

Chapter Two: Why was I concerned? Examining my understanding of my practice as I clarified my ontological values

As I continued on my learning journey, I attempted to develop an understanding of my practice. I examined why I was concerned while gaining clarity around my ontological and epistemological values. I engaged in critical questioning of the form ‘What are my concerns?’ and ‘Why am I concerned?’ as outlined by McNiff and Whitehead (2005), as I struggled to develop my emergent living educational theory.

This chapter outlines how I began to gain insight into my work practices and into why I was concerned. As outlined in Chapter One, I was concerned about my inability to offer explanations for my work practices that included internet based collaborative projects, and my inability to explicate why I worked in the way I chose to work. It describes my emergent understanding of the dissonance I experienced between the external world of filling in workbooks and completing textbooks (Riel 1999), my concern with my awaking realisation of the forms of injustice that were inherent in the education system in which I was involved (Lynch 1999) and my new insights into how my embodied values around love and the nurturing of holistic approaches to education (Miller 2000a). I now realise that this sense of dissonance was what Whitehead (1989) describes as ‘experiencing oneself as a living contradiction’ where my embodied ontological values were being denied in my practice. It was a place of conflict between what I wanted for myself and my students and the reality of the education system in which I was working.

I will also describe in this chapter, how my ontological values underwent a process of clarification as I engaged with my research process (Whitehead 2005a) and as I reflected on my practice as being the living manifestation of my values. I will explain how the clarification of my ontological values in the process of this research allowed me to reach an understanding not only of why I was concerned but also of the underpinning motivation around developing projects for my classes that nurtured connectedness with others and with the environment. I learned that my desire to include technology in

teaching and learning and to develop collaborative projects with others was drawn from my ontological values around love (hooks 2003) and interconnectedness (Capra 1997). This learning has been one of the key insights in my research process. I have now learned that my practice was the articulation of my values. I have learned how my values can then transform into my educational practices with potential for influencing the education of the social formations of teachers and policy makers (see Chapter Seven for more detail about contributing to new practices and theory and to the education of social formations and see Whitehead and McNiff 2006). I will outline in this chapter how my embodied values came to be clarified in this way.

I also outline how I learned that my concerns were also of an epistemological nature and that these concerns were embedded in issues such as ‘What is knowledge?’ and ‘Whose knowledge counts?’ and ‘Who decides?’ I offer explanations around how my emergent epistemology of practice has significance for discourses pertaining to curriculum. To conclude I demonstrate how my concerns have given rise to committed informed action on my part in the form of praxis.

This chapter is organised in the following manner:

Section 1: Why was I concerned?

Section 2: Developing a living theory as my ontological values become clarified in my practice

Section 3: Exploring curriculum as an area of concern as I develop an understanding of my practice

(2.1) Section 1: Why was I concerned?

I came to realise that my concerns were mostly of an epistemological nature, as my ontological values became clearer in the process of my research. Because I had learned to become more critically aware (see Chapter 1), I had come to realise that I was concerned about the perceptions that exist around what knowledge is, how knowledge is transmitted

in school and who decides on such matters (Brown 2002). I could now see that I was concerned for two closely related and interdependent reasons. The first reason for my concern lay with my realisation that while technical rational approaches to learning in the form of emphasising linguistic and logico-mathematical intelligences (Gardner 1993, for example) address the needs of some students, they close down the learning process for many others (see Lynch 1999), which I perceive as a form of injustice. I was concerned secondly, because technical rational epistemologies continue to dominate many discourses in Irish education (see the OECD 1991 review of Irish education) and there appears to be little interest in critiquing or questioning that domination (Conway 2002).

While these may appear to be two distinct concerns, they are connected at their epistemological root as they both pertain to issues around epistemological conflict; around the understanding of knowledge, how knowledge is generated and who decides such issues. I will discuss both reasons for my concerns in the next section of this chapter, but for now, I would like to offer two examples which I have drawn from my practice which go some way towards outlining why I am concerned.

Examples which help to explain the reasons for my concerns

As outlined previously, at the outset of my research, I believed at one level, that technical rational ways of knowing and didactic methodologies (Brown 2002) were the correct and only way of learning. I perceived that I had done ‘a good week’s work’ if a certain number of pages of the class workbooks were completed. Yet, aspects of my work practices (as outlined in Chapter One) belied this belief and came from a different approach to learning and knowledge. For example, I had begun to use technology to create collaborative learning projects for my classes and this new aspect of my work was incongruous with the didactic methodologies I thought I espoused. This apparent conflict, at the outset of my research, between what I thought I believed and what I actually did in my classroom, served to highlight the concerns I developed. The following anecdotes from my classroom help to elucidate my concerns:

Liam, one of my students, was an avid reader; books on soccer and history particularly caught his interest. However, he had difficulties reading aloud, his hand writing was

difficult to decipher and his spellings were weak. Diagnostic tests gave no indication of specific learning difficulties and the educational psychologist suggested working on phonic attack and said he would probably never speak/read in public. The use of assistive software was also suggested.

Having followed a structured phonics programme and having begun to use assistive software, Liam himself suggested using the spell-checker facility on the regular word-processing software the whole class used. Within weeks, the quality of his writing was equal to that of his peers. When printed, there were few spelling errors, and the text was neat and legible because it was generated on a computer. Furthermore, following some practice sessions in class, Liam began to volunteer to read in class gaining confidence daily and culminating in his making the welcome speech for the bishop at his Confirmation.

Another student in another class was Tim, who was a twelve year old who hated Maths. He used to flick his textbook open with disdain, as though this subject was an annoying inconvenience in his life. He could see no connection between Maths and his life at any level. Tim was an excellent artist and his world revolved around drawing, painting, colour and form. One day, I introduced the class to Logo, a child friendly programming language aimed towards children. The software can be programmed to many things, but in this case, I wanted the class to use the programme for drawing. As the lesson progressed, I suggested that those who felt that they were gaining confidence with the software, would attempt to make a programme to draw a set of books on a shelf such in Fig. 2.1.

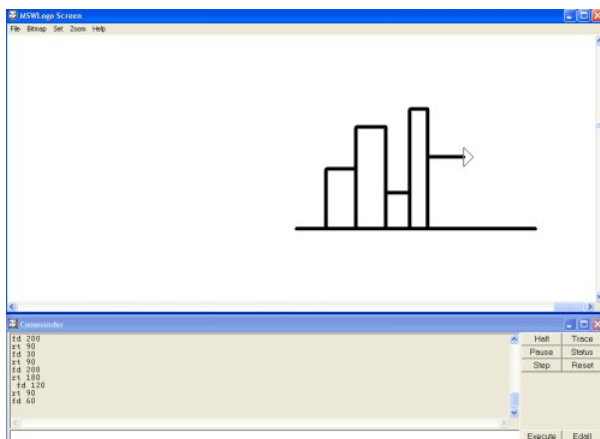


Fig. 2.1: A screen shot of a drawing made using Logo

The programmer has to instruct the pen to draw the line a particular length, to turn a ninety degree angle in a particular direction, to draw a line another length and so on until the drawing has been made. This is basically a Maths exercise. Tim, who hated Maths with such vengeance, was the first student in the class to create a successful drawing of a set of books on a bookshelf. At the time, I was surprised, because this was an exercise that called on numerous Maths skills and yet Tim had succeeded with speed and confidence. As I reflected on it, I realised that the software had offered a different approach to Maths. It had called for the approach of the artist; the creator and the thinker (see Eisner 1997). This had appealed to Tim so much that he did not ‘see’ the existence of Maths in his creativity.

As I reflected on this incident, I could see the similarity between it and Liam’s experience above. In both cases, at the practical level of classroom teaching, technology had provided both boys with an alternative form of expression and a different way of coming to know (Bentley 1998). Clearly, in both cases, the technology had improved their learning experiences. They had both circumvented their difficulties and engaged in their learning in a way that was positive for them. Yet, in both cases, the freedom afforded to them was fleeting and short-lived because the forms of learning that were meaningful for them are unacceptable in the wider system of education that would include handwritten examinations and grades. As Heppell (2001, p. xvii) observes, ‘...the possession of a computer in the examination room is still regarded as cheating’.

As I began to theorise these and similar practices, I began to realise that the tension that exists between how people can come to know and how the education system demands that they come to know, is kernel to why I was concerned. Reflecting on these examples, I can now see how I began initially, in an intuitive manner, to exercise what I now know

to be my innate values around loving and caring relationships and the nurturing of meaningful ways of coming to know, without stopping to theorise or to question why I was stepping outside the traditional transmission models of teaching (Skinner 1978). I will discuss the process of the clarification of my values in the next part of this chapter. Values according to Whitehead (2005a) are to be understood as ‘embodied and ontological, in the sense that they are living energies of action that give meaning and purpose to life’ (2005a, p.18). I was, as Whitehead says (1989), experiencing myself as a living contradiction. I now see how the values around love and nurturing the wholeness of people that underpin how I live my life were being denied in my practice. Looking at the two examples from my class here, I see how pausing to think critically, to create an action plan to improve the situation and to act accordingly proved to be worthwhile. At the time, I was working intuitively because I had not reached a stage of understanding that I was able to articulate my learning in terms of my ontological values. The recognition of the importance of my embodied values as I developed my living educational theory had yet to be uncovered but despite this, my tacit values were being expressed in my practice.

In Liam’s case, critical reflection about the situation and then shifting the learning emphasis from the traditional methods that have been passed on and accepted for decades (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986), to experimenting with different approaches (Bentley 1998) was a resounding success. In both cases, doing something different from traditional technicist approaches was of importance in the learning environment. In the UK, the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (1999, p.89, cited in Craft *et al.* 2001) defines ‘teachers using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting, exciting and effective’ as a form of creative teaching. I believe I was drawing on my own creativity as I tried to improve the learning processes for my students. I will discuss the links that exist between creativity, spirituality in education and holistic approaches to learning (Craft *et al.* 2001; Miller 1996; Palmer 1993) in greater detail in Chapter Four. I am not suggesting that the use of technology always helps teachers and learners circumvent difficulties; I am suggesting that there are occasions when technology can be helpful and liberating. I will speak about this in more detail

throughout this thesis and in particular in Chapter Five. More importantly, I learned that taking time to critique my practice and to plan different approaches and to experiment with them, can create good learning experiences for my students. These ideas are now kernel to my understanding of action research and developing a living educational theory. They are also kernel to the notion of praxis as outlined by Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.34) as ‘thought and action (or theory and practice) are dialectically related [and]...mutually constitutive’.

These examples above, drawn from my practice, help to illuminate how I began to develop an understanding of my practice. I will develop these ideas as I discuss my concerns now under the headings of:

- (a) the injustice of closing down learning processes for many and
- (b) the unquestioning acceptance of the dominance of technicist approaches to education in current educational discourses.

(a) The injustice of closing down learning processes

The idea of people, children in particular, being discriminated against, being victims of social injustice because their learning strengths are not adequately addressed in our system of education is, in my understanding, a form of social injustice. Griffiths explains the term ‘social justice’ in terms of, ‘the good of the community which respects - depends on - the good of the individuals within it, and the various sectors of society to which they belong’ (Griffiths 2001, p.25). She reminds us that in the 1950s and 1960s the term ‘social justice’ referred to issues of social class, while in the 1970s and 1980s the term included gender and race as areas of discrimination and exclusion. These continue to be the issues that inform much of the dominant theories of social justice (Griffiths 2001). Zappone (2002) suggests that equality is generally understood ‘primarily as equality of access to, participation in and benefit from education’. She cites Dunne’s (2002) ideas around the understanding of fairness in determining people’s chances of getting a job as

producing ‘not a more equal society but rather the “rise of meritocracy”’ (Zappone, 2002, p.17). She maintains that

Equality of opportunity is a concept that supports the notion that $IQ + effort = reward$, hereby taking our eyes off the structures and systems that create and maintain the inequalities across social groups.

(Zappone 2002, p.17)

Zappone’s (2002) main argument is that ‘there is a relationship between patterns of inequality in education (for example; literacy inequality) and income inequality’ and that such educational disadvantage should be tackled. Her focus is on educational disadvantage in terms of how people from poorer backgrounds are discriminated against in normative education systems. However, her underpinning argument around $IQ + effort = reward$ is striking because it pinpoints the thinking that IQ alone is the key ingredient for learning.

I perceive that there is yet another issue that can easily be included in an understanding of the various fields of injustice: this is the lack of recognition given by the education system to children’s various learning strengths and weaknesses. I believe the neglect of the learning needs and strengths of students, whose intelligences do not fall into a logical/linguistic category, is a serious and generally unacknowledged form of injustice.

The writings of Gardner (1993) and Goleman (1996) illustrate how traditional didactic methods of teaching and learning do not address the learning needs of many. Gardner (1993, p.8) explains how Western society has put linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences to the forefront of people’s thinking, ‘figuratively on a pedestal’. He suggests that much of our testing is based on the high value that society places on verbal and mathematical skills:

If you do well in language and logic, you should do well in IQ tests and SATs, and you may well get into a prestigious college, but whether you do well once you leave is probably going to depend as much on the extent to which you possess and use the other intelligences...

(Gardner 1993, p.8)

While Gardner is critical of a system of education that is overly technical rational in its approaches, he talks instead of the necessity of ‘individual-centred’ education (1993, p.71) because ‘individuals have quite different minds...and we should instead try to ensure that everyone receives an education that maximised his or own intellectual potential’. I perceive that the examples from my own practice, cited above, demonstrate how I adjusted the learning environment so that individual students might learn with greater ease. Had I persisted in teaching in a manner that did not address the learning needs of the students, that had put language and logic on a pedestal, then the pathways towards learning could have been closed down for them, which, to my understanding, is unfair and unjust. As McCarthy (1980) suggests, traditional didactic methodologies do not address the needs of many students and she asks, ‘If 70% of our students learn most comfortably in ways not generally attended to in our schools, then how should we proceed?’ (cited in Ginnis 2002, p.38). Issues such as these began to inform my understandings around why I was, and still continue to be concerned, about my own educational practices specifically and some other education practices in general.

Like Darder (2002), I understand the transmission of standardised packages of knowledge with much emphasis on the memorisation of descriptive content to be yet another form of injustice as it can close down the learning process for many. The Irish curriculum, according to Lynch (1999), favours students whose learning strengths lie in linguistic and mathematical areas. As a result, students whose learning strengths lie in a different sphere (visual spatial or bodily kinaesthetic, for example: see Gardner 1993) are seriously disadvantaged (Lynch 1999, p.274). I frequently encounter students who have problems with memorisation, whose test scores are low but whose ability to learn, to create or to design knows few bounds. These are the students whom the education system neglects to educate adequately. Interpretations of education that diminish the wholeness of the individual (see Miller 1996) and that see learning as the delivery of discrete packages of information (Thorndike, cited in Belkin and Gray 1977) give me concern and directly contradict my embodied values around love and holistic approaches to education, which I will explore in the following section. This is not what I perceive education to be about or what Freire visualised when he spoke about knowledge as a process, as something that

should be engaged in through dialogue (Freire and Faundez 1989) or developing education as the practice of freedom as opposed to the practice of domination (Freire 1970).

I asked myself how I, as an educator, could persist in sustaining a system that denies or diminishes the learning processes of many of its students. I queried why educators continue to see teaching as a transmission process, as suggested by the report on the evaluation of the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005) when frequently, dialogical or creative processes can be equally, if not even more meaningful for students. These questions form the basis for why I was concerned and are drawn from my ontological values around love and caring relationships which I will outline below.

Perpetuating practices that are a form of injustice is reprehensible in a classroom (O'Hanlon 2003, Lynch 1999 and Zappone 2002) where the victims of the injustice are children, who are often among the most vulnerable in our society. I agree with O'Hanlon (2003) as she explains that in all contemporary societies, there are people who struggle to gain equality of opportunity and social justice in the education system and that such education systems can be key in 'perpetuating or curtailing educational disadvantages' (2003, p.8). The notion that the education system has the power to perpetuate or curtail forms of injustice and that I, as an educator, may have the power to perpetuate or curtail forms of injustice, is an important realisation for me. Students like Tim and Liam above, whose learning strengths were not of a linguistic, logical nature can frequently be perceived as failures, as they score poorly in standardised tests and in similar examinations that are based on technical rationality (see Glenn 2005b). My continuing to work with students like Tim and Liam using traditional didactic methodologies, where the students were the 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled with knowledge (Locke 1690), could have resulted in their perceiving themselves as failures. Morgan (2002) suggests that how students perceive themselves at school can contribute to whether they begin to lead a life in crime as there appears to be a direct link between perceived failure at school and anti-social behaviour. Therefore it is imperative that I, and educators like me, develop an awareness of the forms of injustice that are inherent in the education system

(Lynch 1999) and that influence children negatively as they grow up. I have come to realise that the power that I have as a teacher must be used wisely.

Freire equates the transfer of knowledge methodology with sustaining 'elite authority' (Shor and Freire 1987, p.76) which is consistent with 'control from above' which acknowledges the nature of power-constituted relationships that can exist in educational settings. Such links between power (in the form of dominance) and control can be seen in many teacher/student interactions (for example, where students must ask the teacher for permission to go to the bathroom) or in teacher/principal interactions (where the principal insists that the teacher supervise a class for a colleague during a period allocated for class preparation, for example). Developing an awareness of such 'elite authority' was part of my own awakening and growth in learning. However, as I developed an awareness of these hegemonies, I need not presuppose that they must continue to exist. Bearing Shor and Freire's (1987) ideas around control and power in mind, I believe O'Hanlon's insights are helpful as she pinpoints that the education system, and those who are part of that system, have a choice. As a teacher, I can choose to curtail or perpetuate forms of injustice in the education system. As I develop praxis around my work, I am now aware that my work involves choices between closing down learning processes for people or opening up pathways and opportunities for learning. Lynch's writing is helpful here:

The cultural hegemonies in education are not only class hegemonies as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) suggested, there are also gender and racial hegemonies....The gendered (and indeed classist, racist, and ethnocentric) nature of knowledge is ...evident in what is omitted from schooling in its entirety, in the forms of knowledge and understanding that are left outside of formal schooling.

(Lynch 1999, p.279)

While Lynch is talking here about the marginalisation of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences (Gardner 1993) as a feminist issue, I believe she has gone some way in extending Griffiths' (2001) understanding of social justice (see above). Lynch (1999) has acknowledged that in the Irish education system forms of knowledge are limited and oriented toward the linguistic and mathematical and that this is a form of injustice because it places many students at a disadvantage. I would suggest then, following on

Griffiths (2001) and Lynch (1999), that the cultural hegemonies in education should include 'intelligence hegemonies' because of the marginalised nature of approaches to learning that are not of a linguistic or mathematical nature (Gardner 1993) and the lack of recognition given to holistic and creative approaches to learning.

Russell (1971) talks about how paradoxical it is that education has become an obstacle to freedom of thought and intelligence instead of providing learners with an emergent and creative process of coming to know and developing one's potential. He suggests that a theory of education should be 'to provide opportunities of growth and to remove hampering influences' (1971, p.18). I am drawn to Russell's ideas as I see the paradox reflected in my own thinking. On one hand I see how education in general, and an over-dependence on technical rational approaches to learning in particular, can be an obstacle for freedom as it can close down the learning process for many, as seen in Liam and Tim's stories above. Yet, I also see education as part of our growth as human beings; our development and our process of growing towards our potential are embedded in my understanding of education. I have learned that engaging in technical approaches in education solely can act as obstacles to freedom and thought, as they tend to discount the uniqueness of students, advocating instead the perception of learners as 'empty vessels' (Locke, cited in Mathis *et al.* 1970, p194) and one-size-fits-all approaches of didactic models of teaching (see Gardner 1993). Such approaches to teaching and learning can be unjust and are at odds with my embodied ontological values around love and connectedness in education. Brown (2002, p.28) explains how the increasing obsession western culture has with measurability and standardisation in education 'limit[s] rather than extend[s] the scope for fruitful educational experiments'. Instead I search for ways of teaching and learning that embrace Russell's (1971) ideas around the provision of emergent and creative processes of coming to know and developing one's potential.

I like Palmer's understanding of education as he says:

Education at its best - this profound human transaction called teaching and learning - is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, and transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life.

(Palmer 1998, p.26)

Palmer's understanding of education embraces education as a holistic and spiritual process. This thinking is commensurate with my own as I develop my theory of practice but I perceive it to be incommensurate with the prevailing system of education in Ireland.

(b) The dominance of technicist approaches to education in educational discourses

Conway (2002) outlines the continuing dominance of 'technical and transmission oriented discourse' in relation to pedagogy in Irish education. He questions, rightly in my opinion, the accepted assumptions that underpin various pedagogical practices. He highlights how, for the past decade in Ireland, there has been little debate or reflection on whose knowledge was considered relevant and how or why it was taught. Such issues concern me also because, as outlined above, I have now come to perceive the sole use of traditional didactic methodologies as closing down learning for people and as a form of injustice, as opposed to the opening up of pathways of learning that educational experiences should provide. I now see that my own unquestioning complacency, as outlined in Chapter One, can be located within the larger picture of generations, perhaps, of teachers who do what they do because that is what is expected of them (see Carr and Kemmis 1986 and Murphy 2004).

I am also concerned because I believe, that as an educator I should always be questioning and searching; looking for better ways of living and being and creating opportunities for a good social order to develop and thrive. I perceive that I was part of an unquestioning 'herd', which Russell (1971, p.52) describes as existing when groups of human beings who are in close proximity develop a certain 'instinctive uniformity of behaviour'. I was part of the 'herd' who chose not to engage in critique or who were unable to critique, as outlined in Chapter One. Only when I began seriously to investigate my practice and to think critically around 'Why am I working in the way I do?', did I begin to understand why I was concerned with my work and the system in which I work. The importance of critique and the questioning of accepted norms has become a key issue in my research and in my everyday work as a teacher. It is interesting to note that Conway's claim about

the lack of debate in educational discourse in Ireland around the domination of technical rational approaches to education (see Conway 2002) is happening despite the phased introduction of the Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 1999) since 2000. It is ironic that one of the main tenets of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) is that teachers and schools should take responsibility for drawing up and designing their own school policies and plans. It states that ‘within the framework of the curriculum schools are afforded flexibility to plan a programme that is appropriate to the individual school’s circumstances and to the needs, aptitudes and interests of the children’ (Ireland, Department of Education and Science, Introduction 1999, p.11). It continues: ‘the curriculum assumes that schools, in the process of planning its implementation, will adapt and interpret the curriculum where necessary to meet their own unique requirements’ (1999, p.11). There is an inherent recognition within the Primary School Curriculum that educators are capable of devising their own policies and plans. Despite this, I have learned from my own experience at in-service programmes for the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum that many teachers seem to be rejecting this liberating opportunity, preferring instead to be ‘told’ what the policies ought to be and to be ‘given’ planning documents. Murphy (2004, p.256) explains how teachers’ ‘instructional practices appear to be influenced and informed by their personal beliefs and experiences of traditional classroom practice rather than by the child-centred principles of the curriculum’. This idea is also echoed by Archer (1982, cited in Lynch 1999, p276). I acknowledge that many teachers are under considerable pressure from lack of discrete time allocated to issues pertaining to school and classroom planning in schools (see Carr 2003). However, I suggest that some of the problematics that have arisen with respect to the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) are driven by an epistemological conflict. This conflict has arisen as a result of the introduction of a curriculum which embraces a heuristic epistemology within an education system that continues to perpetuate didactic methodologies as suggested by the findings of the recent report on the evaluation of the Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005). I can locate my own learning in this dilemma also. As I began to engage in my research, my understanding of the pervasive hold technical rationality has on my thinking began to emerge. I began to develop an insight into my

practices with internet collaborative projects as part of my own intuitive battle against the injustice of a system that was overly dependent on technical rationality.

While acknowledging that I am part of an education system that continues to prioritise didactic methodologies, as outlined in the evaluation of the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005) and technical rational approaches to education in an uncritical manner (Conway 2002), I believe it is important to strive to move beyond these constraints. I have learned through the course of my research that it is important for me and perhaps for others too - both as learners and teachers - to think for myself, to move outside the constraints of a technicist system, to look for better ways of being and to develop relationships that enhance the learning process. I believe that much of my work with technology is guided by these beliefs as my classes and I work together towards a better classroom and a better society, where respect for the other is as important as, and grounded in, respect for oneself. I perceive that technology has the potential for emancipation, provided it is used in a way that realises its generative transformational potential (see Whitehead and McNiff 2006 and see also Chapter Five for more on technology and its potential for emancipation).

Embracing my concerns

Engaging in critical thinking or critique, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.138), could 'emancipate humanity from political oppression and the ways of thinking which legitimated it'. I have learned that neglecting to think critically or to experiment with different approaches to teaching and learning can result in situations such that some students fail to learn (Holt 1970). I suggest that persisting to work towards situations where children can fail to learn is a particularly offensive form of oppression (Giroux 1988), because it can allow children to be cut off from all forms of learning, especially those that might be emancipatory or life-enhancing. If these ideas are explored at an even deeper level, and the ways of thinking which legitimated this oppression are examined, then, as Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest, one is brought right back to the kernel questions around knowledge and the forms of knowledge which are considered valid and who decides such issues. These epistemological questions animate much of my thinking

and have inspired my claim to knowledge as I explore my ideas around interconnectedness in education.

If my aim is to work towards a better society for people (and it is), and I perceive education as a main pathway towards that better society, then I am compelled to be critical and creative in my teaching and in my ways of thinking about education. I invite other educators to do similarly. I could see, in light of my new understandings around the inadequacies of technicist approaches to learning, why I was inspired to offer other approaches to learning to my classes. In the next section, I will discuss how my developing awareness of my ontological values helped me develop an understanding of my practice.

(2.2) Section 2: Developing my living educational theory as my ontological values become clarified in my practice

As I explain why I was concerned, I want to demonstrate how these concerns have emerged from my ontological and epistemological values.

As I embarked on my research journey, I had only a vague understanding of what my values were. Whitehead (2005a) explains how ontological values can be clarified, as people give accounts for themselves and their learning. He says (2005a, p.18), 'Each living theory is an account of learning in relation to the values used by the individual to give meaning and purpose to their lives'. Whitehead (2005a) continues by explaining how the meanings of the ontological values can be clarified in the course of their emergence in practice and that through this clarification process, ontological values can be transformed into living epistemological standards of judgement that can be used to evaluate the validity of a claim to knowledge. I could only begin to develop my living educational theory as I came to recognise the role the clarification of my ontological values played in the process of developing my living educational theory as well as in establishing the validity of my work. As I began to become aware of my embodied ontological values, to understand them and to be able to articulate them, I saw them

transform and re-shape in light of my engagement with the literature and in light of my engagement with my practice. I will discuss how my values began to be clarified in the process of my research in the next section, as I underline the importance of establishing the validity of my work. I will outline in following chapters and especially in Chapter Six, how my ontological values were transformed into the living epistemological standards of critical judgement I used to test the validity of my claim to knowledge. I also will show that I engage with the social criteria of comprehensibility, truth, sincerity and appropriateness which form the basis of Habermas's (1976) theory of communicative action. Habermas talks about the need to establish the validity of knowledge claims as a core aspect of communicative action.

I have learned to use my embodied ontological values as living standards of judgement against which to gauge if I am living and working in the direction of a good social order, or if, perhaps, I am denying my values in the way I work and the way I am with people. Continuously, I experience myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989) where the values I espouse are not commensurate with the practice in which I am engaging. For me, this contradiction is part of being human. When I hold my work practices up to the light of my values, I rarely expect to experience immediate concurrence between my values and my practice, even though I continuously strive towards good practice. Instead I examine my work carefully, and reflect on how it can be improved. This is part of the living process of generating my living educational theory which enables me to live my values more fully in my practice. I perceive this nearly as a celebratory process, as I see my own imperfections, my own inability to live in the direction of my embodied values as a statement of my own human frailty (Arendt 1998). For me, this research is not an exercise in producing the neatly packaged research outcomes that may be expected in other research paradigms (Cohen *et al.* 2000). Instead this is a deeply considered, yet raw and real engagement between my embodied ontological values around love and how I live my life, and it is given life in my emergent living educational theory.

I have now reached a stage in my research such that I can engage in critical thinking and am continuously clarifying my embodied ontological values in my practice. I believe that I am becoming what McLaren (2003, p.73) calls a 'critical educator' who is interested in Habermas's ideas (1972) around emancipatory knowledge, which 'attempts to reconcile and transcend the opposition between technical and practical knowledge' and can 'help us understand how social relationships are distorted and manipulated by relations of power and privilege' (McLaren 2003, p.73). I can articulate my emergent living educational theory in terms of how it is grounded in an epistemology of practice which is informed by the fact that my ontological values have been clarified in the research process and have enlightened my understanding of 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.

As I work towards thinking independently I reflect on my concerns and the reasons for my concerns. Miller's (1996) thinking is helpful as he suggests that education should be about helping students develop a capacity for connectedness and that if education can be aligned with the interconnectedness and dynamism of nature, then 'the possibilities for fulfilment increase greatly' (1996, p.3). I am also thinking of Wenger's (1998) comment that 'Education must strive to open new dimensions for the negotiation of the self. It places students on an outbound trajectory toward a broad field of possible identities' (Wenger 1998, p.263). Both Wenger (1998) and Miller (1996) see education, as I do, as a process of growth and development, where the seed of potential growth is enhanced and where the individuality of people is nurtured.

I value the recognition of the wholeness of the person, because frequently the education system in which I work seems to fragment the very essence of people's lives in its divisions of intellect and spirit (Miller 1996). It appears to pay homage to the linguistic/mathematical abilities of people, while diminishing other skills or qualities they may have (Gardner 1993). McLaren (2003, p.73) explains how a critical educator aims at creating conditions such that dominance and oppression can be conquered and transformed. My living educational theory began to emerge as I learned to espouse

critical thinking and creative action in a movement towards praxis and towards nurturing educational growth and as I chose to remove the hampering influences of traditional technicist approaches to education.

Clarifying my values

Throughout my learning journey, my values have undergone a process of clarification. Initially, in an attempt to pinpoint what my values were, I examined carefully what I perceived to be the manifestations of my values in my practice and then proceeded to locate these ideas within varying conceptual frameworks. As I began to engage critically with the texts within these frameworks I gained clarity around the underpinning values that motivated my work. The following example helps to explain these ideas:

I knew that if a child in my class behaved in an unacceptable manner, for me, it was important to engage with the humanity of the child, to address their misbehaviour in a compassionate manner and to encourage them to explain the misdemeanour and to see how this misdemeanour was perhaps unfair and dismissive of others. This, I knew, was different to the traditional ways of dealing with misbehaviour where the child is reprimanded, punished perhaps, and instructed not to behave like that again. As I sought to gain understanding around why my response was different, I encountered the writings of Nel Noddings who calls such compassionate responses ‘confirmation’ (1992, p 25). Noddings speaks of the importance of the seeking of a better self and the importance of care in education and suggests that caring in education can enable the revitalisation of schools. I began then to articulate my values in terms of *care* and *openness*. My thinking around my values was animated by Noddings’ writings (1992) and I found myself looking for the ‘better self’ in my students. At this time also I was drawn to the writings of Martin Buber. Buber talked about the importance of the ‘I-Thou’ relationship, where one person is aware of and open to the presence of the other (see Yoshida 2002). As I became aware of such relationships, I began to work towards creating ‘I-Thou’ relationships in my classroom and with others. Buber talks about what it means to see the whole person, to see a person as a ‘Thou’:

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words nor the statue of lines, but these must be tugged and dragged till their unity has been scattered into these many pieces, so with the man (mensch) to who I say Thou. I can take out from him the color of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time he ceases to be Thou.

(Buber 2000, pp.23-4)

When I think about Buber's insights into and his understanding of being aware of the wholeness of others, I am struck by how few examples of 'I-Thou' relationships I had experienced myself in main-stream education. I am struck also by how infrequently engagement with the human-ness of others, by which I mean an 'I-Thou' interaction and a recognition of the wholeness of the person, is perceived to be a priority in learning contexts.

As I reflected on these writings and located my interest in creating dialogical learning environments for my students as informed by these frameworks, I questioned if the main underpinning value in my work was one of care and openness as suggested above. I questioned the meaning of the terms 'care' and 'openness'. In my understanding, both appeared to be elements of an overarching idea of love. I had to ask myself if my way of working with my students was animated by love and if love was an underpinning value in my work. Initially, I recoiled from the idea of articulating my embodied ontological values in terms of 'love' because of my awareness that talk of caring and open 'love' could easily be misconstrued and confused with the horror that is child sex abuse. I was also inclined to reject 'love' as a value because I suspected that it might infer that my thinking was somehow soft, uncritical and unclear.

Similarly, hooks (2003) discusses how her writings on love in education has been critiqued because it demonstrates a lack of objectivity and of being too emotional. hooks argues that an over-emphasis on objectivity can easily lead on to adversarial relations, domination and disassociation, which, in her view, do not encourage educative relationships. She suggests instead that the basic principles of love are a combination of

care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust, and that when these principles 'form the basis of the teacher-pupil interaction, the mutual pursuit of knowledge creates the conditions for optimal learning' (hooks, 2003, p.131). She further argues that teaching with love enables teachers to respond to the concerns of individual students and demands that such a manner of teaching calls for teachers to be flexible and creative around creating the best climate for learning in their classroom.

I found hooks' ideas to be illuminating and they helped me to gain clarity in my own thinking around my values. Her discussion around the roles of objectivity and love further highlighted for me the importance of being courageous in one's commitment to love as a value. I had believed that there was a close link between loving, caring relationships in the classroom and the recognition of the wholeness of the students and their individual learning strengths and needs. My engagement with hooks' writing served further to convince me of this.

As I drew on hooks' (2003) ideas to inform my own thinking, I began to see that my understanding of the terms 'care' and 'openness' were interchangeable with the term 'love'. As I explored the idea of love as the underpinning value that animated my work, I engaged with Fromm's ideas around love (1957) and was struck by his idea that for society to improve, a person's social loving nature must not be separated from one's social existence. Instead, they should be as one. The language of love is often muted in educational settings today and I concur with Gilligan (2004) as she calls for the silence around love to be broken. Building on hooks' and Fromm's ideas, I came to realise that the main overarching value that underpinned my way of working was indeed one of love. I am aware that Noddings has been critiqued for her overemphasis on caring in the context of formal education as it can present a range of potential conflicts within professional frames of reference and could be possibly interpreted as being patronizing (see Smith 2004). Noddings argues that such arguments are politically and philosophically rooted and have little reference to anything intrinsically problematic about the notion of care. She also argues that reciprocity in caring relationships helps to

ensure that they do not become patronising or one sided (see Smith 2004). I agree with Noddings (1997, p.28) as she says :

In direct opposition to the current emphasis on academic standards, a national curriculum, and national testing, I have argued (Noddings 1992) that our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people.

(Noddings 1997, p.28)

She argues that society

...needs to care for its children--to reduce violence, to respect honest work of every kind, to reward excellence at every level, to ensure a place for every child and emerging adult in the economic and social world, to produce people who can care competently for their own families and contribute effectively to their communities

(Noddings 1997, p.29)

For the purposes of my research, I now choose to call this value 'love' and to be aware of the importance of locating it in my social existence and in my work with others. I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four how I have developed an understanding of these values as they are transformed into living practice.

The values that underpin my work

As my values became clarified in the process of my research, my concerns around my practice and the reasons for these concern also became clearer. I know now that I value love and enmeshed in that is the recognition of the human-ness of people in terms of experiencing the wholeness of the person (Buber 1958). As part of engaging with of the human-ness of people I locate my value of nurturing dialogical ways of knowing (Bohm 2004) as the flow of learning that occurs between people and the relationality of education to present-day life processes (Crowell 2002). I have learned that technology, in the form of multimedia and internet based communications, can help in the realisation of these values as they can assist communication and learning in a loving and free manner. I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five.

As I developed an understanding of my ontological values and as they became clarified in the process of the research, I realised that my work practices, in particular those practices that involved the creation of collaborative learning spaces using technology, were inspired by these same ontological values. As I asked myself, 'How can I understand my practice?', I perceived that my practice was the manifestation of my once tacit, but now clarified embodied ontological values around love, the interconnectedness of people and their environment. These values are embodied in my practice (Hocking *et al.* 2001), and the way I work is a tentative demonstration of how I am coming to understand and articulate my values (McNiff *et al.* 1996, 2003). I use the word 'tentative' carefully here, not because I am unsure about the importance of living my values in my practice, but because interwoven throughout these values is the recognition of my own humanity and its imperfections. The living of one's values in one's practice does not assume a closure or a final tidy outcome. Instead I live out my values in my practice in a dialectical and ever questioning manner, never fully succeeding and always unfinished, poised and ready for more questions. I believe that placing confidence in uncertainty is a prerequisite to understanding our humanity. Too often, people's beliefs, their epistemologies and the way people are with others, are grounded in an admiration of certainties and monistic ways of viewing the world (Berlin 1998). These are the assumptions of current dominant perspectives. Very often these certainties are flawed because society has failed to acknowledge the fact that as humans we are unpredictable and un-programmable. People can choose to accept or reject beliefs, and so therefore people have all the potential to respond to 'certainties' as they see fit, and rightly so. Therefore, their freedom to choose makes for very few certainties in life.

Schön (1995) also acknowledges uncertainties and talks about how through reflection, a practitioner can make sense of the uncertainties they may allow themselves to experience. He explains that when educators experience uncertainty 'they tend to be afflicted with a nagging sense of inferiority in relation to those who present themselves as models of technical rigour' (Schön 1995, p.28). Schön continues that such practitioners then choose to act on or accept their dilemma and 'that depending on how people make this choice,

their lives unfold differently' (1995, p.28). I believe that the acknowledgement of our humanity must be located in the premise that uncertainty is part of the human condition. I celebrate, as part of my own being human, my acknowledgment of my *inability* fully to live my values through my practices, even though I constantly work in that direction.

'Experiencing oneself as a living contradiction' is the term Whitehead (1989) uses to describe the conflict that can occur between the aspirations of one's values and the reality of one's life and work practices. The experience is an area of tension, where the differences between one's beliefs and one's practices are highlighted. It can be an area of experiencing dissatisfaction and disillusionment, where the practitioner realises the discrepancies between their values and the actions they undertake in their practice. It can also be something quite different. I believe the experience of understanding oneself as a living contradiction can be interpreted as energising, because it draws on the tensions between one's values and one's practice, between an unattainable ideal and human endeavour; in essence it highlights our humanity as a living and imperfect contradiction. Carr and Kemmis (1986) explain contradiction in terms of how new constructive thinking and action is called upon to transcend the dilemma of the contradiction. Kemmis and Fitzclarence (1986) explain: 'The complementarity of the elements is dynamic: it is a kind of tension, not a static confrontation between two poles' (Kemmis and Fitzclarence 1986, pp. 36-37). These tensions are kernel to what I see as being human. They highlight our freedom to choose and our ability to think for ourselves. They display our imperfections and inadequacies because as humans we are not programmable automatons who can behave and work exactly as we ought to. Sometimes we choose options that are not wise, sometime we make mistakes and sometimes we are unjust. Sometimes we act in direct opposition to our values and beliefs. If we choose to 'forgive and remember' (Shulman 2002), and use our 'mistakes' or personal experiences as living contradictions as a launch pad for improving our practices, then the experience of oneself as a living contradiction should be grounds for celebration and not lamentation. That a place of tension and human frailty can give rise to new creativity and innovative ideas about work practices is a very exciting and productive concept (see the work of McDonagh 2000, Ní Mhurchú 2000 and Roche 2000 for example).

Through the clarification of my values in my practice, I have learned that I was deeply concerned about being part of an education system that disregarded the human-ness of people and which over-emphasised transmission models of teaching (see Conway 2002; and Ireland, Department of Education and Science 2005 for example) despite the fact that such models did not address the learning needs of many students (see NCCA 2005). This awareness ran contrary to my ontological values around love and I perceived how the internet based projects that I established for my classes with others outside the classroom, were the manifestation of my ontological values in my practice. I saw how the education system was embedded in the power-constituted nature of relationships in education, in elitist forms of power and that it divided teaching and learning from the world outside the classroom. I began to work towards a better way of being - albeit at an unconscious, tacit level at first, in an attempt to diminish these negative aspects of the dominant education system in my classroom. As I began to engage in critical thinking and became less 'obedient' and more questioning (Chomsky 2000), I saw a clear connection between my ontological values around love and the connectedness of learning to life outside the classroom and the educational relationships I was attempting to develop with my classes as we engaged in internet based collaborative projects. As I began to clarify my embodied ontological values in my practice, I began to recognise that my concerns were of an epistemological nature. I began to perceive, like Apple, that education can be a site of conflict about 'the kind of knowledge that is and should be taught, about whose knowledge is "official" and who has the right to decide' (Apple 2004, p.vii). These questions are at the heart of the conflict that inspired me to engage in internet based collaborative projects in the first instance and that encouraged me then to engage in the process of developing my own educational theory of practice.

(2.3) Section 3: Exploring curriculum as an area of concern as I develop my understanding of my practice

If, as Conway (2002) and Lynch (1999) suggest, the current dominant education system is located within a technicist perspective that sees knowledge only as something external and commodified, whereas I see how knowledge as a holistic way of being which can be

generated in an emergent dialogical and holistic process (Miller 2000a), then areas of conflict are bound to arise. If I believe that each student is a legitimate knower in his or her own right (Bentley 1998), and the 'system' sees the student as an empty vessel awaiting knowledge transmission (Locke, cited in Mathis *et al.* 1970, p194), then I will also experience conflict. The conflict led me to question such issues as those outlined by Apple (2004) (see above) around what is considered to be legitimate knowledge and who decides this. In attempting to engage with these questions, I have come to see that curriculum and how I, as an educator, perceive curriculum, is key to issues of knowledge and knowers. Schön's (1995) thinking about the need for a new epistemology in institutional settings is pertinent here. Schön explained how 'we cannot avoid questions of epistemology' (1995, p.1) as the new forms of scholarship outlined by Boyer (1990) challenge institutional epistemologies.

I perceive traditional conceptualisations of curriculum to be modelled on Tyler's idea (1949, cited in Carr and Kemmis 1986) that curriculum was the means to a given end, where objectives were established and the teacher implemented these goals. A traditional curriculum is closely aligned to the delivery of knowledge (Carr and Kemmis 1986). It has discrete subject areas and discrete subject timetabling, schemes of work and text books. As Lynch points out, 'Neither the curricula nor the modes of assessment allow fully for the differences in intelligences between pupils' (Lynch 1999, p.305).

In Ireland, educators in the primary sector have been implementing the newly revised primary curriculum: Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, Department of Education and Science, 1999) since 2000. The underpinning ideas of the Primary School Curriculum are commensurate with my own ideas around curriculum in that it aims to:

...celebrate the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development. It is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life - spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical.
(Ireland, Department of Education and Science 1999, Introduction, p.6).

It recognises 'the importance of developing the full potential of the child' (1999, p.7) and it is 'concerned to develop their [children's] capacity for creative expression and

response; and it promotes their emotional and physical development' (1999, p.7). It also acknowledges the child as an 'active agent in his or her own learning' (1999, p. 8) and that 'learning is developmental in nature' (1999, p. 8). The Primary School Curriculum also states its 'recognition of the principle that there are different kinds of learning and that individual children learn in different ways' (1999, p.10). I have found each of these ideas and many more besides to be commensurate with my own thinking and values around education. The bodies involved in the drawing up of the curriculum documents seem to have been well informed and creative in their thinking. As a result, one might think that curriculum development in Ireland has been well planned and implemented in a balanced and fair manner, but that does not seem to be the case in reality.

Already, even though the introduction of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) is not yet fully implemented, many teachers and their union (the Irish National Teachers Organisation - INTO) are expressing dissatisfaction about the implementation of the new curriculum (see InTouch 2003) to the extent that the implementation process was delayed for a year (see Dempsey 2003). Dissatisfaction has been expressed in academic circles also (see Morgan 2002, Murphy 2004). The sense of dissatisfaction with this new curriculum is puzzling. The rhetoric of the trade union would lead us to believe that the answer lies in poor funding, poor pupil teacher ratios, curricular overload and poor professional development programmes (see Carr 2003). While these are all reasonable arguments, I believe that the real reason is more deep rooted and lies in the chasm that exists between the ideals of the curriculum statements and the reality of the dominant role technicist rationality holds in our education system. This chasm is indicative of the clash of ideas that may be experienced in our current education system and embedded in issues of epistemology. This chasm is also at the heart of why I am concerned about my practice and about how people learn and I am aware that I have become entangled in a conflict of epistemologies (see Young 1998).

In my own learning journey, I have come to understand, now, that how I perceive curriculum is similar to my perception of knowledge, as they are both interrelated. I see curriculum as Elliott (1998, p.23) does, when he draws on the work of Stenhouse to

describe curriculum as a resource ‘to help teachers reconstruct their view of knowledge and in its light their pedagogical relations with students in classrooms’. This implies that curriculum is organic, emergent and alive. These ideas inform my understanding of what curriculum is about. This is quite a different understanding to the traditional view of curriculum which is ‘aimed at the acquisition of knowledge’ and ‘designed to support a transmission mode of teaching’ (Elliott 1998, p.133). This traditional view of curriculum sees curriculum as a package to be delivered or transmitted: curriculum is of an external, reified nature. Young (1998) also encounters dilemmas around curriculum and describes two models around curriculum as ‘curriculum as fact’ when referring to what can be loosely aligned with the technicist model, and ‘curriculum as practice’ when referring to the model which subscribes to the idea that knowledge is produced acting collectively. He points out that the

curriculum as fact with its underlying view of knowledge as external to knowers, both teachers and students, and embodied in syllabi and text-books, is widely held and has profound implications for our conceptions of teaching and learning

(Young 1998, p.25)

The dilemma that exists between technicist epistemologies and those of the new scholarship (Boyer 1990) is apparent here, although Young is also critical of more fluid forms of curriculum. Earlier, I discussed how the dilemma is located in the locus of practical teaching in the classroom, and it is apparent here now in the wider focus and interpretations of curriculum.

I have come to question the apparent dominance of technicist approaches to education. I query why so many teachers subscribe to it when it is clear (from curriculum documents, if not from common sense) that dialogical and other approaches to teaching and learning are worth exploring. Elliott (1998, p.133) cites Posch (1993) to explain the ‘advantage’ of technicist models of curriculum:

...it enables schools to “maintain a close relationship with the outcomes of academic knowledge production”. Such outcomes have traditionally constituted the educational “gold standard” in western societies.

(Posch 1993 cited in Elliott 1998, p.133)

The advantage, if it can be called such, then lies in the idea that the knowledge can be stored in textbooks, the success of the transmission process can be measured through examinations, and, as a result, the student can take their place in what is perceived as a static society (Elliott 1998). The wholeness of people, their need for dialogue, the notion of learning as an emergent process and the idea that education is inclusive of all people with all intelligences so that people can develop to their potential, are ideas that are not addressed by a technicist model of education.

Technical rational processes may not best serve all the needs of the learner but it is worth exploring if technical rational processes are responsible for the uncomfortable position the Primary School Curriculum (1999) now holds in this country. The curriculum documents do not appear to promote technicist ideals to any great extent, in fact the opposite appears to be the case, and yet, there are countless examples of technical rational epistemologies shaping and moulding this exciting new curriculum. There is much anecdotal data of school inspectors equating the aims of the Primary School Curriculum with targets which must be attained, and inquiring if teachers have in fact attained these targets. Carr and Kemmis (1986) explain how Tyler's (1949) text on curriculum influenced curriculum such that

the aim of developing the cultivated person was now discarded in favour of developing conformity to an agreed image of the educated person (implied by goals)...and that teaching and curriculum became instrumental – the means of achieving these given ends.

(Carr and Kemmis 1986, p. 14)

Examples of similar interpretations (misinterpretations, in my view) of the Primary School Curriculum appear in the media, which promote the use of technical models of evaluation to measure the success of the implementation of the curriculum (see Kilfeather 2005 for example, who, speaking on behalf of the *Parents Council of Ireland*, is calling for standardised tests to be administered so that people can ascertain where the 'good' schools are).

I believe that changes introduced by the Primary School Curriculum (1999) are being presented as low-key and as building on a previous curriculum (*Curaclam na Bunscoile*, Ireland, Department of Education and Science 1971), but in fact are demanding of a whole new form of institutional epistemology. In its introductory section, the Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, Department of Education and Science, Introduction 1999, p.2) states that it ‘encompasses the philosophical thrust of *Curaclam na Bunscoile*’. While this may be true, the form of epistemology the Primary School Curriculum embraces is different to that of *Curaclam na Bunscoile*. The form of epistemology which is called for by the Primary School Curriculum is one which perceives knowledge as being relational: ‘it...takes cognisance of the changing nature of knowledge and society’ (1999, p.7) and is supportive of creative forms of generating knowledge: ‘there are different kinds of learning and children learn in different ways’ (1999, p.10). It also calls for schools to ‘plan a programme that is appropriate to the individual school’s circumstances and to the needs, aptitudes and interests of the children’ (1999, p.11). The Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, Department of Education and Science, 1999) also promotes the importance of critical thinking and has as one of its specific aims that children be ‘enabled to come to an understanding of the world through...the ability to think critically’ (1999, p.34). Nurturing a sense of spirituality is also an important element in the curriculum as it includes ‘the spiritual dimension in life’ as one of its key issues (1999, p.9). The Primary School Curriculum (1999) is based on these principles outlined above and it underpins how I work with my students as I contribute towards their learning and to the education of social formations as I hope to encourage people to think critically, to query the accepted unquestioned norms and to move towards change for the social good. In my opinion, it reflects, however, a substantially different understanding of knowledge and how knowledge is acquired as perceived by the previous curriculum (*Curaclam na Bunscoile*, Ireland, Department of Education and Science, 1971). I also believe that it communicates a substantial change of perspective and epistemology from traditional interpretations around curriculum. This change needs to be flagged and acknowledged appropriately; its dismissal as being a ‘follow on’ to the previous curriculum of the 1970s can be misleading.

The role of the 'interpretation of ideas' as outlined by Young (1998) must also be acknowledged in communication processes - specifically in the communication processes around the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum (1999). Young (1998, p.45) talks about how

... an external structure such as the National Curriculum has to be interpreted by teachers to become a reality in schools and that it is in that process of interpretation that the scope and the need for teachers' professional autonomy can be found.

Young 1998 p.45

However, it is my understanding that if the teachers whose professionalism has been moulded and shaped by ideas that are technical rational in nature, then problems will arise when a curriculum, such as the Primary School Curriculum (1999), that is not dominated by technicist assumptions is introduced. An epistemological conflict will arise. Young's ideas around the interpretation of ideas are relevant here as I explore ideas around the dissatisfaction with the Primary School Curriculum (1999) that many teachers are currently expressing (see Carr 2003; InTouch 2003). If teachers like myself have been immersed in a culture that is dominated by technical rational thinking, then it is difficult to shake off the shackles of such an immersion. Murphy's (2004) paper is also helpful here as he explains how teachers' practices in Ireland appear to be more influenced by their own beliefs and by traditions that have been passed on than by the introduction of the Primary School Curriculum (1999). Although I believe that educators should be 'afforded flexibility to plan a programme that is appropriate to the individual school's circumstances' and that schools will 'adapt and interpret the curriculum where necessary to meet their own unique requirements' (Introduction, Primary School Curriculum, 1999, p.11), the problem lies in a *lack* of engagement with the ideas of the Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, Department of Education and Science, 1999), as opposed to a well-argued rejection of it. If educators are equipped with and derive their knowledge base from a technical rational way of thinking, and are then presented with a curriculum which is embedded in a different epistemology and calls on hermeneutic, dialogical, personal and creative ways of knowing, then many educators will have difficulties in recognising and interpreting the ideas inherent in this newer model of curriculum.

Perhaps it might be useful to return to the model of Foucault's interpretation of Bentham's panopticon (Foucault 1980) to understand the problematics here and visualise people not only as the prisoners but also as the keepers of their own imprisonment. In such circumstances, prisoners/keepers/educators are unable to interpret ideas from a new or different epistemology, because they are not equipped to do so and because they do not possess the freedom of mind to do so. Many educators are adhering to a system of education with which they are familiar, but in the process they are perpetuating the myth that only technical approaches to education are worthwhile approaches. I now see the dilemma the Primary School Curriculum potentially presents for educators in Ireland as a socially constructed curriculum in a milieu that is structured by technicist beliefs and philosophies. I have also come to see how my own ontological values seemed to be in direct contrast, not to the Primary School Curriculum itself, but more to how the Primary School Curriculum is interpreted (see Young 1998 for more on the problems pertaining to how curriculum might be interpreted).

Generating purposeful concern

Bearing in mind my concerns about education and current perceptions around curriculum as I have outlined above, and how my ontological and epistemological values are often in conflict with the dominant system of education, I have clarified my thinking around why I was concerned. I now began to perceive my concerns as being with purpose. By this I mean that I reached a stage in my thinking such that I no longer saw my concerns as being tacit or innate or static. I now saw them as giving rise to action, to active critique, to action in a movement towards a good social order, to overcoming the oppression of an over-dependence on technicist thinking (McLaren 2003). For much of my teaching life, I equated being neutral and working quietly alone with my students as being the 'best' approach to education. I now realise that I was acting as the 'obedient' teacher (Chomsky 2000), perpetuating dominant perspectives in education, thinking mainly at the level of technical issues (Apple 2004) and not engaging in critical thinking. I can see now that taking such a neutral stance not only perpetuates an uncritical approach to education, it can also infer a complacent attitude and a support, albeit unspoken, of the dominant ideology, as suggested by Freire (Sterling *et al.* 1995). I have chosen not to remain

neutral, I have chosen instead to ‘trespass’ (Bourdieu 1990) so as to gain insight and understanding into my work within the education system in which I work. I have chosen to take action against the frequent injustices of technicist approaches to education and to take action towards creating opportunities for learning in a dialogical, inclusive and creative way. I believe that critical thinking, though worthwhile, is not enough on its own as it can remain at the level of rhetoric without some form of movement. I understand critical thinking to imply an action, a journey towards committed, informed, purposeful action or praxis. For me, this movement is about the creation of a better classroom, where relationships are central, where people have respect for one another, where education is seen as a conduit towards a good social order and by contributing to the education of social formations as outlined by Whitehead (2004). Contributing to the education of social formations (see Chapter Seven) calls on people to think critically, to query the accepted unquestioned norms and to move towards changing the status of people’s ‘own situations in relation to their value commitments’ (Mc Niff 2005, p.17).

The unquestioning acceptance of norms, of perceiving norms as ‘given’, is an inherent part of an uncritical stance (Sachs 2003). I also adopted such a stance as I saw no need to question the ‘givens’ of teaching practices. Berlin’s thinking is illuminating here as he talks about a belief in determinism, in the acceptance of things, which allows people to evade responsibility and provides people with an excuse for stasis (Cherniss and Hardy 2005). This evasion of responsibility because things are the ‘way they are’ is an inadequate response to education. Arendt (1958 cited in Coulter and Wiens 2002) warns of the importance of both thinking about what one does and acting accordingly. It was imperative to critical thinkers like Freire (Darder 2002) that educators acknowledge that ‘oppression does not exist within a closed world from which there is no exit’ and instead that they ‘embrace fully this dialectical understanding of our relationship with the world and transform our teaching into... revolutionary praxis’ (2002, p.54). I have learned in the process of my research that I have attempted to transform my teaching into ‘revolutionary practice’. For me, working towards a good social order is about creating learning environments so that opportunities for people to live out their values abound. I have learned that, frequently, these learning environments are enhanced with the

inclusion of technology as it adds to the connections I like to make between the classroom and others in the wider world. I have also learned that technology can also make the engagement with their learning more accessible to all children through the use of word processors and multimedia (see Eisner 1997).

I perceive this commitment to purposeful concern and praxis being manifested in how I embrace a desire to work in a way that is commensurate with my values around love, in a way that sees curriculum as being dynamic and relational and espouses the notion that people can learn for themselves. In Chapter Four, I will explain how I developed the praxis that arose from my understanding around my concerns and why I was concerned. My praxis took the form of developing an understanding of my work that transformed into my claim to knowledge. I am claiming that I have developed an epistemology of practice that is embedded in dialogical and inclusive ways of coming to know. I will show that this epistemology is evident in my learning, in my practice and in how my students learn, and I will produce substantiated evidence to support this claim as I theorise my practice as a thoughtful and critical response to my concerns.

To conclude

In this chapter I have explored the reasons I was concerned with my work practices, and epistemological conflict from which these concerns have emerged. I have explained how I have developed a sense of clarity around my values and have developed an understanding of my practice as the manifestation of these values. I explored issues pertaining to how curriculum and its interpretation can be a source of epistemological conflict as I develop an awareness of my ontological values.

In Chapter Three, I will address the question ‘What could I do about my concerns?’ and examine issues around methodology. I will explain how, in the process of investigating my practice, I developed an emergent living educational theory from my practice (as defined by Whitehead 1989) in the form of a living epistemology of practice.

