).

### **The launch pad for my learning**

This project outline above, along with others of a similar nature, is frequently called an internet based collaborative project (ICP) (see Sofweb 2000). ICPs formed for me, the beginnings of my own learning journey. Internet based collaborative projects invite collaboration between one school and at least one other body using the Internet. ICPs also invite collaboration between the students, between the students and the teacher and perhaps the wider community (Riel 1999). I had undertaken investigations around these and similar projects so as to establish their educational value in a masters programme prior to my doctoral research (Glenn 2000, 2005). In that study, I found that internet based collaborative projects could help to make children's learning real and relevant because they were writing for a purpose (Riel 1993). I also established that ICPs could enhance children's self-esteem and could nurture an enthusiasm and excitement for

learning (Berenfeld 1996). The study also suggested that such projects could help to diminish the sense of socio-economic disadvantage that was inherent in our school.

The work that I had produced for my masters degree became the launch pad for my doctoral research. I experienced a sense of dissatisfaction around my masters thesis because I felt I had not reached the real heart of my work with ICPs. As part of my engagement with practitioner research, I engaged in asking critical questions, as suggested by McNiff (2000). Consequently, at the initial stages of my research, I asked ‘What is my concern?’ and ‘Why am I concerned?’ My reply, then, was in terms of my perceived need to explore the role of ICPs in education in more detail. In my research proposal for this PhD programme (Glenn 2001), I wrote ‘In doing this research I aim to question the inclusion of online technology, and in particular the value of ICPs in the primary curriculum’ (see Appendix B). In revisiting my proposal in light of my new learning now, I perceive that its underpinning tone is one of being rather self-assured. I had the impression that I already ‘knew’ that ICPs were ‘good’ and expected that in my doctoral research I could collate evidence that would ‘prove’ this. As outlined in this chapter, this self-assurance was somewhat misplaced and naïve, and my subsequent process of coming to know gave rise to much angst in my learning journey. As my research has progressed, its focus has changed from examining ICPs to asking why I felt compelled to engage in collaborative projects. This change (outlined in greater detail later in this chapter) was indicative of a deeper epistemological shift that was beginning to take place within me.

I can now see that my angst was located in the epistemological conflict that I was beginning to experience. I located my perceptions around processes of coming to know in a traditional technicist epistemology, where knowledge was understood as something external to knower; something perhaps reified and objective. Coulter and Wiens (2002) talk about the debate between ‘spectators and actors’ and at the outset of my research I could probably have been positioned as a ‘spectator’. Having developed my research programme now, I can see how my enthusiasm to include internet based collaborative projects in education was derived from a desire for making connections between the

classroom and life outside (Miller 1996). A key learning for me, in the course of my research, was that my need for making connections between my classes and the outside world were embedded in my ontological values around love (Noddings 1984) and the relationality of learning to the community and the environment (Bentley 1998). As yet, I had to ‘discover’ these ontological values and therefore I had no explanations to offer for these felt, but unspoken desires to make connections between my classroom and communities outside. I would only come to understand my desire to nurture these connections as my ontological values became clarified in the course of my research (Whitehead 2005). I will outline in greater detail in Chapter Two how my embodied values around love and the interconnectedness of people and their environment were being manifested in a practical way in the collaborative projects that I undertook with others. Initially, I could only follow these tacit desires (Polanyi 1958) that compelled me to nurture connections with the environment (Capra 1997) and with others outside of the classroom. I can now see that my work practices were indicative of a drift to a different epistemological perspective. At a practical level I saw that dialogue and holistic approaches to education and the connections between the classroom and the world outside were also pertinent to how people come to know. At these initial stages of my research however, I was only aware of the difficulties and problems that I experienced from not being able to understand or theorise my practice (see Mellor 1998). The angst and ‘shattering of illusions’ as I attempted to develop explanations for my practices are outlined below, and while they were exceedingly uncomfortable, they proved to be a rich resource for my learning and development.

### **Getting ready to come to know**

Initially I anticipated an excitement around my doctoral studies which was new and invigorating. The following is an extract from my research diary of 2001:

#### **Take a Parachute and Jump**

( A pause for reflection before embarking on a research project.)

This is the moment before the writing takes place. It is a peculiar feeling, the waiting for the beginning of the research. This is when every piece of reading takes on a certain glow, a particular relevance to my research area. Every book I read, every newspaper

article I peruse and every educational web site I visit seems to be feeding my views, thoughts and reflections. This is the period of eager calmness and quiet anticipation before the storm of activity. The strains of the Something Happens song 'Take a parachute and jump' in the distance is spurring me on to become ready for my leap. I am taking preparatory steps for my jump out of the cosy safe world I currently inhabit, and leaping into the great world of the unknown: my research project. I am beginning to spin the web of practical, necessary jobs and chores that will help me create my research space, and which will be necessary for my work for the next few years.

Journal entry, June 2001

I realise now that my excitement was well reasoned and had I anticipated the amount of learning and understanding that I would encounter, my excitement would have been greatly increased. Had I realised that the amount of inner conflict and turmoil the process of my knowledge generation process was to unleash, I may have held a less romantic perspective.

Here, in this section, I have outlined the background to my work practices in terms of my response to my own personal, tacit knowledge around learning. I have explained how, initially, the focus of my research was planned to be an objective exploration around ICPs. This focus changed as my research interest became clarified in the process of the research. The change of focus, and its underpinning explanations (as explained in Chapter Two) was kernel to the background of my research.

#### **(1.4) My inability to engage in critical thinking**

##### ***Conflict and chasms: monsters lurking in the dark***

At this time, as I was embarking on my doctoral research, my epistemological stance was such that I generally viewed knowledge as something external to both myself and others. I acknowledged that personal knowledge existed (Polanyi 1958) but I did not rate it as being of equal importance to a propositional form of knowledge that is articulated in an abstract, conceptual form. I subscribed to a monistic way of knowing as outlined by

Berlin (1998) and believed that knowledge was propositional or procedural as outlined by Pring (2000) and Ryle (1949). A research diary I kept at this time confirms this as I wrote about how I believed knowledge was acquired:

A tension arises between the 'donor' of the knowledge and the 'seeker'. If the donor is bestowing knowledge, then the questions of ownership of knowledge, and the power of that ownership arises. The recipient may be somewhat overawed by the process. If however, the seeker of knowledge personally and actively wishes to come to know, then they are taking charge of their own learning and may create their own knowledge.

(Journal entry, 11 September 2001)

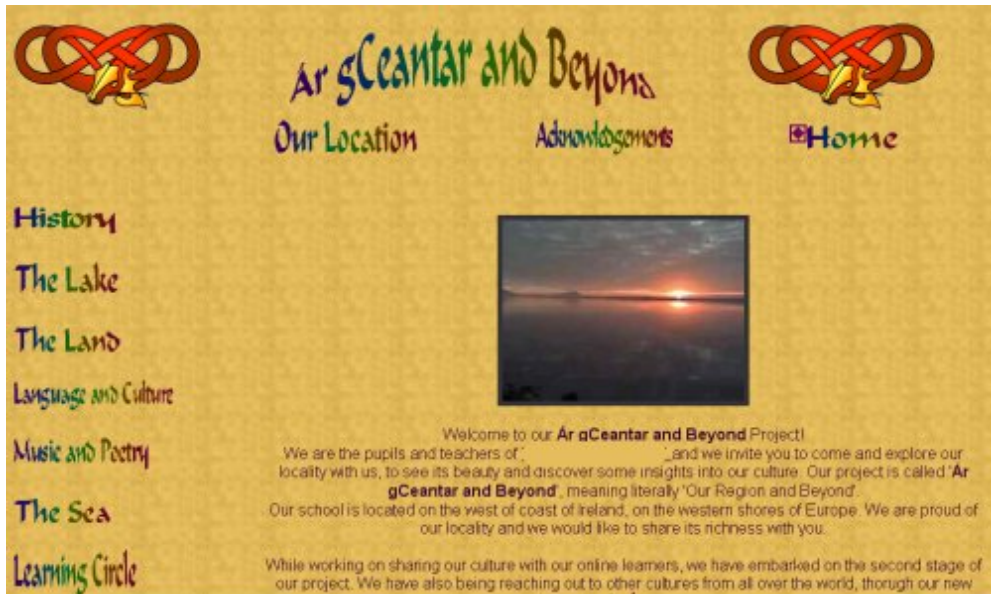
This journal entry appears to be from a technical rational viewpoint (Schön 1983) whereby the view of knowledge is something that is 'specialised, scientific, standardised, firmly bounded' (Schön 1983, p.23) and external. At that time also and what appears to be in a conflictual manner, I was aware, at some level of my psyche, of knowledge being created in the engagements between people. The same journal entry holds the following insights which appear to contradict the extract above:

Instead, we might explore the idea of knowledge as a process, a period of learning. Visualise a pliable changing body of matter, perhaps a cloud that changes its shape with breezes, temperatures and many other factors. Knowledge is similarly moulded, changing with every experience of life. One's knowledge and how one comes to acquire knowledge depends on the knowledge base one has already established. Coming to know is a process of growth, change and adaptation. The events of today (11 September 2001) may change a knowledge base or a world-view totally.

(Journal entry, 11 September 2001)

As I read these writings now, in the light of my new epistemology, the ambiguity of their meanings appear to be perplexing. The statements seem to contradict one another. How could I think that knowledge could be 'donated' or 'transmitted' in one paragraph and then describe it as a process later on within the same text? These contradictions in my thinking were also reflected in my workplace. My work practices at that time (see

example below) seemed to demonstrate that I perceived the potential for people to create their own knowledge on one level, yet my personal writing seemed to contradict that. The following example explicates this conflict in my thinking:



**Fig. 1.2 Screenshot from the *Ár gCeantar* project**

The *Ár gCeantar* project (see Fig.1.2), which my combined Fifth and Sixth Class undertook in 2001/2, was an investigation and report on our locality ('*Ár gCeantar*' being the Irish for 'Our Region'). These were an interesting group of students and were untypical of the main body of students in the school as many of them presented with substantial literacy difficulties, while many had social problems and had difficulties relating to one another and to school. Working with them proved to be challenging.

The project, which I prepared, was to provide a snapshot of life in our region (see Fig. 1.2). At a practical level, each student chose one or two topics for the project, investigated them and reported on them. The topics loosely fell into the following categories: the sea, the land, history, language and culture. I had asked each student to prepare a web page about their research with at least one graphic. I taught one student on our classroom computer in the basic skills of using simple web design software, while a third watched on. When the first student had completed his project, the second taught the skills to the third student while a fourth watched on. Then, when the second student finished their work, the third became the trainer for the fifth student while the sixth

‘watched on’ and so on. The skills were thus percolated around the class with little disruption to other activities in the classroom or need for assistance from me. All the children managed to acquire the necessary skills easily and without any problems.

Some students were enthusiastic about producing the project work, while others experienced great difficulty in collating the information, but eventually all the students made a contribution to the project. Ian chose to research traditional music and in the process of his investigation recorded some live traditional music on his own tape recorder to add to the project. Kathleen, Tim and Lynn chose not just to look at the use of the Irish language locally but instead, to make animations and sound recordings of phrases in Irish and to translate them into English. Kian disregarded his initial work on lambs in Spring and instead was moved to write a beautiful poetic description of the dawn on the frozen lake (see Appendix C). Paul interviewed his grandmother about traditional cures and customs. Chris videotaped her father cutting turf in the bog for fuel. Martin scanned an image of a mechanical digger and wrote a short piece about farm machinery. Kieran took the digital camera home and took many photographs of the farm machinery his brother managed. These inputs to the project, along with many others, may be viewed online at <http://www.inver.org/ceantar>.

Because the parents of the children did not have internet access at home, I invited the parents to come into the school and have their children show them, in the privacy of our computer room, their own input into the project. This was a worthwhile exercise because the parents gained insight into their children’s work and the children developed a sense of pride in their work as they showed the projects to their parents. The invitation to parents also served to enhance the connections between the classroom and the community.

### **Developing an understanding of conflicts in my thinking and in my practice**

While re-examining this period of my life, and examining the project described above, I can see now that I appeared to be functioning at different levels of awareness. On one level, I could see that the work here was drawing on the idea that each student was capable of learning (Gardner 1993) and presenting this learning for themselves. These web pages reflected my own tacit inclination towards creating connections with people

outside the classroom. Yet, at that time, had I been asked, I would have been of the opinion that teaching was basically the transmission of knowledge with the help of textbooks.

The level of confusion I experienced was quite overwhelming. As I look back now, I realise that I worked in a manner that, almost unknowingly, embraced dialogical ways of knowing (see Bakhtin in Holquist 2002) and that supported my students as knowledge creators in their own right. Yet, I was unable to articulate this knowledge in any way except through my work practices while my conscious thinking was located within a more technicist epistemology. I was able to offer descriptions for my work to others but I was unable to explain or therefore to theorise it. The frustration and confusion I experienced was challenging. Mellor's comments (1998) now prove to be insightful as he talks about the difficulties he experienced in undertaking his research. He describes how he came to accept that his struggle in the swamp was the methodology of his research:

I know I have a goal, which is that I want to look at my job but I don't know what the questions are to ask but I will know when I get there...It is only by getting stuck in and ...being confused and asking questions: What am I doing? Why am I doing it? that it becomes clear...

(Mellor 1998, p.454).

These were the questions that had echoed around in my mind. I had approached the research with the notion that I already *knew* why I was working with ICPs. Yet, as I explored my work and reflected on it carefully, the more I realised that a chasm existed somewhere within my knowledge, the more dumbstruck and inarticulate I became.

And so, the focus of my research gradually changed. I was no longer as concerned about the role of internet based collaborative projects in my work. Instead, I was more concerned about my inability to offer adequate explanations of my practice. This new focus became an overwhelming concern for me because initially I was unable to articulate explanations for my practice and this was exceedingly frustrating. Eventually, these concerns transformed into what is now emerging as my living educational theory. It is helpful here to look at the work of Argyris and Schön (1974), who talk about a form of

tacit knowledge that people are unaware of: ‘the tacit knowing of a problem whose solution we do not have yet’ (1974, p.36). On the surface, the knowing of something at an internal level that I did not know at an explicit level seems to be a contradictory notion. Yet, in light of my learning throughout the research process, I can now see that this innate, barely formed knowledge was kernel to my first faltering steps towards developing my living educational theory. I see how my practice reflected the barely-formed knowledge in terms of creating projects that nurtured connectedness, but my thinking and my ability to theorise were locked into a technical rational way of functioning.

In this section, I have outlined how my own inability to engage in critical thinking, to move away from objectivist ways of thinking, that consists of a belief in a reliable, fixed body of knowledge and the perception of the teacher as the conduit for that knowledge (Jonassen 1991), were key contexts in which my research was located.

### **(1.5) My lack of awareness around my ontological values**

#### **A glimmer of understanding around my practice**

Perhaps such thinking may have persisted in my mind had I not been involved in a creative research programme. This research programme was such that the researchers and tutors were involved in forms of learning that were rooted in dialogue and critical debate as well as the traditional texts from the libraries. The programme, developed by Jean McNiff and others at the University of Limerick, was innovative in several ways. It was unlike traditional PhD programmes that ‘conform closely to the “sorcerer’s apprentice” tradition where students come to sit at the feet of an individual supervisor’ (see Dunleavy 2003, p.6). It was innovative in that the programme was structured so that a group of practitioner researchers met regularly, received off-campus support between meetings and also communicated as a study group while off-campus. The programme was also innovative in that dialogue was structured into all teaching and learning activities. It was an expectation of the programme that all participants actively participated. My research colleagues and I were therefore constantly involved in conversation, and this conversation was characterised by care. It was an environment, in which we, doctoral

researchers, talked with one another in an open attentive learning space, wherein every voice was listened to and dialogue could take place without fear of ridicule or offence. The kind of learning space I am referring to here seems to be what is required to fulfil Shulman's (1999a) ideas around dialectical ways of knowing. He suggests that learning can best occur when people become involved in a dual process whereby they articulate what they know, share it, modify it by consideration of other people's ideas, and then internalise their transformed knowledge. This, says Shulman, is a dialectical process of knowledge generation. The process was evident within our doctoral group. We talked with one another and discussed the issues with which we are concerned, we modified our ideas, we internalised our thoughts again, and we found that our thinking had progressed. Some of us might have become more entrenched in our original views, or we may have altered our views to varying degrees. Whatever might be the case, learning and growth had taken place. While our conversations took place within an ethic of care, they were, however, lively and characterised by creative critique. I believe we were taking note of Gadamer's idea (in Whitehead 1999) that dialectic may be viewed as the art of questioning and the art of real conversation. Gadamer cautions that conversation is not about winning arguments: conversation, he says, 'requires that one does not try to out-argue the other person, but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion' (Gadamer 1975 cited in Whitehead 1999).

### **The shattering of illusions**

At one study-group session, my complacency in my knowledge base was shaken to such an extent that I knew that I had to interrogate my own thinking very seriously. The question 'Why do you feel you have to work with multimedia and technology? What is it that makes you do this?' were posed by P., a member of our study group. She voiced the question that had been surfacing in me for some time. I found that I could not explain why I felt compelled to use multimedia and engage in collaborative projects. I was unable to provide her with an adequate response; I could reply to her in terms of my describing my work but not in terms of offering satisfactory explanations for it. Initially, I responded to the question around why I felt compelled to create collaborative projects in terms of how such projects could reduce the sense of isolation and social disadvantage that my

students experienced and that such projects also gave the students a sense of writing for a real audience. I believed at that time that this was an acceptable explanation but I soon realised that I was offering descriptions of my work but was unable to offer adequate explanations.

There followed a period of turmoil in my thinking around the question ‘Why am I working in the way that I am working?’ I wrestled with various descriptions of my work and struggled to articulate an explanation for my work. Jean, my tutor, encouraged me with questions like: ‘What is the benefit of locating communities in cyberspace? Why do you want to want to encourage people to share their ideas? This is very important, and central to what you are trying to do. Let’s try and work out why you want to encourage people to share their knowledge and how technology can do that’ (e-mail 29/8/2001). My responses were confused and clouded. I ‘knew’ and ‘felt’ that my way of working was good, and that it was somewhat different to how many of my colleagues worked, but I experienced difficulties in explaining why I believed it was good. I presented samples from my work to my research colleagues and at education conferences (see Glenn 2003, 2004, 2004a, and 2005a) and as a tutor of professional development seminars. My audiences agreed that my way of working was good, but I was still unable to answer the question: ‘Why am I working in this way?’

My struggle to engage with the questions and the issues around the question ‘Why am I working in this way?’ slowly became an overwhelming concern. It became a new dauntingly difficult focus for my research. I perceived it to be difficult simply because I had trouble finding a response to it. I was no longer so deeply concerned about the effects of ICPs on teaching and learning; questions around understanding my practice became my main concern. This change of focus was gradual and organic and emerged alongside my new, but confusing, epistemology, as I began to develop my capacity for critical thinking. Slowly, slowly through my engagement with my tutor, my research colleagues, the writings of Apple (2001), Freire (1970), Foucault (1980), and Polanyi (1958), my understanding of my inarticulateness began to emerge. Jean, my tutor, tried to guide me with questions like ‘You also asked me at the end of your letter if you are going in the

right direction. What are the assumptions that underpin that question? Probably that there is a right direction and possibly that I know what it is if there is one', (e-mail 30/10/01). But such subtle guidance and gentle probing could not seem to awaken my awareness of my internal tacit knowledge.

My reading of Polanyi's (1958) ideas around personal or tacit knowledge clarified my thinking about my own personal knowledge. Polanyi outlines personal or intuitive knowledge as being a valid form of knowledge: 'We can know more than we can ever tell', says Polanyi (1967, p.4). He called this pre-logical stage of knowing 'tacit knowledge'. He continues that such knowledge initiates a compelling sense of responsibility for discovering a hidden truth. The recognition of my own tacit knowledge, in terms of my innate desire to create projects with my classes which explored connectedness and was manifested in my practical work, compelled me to continue my learning journey.

As I reflect on this period of coming to recognise the importance of personal ways of knowing, I can see clearly that despite my inability to explain or theorise my practice, my ontological values around dialogical holistic and inclusional ways of knowing and the relationality of education to present-day life processes were being expressed in how I worked. I was developing learning spaces for my students that embraced different ways of learning (Bentley 1998, Craft *et al.* 2001), of building caring relationships (Noddings 1992, 1999) and engaging with the wholeness and human-ness of people (Nakagawa 2000). Whitehead (2005a, p.18) describes how values are the 'living energies of action that give meaning and purpose to life and whose meanings are clarified in the course of their emergence in educational enquiry'. I was practising in such a way that I was living in the direction of my ontological values, but in an unknowing manner. I can see now that I was developing these projects more from an intuitive perspective, than from a position of critical thinking. I was, as yet, unable to explain, to theorise my practice or indeed to think critically about the system that produced such naïveté in me (Apple 2004).

## **Theory and Practice**

Clandinin and Connelly (1995, p.6) describe practice in education as ‘personal knowledge at work’. They also outline the dilemma posed for educational researchers who wish to produce practically useful theoretical knowledge. They explain (1995, p 6) how the practical narratives of the educational researcher have a poor record: ‘The kind of research and theory produced tends to be held in little theoretical regard by disciplinary scholars and held to be of little practical value by practitioners’. I empathised with this thinking because I was experiencing a theory/practice dilemma myself but I reached a level of understanding around my thinking that allowed me to acknowledge the importance of my work practices; these were the outward manifestations of some internal thought processes that were as yet unclear. I would at a later stage see that such dilemmas were located within the struggles between technical rational and dialogical ways of knowing. I would perceive that such forms of personal knowledge are frequently shut down in education systems because they are contrary to the normative technicist forms of discourse inherent in such systems. I would learn that my desire to dabble in projects that encouraged the building of connections between my class and others outside the classroom, was drawn from my ontological values (then, still unrecognised) around loving relationships, around engaging with the human-ness and wholeness of the person and the relationality of education to everyday life processes in the world outside the classroom. But as yet, the recognition of these values was still lying dormant within me; I was struggling at the level of being able to articulate a response to questions of the kind, ‘Why am I working in this way?’ and ‘How can I understand my practice?’

I gained more confidence around my work and my inarticulate way of knowing through my engagement with the works of Polanyi (1958 and 1967) and Clandinin and Connelly (1995 and 2000) because I could now see that personal ways of knowing were of value and could be of relevance to others. This insight was in itself illuminating because until now, I had understood that knowledge, or at least knowledge that could be considered to be of value, would be in the possession of those involved in objective institutionally-based research. That I could now embrace my own personal knowledge and perceive it to be of worth was a new and exciting step for me.

As I developed a confidence in my own personal knowledge, I began to take my first tentative step towards being able to develop an understanding around my practice. I also gained some clarity into my difficulties as I engaged with Chomsky's (2000, p.3) ideas around education systems:

Schools ...are institutions for indoctrination and for imposing obedience. Far from creating independent thinkers, schools have always throughout history, played an institutional role in a system of control and coercion.

Chomsky 2000, p.3

Such was my own inability to think in an independent manner at that time, I understood that Chomsky's words (2000) were referring to teachers and schools in *other* places and not to my school or me. Yet, as I reflected on his writing, it finally led me to pause and prompted me to question my ability to think independently. The possibility that Chomsky's words might refer to *me* specifically alarmed me. They shook me out of my complacency and as a result I began to engage with writings of other critical thinkers in education such as Apple (2001; 2004), Darder (2002), Freire (1970; 1973), and hooks (2003). I came to realise that I was bound within my own unquestioning acceptance of the norms of my understanding of the Irish education system and that even though my own personal knowledge was being realised in my practice, as yet I was unable to offer any explanations for it. However, it was an epiphany for me to realise that I was colluding in my own subjugation and imposed obedience myself (see Foucault 1980 and the section 1.6 of this chapter). Now, at last, I was beginning to understand *why* I was unable to explain, and this was to provide me with my initial theorising of my work. I undertook my research against the background of this process of developing new understanding.

## **(1.6) My complacency around issues pertaining to education**

### **Education as a site of indoctrination**

As explained previously, my professionalism was based on the misconception that knowledge was external to the knower and that transmission models of teaching were the 'correct' models of teaching. It was in this context that I embarked on my research programme. This misconception is one that has been transmitted through our culture,

through previous generations of teachers (see Carr and Kemmis 1986; Murphy 2004; OECD 1991) and through educational discourses. Conway (2002) points out that discourses in Irish education have been notably inattentive to critiquing curriculum; what is taught, how it is taught and why it is taught. He is critical of the dominance of transmission models of teaching and technical rational discourses in relation to pedagogy here. McNiff (2005) takes the argument a step further when she suggests that many of our normative behaviours are based on theories founded on rational conceptualisations drawn from the disciplines of education rather than on living educational theories (Whitehead 1989) drawn from real-life experiences in education. I am keenly aware that my own complacency was a substantial context for my research; one which caused many difficulties for me as I engaged in my research process. Both Conway (2002) and McNiff (2005) are engaged in processes that aim to shatter the illusions that prevent educational growth. More processes like these are needed to illuminate and problematise the complacent thinking that permeates so much of educational discourse currently. I hope that my own newly acquired ability to think and speak critically will contribute to such processes.

I now know that I was not a critical thinker and my complacency was indicative of being embedded in such a system of non-critique. The ‘dumbing-down’ of people is often associated with issues of power. Chomsky reminds us that ‘once you are educated, you have already been socialized in ways that support the power structure’ (2000, p.3). Assumptions are frequently ingrained within a culture and are normalised within the culture as suggested by Foucault (1980), and, as members of that culture, people are often not even aware of them. I perceive that my own inability to question my work practices or to articulate explanations for them as being located within that power constituted structure, because I too was educated in a manner such that I was socialized to support power structures. Foucault (1980) draws on Bentham’s model of the panopticon, where cells are located around an observation centre in such a manner that the inmates may be observed by the guardians in the observation tower. However the inmates are never sure when they are being observed and so they become self-regulating. This model also assumes that the guardians who occupy the central position in the panopticon are

themselves regulating their own behaviours. Foucault describes it as a machine ‘in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised’ (Foucault 1980, p.156). Foucault also explains the close alliance that exists between power and knowledge and how those who possess knowledge are those who have power. Even though these ideas appear to describe a dramatic tyrannical type of power, the power wielding according to Foucault is of a more subtle nature. In *Power/Knowledge* (1980) Foucault talks about the

....circulation of power through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions. By such power, even faced with ruling a multiplicity of men, could be as efficacious as if it were being exercised over a single one.

Foucault (1980, p. 151-2)

Thus power can be seen, not just as located in a superior external position but existing in the everyday relationships between people. It could be seen that Foucault’s ideas around power are kernel not only to our society’s unquestioning acceptance, but my own acceptance also, of that which I believed to be normal. If our culture dictates that technicist assumptions underpin people’s ways of coming to know, then the trend will be that they may unquestioningly subscribe to that epistemology. I believe that, as I approached my research, I unquestioningly subscribed to technicist assumptions. This emerged as a key concern for me in the course of my research.

Chomsky (2000) also addresses such issues. He says that attempts to control the public mind through education systems are not only located within the academy but begin at an early age:

...through a socialization process that is also a form of indoctrination that works against independent thought in favour of obedience. Schools function as a mechanism of this socialization. The goal is to keep people from asking questions that matter about important issues that directly affect them and others.

(Chomsky 2000, p.24).

My thinking had been 'indoctrinated' and I was unable initially to question and later to articulate an explanation for my tacit knowledge as an educator. Once I became aware of the power constituted nature of relationships and the complacency of thinking that arises as a result of such relationships within some systems of education, I saw them being exemplified not only in many of the overarching principles of education systems but also in the minutiae of regular school life on a daily basis. Polanyi (1958) talks about how once a person has made a discovery, they have crossed a gap such that they see and think differently (1958, p.143). I began to see and think differently. For example, I saw how the public's acceptance of state examinations such as the Leaving Certificate as the summative evaluation of a student's learning as an accepted norm might be an example of an uncritical approach to education. The *Irish Times* (Flynn 2005a) tells us how the Minister for Education and Science wants to ensure that public confidence in the public examination system is maintained and that 'any danger of "dumbing down" [the examination is] resisted'. The Minister appears to assume that not only should the public accept state examinations as 'given' but that critical engagement around them should be resisted. To give another example of how I began to see and think differently, I reflect on when educators expect students to wear uniforms and yet do not have to comply to any strict dress code themselves. I perceive that this can be indicative of complacency in their thinking and an acceptance of the power-constituted nature of the teacher-pupil relationship.

Once I began to be able to think in a critical manner, I could see avenues for critical engagement in nearly every aspect of my life. I perceived how I had rarely questioned the syllabus or queried who decides which versions of a story should be told to students. Todorov (1995) explains how stories change depending on the person who is telling them and the context in which they are told. I began to see how my lack of questioning might be indicative of complacency in my thinking and perhaps the thinking of others also. Conway's (2002) paper, which discusses the lack of epistemological critique in educational discourses in Ireland, supports my ideas. Shor and Freire (1987, p.77) explain how the standard transmission-of-knowledge model of curriculum is an authoritarian model which 'implies above all a tremendous lack of confidence in the creativity of

students and the ability of teachers'. The lack of confidence in the ability and creativity of teachers and students is especially pertinent to me as I can now see that I was dabbling in creative forms of teaching and learning, despite the influence of a transmission model of curriculum. Instead Freire (1997) emphasises the importance of critical thinking in education and the urgent need for it immediately. He says:

I must not leave for a random tomorrow something that is part of my task as a progressive educator right now: a critical reading of the world, alongside a critical reading of the word.

Freire 1997, p.75

Freire leaves me in no doubt: he places a moral imperative on me and on my colleagues in education to cast off our complacent thinking and to engage in more critical and reflective approaches of thought.

Conway (2002) makes the point that educational discourse in Ireland has been 'notable in its inattention to and resistance to problematize curricular concerns' (2002, p.62). My own thinking, based on my own experience and at an anecdotal level, would concur with Conway's views. Imagine what might be the case if the complacent thinking that I experienced myself and can sometimes witness in others, was applicable to the wider body of people who work as educators, and examine the implication, then the consequences are frightening. If only a fraction of educators fall prey to complacency in their thinking, then the influence that they may bring to bear on their students and fellow educators may be quite far reaching. Carr and Kemmis make the point that they want to question 'conformist views in education by questioning some of the beliefs on which it rests' (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p.2). Bearing in mind that educators may hold much influence on how people think and learn, their acceptance of complacency in their thinking and their acceptance that things ought to remain as they are, has enormous implications for the future. It can generate a whole culture of unthinking learners who are unable to question or think critically. The OECD report (1991, p.55) recognises the self-perpetuating nature of complacent thinking: 'The face ...Irish schools present to the world is quite recognisably that of previous generations'. I believe that I was a product of that self-perpetuating system and I now believe that much of my own desire to be

involved in a practitioner based research programme was motivated by a part of my innate awareness of this 'dumbing-down' process that I was scarcely able to articulate initially; such was my entrapment in it. This initial stage of being 'dumbed-down' was a key context for my research. As part of a system that promoted the 'dumbing down' of critical thinking, I was paralysed, as Freire (1973) suggests, by my inability to be critical and was carried along in the wake of change. Lomax and Whitehead (1996) also echo this idea when they speak about oppression being in the minds of people through 'the imposition of values and practices that disable us from participating as fully as we might in our educational enterprises and imposed change that alienates us by appearing to devalue our educational values and practices' (cited in Holley 1997, p.2). I believe that I was Foucault's 'prisoner in the panopticon' or Chomsky's 'obedient' teacher; not seeing the need for critique and unable to explain my actions.

In reflecting on that tempestuous time, I find the writing of Derrida (1976, p.162) enlightening. He argues the importance of 'departure' from the familiar, the attempt to get out of the traditional orbit, and suggests that only by such departures can one begin to question the traditional assumptions that underpin a particular field or discipline. In my case, the attempt towards departure was marked by a battle between inner personal knowledge and the external normalised knowledge that constitutes a traditional education system. This was a key concern for me as I embarked on my research process.

### **In conclusion**

Laidlaw (2002, p.52) advocates the following: 'a theory can help us to understand what we are doing in terms of reasons'. I have learned that the process of coming to know and the creation of a theory are closely linked. I believe that at this period of my learning journey, I finally was able to begin to theorise my practice, with specific reference to my inability to articulate my understanding of my practice, in the following manner: I came to understand, through deep and critical engagement with my work, with the literature of critical thinking and with my colleagues, that I was the product of a system which did not encourage questioning (Apple 2004, Freire 1970). I had no explanations because for a long time, and through no direct fault of my own, I had had no questions. This was a key

concern for me as I engaged in my research process. But finally, I could now offer a description of my work, and explain why I was unable to explain it. This for me was the kernel of the first stage of creating my living educational theory (Whitehead 1989). Laidlaw (2002, p 52) continues: ‘When I understand why I am doing something, this seems to offer me the opportunity to work at improving what I am doing in a way that helps me to evaluate my effectiveness and to imagine.’ I could not yet understand why I was working in the way I did, but my understanding of my inability to articulate my explanations, provided me with a creative and firm foothold for continuing on the learning journey which now forms the basis for this thesis. This journey has now led me not only to resist the imposition of dominant forms of knowledge (Carr and Kemmis 1986) but also to find ways of exercising my own creativity.

In Chapter Two, I will ask, ‘Why was I concerned?’ and explore my emergent understanding of my practice as my ontological values become clarified through their emergence in the research process (Whitehead 2005a). The chapter explores the injustices which exist in many current technicist approaches to learning and I submit my own living educational theory for examination as I develop opportunities for learning in a dialogical, inclusive and creative manner.

