

Chapter Three: What could I do about my concerns? Examining issues around methodology

As my learning journey continued I gained insight into the concerns I had around the contradictory nature of my work within the educational system; why I was concerned about the dissonance I experienced between the rationalised external world of structured practices such as completing textbooks, and my own internal values around love and caring relationships. I decided to take action. As outlined in Chapter Two, I began to think critically and I developed an understanding that this critical thinking implied a journey towards committed, purposeful action. The action in which I chose to engage took the form of developing a living theory approach to action research as I investigated my understanding of my practice (Whitehead 1989). This chapter outlines the methodology I employed so as to engage in an ordered enquiry which I am presenting here in the form of this thesis. In the process of investigating my practice, I developed my emergent living educational theory from my practice in the form of a living epistemology of practice, which is informed by the fact that I know what I am doing in my practice and I know how I have come to practise in this way. I am claiming that I am developing an epistemology of practice that is grounded in dialogical, holistic and inclusional ways of knowing. I am thinking here of Bohm's (2004, p.7) ideas around dialogue as 'flow of meaning' out of which new, creative understandings may emerge. Bohm describes this emergent, shared meaning as the 'glue' which holds societies together. I am also drawing on Capra's thinking as he (1997) explains how 'deep ecology' does not separate humans from the natural environment; it is a form of spiritual awareness. In the course of the research I have developed key insights into my understanding of my ontological values and the importance of loving and caring relationships as a basis for sustained forms of learning. Embedded in this is my ever-increasing understanding of the importance of the interconnectedness that exists between education, people and their environment and the wider experiences within the cosmos (Miller 1996; Montessori 1949) and how technology may be a vehicle for encouraging such relatedness (Brown and Duguid 2002).

Whitehead (1989) recommends that researchers can ask questions such as ‘How can I improve my practice?’ in order to generate and make public their descriptions and explanations of practice as their own living educational theories. I perceive the question ‘How can I best understand my practice?’ to be embedded in the question ‘How can I improve my practice?’ As the focus of my research was around developing an understanding of my practice, the research methodology, which informed my investigation, was influenced by my ontological and epistemological assumptions (McNiff and Whitehead 2005b). These assumptions in turn were influenced by my research findings in the form of my own new learning and insights around my ontological and epistemological commitments. I began to perceive and articulate an interdependent reciprocal dynamic interaction between my ontological and epistemological values and my research methodology, as my values influenced how I did my research and my subsequent learning influenced my ontological and epistemological values. As I began to clarify my research methodology, I am reminded of Said’s (1994) explanations around how the intention involved in a new beginning can transform into a methodology. This chapter captures the essence of this transformation. This chapter outlines why I chose a living theory approach (Whitehead 1989) for my investigation and how this approach grew and developed and emerged from the research itself. Even though the research process itself was dynamic and grew in conjunction with my emergent epistemology, the structuring of my research methodology brought order and discipline to the process of my enquiry and the process of communicating the story of my enquiry (see McNiff and Whitehead 2005b). I will outline in this chapter how I perceive this order and discipline in the way I observed good ethical practice, in my data collecting processes and in the way I have generated validated evidence in relation to my living epistemological standards of judgement (see Whitehead and McNiff 2006). I see this rigour (see Winter 1996) in the manner that I have presented my work-in-progress to colleagues, to fellow practitioners (INTO and NCTE 2005) and to others involved in academic work at various educational conferences (see Glenn 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2005a) as I invited them to engage critically with the descriptions and explanations I was offering for my practice.

I have chosen my emergent understanding of the importance of interconnectedness (Miller 1996) as the basis for the methodology for my research; as the foundation on which I create the framework of my methodology. Through my emergent understanding of my new epistemology I have thus moulded the methodology which has framed this research (see Bradley 1993). This chapter demonstrates how my emergent epistemology, my understanding of coming to know as a dialogical and inclusional process, led to the development of my methodology which was embedded in the web of interconnections (O' Donohue 2003) between my learning and that of my students. As I collected data that would eventually be produced in the form of validated evidence for this research, I utilised the web pages, the email communications and the multimedia presentations that my students had undertaken as they too were involved in building connections as a holistic approach to learning.

I have undertaken this research with the purpose of contributing to the education of social formations also, in terms of inviting educators to engage with my research and to question the accepted norms of their work practices and to exercise their capacity for critical engagement (McNiff 2005c). Huxley (1992 cited in Nakagawa 2000, p.74) explains that education;

...aims at reconciling the individual with himself [sic], with his fellows, with society as a whole, with the nature of which he and his society are but a part, and with the immanent and transcendent spirit within which nature has its being.

(Huxley 1992 cited in Nakagawa 2000, p.74)

I am drawn to these ideas as my own 'reconciling' has to do with a renewed emphasis on embodied and dialogical ways of knowing, within a system where technical rational epistemologies are dominant (see OECD 1991) and fragmented thinking about teaching and learning prevails (Brown 2002). McNiff and Whitehead (2002, p.59) seem to think in a similar manner when they say that what action research stands for is the 'realisation of human needs towards autonomy, loving relationships and productive work; the urge towards freedom, creativity and self-recreation'. I am drawing on Palmer's (1993) and McNiff and Whitehead's (2002) ideas to create my own visions of working towards a good social order, where people are mutually respectful of one another and learning is

seen as a process of growth and emergence; as part of the process of living. Like Dewey (1938), I too perceive education as a process, which is life-affirming. The situation that I visualise is of an invitational nature in that I am asking others to listen and to test my claim to knowledge against their critical responses.

In this chapter I will outline how I first encountered action research and how it has since become a life affirming process for me. I will also describe how my initial attempts at action research were paradoxically undertaken while I was subscribing to a technicist epistemology and how I perceived action research as something to be ‘done’ to people, including myself. I will outline how this epistemological stance changed and the significance of this change as I acknowledged how I experience myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989). Now, having embarked on a learning journey, I see my process of living theory not just as an approach to research, but more as a way of life. This chapter will describe and explain this epistemological growth and I will outline why I perceived the traditional propositional forms of research to be unsuitable for my work. The chapter is organised in the following manner:

- (i) At the beginning of my research
- (ii) Doing research differently
- (iii) A new understanding of my practice: developing a new epistemology
- (iv) What about traditional approaches to research?
- (v) My living theory approach to research
- (vi) Evolving research questions: evolving epistemologies
- (vii) The research methods of my living educational theory

(3.1) At the beginning of my research

As I embarked on my research programme, initially in the form of an M.Ed (Glenn 2000 and 2005) and moving on to my PhD programme subsequently, I was drawn to the literatures of action research. Action research formed a compulsory module of the diploma stage of my masters programme and I chose to continue with an action research approach for my masters thesis. As I began to write up my thesis and as I read the literatures pertaining to action research, I became aware of certain discrepancies in the

literatures around action research. Some texts appeared to approach the ideas around action research differently to others. I read and re-read the textbooks trying to capture what the 'real' action research meant. Carr and Kemmis (1986) appeared to talk about action research in propositional terms whereas other writers such as McNiff *et al.* (1996) seemed to perceive action research in dialectical terms. Some of my course tutors saw action research as an interpretive form of research. I realise now that I was entangled in a maze of interpretations around action research. Many of these interpretations are part of a trend towards what McNiff (2005c, p.4) currently describes as 'linear programming, input-output, the implementation of pre-packaged action plans to ensure a tidy predetermined outcome', designed perhaps to fulfil financed research programmes which demand results and outcomes in classrooms. At the time, it was confusing for a novice researcher such as myself to differentiate between the various interpretations of action research. In desperation, I emailed Jean McNiff, the author of one my key texts at that time: *You and Your Action Research Project* (McNiff *et al.* 1996), pleading for clarification on the issues which were puzzling me. Jean invited me to a study group meeting in Dublin and that was the beginning of my doctoral studies and a life-enhancing engagement with action research that has continued since.

Action research from a technicist stance?

As outlined in Chapters One and Two, I was a product of a society where technical rational thinking was the dominant epistemology (see OECD 1991). It dominated my childhood learning experiences, my learning and teaching experiences as a young adult and continued thus until recent times. Propositional logic informed much of how I thought about ways of knowing. I perceived knowledge as being external to the knower; it was something separate and to be viewed objectively; something informed by Cartesian logic. I perceived things to be black or white and would adhere to conventions and rules unquestioningly. I respected rules and regulations and expected others and myself to adhere to them. I find this way of being and thinking interesting now as I read Chomsky's (2000, p.24) comments on schools. He talks about how the goal of schools is to keep people from asking questions about relevant matters and how as a teacher you learn to be obedient. He explains how the most obedient and unquestioning teachers are frequently

perceived as the most committed. I now realise that Chomsky was describing me: the 'me' who did not recognise herself on her initial readings of Chomsky (see Chapter One), the 'me' who existed in a black and white world until she saw that there were other ways of thinking and being.

Yet, despite my technicist tendencies, I was drawn to the writings of action researchers (namely Carr and Kemmis 1986, McNiff 1988, McNiff *et al.* 1996, O'Hanlon 2003 and Whitehead 1989, 1993) and their approaches to research. The notion of teacher as researcher (Stenhouse 1975, 1983) appealed to me greatly as did the idea of taking 'action'. Carr and Kemmis (1986) explain that teachers are drawn to research for many reasons. These reasons, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986), include a desire to reflect on educational practice and to justify it, while other teachers want to justify innovative practices in which they have engaged, and others still, choose to embrace the autonomy that has been offered to them and choose to engage in educational research. I became involved in research through a combination of Carr and Kemmis' (1986) ideas. I liked the idea of taking charge of and developing my own professionalism. Even though, at a superficial level, I was entrenched in a mode of complacency and obedience, I was at a deeper level dissatisfied with what Whitehead calls 'education theory'. Whitehead (2005) differentiates between the terms 'education theory' and 'educational theory' and explains (2005, p.3) that education theory is drawn from the disciplines of history, philosophy, psychology and sociology, whereas 'educational theory', as Whitehead perceives it, is drawn from educational practice. I will discuss 'educational' theory in greater detail later in this chapter. For now, I would like to describe my learning journey at the stage where I was experiencing a sense of dissatisfaction with education theory. I believed that many of the theories that were considered to be pertinent to the classroom were quite irrelevant. In particular, I questioned Piaget's stages of development (see Piaget 1972), which featured prominently in the teacher education programmes in Ireland at that time (see Conway 2002), and wondered how relevant his theory was to the children I taught. I was frequently struck by the thought that perhaps many education theorists had little connection with a regular classroom and had little comprehension of the messy processes (see Mellor 1998 and Schön 1995) that constitute every day work. As a result, my initial

interest in action research was based on the premise that it allowed practitioners to have an opportunity to research their own practice and to theorise their own practice.

However, my understanding of action research at that time was primarily drawn from a technicist perspective. While I was aware of the significance of Whitehead's (1989) question, 'How do I improve my practice?', my understanding of it was quite different to what I now perceive to be kernel to questions of the form 'How do I improve my practice?' I engaged with Whitehead's question at a superficial level and expected that if I investigated my practice by keeping a research journal and observing my class and using the regular research instruments, I would discover areas in my work that needed improvement. While aspects of these assumptions may be true, I also anticipated that I would undertake steps in that direction and compare the 'before' and 'after' situations. I expected that there would be an improvement in the 'after' observations and I believed that this would 'prove' that my practice had improved. My action research would have 'caused' an improvement in my practice. I had fallen into what Sanger (1996, p.196) calls the 'causality trap'. Few of these assumptions came to fruition but such was my initial understanding of action research. My initial forays into action research were from this perspective, even though I would consider them to be inadequate now.

I now know, as I reflect on that period of my life, that at some deeper level my own personal tacit knowledge (see Polanyi 1958) told me that perhaps I did not fully subscribe to technicist thinking or perhaps that I was a technicist with disobedient intent. This tacit subliminal knowledge informed my thinking and actions such that I was able to develop a commitment to pursuing action research, despite my epistemological difficulties as outlined above. I have given examples in Chapter One of how my journal entries and my work practices from that time were indicative of the conflicting epistemologies that were within me. I have shown there, how on one level I perceived knowledge as something to be transmitted and later on in the same journal entry, I spoke about knowledge as a process. Drawing on McNiff and Whitehead's ideas (2002) around generative transformational processes, I can now see how the dilemmas, which were apparent in my writing, were reflected in my practice and again in my epistemology. My thinking, as was

evident from my writing (see Chapter One) was in conflict. My practice consisted of espousing technical rationality in education on one hand and was embracing dialogical ways of knowing on the other while at the same time my epistemology was reflecting these conflicts. This period of knowing while at the same time not knowing, of perceiving knowledge as being external while perceiving it as embodied was similar to what Mellor (1998) describes as 'the struggle'. Mellor explains how his struggle in his practice and in his research was at the heart of the research and became the methodology itself. I believe that my 'struggle' too is what my research is about because it interrogates accepted epistemologies and seeks new and better ways of knowing. Whitehead and McNiff (2006) remind us that one's research methodology is influenced by one's ontological and epistemological assumptions. I can trace how my methodological approach evolved from that of a spectator standing outside of my research to becoming the focus of the research, as my epistemological understanding evolved in the course of the research.

(3.2) Doing research differently

Dadds and Hart (2001) have written about practitioner enquiries that have diverged from traditional approaches to research and have queried the relevance of traditional methodologies to practitioner enquiry, suggesting that perhaps these methods are sometimes deskilling rather than enabling for the practitioner researcher. As outlined here in this chapter, I too have undertaken to do my research differently. This is not only because I am developing a living educational theory where the focus of my research is myself and my own learning, but also because I am creating a *living* theory approach to my research, and because I have chosen to present a digital version of my thesis in the form of a CD-ROM with live links to video clips of my classes and web pages they have made. These video clips and web pages form much of the evidence to support my claim to knowledge in this thesis as I explore forms of communication not normally used to represent our learning (see Eisner 1997). I perceive my research methodology to be different to traditional social science research methodologies because I am the focus of my own research. I am not undertaking research on other people specifically. Instead, I am researching myself and my practice in relation with others. My research approach

differs from traditional approaches as it is closely aligned to my epistemological values around dialogical and inclusional ways of knowing, where the interconnectedness between people and places offers a fluid, vibrant locus for coming to know.

Whitehead (2005a) outlines the difference between living educational theories and the traditional forms of theory with clarity. He says:

What I want to be clear about are the distinguishing characteristics of living educational theories and their living critical standards of judgement that make them distinct from the traditional disciplines and theories of education. I am thinking of these distinguishing characteristics in terms of:

- I. the living critical standards of judgement that can be used to evaluate the validity of claims to educational knowledge that are made from a living theory perspective.
- II. the adequacy of the explanations of educational influences in learning
- III. using embodied ontological values in accounting for ourselves and our learning
- IV. transforming embodied values in living epistemological standards of critical judgement
- V. evolving inclusional, responsive and postcolonial forms of educational theorising
- VI. creating a new disciplines approach to educational theorising through educational enquiry

(Whitehead 2005a, p.7)

I believe that my approach to living theory demonstrates each of the distinguishing characteristics as outlined by Whitehead (2005a) above. I am developing an inclusional form of educational theorising in the form of offering adequate descriptions and explanations here in this thesis, as I draw on my embodied values around love and connectedness to give an account of my learning. I am transforming these embodied values (see Chapter Six) into living epistemological standards of judgement that can be used to evaluate the validity of my claim.

Despite their enthusiasm for creative approaches to practitioner enquiry, Dadds and Hart (2001, p.8) have expressed reservations about the way practitioner research has become

controlled and narrowed by the ‘constraints of higher education teaching and criteria’, but are exuberant about exciting and unorthodox ways of doing practitioner research that challenge the thinking of the academy. They remind the reader that practitioner enquiries are designed to improve conditions for those in the workplace and that through such inquiry, researchers are willing to open up their professional practices to critical scrutiny. I believe that I am fortunate that my own experience of engaging in practitioner research has not been narrowed by academic criteria. However, I believe that it is important, to question one’s claim; to show that one has engaged with the social criteria of comprehensibility, truth, sincerity and appropriateness which Habermas (1973) says are the basis of testing knowledge claims in the process of communicative action. I have shared my emergent thinking around my research with others as I attempt to show my engagement with Habermas’s social criteria and to invite argument through discourse with others as suggested by Habermas (1973). This sharing took the form of conversations with research colleagues and the presentation of papers at academic conferences (see Glenn 2003, 2004, 2004a and 2005) with invitations to people to respond and critique. McNiff (2005b) suggests that the researcher must assess the validity of their practices and evaluate their work in the most stringent terms. I apply these standards to myself as I engage in my research. I may choose to do my research differently, but I am addressing issues of validity and authenticity very seriously. McNiff talks about the importance of demonstrating ‘our capacity to engage with issues of articulating our critical standards of judgement’ (2005b) that have been moulded by one’s ontological and epistemological values. I believe that I am rigorously addressing such issues in my research as I present validated evidence to support my claims and to meet the living standards of judgement required by my claims (see Chapter Five and Six).

Experiencing oneself as a living contradiction

As outlined in the previous chapters, I became critical of the technician system that had ‘produced’ me and of myself, also, for having allowed it to ‘produce’ me. I began to question the norms that formed the everyday structure of my work practices. I began to perceive the education system as being a place of dissonance between what I wanted for

my class and what the system was providing for them. I saw that many aspects of the Irish education system closed down the learning process for some children instead of providing them with an opportunity to develop and grow to their potential. I now realise that my own growth in learning emerged as I began to engage in critical thinking about what I was doing and to see how my understanding of my work might be improved. As outlined in Chapter Two, Whitehead talks about education being a value-laden practice (1989). He describes such values as being embodied in practice and explains that their meaning can be articulated throughout one's practice. When one's values are denied in one's practice, Whitehead describes that as 'experiencing oneself as a living contradiction' (1993). I perceived that my ontological and epistemological values were being denied in my practice and this caused me concern. I have addressed what these concerns were and why I was concerned in Chapters One and Two and here in this chapter, I am addressing these issues in terms of the process of the living theory approach I undertook in response to my concerns.

(3.3) A new understanding of my practice: developing a new epistemology

As my understanding of my practice as a place of contradiction grew, my understanding of a living theory approach to research also developed. I saw that, not only was I experiencing myself as a living contradiction in my epistemology and my practice, I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction in my research approach also. But I was no longer threatened by these multiple contradictions. The 'me', who had held such propositional values in earlier times, was changing slowly into someone who could not only accommodate and embrace contradiction in my thinking and in my practice but embraced it as an energising and life affirming process. I now saw how my desire to engage in projects that involved other people and our environment was born from the embodied values within me and were now being manifested in my research approach.

This new understanding heralded a near reversal of my previous thinking, as I began to engage with living theory. I was now immersed in an epistemology that not only included dialectical forms of logic but also included propositional forms of logic (Whitehead 2005). I delighted in the contradictory nature of such forms of logic; the excitement of

espousing both propositional and dialectical possibilities at once within a living logic was invigorating and inspirational after a lifetime of the closed thinking of technical rationality. Polanyi (1958) talks about how discoveries enable one to see the world in a new light; ‘to never see the world again as before’, such that one’s ‘eyes have become different’ and to see and think differently (Polanyi 1958, p.143). Such was my experience with my engagement with living theory. I explained in Chapter Two how I now perceive experiencing oneself as a living contradiction as energising because it highlights the tensions between one’s values and one’s practice, between what is and what might be; in essence it highlights our humanity as a living and imperfect contradiction. Whitehead (2005) describes these ideas thus:

...individuals experience themselves as living contradictions in the sense that they experience a tension of holding together the values that constitute their humanity and the experience of their denial in practice. This stimulates their imagination on action plans that are intended to enable the values to be lived more fully in practice.

(Whitehead 2005, p.4)

Experiencing oneself as a living contradiction, for me, was a locus for creativity and potential. It stimulated my imagination so that I was enabled to come to see how my values were being lived in my practice. This was where I found the life affirming energy I needed to equip me to develop my research approach.

The epistemological change that was manifested in my work practices, in my perceptions around how people learn and in my research approach is significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that one can hold multiple epistemologies and perspectives at the same time. I see the conflictual and changing nature of my epistemology and its multiplicity as being at the core of my humanity. It evokes Plato’s ideas of humanity being able to hold the one and the many together at the same time (see de Botton 1999), while also demonstrating the emergent and fluid nature of how people come to know (Bohm 2004). The epistemological change is also significant because it demonstrates how dialogue, as a flow of understanding between people, can create new learning and insights. My willingness to be open to change is something that I perceived to happen to

me as I engaged with new ways of thinking and being. It is significant because it draws on the idea that dialogical ways of knowing can create something new if people are willing to listen; to ‘drop ...old ideas and intentions, and be ready to go on to something different’ as explained by Bohm (2004, p.3). I now see living theory existing not only in how I work, but how I am with people, how I perceive learning. It shapes and reshapes my epistemological and ontological values in ongoing processes of engagement. Palmer (1993) describes how the patterns of epistemology can help to make sense of the patterns of our lives. He says (1993, p.21) ‘The shape of our knowledge becomes the shape of our living; the relation of the knower to the known becomes the relation of the living self to the larger world’. I like Palmer’s ideas but I believe that it is important to interrogate the ‘shape of our knowledge’ on a continuous basis. Unless I constantly engage with questions of the form ‘How can I improve my practice?’ (Whitehead 1989) there may be a danger that my thinking would become as entrenched and staid as the practices that caused me concern at the outset of my research. McNiff (2005c) reminds us that thinking in terms of perfection is usually fundamentalist. She suggests thinking in terms of new beginnings instead, with the intent of finding new and better ways of learning.

(3.4) What about traditional approaches to research?

My emergent living educational theory of practice is drawn from an epistemology of practice that embraces dialectical and dialogical ways of knowing. The word ‘theory’ has its etymological roots in the Greek word *theoros* meaning ‘spectator’ (Online Etymology Dictionary 2005) and pertained frequently to looking at and contemplating drama. The Greeks, however, regarded drama as ‘integral to life’ and as a ‘soul-making force’ (Palmer 1993, p.23), and did not perceive it with the detachment of many current day spectators. Despite this, ideas around research and theory (including education research and theory) are generally associated with the role of the researcher as observer and spectator, who behaves in an objective and detached manner. Much education theory has been accumulated by theorists who talk about teaching in conceptual and propositional terms and presupposes that valid theory exists in propositional form only (McNiff *et al.* 2003). As an educational researcher who works in a classroom with children on a daily basis, I know that while propositional theory provides me with some valid theories, much

of the knowledge that I, and many other teachers, generate as we practise is of a personal or tacit nature (Polanyi 1958). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) also speak about theory and explain how theory produced by scholars is held in little regard by practitioners as teaching needs to be understood as more than the transmission of knowledge and more than something that can be independently assessed and evaluated. They call for a narrative understanding of teacher knowledge instead, where the teachers are authors and characters in their own stories. Elliott (2004) outlines the dilemmas of the theory-practice relationship and explains that many people interpret Elliott's own writings as a 'privileging of practice over theory' (Elliott 2004, p.1). He eschews this idea and suggests that research that privileges practice over theory does not enhance the theory-practice link, it simply excludes the theory. Such privileging, suggests Elliott, is shaped by the same form of educational theorising that privileges theory over practice. He believes, as Clandinin and Connelly do (1995) (see above), that such assumptions 'effectively exclude action research from the domain of public knowledge and confine it to the domain of private knowledge' and research reports 'are often not deemed to be of sufficient status [for] academic publications' (Elliott 2004, p.1). Elliott suggests that the academic resistance to educational action research might be located in a fear of the potential power over what counts as knowledge that teachers might exert as they become active agents in their situations (Elliott 2004, p.8). It is interesting to note how Elliott locates the theory-practice dilemma in terms of the fear that educational action researchers can instil in academia with their suggestions for new epistemologies.

In my research I believe that I am developing new epistemologies of practice for myself as I become an active agent in my educational situation. Schön, a major proponent of the idea of practitioner as researcher (1983, p viii), describes practitioner knowledge as a 'kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit'. He has drawn on the work of Boyer (1990) who called for a new scholarship where practitioners could study their own practice, but Schön (1983) has outlined how such a new scholarship demands a new epistemology because such new scholarship challenges traditional epistemologies. Schön's thinking informs my approach to my own research although I am hopeful that my research will not instil fear in any academic circles, including my own. I would prefer

instead to invite dialogue and debate around my work as practitioners and academics come together to engage in educational processes.

The writings of Guba and Lincoln (1994) are helpful as I offer here my explanations for choosing an action research approach to my research. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explore the basic beliefs of alternative inquiry paradigms and compare them in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology. They suggest that a positivist ontology assumes that an 'apprehendable reality is assumed to exist' (1994, p.109) and that epistemologically, the investigator and the investigated are independent entities. The methodology employed in a positivist paradigm is experimental. Questions and hypotheses are 'stated in propositional form and subjected to empirical tests to verify them' (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p.110). In a postpositive paradigm, according to Guba and Lincoln, the ontological stance is such that reality is assumed to exist but it is only 'imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms' (1994, p.110). (Guba and Lincoln prefer to use the term 'qualitative' to describe types of research methods and perceive that issues pertaining to method are secondary to questions of paradigm. They continue to explain that positivism describes the 'received view' that has dominated 'formal discourse in the physical and social sciences for some 400 years'. Postpositivism, according to Guba and Lincoln, is an attempt in recent times to respond in a 'limited way, that is remaining within essentially the same set of basic beliefs, to the most problematic criticisms of positivism' (1994, p.109)). The postpositivist paradigm assumes an objectivist epistemology also but it is in the methodology, which includes qualitative methods, that Guba and Lincoln see a move towards a more naturalistic approach. They perceive the researcher who is positioned in a postpositivist stance as 'doing inquiry in a more natural setting' (1994, p.110). The researcher collects 'situational information...introducing discovery as an element in the inquiry, soliciting emic viewpoints to assist in determining the meanings that people ascribe to their actions' (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p.110). Those who challenge positivism reject the positivist belief that human behaviour is controlled by universal laws and is exemplified by underpinning consistency (Cohen *et al.* 2000). Researchers in both paradigms above wish to be detached from the object of their research, perceiving that detachment might ensure

validity (Candy 1989 cited in Melrose, 1996). In engaging with quantitative methodologies, the observed phenomena are important while in qualitative methodologies, meanings and interpretations are vital (Cohen *et al.* 2000). While adopting a qualitative methodology is characterised by a concern for the individual (Cohen *et al.* 2000), it is important to remember Habermas' observation of the 'double hermeneutic' (Habermas 1984 cited in Cohen 2000, p.28), whereby people attempt to interpret in a world that is already interpreted. A criticism of both of these paradigms is that the issue of voice is rarely addressed and the researcher can be perceived as a 'disinterested scientist' in a value-free epistemology (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Melrose (1996) suggests that the critical world view has emerged as some researchers perceive that neither the positivist nor the postpositivist paradigms go far enough in improving learning for the individual, the education system or the norms of society (Melrose 1996).

My own critique of quantitative and qualitative methodologies lies mainly in the area of an objectivist approach. Polanyi (1958, p.381) talks about the 'crippling mutilations' that objectivist frameworks have imposed on society and I perceive these mutilations existing in the fragmented nature of issues pertaining to knowledge and knowledge generation. Miller (1996) explains how 'fragmentation permeates everything' (1996, p.1). Society has separated itself from its environment which has resulted in 'ecological devastation' (1996, p.1). Miller also explains how people are cut off from their communities as they frequently live in fear and isolation. He expands on this idea of fragmentation in society to include fragmentation within people themselves (Miller 1996). He says (1996, p.1), 'We find ourselves disconnected from our bodies and our hearts. Education specifically has done much to sever the relationship between head and heart'. Miller's thinking is especially pertinent in the field of educational research. I perceive his ideas around fragmentation are reflected in many quantitative and to a lesser extent in qualitative research methodologies, as outlined above. I am critical of research methodologies where thinking, with reference to people and their involvement in human endeavour, is objectified, and findings, sometimes in the form of people, are classified and categorised as though they were inanimate objects. Lynch (1999) makes the point that that the idea of assuming that a social investigation is neutral is problematic. She asks, '...by naming

someone else's world for them are we robbing them of a voice? By speaking *for* people, do we misrepresent their point of view?' (Lynch 1999, p.43). I am using the term 'fragmented' here to describe the detachment of the researcher from the research topic, the objectification of the research subjects and the possible reification of the subsequent theory as it is documented in the bound form of theses. Fragmentation according to Bohm (2004, p.56) is when thought 'goes wrong'. He compares it to taking a watch apart by smashing instead of taking it apart and finding the pieces. He explains how things which 'really fit, and belong together, are treated as if they do not' (Bohm 2004, p.56).

Instead, I prefer to take a more holistic approach both to my work practices and to my research. I bear Gage's (1989, p.148) warnings about 'paradigm wars' in mind and take heed of his advice that educational research is 'no mere spectator sport, no mere educational game' and that it has moral obligations in the form of a need for better education for children and that what happens to children is our concern. I believe that I am concerned about what happens to our children. I also believe that I 'belong' (Bohm 2004) in my classroom, I 'belong' in the theory I am developing and I belong in my research methodology. In other words, I am a 'living I' who is central to the research (Whitehead 1993). I believe that my research will be of value to other practitioners because it is embedded in the everyday activities of the primary school classroom. I am aware of Zuber-Skerrit's critique that action research techniques are embedded in such a small scale investigation that they may be insufficient to lead to new insights or that they may be too small-scale to be valid or that they may be too convoluted to be practical (Zuber-Skerrit 1996, p.17). I am also aware of the opinions of Cohen *et al.* as they point out that giving action researchers a small degree of power to research their own situations 'has little effect on the *real* locus of power and decision making which often lies outside the control of the action researchers' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p 33). Bearing this critique in mind, I share my thinking and invite dialogue at both a practical and theoretical level with other practitioners as I engage in the design of professional development courses for primary school teachers (see Chapter Seven). I am also hopeful that my research will not only influence teacher colleagues but that it will also influence future interpretations of curriculum and that it will make a contribution to the education of social formations (see

Chapter Seven). I have found that traditional research methodologies do not address my research purposes adequately, therefore, because the perception of people as objects of study directly contradicts my ontological values around loving relationships and the recognition of the human-ness of the person. Instead, I am developing my own approach to my research; one that is commensurate with my ontological and epistemological commitments and one which emerges from the research. Like Senge (1990, p.12), I suggest that at the 'heart of the learning organisation is a shift in mind from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world' and I anticipate that my research methodology demonstrates this 'shift in mind'.

I am aware, also, of the power-constituted nature of hierarchical relationships that exist in education. This awareness has reinforced my rationale for choosing to engage with non-traditional forms of research. Lynch (1999) has spoken about how children in educational research often 'occupy the status of the colonised "Other"...much is written about them but they rarely speak in their own voice' (Lynch 1999, p.44). In traditional approaches to research, the researcher's role is considered to be separate from and superior to the practitioner's role (Schön 1995). McNiff (2005b) focuses on this superiority and describes how this pedagogical imbalance can also be reflected in similar hierarchical relationships in the classroom. In such cases, the teacher is perceived as the knower and therefore as someone who is superior to the student. The classroom becomes the site for power-constituted hierarchical relationships where power is perceived as a form of dominance. Cohen *et al.* (2000) remind people that doctors' consulting rooms and principals' offices are places where power inequalities can thrive, as ideas are frequently imposed on unequal participants and they are persuaded to accept definitions of situations. They alert their readers that such power struggles exist similarly in educational research. McNiff outlines also how educational research itself is a site for the struggle in epistemological power (2005a). The idea of education being a site for the struggle in epistemological power abhors me because I am not seeking to create a classroom which is based on a hierarchical power structure. Instead, I prefer to engage with ideas around how I use power. I perceive my use of power as a transformational or emancipatory process, and how I conduct myself in the power struggle is indicative of that belief. I am

aware of the political implications of subscribing to an epistemology that is perceived to be in conflict with dominant epistemologies. I am drawing here on the idea that in dialogue and dialogical ways of knowing, nobody is trying to be a winner (Bohm 2004, p.7), there is 'no attempt to gain points or to make your particular view prevail'; dialogue infers a 'common participation'. These understandings underpin my commitment to my living action research as I develop dialogical and inclusive epistemologies that are of a non-coercive nature, as I share my claim to knowledge with others. I am convinced of the validity of my claim to knowledge and in Chapter Six I will provide authenticated evidence to support my claim to knowledge.

Instead I am drawn to the ideas of McNiff and Whitehead. (2002) who perceive knowing as a holistic practice. I perceive research also as a holistic practice, where the practice informs the theory and the theory informs the practice as a self-generating spiral which can inspire and promote new educational theory and practice. This is what I am aiming towards as I outline my research narrative in this thesis.

(3.5) My living theory approach to research

Action research is at its most basic an aspect to research and at its most holistic, a way of life. It has become a way of life for me as well as being the research approach that I undertook in this research. Living theory is recognised as one form of action research (see McNiff and Whitehead 2002 and McNiff *et al.* 2003) and is something that is live and emergent. For me, it has to do with the human-ness of people, in terms of my engagement with the wholeness of the person, with how theory has been drawn from living situations. Whitehead (in McNiff *et al.* 2003, p.165) describes living educational theory thus:

In living educational theories, the explanatory principles are embodied values that have been transformed in the course of their emergence in practice into communicable standards of practice and judgement ... In living educational theories the explanations are produced by practitioner researchers in enquiries that are focused on living values more fully in the practice of enquiries of the kind 'How do I improve what I am doing here?'

I would like to take this extract and use it to explain how a living theory approach is not only useful as a research methodology and answering questions like ‘What can I do about my concerns?’ as exemplified by this chapter, but how for me, it shapes how I live my life. I will focus on the following four aspects of Whitehead’s description above to help to explicate my interpretation of the methodology of living educational theory:

- a) Living educational theory: a methodology,
- b) The role of embodied values in my methodology,
- c) The importance of communicable standards of judgement in my methodological approach to living educational theory and
- d) Asking ‘How do I improve what I am doing here?’ as I develop a living form of methodology

(a) Living educational theory: a methodology

As outlined earlier, my initial interest in action research was kindled by the idea that teachers could engage in their own research as outlined by Stenhouse (1975). This aspect of action research still engages me, as does McNiff’s development of the idea of practitioner as theorist (2002) and teacher as theorist (2005). Schön (1995, p.28) talks about the ‘swampy lowlands’ of ‘messy and confusing’ problems that are incapable of technical solution. Many practitioners, such as myself, inhabit the swampy lowlands where the ‘problems of greatest human concern lie’ (p. 28). Schön (1995) offers a view of an epistemology of practice that assumes that practitioners generally hold a valuable store of tacit knowledge and suggests that reflective practice can have implications not only for the practitioner and their practice, but for the organisation, for future research and practice and for the larger society. These interpretations of action research here are focusing on a living approach to action research and practitioners can use action research to generate what Whitehead (1989) calls ‘living educational theory’. In living educational theory, the theory is being created from living experience, from live practice and from the reflective thoughts of living human beings who critically engage with their practice. This is a different interpretation of theory to that outlined by what Whitehead calls ‘education theory’ as outlined above and has been drawn, for example, from the ‘disciplines’ of education. Whitehead’s idea of living theory does not seek to diminish the relevance of

the traditional form of theory either because living theorists organise their thinking in a form of logic that is inclusional and includes both propositional and dialectical possibilities and celebrates open-endedness (Whitehead 2005). In my research here, I am creating a living educational theory because I am drawing the theory from my practice. I offer descriptions and explanations of my practice to test and support my emergent theory as I systematically study what I am doing and I submit my evidence to others for critical examination as I test and hope to validate my claim to knowledge (see Chapter Six).

Living theory is also living because it *is* alive and ever re-forming. My living theory, as I articulate it today in this thesis, is an accurate account of my ideas around education at this moment. When I revisit this writing, my theory may have changed. This is because I am a living person and my engagement through practice is also with living people. As outlined in Chapters One and Two, I perceive that every moment of every day people can learn and grow towards their potential. Learning and growth imply change and this change in turn implies that my educational theory may have changed. This is because it is always unfolding (Bohm 1980), in processes of living.

My epistemology, as it has emerged in my learning journey, is such that it perceives knowledge as a process, as something created between people and as something tacit while being closely linked also to traditional propositional forms of knowledge. A living theory approach to research also recognises the importance of personal and dialectical ways of knowing (McNiff *et al.* 2003). My understanding of how a living theory approach also informs how I live my life, how I am with people, how I think and how I approach questions about what I can do about the things that concern me. It has also informed my chosen research methodology as an emergent and holistic path towards learning.

(b) The role of embodied values in my methodology

Whitehead (2005a, p.1) talks about ‘embodied values that have been transformed in the course of their emergence in practice’ as being a key aspect of living theory. The idea of

embodiment is investigated by Hocking *et al.* (2001) as they explore the possibilities for education through holistic schools of thought. They explain it thus:

Embodiment moves us away from the Cartesian legacy of how we view knowing and knowledge not as concrete things that reside in the body or mind but that emerge through our interactions with/in the world.

(Hocking *et al.* 2001, p xviii)

The connections between values and practice exist in living theory through my interaction with the world. My ontological and epistemological values around love and the recognition of the human-ness of people as outlined in Chapter Two, guide how I work as an educator, how I think about knowledge and knowledge generation and also guide how I live my life. McIntyre explains practice as ‘...any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that activity are realised...’ (McIntyre 1981, p.175). My emergent understanding of my embodied values as guiding my work practices has helped me to respond to the questions, ‘How can I understand my practice?’ I have learned in the course of my research and through the clarification of my values in that process, that my embodied and once unspoken and un-articulated values have informed my work practices. This has been a key insight for me in my research process and it has helped me to understand why I was compelled to work in the manner that involved the creation of collaborative projects and building connections with others outside the classroom and which had puzzled me at the outset of my research. I know now that I am committed to a holistic approach to education, which is ‘rooted in an epistemology of wholeness, context and interconnectedness’ (see Miller 1997, p.81) and my values around love and nurturing the wholeness of people are manifested in this approach. My embodied values are communicated then in my work practices, in my epistemology and in how I am with people. For me, they take the form of nurturing creative ways of knowing and the relationality of education to present-day life processes. These ontological and epistemological values are embodied in my practice, and the way I work is a tentative demonstration of how I am coming to understand and articulate my values. Again I am using the word ‘tentative’ carefully here; not because I have a fear of clarifying my

embodied values in my practice, but because I want to highlight how rarely my values are fully realised in my practice and yet how continuously I strive towards their realisation. My ontological and epistemological values also underpin my chosen methodological approach to my research and inspire me to create my own living educational theory as I am doing in this thesis.

As my values guide how I live and work, they are not fixed or finite. As I take part in life and as I work with my class, I aim to live in the direction of my values; to live my values more fully in my practice. Sometimes I find that I need to re-visit my values, how I express them and how I understand them because as they are given life through my engagement with others, I am not satisfied with them. Melrose (in Zuber-Skerrit 1996), talks about how a researcher's values may change by their learning during the course of their research. The following example describes such an incident in which my values were re-shaped: In 2001/2 my class of eleven year olds was partaking in a collaborative communications project called 'Learning Circles' which I will describe in greater detail in Chapter Four. The objective of the project was to share elements of our geography, culture and history with students from other schools throughout the world while exploring their history and culture through their submissions to the project. This programme utilised e-mail and postal mail and my students communicated with students from five other schools around the world and exchanged local stories, recipes, fables and histories as well as local artefacts. This project is accessible online at http://www.inver.org/ceantar/Learning_Circle



Fig. 3.1 Still from videotape of a conversation around *Learning Circles* project

As the project drew to a close, I was pleased with it and felt that the class had had a positive learning experience from it. I held a semi-formal evaluation through discussion with the class, which I videotaped as part of my data collecting process (see Fig. 3.1). The video recording of a section of the conversation around our 'Learning Circles' project can be viewed on the interactive version of this thesis on the CD-ROM that accompanies this thesis. I had correctly anticipated a favourable response from the class; the children did enjoy the dialogue and interaction with children from other countries. However, two of the children had some suggestions to make: one suggested that the communications would have been more pertinent to them had they had individual pen pals to whom they could write or e-mail. The other student suggested that we should have used a videoconference with some of the other classes so that we could hear and see our partners in the project. These were positive, practical suggestions which I will remember for my next experience with a 'Learning Circles' project.

This conversation is significant in that it demonstrates how at one level I appeared to be living in the direction of my ontological values around nurturing dialogical and inclusional ways of knowing and the relationality of education to present-day life processes. I could see this in the way the children had exchanged and received letters,

artefacts and reports on various aspects of our culture with the children from the other schools. But at a more important level, I had neglected to live in the direction of my values around experiencing the wholeness of the person as carefully as I could have, in the project. The error lay in the fact that my class communicated with other classes, not with other individual children. My class had no sense of individual people reading their work, only groups or classes. I am thankful to my two young students for being able to articulate their concerns to me because it highlighted for me the importance of recognising that the values I hold for myself can be of importance to others also. I had perceived my values around holistic way of being with others to pertain to how I related to others, in particular to my students; how I would always relate to them in the 'I-Thou' manner as described by Buber (1970) as I nurtured my awareness of their human-ness.

However, in this conversation, the students taught me that that their own 'I-Thou' relationships with others were equally important to them. They had missed out on the sense of 'I-Thou' in their communications with the other classes and were suggesting ways to overcome this by videoconferencing and by arranging pen pal or e-pal partnerships. I had to revisit my values around the recognition of the human-ness of people in terms of experiencing them in a holistic manner as a result of this conversation with my students. I had learned that it was not enough to live out my embodied values in my own relationships with my students, but that I also needed to create learning spaces to give my students opportunities to do likewise.

I believe that this example serves to explain the dynamic nature of my values, about how I express them in my work or how they help to form my living educational theory. I prefer, instead, to be confident in my uncertainty (McNiff 2002) and in my ability to interrogate my ontological values, to see if I am giving life to these embodied values in my everyday living and work. I perceive them as being ever-growing and changing; as being 'live' as I develop my living theory of education.

Much has been written on the theory-practice divide in education (see Schön 1995; Clandinin and Connelly 1995) which describes how practitioners appear to work at their

practice at one level while theorists develop theories about education and appear to engage in research at a more clinical, detached context, at some distance from the locus of the work. I believe that I am attempting to share the story of my learning journey in a narrative form as suggested by Clandinin and Connelly (1995), as I describe and explain the processes of how I have reached my current understanding. McNiff and Whitehead (2005b) perceive action research as a form of narrative inquiry and describe knowing as a holistic practice (McNiff 2002), where the boundaries between theory and practice merge as they interact with one another in a movement towards better education. I am drawn to this idea of theory as a form of practice and practice as a form of theory as they co-exist in a living dialectical relationship. As I make my claim to knowledge here in this thesis, I am aware that I am drawing my living theory from my practice and I see how my practice is the living expression of my theory. My practice gives rise to my theory and this theory, in turn, influences my practice, as both theory and practice interact in a mutually reciprocal manner.

(c) The importance of communicable standards of practice and judgement in my methodological approach to living educational theory

Whitehead (in McNiff *et al.* 2003, p.165) refers also to the importance of ‘communicable standards of practice and judgement’ above. As I create my living theory, it is important to demonstrate that I have produced evidence to test and support my claim to knowledge so that the theory can be validated and legitimated. I will outline in greater detail how I have worked towards explaining how I am transforming my ontological values into critical epistemological standards of judgement as I assess the validity of my work throughout this thesis and in particular in Chapter Six (see McNiff 2005b). I have collected data to support my claim to knowledge. As I find aspects of this data that is commensurate with the standards of practice that I have established from my value base, I have presented it as evidence. I have shared this evidence with other critical thinkers so as to have it validated in stringent terms and presented it to the wider public for legitimation purposes. While I will engage in more detail with these issues in Chapter Six

and Seven, I would like to focus on one aspect of Whitehead's ideas around 'communicable standards of practice and judgement' here.

Whitehead's use of the word 'communicable' is wisely chosen here. Unless I can communicate my living educational theory, unless I can communicate its standards of practice and judgement with clarity to others, then the theory itself is of little use to others or to myself. I have struggled, with difficulty, at each stage of my research to communicate my thinking in a manner that is adequately clear and I am aware that clarity of communication is key to good research reporting. Much of the data and evidence I have collected myself on my learning journey is of a fleeting nature and is frequently difficult to capture and to communicate. The following extract from my research journal of November 2003 highlights this dilemma:

I have come to know in an embodied way. I have watched the way I work with my class. I have watched the way they are with one another, with others and with me. I have read around the conceptual frameworks that are underpinning my work. I have listened to other practitioners talking. All of these have helped me come to know and yet this does not adequately describe the process. The explanation is too simple and too model-like. The truth is captured in series moments, in single moments and in long time spans. It is captured in the twinkle of an eye, or the defeated shrug of a shoulder. My coming to know is captured in the din of excited students, in the silence of dejection, the tear of frustration, the giggle of friendship, the exuberance of happiness, the frown of irritation and the plea for help. These moments flash through my mind like a film and I know that they have somehow interconnected with one another to inform my thinking on my work and caused me to come to know. That this provides others with an inadequate description is gnawing in my mind and I come to realise that this is Schön's swampy lowland in my living experience.

Research Journal, November 2003

Whitehead talks about such difficulties in his own work as he strives to create communicable living theory and standards of judgement to others (2003). He talks about the limitations of expressing the meanings of embodied values through words without

being able to demonstrate their meanings through their connections to lived experience. He explains how video-clips help him to communicate his understandings of inclusionality, educational conversations and life affirming energy, among other metaphors.

I agree with Whitehead and I believe that my journal extract above helps to clarify the difficulties I have around using 'words' only to teach, to learn and to share meanings. Eisner (1997) suggests that people should not be overly dependent on using text for communicating, that they should explore using different media to represent their thinking. These difficulties in communicating do not exist at the level of sharing living theory alone. For many, these difficulties exist in how people learn, how they teach, how people are expected to express their learning and are, perhaps, part of the Cartesian legacy, where mind and body are perceived as two separate entities (see Hocking *et al.* 2001). In our everyday living people do not leave the responsibility of communicating their human desires and values to words and text alone. They use gestures, body language, physical contact and bodily kinaesthetic knowing, akin to the idea of personal knowledge as outlined by Polanyi (1958). It is considered natural for children to express themselves and their learning in non-verbal ways; they are allowed to throw tantrums, to laugh, to cry or to dance with joy. As adults we are expected to communicate with more restraint. I believe that as I consider learning and living theory to be a fluid, developmental and creative process, then the means with which people can learn and express their learning should also be fluid and creative also. Lomax and Parker (1995, p.302) talk about how educational forms of representation should be 'pluralistic, rather than monolithic, and diverse, rather than constrained, so that they can celebrate the unique, personal and subjective strengths of individual action research and help practitioners display their own personal signatures'. Drama, visual arts, music and video can help self expression and communication, but because of their nature are tied by time and place to a specific performance and are limited to a live audience. Multimedia presentations (and especially multimedia presentations on the web, so that they are freely accessible to many) can enhance how people learn and how they share their learning (Mayer 2001). Such presentations can include text, images, video and film, music, sound,

clips of drama and performance; they include most aspects of what might be needed to narrate a story or to communicate something, and are accessible to many in the western world. Because I believe that technology can enhance learning (see Chapter Five) and the communication of what has been learnt, and the communicable nature of living theory (Whitehead 2003), I am presenting my thesis in a digital format as well as the traditional text based version. Much of the evidence that I am presenting to support my theory, is already in the form of online web pages, video and sound clips. The digital format may not capture the joy, the angst or the excitement that constitutes a regular day in a classroom, but the video-clips, sound files and web pages that my class and myself have collected over the past number of years can help to give live examples of our work and how we work, to support my emergent living educational theory. The following example may help to explicate these ideas.



Fig. 3.2 Screenshot from video as we receive e-mail from e-pals in the United Kingdom

Fig. (3.2) is a snapshot of a video taken when this class was involved in an East/West project with a school near Liverpool, to which I referred in Chapter Two and will discuss in greater detail in forthcoming chapters. One aspect of the project was an e-pal communications programme that spanned two years. This video clip forms part of the evidence that I am presenting to support my claim to knowledge in Chapter Six. In the digital version of this thesis, the reader will be able to click their computer mouse here and see the video file above. For those who are reading the text version of this thesis, they have to suffice with my written descriptions and the photograph above.

This video clip shows the class responding in a spontaneous manner to the email messages they have received from their e-pals in the UK. It depicts a noisy, boisterous group of children reading and responding to their emails. The video clip helps to capture the sense of excitement and joy that the class are expressing in response to their emails. It captures the sense of friendship the class have established with the partners in the UK. It also shows the ease with which the class can talk with one another and with me. This video clip is kernel to the evidence that I am producing in Chapter Six to support my claim that I am developing ways of working that engage with the human-ness of people in a holistic way. As I submit this clip as evidence to support my claim to knowledge in Chapter Six, I am hopeful that it will assist people in assessing the validity of my claim in a way that words alone may not. In Chapter Six I am going to talk about this class's spontaneous response to their e-mail messages, its portrayal on the video-clips and the different layers of learning that I perceive in the video. I am going to explain how I believe the video clip captures the essence of how I engage with the wholeness and human-ness of my class. I am also going to draw on the writing of Fromm (1957) as he describes a commitment to productive work and loving relationships as being kernel to the quality of life people lead. I will explain how having fun at school can be a form of productive work and loving relationships and such metaphors are part of a holistic realisation of education. I believe that watching this video clip will enhance the communicable nature of the standards of practice and judgement as I produce evidence to support my claim to have generated a living educational theory. In chapters Five, Six and Seven, much of the validated evidence that I will produce there, will be in the form of video, sound and web pages as I make my claim to knowledge. I believe that my use of video, sound recordings, multimedia and web pages is strengthening my methodology, not only as a data collection process but is also helping the clarity of how I am communicating my enquiry and the rigour of my methodology. Eisner's (1997) thinking is helpful here as he talks about 'the potential of other forms of representation for illuminating the educational worlds we wish to understand..' so that '...our capacity to wonder is stimulated by the possibilities that new forms of representation suggest' (Eisner 1997, pp.4-8).

(d) Asking ‘How do I improve what I am doing here?’ as I develop a living form of methodology

In this final segment drawn from Whitehead’s quotation above, I am mindful of how Whitehead (in McNiff *et al.* 2003, p.165) refers to how I can live my values more fully in my practice as I ask ‘How do I improve what I am doing here?’ I interpreted the question as ‘How can I best understand my practice?’ because that was what emerged as being pertinent for me as I planned my research approach (see ‘Evolving research questions: evolving epistemologies’ below). I am drawn to questions like these because they have emerged from an epistemology that is commensurate with my own. Much of the current thinking on educational epistemologies promotes the commodification of education (see Apple 2004, Ball 2004, Brown 2002, and Lyotard 1986). The commodification of education refers to the changing perception of education as a commercial product and students as consumers. This perception of education is substantially different to mine. Ball (2004, p.5) suggests that such commodification might imply that pedagogic relationships and values become marginalized and that students become active consumers but passive learners. In an atmosphere that embraces the commodification of education, questions such as ‘How do I improve my practice?’ are crucial to the ongoing process of education because they are of a different epistemological view, they position ontological values as being kernel to learning and they embed pedagogy in the relationships that we humans create for ourselves. Such questions perceive the knowledge base as ‘fluid, developmental, generative and transformational; [where] all people are potential knowers’ and it perceives education as a ‘creative process which is based in caring relationships’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2002, p. 31). As I reflect on these issues as outlined by McNiff and Whitehead (2002), I find that they are closely aligned to my own embodied values. I experience them as being relational, life-affirming and exciting. As I develop a living theory methodology for my research, I delight in the openness and the possibility for creativity that this approach gives me. I experience a sense of at-oneness with educational living theory as a research approach and as a way of life. Hocking *et al.* (2001, p.xxix) seem to capture this well : ‘Our journeys into new spaces helped us to reconnect with a world that is passionate, animate and energizing...we yearned for a

spirit of aliveness in education that would echo our connections with the natural world - one full of vibrant, buzzing activity and interaction.'

Questions of the form 'How do I improve my practice?' also assume that there is a purpose to theorising one's practice. For me, the purpose lies not only in the clarification of my understanding of my work as I develop a living educational theory but also in my vision around a better society. I perceive that a better society has to do with human relationships, where people have respect for one another, where education is seen as a pathway towards a good social order and by contributing to the education of social formations as outlined by McNiff and Whitehead (2005a). I hope that my research will influence policy makers and practising teachers to see curriculum as something live and dynamic, to see education as a process and to see learning taking place in environments where dialogue, care and connectedness with others abound.

(3.6) Evolving research questions: evolving epistemologies

As my research evolved, so too did my research question. McNiff (see McNiff and Whitehead 2002) sees the systematic action research cycle of observation, description, planning, acting, reflecting, evaluating and modifying not as a linear, sequential plan (see Fig. 3.3). Instead she sees the action research process of living theory as a 'spontaneous, self-creating system of self-enquiry' (McNiff and Whitehead 2002, p.56) wherein generative transformational evolutionary processes influence and change the original research question such that new, different and exciting channels of enquiry are revealed in the process of the research.

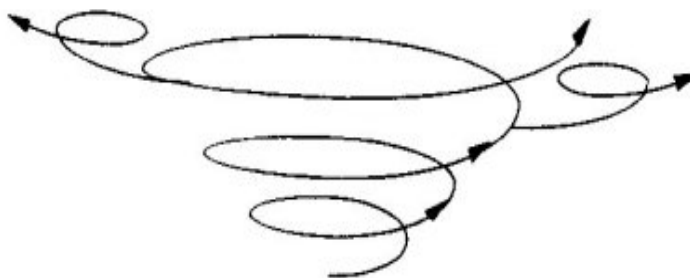


Fig. 3.3 A generative transformational evolutionary process (McNiff *et al.*, 2003a)

As I interrogated my research question, I experienced McNiff's generative transformational processes in my thinking and learning as one question gave rise to another related question, thus opening a whole new vista of learning for myself. My initial research question was about investigating my work in the field of Internet based Collaborative Projects (ICPs). ICPs are about the integration of projects into the curriculum, which allow teachers and pupils the opportunity to exchange ideas, data and multimedia presentations globally on a given theme, using internet communication tools. The investigation that I had envisaged that I would undertake was as a progression from my masters programme (see Glenn 2000, 2005).

The question gradually re-emerged from my learning process as, 'Why am I working in this way?' as outlined in Chapters One and Two. The focus of the research was changing as my epistemology was changing; I was no longer examining aspects of technology in my work, I was thinking critically about why I worked in the way I did, why I was integrating technology into my work practices, what compelled me to do this and how I could best understand it. My epistemology of practice was emerging in the form of my ideas around what I know and my ideas of knowledge acquisition and this in turn was informing my emergent theory of practice. I was stepping out from being in spectator mode and moving into 'living I' mode (see Whitehead 1989). This newfound ability to think critically was part of what I perceive to be the first stage of my own educational growth as I developed my living approach to my research.

As I asked myself the question 'Why am I working in this way?', the question began to re-emerge in a new form. I placed the question 'Why am I working in this way?' against

the background of my concerns around the dissonance I was experiencing between the external world of filling in workbooks and completing textbooks, and my own internal values around love and acknowledging the wholeness of the person. As I began to perceive an epistemological conflict between my thinking around what knowledge is and how it can be acquired or generated and the technical rational norms of the education system of which I was a part, my question gradually changed into a different form such that I now began to ask ‘How do I understand my practice?’ I perceive that asking ‘How do I understand my practice?’ to be a more penetrating question than ‘Why am I working in this way?’ because it recognises the existence of my ontological values and acknowledges their potential influence in my own educational growth. It marks a new spiral in my own learning process, a new spiral in McNiff and Whitehead’s (2002) generative transformational evolutionary processes.

As my research process continued, and as the structure of my research methodology became more ordered, my question was reshaped again. As I engaged with ideas around how I could interpret the data and generate evidence in relation to the living critical standards of judgement around my claim to knowledge (Whitehead 2005a), I began to focus on ‘How can I explain my educational influence in learning in terms of my claim to knowledge?’ My explorations around this question will be outlined in greater detail in the course of this thesis and especially in Chapter Seven.

The final metamorphosis of my research question will be dealt with in the final sections of this thesis as I ask ‘What was the significance of this learning journey?’ where I outline the reasons why the learning was of value and I explain how I perceive it to be of use for the education of social formations (Whitehead 2004) and how it has the generative transformational potential (McNiff and Whitehead 2002; McNiff *et al.* 2003) for the creation of a good and just society. The question also pre-supposes the generation of new questions, ones which will lead on to more critical engagement and research; in effect the continuation of a living theory approach to life where I begin yet another new action research spiral by asking ‘How can I improve my practice here?’

(3.7) The research methods of my living educational theory

The methodology that I employed for this research was a self-study approach to action research. This methodology formed the frame around which I established my research. Whitehead and McNiff (2006) say:

We value methodology for the order and discipline that it brings to the processes of enquiry, and to the processes of communicating those enquiries as oral, written and visual narratives.

(Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p 88)

As I began my learning journey, I drew up a research design, which incorporated my best thinking at that time around how I could best investigate my practice. As I had chosen a living theory approach to explain my learning journey, my ideas, the theory that was emerging and my own epistemology, changed and were re-shaped in the ongoing emergent process that frequently constitutes learning. After many re-drafts and much re-thinking, I decided to use a modified form of Whitehead's (1989) model to structure my research process and its writing up:

What is my concern?

Why am I concerned?

How do I gather evidence to show reasons for my concerns?

What do I do about the situation?

How will I check whether any conclusions I come to are reasonably fair and accurate?

How do I evaluate the validity of my account of learning?

How do I modify my practice in light of my evaluation?

How do I explain the significance of my work?

(McNiff and Whitehead 2005b, p.3)

These are the questions that informed my learning and formed the framework for this thesis.

Because I believe that there are many ways of coming to know, and that people come to know in dialogical and holistic as well as propositional ways, I have found that this has influenced my own learning. I believe that people can learn using different forms of

intelligences (Gardner 1993) and can create their own knowledge through their relationality with other people, with their environment and the wider cosmos (Miller 1996), as well as using traditional propositional approaches, and I apply these beliefs to myself. I have drawn my methodology from such beliefs.

The following section will detail my research methods, the participants in the research, where the research took place, ethical issues and data gathering processes. I am drawing here on the definition of Cohen *et al.* (2000) as they explain research methods as the range of approaches used to gather data.

The practicalities of engaging in living educational theory

In engaging in a living educational theory approach to research, the chief participant in this research was myself. I was investigating my own practice. The living 'I' according to McNiff *et al.* (2003, p.20) shows how people can take responsibility for 'improving and sustaining themselves and the world they are in'. As I was investigating my practice, the research involved my class of children who were participants in this research. It also involved the children's parents and some members of the wider community. I also convened a validation group to offer critical feedback on my findings. The validation group consisted of one colleague who is a principal from another school and my research colleagues and tutor, who formed our study group in the university (see Chapters One and Six).

The context of my research is a remote four-teacher primary school on the west coast of Ireland. My involvement with online collaborative projects had been motivated by a desire to build connections between my classroom and the world outside. In my previous research I had found the use of the internet to create communications projects with other classes and to structure web based projects went some way to alleviate some aspects of educational disadvantage and was educationally beneficial (Glenn 2000 and 2005). This current phase of my research is part of a developmental programme in which I was initially investigating the use of online projects in school contexts but then began to focus on issues pertaining to my own learning and understanding and critical thinking.

I obtained permission from my Board of Management and my school principal before embarking on my research. They were aware that I was undertaking research and collecting material from the children and their parents. I also sought and obtained permission from the children themselves and their parents for their involvement in the research. I got permission for the children to access the internet in properly supervised conditions and for their work and group photographs and video clips to be published on the internet. (Samples of permission letters are available at Appendix D).

I made it clear to all the persons involved that I would anonymise the names of all the participants in the writing of this thesis, and that at no time would I divulge the name of our school or its locality. I also reassured my participants that they could withdraw at any stage from the research. (A copy of my ethics statement is available at Appendix E).

I gathered data from my own observations, from my research journal, from the comments of my class, informal interviews with parents, the work my class produced in the form of projects or essays or communications to me, the comments of observers, video footage of the class working together and interviews with my participants. I analysed this data in conjunction with the living standards of judgement I identified as manifesting my ontological, epistemological and pedagogical values in my practice. This analysis and the identification of items of data as evidence will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Six. These data gradually evolved into evidence, under my own systematic and rigorous scrutiny and that of my validation group. The validation process was ongoing and of extreme ethical importance. It has supported my claim to professional judgement in the process of the realisation of my values. I believe that I am demonstrating methodological rigour, as suggested by Winter (1996), by taking such care around these aspects of my research.

In conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined why I have chosen an action research approach to my research. I have explained how I became interested in action research even though my explicit understanding of my epistemology at that time was of a technicist nature. I have outlined my epistemological growth and explained why traditional quantitative and qualitative methodologies did not address my research requirements adequately. This chapter has offered explanations of my understanding of living theory and has outlined how my research questions have evolved as my research progressed. I concluded by describing the methods I employed while engaging in my research.

As outlined in greater detail in Chapter Two, I have learned in the course of my research that my ontological values inform how I work. I value love and embedded in my understanding of love is the recognition of the human-ness of people in a holistic way (see Miller 1996). This new learning and the uncovering of my ontological values has been one of the key findings of my research. I have also learned that many aspects of action research are commensurate with my own ontological values and commitments and have now become part of who I am. My research is about the creation of my living educational theory as I offer descriptions and explanations of my practice and my understanding of it. I ask questions that will bring me to a position where my practice is more commensurate with my values, and to where I can begin a new spiral of living theory generation. I am developing my living educational theory in the form of a new epistemology of practice that is grounded in dialogical and inclusional ways of knowing. Some call this a spirituality of education (see hooks 2003, Palmer 1993, Miller 1996) and it is this commitment to spirituality and holism that shapes the form of research I have undertaken as I engage with questions like ‘How can I understand my practice?’. Such spirituality does ‘not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge’ (Palmer, 1993, pxi).

In Chapter Four, I will outline the ‘path’ I walked as I continued on my learning journey. I will demonstrate with integrity the steps I undertook as I engaged with the question ‘How do I understand my practice?’ and as I developed my emergent living educational theory and supported it with descriptions and explanations of my practice.

