<u>How can I improve my practice</u>

so as to help my pupils

to philosophise?

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Assessment Criteria for the Dissertation

A: Conceptual Domain

LM   *The assignment demonstrates that the student can use and/ organise coherently relevant ideas, perspectives or theories to interpret and/or explore issues under study and in addition can critically analyse and/or evaluate those ideas, perspectives or theories showing the ability to synthesise and/or transform ideas in the process of developing an argument.*

B: Literature Domain

LM   *The assignment demonstrates that the student can reference an extensive range of relevant literature and utilise it in the development of analysis and discussion of ideas, including critical engagement with that literature*

C: Contextual Domain

LM   *The assignment demonstrates that the student has an awareness of the significance of relevant contextual factors (e.g. personal, locational, historical, political etc) influencing the area of study and is able to critically engage with the contextual significance.*

D: Research Domain

LM   *The assignment demonstrates that the student can plan for and execute a small scale enquiry in a systematic and reflexive manner, identifying and explaining methodological and epistemological issues around the research process and critically analysing and evaluating research outcomes.*

E: Ethical Domain

LM   *The assignment demonstrates that the student has an awareness of ethical issues arising in or associated with the area of study, showing sensitive engagement with an appropriate ethical framework for interpretation of ideas or for practice. In addition, there is exploration of some of the problematics arising in relation to ethical dilemmas or decisions.*

F: Values Domain

LM   *The assignment demonstrates that the student can clearly identify and analyse the basis of their own value position and where relevant, the value position of others in relation to the area of study, and critically evaluate associated claims to knowledge.*

G: Action Domain

LM   *The assignment demonstrates that the student can explore the relationship between theory and practice in the workplace, and use reflection to develop personal theory and refine professional practice, with due regard to issues of equity and social justice, critically evaluating professional development needs and/or outcomes.*

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

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<div align="center">This dissertation is dedicated to him.</div>

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Teaching is a complex and dynamic process which involves exploration, choice, decisions, creative thinking and the making of value judgements. The major elements in this process – evaluation, research and experimentation – are not value-added features of teacher quality: they constitute the very basis of competence in teaching – that is, reflectivity.

Hexall *et al*. (1991) cited in Rudduck (1991: 329).

Is it possible for a child to spend eight years in Primary School and never to speak in classtime other than to answer a teacher-directed question?

If this is possible, is it acceptable?

(Donnelly, 1996: 36)

Abstract

How can I improve my practice so as to help my pupils to philosophise?

I can make a claim to knowledge. I can claim to have a theory about philosophising in my classroom – a theory that I have generated through my practice. My claim is that now I know how I can best stimulate my pupils to use their higher-order thinking powers. My evidence comes from trying out various discussion stimuli – to establish which method worked best in encouraging dialogue in the class – and then, secondly, from analysing the scripts of the dialogues for signs of emergent philosophising. This was done in a 'systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry' (Bassey 1990: 20) through an ethical action research study.

My practice has since been transformed. I can now make another claim to knowledge: I know that I have improved as a teacher. I have developed a better pedagogic style, one that is open to further reflection and development, and inclusive of the rights of my pupils to voice their ideas. Reflecting on my practice, and engaging with the existing theories in the literature of philosophy with children, led me to the realisation that there was divergence between my values and my practice. Following dialectical discourse with my tutor, Jean McNiff, and also with workplace and MA Ed colleagues, I set about planning an intervention in my practice and developing my professional knowledge so as to synthesise my values and my practice. I further refined my ideas for carrying out the research and writing this report.

As my practice evolves, I am continuously learning. The knowledge that I have generated is personal and true for this year's context. It is laden with my values and imbued with my personal sense of what is right. Perhaps next year's pupils will present a new set of challenges. If so, I can build on the knowledge I have gained from this year. Thus, the transformation of my learning from year to year will generate new personal, professional knowledge.

This report is the story of how I reached the stage in my professional development where I can confidently say that I have generated my own epistemology of practice.

Introduction

This dissertation is, in one sense, the culmination of four years' action and reflection on doing philosophising with the children in my classroom. Yet, in another sense, it is part of an ongoing process that I will continue to explore for as long as I teach. Each class brings its own new dynamic to the process and helps me to understand what philosophising is all about.

Outline of chapters

In *Chapter One* I present the focus of my study. I give the background and rationale for undertaking it. I outline the relevance and currency of this work to the contexts of my immediate workplace and to the wider educational field.

Chapter Two provides a contextualisation of the theory underpinning the psychological and philosophical aspects of doing 'thinking' in a primary classroom. I examine the three main pedagogic and learning models – behaviourism, constructivism and social constructivism – and I show how my study is influenced by, and fits well into, social constructivism.

By investigating the work of educationalists such as Donaldson, Lipman and Fisher, I will by default be engaging with Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky, upon whose theories much of their work is based. I argue that by providing children with opportunities for creative, critical and abstract thought in what Lipman (1993) calls *'a community of enquiry'*, I am helping to develop higher order thinking in my pupils.

Chapter Three deals with the methodology of the research and examines the options open to teacher-researchers within the major paradigms of research. By engaging critically with what Bassey (1990) defines as the three major research paradigms - the empirical, the interpretive and the critical theoretic - I show that by electing to undertake an action research study I have thoroughly examined the other possibilities

before rejecting them. I also show that I fully meet with the moral obligations
pertaining to this most ethically demanding of research paradigms.

Chapter Four looks at the research that I carried out in my classroom on doing
'philosophising with children'. As the story of my study unfolds it shows how the
thinking of a group of small boys has developed along with their confidence. My
research focussed initially, on what was the best means of stimulating philosophical
enquiry. Then I analysed the transcripts of several thinking time sessions and
demonstrated that there was, in fact, higher-order thinking taking place. As the study
progressed, the self-confidence of three children showed such a dramatic
improvement that I took time out to examine and report on the phenomenon.

In *Chapter Five* I give my conclusions. I examine the learning outcomes for my
pupils and myself. I show the significance of my study for my own practice, for my
school and for the wider educational field. I describe how, through doing action
research, I have come to understand the power of this methodology to generate a
personal epistemology of practice through the process of reflection, action and
evaluation.

<u>Chapter One</u>

Contextualisation

Personal background

I was born in 1952. I was the eldest child, doted on by grandparents who lived beside us. I was a precocious speaker and was listened to – at least, so my parents' anecdotes would have me believe.

During nine years in primary school, however, I don't recall *ever* being asked my opinion on anything. I vividly remember reciting by rote, chanting tables and spellings. But I have no recollection of classroom discussion. A behaviourist learning style was favoured.

I have been a primary teacher now for twenty-eight years. My teacher training was completed in 1972. In 'Teaching for Learning' (Roche 1999b), I described how, before the introduction of free secondary education in 1967, primary education had been expected to serve as the sole basis of formal instruction for a very large percentage of the population.

Mastery of the three R's was of paramount importance in determining pupils' future lives. The onus was on teachers to impart a competency in numeracy and literacy through instruction. A didactic pedagogy was considered most effective. For this to work, of course, the 'empty vessels' being filled had to be silent and motionless in their rows for most of the school day. Uniformity was sought; in practice and in the standardisation of syllabi, of instruction models, of timetables, of dress and of textbooks. Evaluation was carried out with rigorous thoroughness by an inspectorate that was feared. Assessment was effected at the end of the primary cycle by an examination called The Primary Certificate - abolished in 1967. I can remember vividly the dread associated with it.

My teacher training, therefore, took place in the shadow of a system that had existed unchanged for many years. The all-female training college experience itself was as rigid as a strictly run boarding school. We slept in huge dormitories with minimum privacy, where a single switch controlled 'lights out'. Attendance at breakfast was compulsory. Failure to attend meant lining up like convicts outside the 'Office' awaiting a reprimand and the ever-present threat of being thought 'wilful' (with the corresponding threat of not getting a reference for a teaching position).

We were like docile sheep after two years of this 'formation'. We were certainly not likely to question the established *modus operandi*. From a feminist perspective, it is interesting to note that our male counterparts in the other large (all male) Dublin training college had single rooms and personal autonomy about attendance at meals and lectures.

Halfway through my training the New Curriculum (1971) was ushered in. Greeted with a mixture of enthusiasm from innovators and suspicion from conservatives it meant that I got a training that in retrospect I feel, paid lip service to a constructivist Piagetian-influenced curriculum but which, in fact, favoured very strongly the previous traditional, didactic pedagogy. With hindsight, I feel that there seemed to be an ambivalent attitude in the training college. One the one hand, a constructivist type *infant* education was advocated.   On the other hand, *middle and senior classes* seemed to have a constructivist theory but a behaviourist practice.   Hall (1995: 5) states that there was divergence between the approval and the implementation of the 1971 Curriculum.

As a teacher, I continued operating in a *'docile sheep'* mode for many years.

In retrospect, and with the new perspectives that I've gained from doing an action research project, I realise now that this operational and technical pedagogy left me with an unease about my practice. With the hindsight of reflection, I can see that I suppressed my values of honesty, fairness and freedom in the daily effort to cover as much of the programme as the circumstances allowed. I often felt that I was short-changing the children in my care but I was generally helpless to address the seemingly insurmountable problems caused by inexperience and lack of confidence.

Later, I became conscious that I talked a lot 'at' the children. The Flanders Study (1970) showed how two thirds of class time is devoted to 'teacher-talk'. In my case, conversing 'with' my pupils only happened in hastily snatched moments. I knew that this was wrong. Children, especially infants, long to tell their stories to each other and to their (often) adored teacher. The social aspect of school was largely neglected in favour of cramming these little heads with facts.

In Roche (1998c: 5), I referred to Donaldson's (1978: 14) claim that '*schooling... often turns into a distinctly miserable experience for many young children'*. Many of them, she says, emerge from it ill equipped for life in our society and are often keenly aware of that fact. She adds that for the teachers of unhappy children, the school experience is generally unhappy too (p14). I certainly was, and in fact I left teaching for three years to concentrate on my own two babies.

During this career break, I had time for reflection and time for reading. Reading inspiring educationalists like Donaldson (1978), Holt (1964), Ashton-Warner (1963), and Marshall (1963) reinforced my beliefs in the need for children to interact more with each other and with their teachers. Like Donaldson I saw the social aspect of schooling as being critical - not just for the child's happiness - but also for her cognitive development.

When I began teaching again, I indulged my instinct to chat with the children and found that I did not lose their respect - as some older colleagues forecasted gloomily. Instead, my confidence grew and the interpersonal relationships noticeably improved. There was mutual cordiality. However, I felt uneasy. Niggling at the edge of my consciousness all the time was the feeling that I couldn't justify to an inspector the time that I was giving to 'chatting'. I looked around for some way to theorise it.

In 1996 I attended a course on 'Philosophy with Children'. As well as getting an overview of the epistemological and theoretical issues, I also learned the methodology, as developed by Donnelly (1994), of how to introduce and facilitate a programme on abstract thinking to primary school children.

Relevance of the research to my own practice

This work was extremely important to me, for a number of reasons. One was the way in which I came to a new level of understanding of my students' intelligences and personalities. Another was that the weekly sessions had the most unexpected benefits on the confidence of timid children and, in fact, helped them to learn more easily (Roche 1999a).

For 'Researching Education'(Roche 1999a) I investigated - through a small-scale action research project - how interpersonal relationships in my classroom improved through introducing such an oracy programme. This whetted my appetite because my findings and the positive evaluations of parents, pupils and colleagues affected my practice significantly. Later, I explored the theory behind and the rationale of talking and thinking in my classroom with emphasis on the work of Lipman (Roche, 1999b).

The writing of that assignment meant that I had to reflect on the theories already in existence and on the hybridisation of them that suited my particular circumstances. I further developed my ideas for Accreditation of Experiential Learning portfolio work (Roche 1999c) in which I reflected on the learning outcomes that affected and informed my practice following the course on 'Philosophy with Children'.

This report, then, follows on chronologically and will show how my understanding of *philosophising* (see p 13) developed along with my practice. Underpinned by the theories of Dewey, Vygotsky, Lipman, Fisher, Holt, Piaget, Donaldson and many others who have refined and defined 'thinking in the classroom', I tentatively at first and then more confidently began to generate my own personal theories around this area of education.

I believe that I can make a claim to knowledge that is valuable to my own practice and also to other teachers who might be interested in trying out a programme of thinking skills in their own classrooms. I know that, since beginning to engage with action research, I have learned an enormous amount about my practice. I know too that there is much more to learn –that, in fact, the more I learn the more I realise that I don't know.

Paradoxically, while the writing up of this dissertation represents the end of my exploration of the tip of the 'philosophising' iceberg it also marks the beginning of my delving beneath the surface of a new personal practice of pedagogy.

Relevance of the research to my workplace

I teach in an all boys' National School that is located in an area of urban disadvantage. There are eight classes – infants to sixth - and in the majority of these, there is a traditional didacticism with an emphasis on the three R's.   While some pupils do very well, many others fail to reach their potential, in my opinion.

Ours is not an unusual school in this respect. Morgan (1998) in his study of the higher-order cognitive performance of Irish children in relation to their American and European counterparts, concluded that while Irish children perform well on basic skills, they *do relatively less well on tasks that demand higher cognitive capacities'* (p16). Citing from the findings of Galton, et al. (1980), Morgan states that of all the interactions between students and teachers, less than 10% were at the higher cognitive level. In fact, he says, progressive teaching was rare in practice; the vast majority of interactions were factual and operational.

It is my contention that, were a programme of teaching for higher order thinking implemented in my school as a matter of school policy, we might readdress the failure of some students to adapt well to the school system. Lipman advocates that we should teach directly for higher order thinking, which he sees as a fusion of critical and creative thinking (1991:20). According to Reed (1998) experimental research has demonstrated that the Lipman programme, when well taught, results in the students gaining significantly in reasoning, reading comprehension and mathematical performance

Relevance of the research to the wider educational field

The aims and objectives of the New Irish Primary Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999) underpin my study.

The general objectives include, that the child should be enabled to:

- *Communicate clearly and confidently*
- *Listen attentively and with understanding*
- *Develop a positive awareness of self, sensitivity towards other people, and a respect for the rights, views and feelings of others* (p35).

The aims in English include:

[The teacher should strive to]
- *Develop the child's confidence and competence in listening, speaking...*
- *Develop the child's ability to engage appropriately in listener-speaker relationships*
- *Develop the child's cognitive ability and the capacity to clarify thinking through oral language…*(p10)

One of the principles of the 1999 Curriculum is that
  Higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills should be fostered
   (p. 9 Introduction).

I feel that I am addressing these aims and objectives in a real and concrete way by providing a structure for my pupils to begin philosophising. I think that, unless children are encouraged to develop their thinking early and are given opportunities for doing so, very little real cognitive development will take place during their formative primary school years. In this context I see a real role for philosophising.

I referred in my Research Proposal (Roche 2000) to an essay entitled 'Developing philosophies of childhood' in which Lipman (1993) states that if children are to be 'seen and not heard', their silencing deprives the rest of us of their insights (p. 145).

I think that this is a profound statement and it inspired me to question whether or not my pupils' democratic rights and freedom in this area are well served by my practice.

Rationale for the research

Williams (1999) states that good thinking is learned best from good dialogue – such as that which happens when the participants ask questions, sift arguments, and explore alternatives. Above all, he says, they try to understand each other, a process which may even lead to disagreement, but which involves listening carefully and containing any disagreement within an ethos of cordiality (p. 17).

Children need to be divergent in their thinking to cope in today's society. Our understanding of what intelligence is, is significantly more complex now, than it was in the 1970's when a convergent-thinking child with a good memory, good organisation, and good application to tasks was often deemed intelligent. This was the kind of student who did well in the regurgitative-type state examinations. Now Gardner (1983) has challenged all our previous assumptions about intelligence. No longer a simple, hereditary or fixed entity, capable of being measured empirically, value is given to qualities such as interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Twomey (1997) says that we must educate in a way that generates adaptability, because of the rapid social changes brought about by technological developments. He states that society now demands that schools address affective goals like creativity, emotional and moral development as well as more traditional cognitive issues.

I see the introduction of a programme of philosophising such as I have been engaged with as being ideal for fulfilling these obligations. Lipman, a disciple of both Vygotsky and Dewey, contends, like Donaldson and Holt, that children gradually discover that school is seldom exciting and invigorating; instead of stimulation they find stultification.

Main focus of study

In this report I show how I monitored and evaluated my practice, through an action research methodology, as I sought the best way to stimulate the thinking of twenty-four six to seven year old boys. I use the term *'philosophising'* (see p 13) to describe the kind of thinking involved. I also engage with the theory of some of the prominent educationalists in the fields of educational psychology and educational philosophy. In writing the report, I am adopting a 'narrative enquiry' process (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: xiii), which suits the action research paradigm well.

The general aims of my study are:

- To generate my own 'living theory of education' (Whitehead 1993) about philosophising in the classroom.
- To improve my teaching while helping my pupils to improve the quality of their learning.

Among my specific objectives are

- To allow my pupils the opportunity to become 'a community of enquiry'.
- To assist my pupils in the move from routine to reflective thought or to move from 'from everyday thinking to critical thinking' (Fisher 1998: 38).

My study involves three main action-reflection cycles. Initially I set out to investigate how using a variety of different stimuli –i.e. picture books, traditional stories, pictures, abstract topics, and more – affected the quality of discussions. I tried out various different teaching methods – sitting with the children in a circle, directing /not directing the discussion, staying in front of the class, and talking with small groups.

I call this period, which lasted from October 1999 to January 2000 'Action Reflection Cycle 1'. During the Christmas break, I reflected on the previous half term and read widely around my topic. Following this I began to change my focus. I now began to examine the quality of the discussions. How could I claim that what was going on

was actually 'philosophising'? For Action Reflection Cycle 2, (January – March 2000), I identified criteria by which to judge if higher-order thinking were taking place and analysed scripts. But…in true action research form, a situation arose regarding three children who began to capture my attention. These were three special needs students who rarely if ever spoke in class, and while not bullied in the sense of being physically attacked, suffered exclusion in the yard and were treated with a patronising condescension in class by some of the more academically able students. As our thinking sessions progressed I began to notice that these children contributed more and more.

Imagine my delight - imagine *their* delight when other children began to say

'I agree with J because...'(field notes 13-12-99)
   or

'I think what S said is right' (field notes 9-2-00)…
   or

when W said '*Can I read this book for the boys?* (field notes 23-2-00).

Enter Action Reflection Cycle 3 (which ran concurrently with Action Reflection Cycle 2) as I decided to focus briefly on them and check for evidence of increasing confidence (Research diary 3-2-00).

This phenomenon had happened in a previous study that I'd done (Roche 1999a). By the introduction of this programme I can claim that I have had a very positive affect on the lives of these children at least. They are the kind of child that is so easy to overlook in a busy classroom. Timid, lacking confidence, seemingly slow academically, children like this often have reading difficulties.

I noted in my diary in September 1999 that J,

answers direct questions with quick furtive looks around and, depending on who's watching/listening, takes a breath, opens his mouth to speak and then perhaps decides not to risk any answer and merely shrugs
(Research diary 21-9-99).

By February 2000 he was showing increased signs of confidence. An entry in my research for February 3rd notes that

As I came out of the photocopying room today J. arrived (late) with his Mum. He greeted me with a beaming smile and a big
-'Hello, Mary Roche!'
His Mum was amazed and said
-'J! You mustn't call your teacher that!'
-'Why not? It's her name, Mum'.
This is a new J.
   (Research diary 3-2-00).

Holt (1964) writing in 1958 remarks that even in the kindest and most caring classrooms children are afraid. He says that many of them are afraid a great deal of the time, some all of the time (p71). They fear being called stupid, they fear feeling themselves stupid. Holt states that '*the scared learner is always a poor learner*' (p93). He decides that we have two problems to solve: to stop children from being so afraid and to wean them off the bad thinking habits into which their fears have driven them (p92). Conversing with J's mother she confessed that her little boy frequently told her sadly that nobody liked him or played with him because he was *'thick'* (Validations from parents: Appendix 3.6).

This child is only six. His shy fellow pupils are seven and are also treated patronisingly, but not as cruelly by the rest of the class. They too are beginning to show signs of increasing confidence (Validations from parents: Appendix 3.6).

And so my research and my reflection on thinking in my classroom address an area of personal and professional concern. As I have already stated, I have been teaching

in areas of extreme urban disadvantage since the early 1970's. During all those years I have been concerned at the dearth of opportunities in the average school day for children to engage in real discussion and thinking. Since 1996 I have been trying out various ways of solving this problem to suit my practice.

This report gives you a window through which you can view two terms' work.

<u>(Note: I use the masculine pronoun deliberately throughout, as my class is an all male one).</u>

What do I mean by philosophising?

It might be helpful at this point to spell out what exactly I mean by ***'philosophising'***. It is not about teaching philosophy as a subject. Rather, I see it much as Sutcliffe (1999) does - as conversations or communal dialogues in which the class, both children and teacher, can explore their sense of wonder and at the same time practise the discipline of thinking well together (p241).

To me***, 'thinking well together'*** involves the discipline of an open, fair and democratic discussion in which it is necessary to listen actively and attentively, to give reasons for opinions, to hypothesise, to ponder or speculate and of course to ask questions. It would be difficult for me, to provide a complete taxonomy for children as young as those I teach (6-7 year olds), but even these elements would offer sufficient criteria, I think.

Through practice the children develop the scope of their ideas and the language necessary to convey them to themselves and to others. Through their language I can see the evidence of the development of their thinking. They gain courage from the realisation that their views are valuable and needed. They gain confidence as they hear other children engage with these ideas, accepting them or rejecting them but supporting each such decision with a reason. They may then even change their own minds as has sometimes happened to the great surprise of the child involved.

> *'I disagree with myself now, actually'*
> (24-2-00, research diary)

What do I mean by 'Thinking Time'?

'Thinking Time' (Donnelly 1994) refers to a particular process whereby the classroom tables are pushed to the perimeter of the room and the teacher and class sit on chairs in a large circle. A child begins speaking about the topic, which is chosen in advance. The topics arise from diverse sources such as a poem, a story, a picture or picture book or from another curricular area such as the religion programme.

The teacher can pick a child at random or a 'starter' rota can be decided at the start of a term. Having spoken, this child tips the child beside him. He then has the choice to speak or not speak and passes on the tip. When the circle is complete, with the teacher taking her turn just like the children, those who still wish to speak put up their hands and there is a tacit understanding that priority is given to those who didn't speak before. If the topic is engaging there is a possibility of going around the circle again, if not we stop. There is no wrap-up or conclusion. The children's statements and questions rest as they are and are thus open to further pondering. I found this particularly difficult. I had to resist the urge to evolve the session into a written exercise or an exhortation to 'look it up in the encyclopaedia'.

The rules of the sessions have to be agreed beforehand.   The 'Thinking Time' sessions demand a discipline and a protocol of the children. It is quite a good lesson in civics to allow the children to decide in advance what the rules should be (Appendix 4.2).

Fisher (1995), discussing the 'Philosophy for Children' programme, states that classroom discussion can serve a very valuable role in making our tacit knowledge known to us. When we articulate this tacit knowledge it ceases to be what Whitehead (1932) called *'inert knowledge'*. Bringing this tacit knowledge to mind through talking, can, states Fisher, become a very powerful strategy for thinking and learning. He equates it with the Socratic tradition of teaching which begins with a *'seeming ignorance and proceeds through dialogue to a revealed understanding'* (Fisher 1995: 43). Building on Whitehead (1932) and Polanyi (1959), he postulates that we may even not know what we mean until we hear what we say. He goes on to state that

talking and thinking are very closely linked with the attempts children make to reflect on and extract meaning from experience. Talking to learn in this way, he adds, helps the children through a sort of *'cognitive apprenticeship'*, and philosophy with children provides contexts for this to happen (1995: 54-55).

Donnelly (1994) says that a Socratic structure such as 'Thinking Time' offers the children the opportunity to speak in class without the burden of answering a teacher directed question. With the teacher's omnipotent role relaxed, the children are given the opportunity *'to speak, to listen, to reflect, to have an opinion, to make a statement, to ask a question and to be listened to'* (p7).

Thinking in the abstract is a basic aim of the programme. Donnelly (1994: 8) explains abstract thinking as considering something *'apart from its normal surroundings (i.e. metaphorically to draw it away from)'*. She says we must encourage and support the children *'to go from the particular to the general and ultimately towards a concept'* (p 8). The children are dependent, she says, on their own personal histories of their senses and their knowledge –sometimes based on concrete experiences – and also on their imaginations to explore and define a thought, a question, or an idea. To use language, is in itself, she says, an abstract activity (p 8).

Giving children time to think is crucial to the dialogue, according to Donnelly (1994). As teachers we tend not to wait very long, usually, for a child to respond before either supplying hints, or the answer, or moving on to another child. It takes time to speak, to listen, to question, and to ponder. In time, the process of doing this work with a class builds up trust within the community of the classroom, according to Donnelly, and I can vouch that this happens through my own experience also.

Through asking children to question, to give reasons for opinions, to think critically, creatively and abstractly we are effectively leading out or drawing out from them what is tacit and innate.

Without dialogue there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education.
Freire (1990: 65).

<u>Chapter Two</u>

Contextualisation of theory

An overview of Lipman's 'philosophy for/with children' movement

'Philosophy for Children' began as a distinct movement in the late sixties, according to Reed (1998). Matthew Lipman, Professor of Philosophy in Columbia University, began to perceive a diminution in cognitive levels based on declining scores in standardised tests. It appeared to him that America's children were losing the ability to reason effectively and were lacking problem-solving strategies. He was also concerned with how children felt about schooling - what Reed calls '*the academic endeavour'*. '*Children seemed increasingly to dislike school and to value less'* (Reed 1998: 32).

In 1974, with Dr. Ann Sharp, Lipman founded the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) and developed a teacher-training programme. He wrote a series of texts, one for each grade. Not all teachers agree with his methodology however. Some have adapted the programmes to suit their own particular needs. I use an adaptation. In Action Reflection Cycle 1, I have investigated a variety of ways of 'seeding' discussion in order to develop my own personal methodology (Chapter 4).

Donnelly (1994) used the idea of 'a community of enquiry' – a Socratic dialogue format - to begin exploring the notion of getting children to think abstractly. She called her movement philosophy ***with*** children PwC to distinguish from Lipman's method that is often abbreviated to 'P4C' or *Philosophy **for** Children.* Murris (1997) states that PwC encompasses a far larger group than P4C because she says,

not all children's philosophy teachers believe that the IAPC material is the best educational material with which to introduce young children to philosophy
         Murris (1997: 139).

Lipman (1982) advocates that engaging children in dialogue is one of the best ways of stimulating thinking. Lipman (1980) states that dialogue is the most effective means of enhancing reflection and metacognition. Dialogue can be defined as the collaborative process of attempting to define, clarify, question and enquire about truths and values. According to Rodgers (1961) cited in Quinn (1996: 67) it includes an expectancy, an alertness, an aliveness, and an excitement of self- initiated learning. This in turn empowers and enables the child to enter a world of possibility and abstraction where both the creative and the logical can exist.

Like Donaldson and Holt, Lipman argues that children bring to school a burning curiosity and eagerness to learn but that gradually *'this curiosity and impulse to know and understand fade'* (Fisher 1998: 27). Lipman believes that traditional schooling must shoulder the blame for this malaise. If, as he believes, children can be transformed by education, then that education needs to be of a kind that makes thinking a priority.   Fisher adds that we must capitalise on the natural curiosity and hunger for meaning that children exhibit so readily in their early years. If we fail to nourish these needs, we fail children. Skilled reasoning must be learned, and absorbed by consistent practice in disciplined discussion, from the earliest days in school.

According to Fisher (1998) a philosophical discussion with children relies on several assumptions. One of these is the idea that children have a natural sense of wonder. Another is that by engaging them in discussing their questions philosophically we are facilitating their sense making of the world and their place in it.   The improvement in thinking that follows such a programme is, according to Fisher (1998), a movement from

unconscious to conscious thought, from everyday to critical thinking, moving from the surface of things to the structure of things, from what Socrates calls 'the unconsidered life' to a considered view which backs claims and opinions with reasons
(Fisher 1998: 39).

Lipman based his work largely on the theories of Dewey and Peirce. Peirce (1955) first introduced the idea of a 'community of enquirers'. Fisher (1998) explains this as the idea that scientific progress depends on the shared enquiry of a larger community of thought, a community that extends beyond the individual thinker and ultimately beyond the boundaries of time and place.

Murris (2000, footnote 3,) describes it as '*thinking with one big head'*.

Lipman was a personal friend of Dewey's in the latter's old age and he espoused many of Dewey's principles regarding thinking. Dewey was emphatic that learning comes from the reflection on experience, with the reflection being as integral as the experience itself.

Dewey (1933) contrasted '*routine action'* with '*reflective action'*, as did Schon (1983). Learning through experience, says Fisher (1998), should include both the experiences that children bring with them into the classroom from their lives outside of school and the experience of imaginative and reflective thought in school. Dewey (1933) identified three elements as being necessary for reflection – open-mindedness, intellectual responsibility and whole-heartedness. Pollard and Tann (1993), cited in Donnelly (1994), say that children are made aware of themselves as learners when we as teachers '*consciously and consistently provide the conditions for children to talk and explain their views'* (Pollard and Tann 1993: 280).

I feel instinctively that the thinking and talking sessions that I provide in my class are in line with these aspirations and are underpinned by the theories of the social constructivist psychologists and educationalists such as Vygotsky.

Learning processes –Skinner, Piaget, and Vygotsky – where does philosophising with children fit in?

Children learn in a myriad of ways. Philosophers and psychologists have long regarded learning as a highly complex activity that is still not fully explained or understood.   Pollard (1997) identifies three major theories of learning –the behaviourist model, the constructivist model and the social-constructivist model.

The theory of *behaviourism* suggests that humans learn by building up associations between their experiences, their thinking and their behaviour. Until the 1960's variations on the theme of behaviourism dominated perspectives on teaching and learning. On this model -largely attributed to Skinner who was one of the later psychologists in this area – was founded the whole-class didactic pedagogy. This model saw the role of the learner as a largely passive one. Rote learning, disciplined and tight control, and stimulus/response-type reward and punishment activities would have been standard procedures. As I have already stated, this is the way I was taught. There was a high degree of adult control of the entire schooling process. Input from pupils in any creative way would not have been the norm. According to Pollard (1997), this type of pedagogy runs the risk of reducing motivation and learning can be fragmented because it does not build meaningful understandings.

The theory of *constructivism* - one of the main proponents of which was Piaget - suggests that people learn through the interaction of thought and experience as well as through the sequential development of more complex cognitive structures. Piaget argued that when children meet a new experience they fit their existing thinking to it and assimilate aspects of the experience. Thus they gradually move on to construct more detailed and complex understandings of their experiences. Piaget argued that there are separate cognitive stages of development:

- The sensori-motor stage (birth to approximately two years)
- The pre-operational stage (approximately two to seven years)
- The concrete operations stage (approximately seven to twelve years)
- The formal operations stage (approximately twelve years upwards)

According to Piaget, abstract thinking is only possible in the formal operations stage when the child is twelve years old approximately. Psychologists like Donaldson (1978) have argued and demonstrated that in fact children have far greater intellectual ability than Piaget credited them with. She demonstrated that children emerge as socially competent beings far sooner than Piaget thought. Likewise, Donnelly (1994) states that while she accepts Piaget's argument for its consistency, she agrees with Donaldson that the whole process of socialised speech takes place much earlier than Piaget thought (p. 17).

According to Pollard (1997) critics of the constructivist model feel that too much emphasis is put on the individualism of learning and not enough on the social aspects of schooling. However, the learner is much more active than in the behaviourist model and the classroom is a varied, bustling and colourful environment. Again though, critics argue that too much of the responsibility for learning is placed on the learner.

In the third model there is once again a ***constructivist*** theory but one with a greater emphasis on the importance of the ***social*** context and of interactions with others. It is into this model that I would put the learning from a thinking-skills programme such as I have implemented in my class. Pollard (1997) views Lev Vygotsky as the most influential educationalist in this model.

Vygotsky did most of his writing in the 1930's but his work was not translated into English until the 1960's and 1970's. One of his greatest contributions to modern thinking is his idea of ZPD – the Zone of Proximal Development. This describes the distance between what the child can achieve with help and what he can achieve unaided. Morehouse (1999) states that the class discussion is itself a perfect model for ZPD. More able students are always providing scaffolding to less able students in classroom discussion, he says. The teacher is also providing discussion moves and 'scaffolding' (Bruner 1960) for the students. When I provide my students with statements like *'I wonder why…'* or *'I agree/disagree with…because'* I am helping them to move from routine to reflective thinking using these phrases as scaffolds.

I think that classroom dialogue fits easily into this concept. Vygotsky also extended our knowledge of the role that social development plays in learning.

Ideas, language and concepts derived from interaction with others- structure,
challenge, enhance or constrain thinking
(Rogoff and Lave, 1984, cited in Pollard 1987: 125).

Vygotsky considered young children to be intensely social. Piaget stated that there is *'no real social life between children of less than seven or eight years of age'* (1955: 40).

In **social constructivism**, then, learning is seen as social as well as individual. This approach recognises the need for the learner to take control of the learning as well as the need for good teaching to scaffold the learner until such time as this autonomy can be achieved. Thus a balance is struck between the earlier tight, subject-based didactic approach and the looser child-centred Piagetian model. According to Donnelly (1994), Vygotsky (1978:90) suggests that learning itself stimulates the awakening in the child of various internal development processes that are only possible when the child interacts with people and is operating in co-operation with his peers. The social aspect of learning then, is crucial according to Vygotsky. He says that we only become ourselves through others (1978:163). Thus, says Donnelly (1994: 15), Vygotsky argues that all higher cognitive functions begin with social interactions –real interpersonal relations. The lifeblood of social relations, she adds, is language.

'*Traditional didactic teaching methods delivered knowledge and information from teacher to student',* according to 'Charting our Education Future' (White Paper on Education, Government of Ireland 1995: 53). The Report of the National Education Convention (1994: 73) emphasised the

> *'need for styles of pedagogy which engage and involve all students more*
> *actively in the teaching-learning interaction than was traditional'.*

Fiumara (1990: 118) states that

> *we believe that the adult listens **because** the child speaks. By transforming*
> *and broadening our conception...we could ...justifiably affirm that the child*
> *begins to speak **because** the adult listens.*

Perhaps if we substitute '*Teacher*' for '*Adult*' here, we will make our awareness more acute.

From all of the readings I have done for this study I conclude that the concept of philosophising with children is grounded in the theories of most of the eminent educationalists of the twentieth century and is in line with current curricular aims. It is also as old as the statement attributed to Socrates - that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. Helping children to examine and try to make sense/explain their lives is central to the idea of philosophy with children

<u>Chapter Three</u>

Methodology

Overview of research paradigms

In Roche (1999a) I stated that prior to doing the module 'Researching Education' I read research reports only for their applicability to my own classroom situation. It never entered my head to question the manner in which the research was carried out nor to ask why the research was deemed necessary, or who conducted it. I gave no thought to the question of whose interests were served by it and neither did I query the ethical considerations of the research or, indeed, wondered if there *were* any ethical issues to be addressed.

I am now more critical. I realise now that there are many ways of conducting research and that not all of these are suitable for classroom based enquiry. In carrying out my own classroom-based research on philosophising, I am in effect putting my conceptual and theoretical learning to the test. In applying the conceptual knowledge gained through doing 'Researching Education' to my practice and in embodying within it my understandings of the principles and nature of educational research I have begun to generate my own theory about doing philosophising. This in turn will be underpinned by my practice.

Having knowledge in theory and applying it in practice can be a difficult and complex procedure. However if *I* have generated the theory and apply it to *my* practice thereby improving it, then my very ownership of it makes the process more concrete for me. Through my research study I attempt set my pupils on the road towards better thinking. At the same time I am extending the boundaries of my own understanding and learning about this important area of education. In fact what I am doing is developing 'my own living educational theories' (Whitehead 1983) about thinking and philosophising in the classroom.

Propositional knowledge about education has hitherto been largely generated in universities. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however there has emerged a challenge to the assumptions upon which educational knowledge and theory are based. What counts as knowledge? Who owns it? How was it generated? To what use is it put? These assumptions are now open to question. The answers to these questions can perhaps be found within an examination of the core values and assumptions of the research paradigms involved in the generation of this educational knowledge. McNiff (1988: 26) sees the dominant view of knowledge as one that could be viewed as having at its base the notion of control of the practices of others. She contrasts this reified form of knowledge with Polanyi's (1958) concept of personal knowledge.

The knowledge that I hold about my practice is mine. The knowledge that I will gain through my study will be mine. My claim to that knowledge can be made public and can be used by other teachers to assist their acquisition of knowledge, just as I will engage with the work of other researchers in the field of philosophising to aid my understanding. The methodology that I will apply and the paradigm of research that I will select must be able to encompass this view.

It would be irresponsible and unprofessional of me to embark on a research project within one particular paradigm of research without first seeking an understanding of the major paradigms of research and assessing their suitability for my project.   How could I justify the choice of any one particular methodology without discussing the others?

Let us now examine the major research paradigms and reflect upon some of these questions.

The nature of research

Bassey (1990: 20) defines research thus;

> *Research entails systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge.*

He defines a research paradigm as:

> *a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and the functions of researchers which, adhered to by a group of researchers, conditions the patterns of their thinking and underpins their research actions*
> *(Bassey 1990:13).*

He identifies three major paradigms of research: the empirical, the interpretive and the critical theoretic. Each paradigm has its own specific attributes. Each is underpinned by its own philosophical perspectives and assumptions and has its own epistemology or theory of knowledge. These theoretical and epistemological assumptions affect the methodology involved. A methodology is defined by Hitchcock and Hughes (1989; 20) as *'a theory or an analysis of how research should operate'*.

Within the education field the ontological issues or worldview issues remain a given irrespective of the paradigm involved. I am a teacher in a classroom with children. I am therefore connected to the sociology of their lives and homes and families and they with me and mine. I have my own biography, personality and character; they each have theirs. We operate within a classroom with school timetables, syllabi and curricula. The methodology that I select must take these ontological factors into consideration, particularly the existentialist fact of each person in the classroom being unique. Within my classroom is a vibrant, organic and special group of people, interacting and co-existing in the very real society of our school and neighbourhood. What is true for this class may not be so for next year's group. This also has to be addressed by the research paradigm I choose. The learning outcomes for me as a teacher will inform and improve my practice. Were I to carry out the

same study again, the fact that *I* will have changed will affect the outcomes. My choice of research methodology will have to embrace this metamorphosis also.

The research question at the heart of this dissertation is *'How can I improve the quality of philosophising in my classroom?'* This question involves several assumptions. I am presuming that both my practice and the quality of philosophising in my classroom need improvement. By investigating ways of helping my pupils to philosophise better, I am engaging with the literature and previous research, assimilating and hybridising it to suit my needs and the needs of my students. At the core of the question is my desire to intervene in my current pedagogy and improve it in relation to the teaching of thinking in my classroom. I am presuming that this intervention will not only improve the learning of my pupils but will lead to an improvement in my own learning and in my practice by my reflection on and my critical engagement with my understanding of what happens during my research.

Inherent in these assumptions also are values and ethics. Values provide a structure and a framework for our lives. How I think, how I feel and how I behave as a person or perform as a teacher are all informed and underpinned by the values I hold. In seeking improvement I am evaluating my practice and finding it in a state of constant flux and evolution just like any other organic and living entity. I am stating my values too and then examining my practice to see if these values are being fulfilled or negated by it. This in itself is an ethical exercise. I am also aware of the ontological fact that my practice involves other people, vulnerable people to whom I have moral and ethical as well as contractual obligations. In seeking a paradigm of research to suit my enquiry I have to test each paradigm against all these givens and establish the most suitable one for my study.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) state that ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological implications for the choice of data collection methods. *'What is seen to count as valid and appropriate data on schools and classrooms has varied'(p20).*

Let's examine the three main research paradigms, against all the criteria outlined above, to see which one has the best fit for my research.

The empirical paradigm

Given that any research carried out in my classroom will involve and impact on me and my pupils and will then indirectly impact on their parents, their peers, and my teaching colleagues, I have to decide if an empirical approach would count as *valid and appropriate* for my enquiry in my own classroom.

From my reading of some of the relevant literature I understand that empiricism is based on a scientific model, ideally suited to the study of the natural and physical world. The assumption would be that there is a fixed reality 'out there'. The researcher would have a clear idea of what she was looking for and would conduct an enquiry that would prove or disprove a given hypothesis. Without being context specific, there would be an attempt to prove causality. There would also be control and prediction, and the researcher - while exerting authority over what the subjects would experience - would remain detached from the subjects of the enquiry. The analysis or explanation would be value free and the experiments replicable using other subjects.

Data collection methods would perhaps generate lots of statistics. For validity of analysis this might involve having one group of my pupils, for example, becoming a control group that would act as a foil against which a test group would be judged. The research might well have to be covert. If the subjects knew about the study, their behaviour might be affected and the findings contaminated as a consequence.

This raises two immediate moral questions for me. The first one involves the issue of covert observation, about which I have reservations. I feel an instinctive antipathy towards the idea of 'using' my students in this way. The second regards the issue of a control group. If, for example the study is being carried out, as mine is, with a view to improvement, is it ethical to deliberately exclude a group of children from that improvement in order to validate data? But being empirical research and being value free, the word 'improvement' would not, perhaps, apply - given that it is, in itself, a value-laden concept.

In any case, I would not feel comfortable about carrying out research on my pupils without their and their parents' knowledge and consent, so this methodology is not one I would choose.

This does not mean that I will not use some empirical data collection methods where I see them as being useful and necessary. It is the assumptions underlying this paradigm that I question. It seems to me to be an excellent paradigm when applied to matters of scientific research. As I stated in Roche (1999a), I am heartened to know when I'm taking antibiotics, for example, that full empirical research has been carried out prior to the products being released on the market. Similarly, when I brake suddenly in my car, it is reassuring to know that the brake design was subjected to a comprehensive battery of tests.

'Empiricism regards all human situations as being identical' (Twomey 1997). My pupils, however, are diverse, complex and unique people not bacteria or mechanical components. I cannot see how an empirical approach would be suitable for an enquiry into my practice.

The epistemology of the empiricist tradition is that theory determines practice…the theory …implies control…if teachers are judged in the light of an epistemology that has a notion of controlled educational knowledge as its basis then all we are looking for is slick operators
        (McNiff 1988: 13-14).

The interpretive paradigm

Having rejected empiricism as a suitable framework, let's look at the interpretive tradition. Bassey (1990: 15) says that the interpretive researcher cannot accept the notion of there being a fixed, static replicable reality 'out there'. He argues that people perceive and construe the world in similar ways but have different interpretations of it. The researcher here does not share the empiricist's view of causality or prediction. Those working in the historical, anthropological or ethnographic fields often employ this paradigm. The researcher recognises that causes and effects are independent and interrelated. Each person has their own unique

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construction of the world and builds their own version of the reality of that world and finds their own route to learning through it (Melrose 1996). She goes on to say that the interpretive tradition recognises multiple interpretations of events, based on the different motives, reasoning and understanding of individuals citing Candy (1989) and Webb (1990). Interpretivists seek shared meaning with others.

Interpretivists accept also that their research cannot be exactly replicated. People change and by the very nature of the enquiry, the researcher impacts on and affects the study. Thus repetition might well result in different findings. Also the researcher brings her own bias, history and beliefs to the interpretations of the findings so that it is as a result value laden.

Unlike empiricism the researcher does not begin with a fixed hypothesis about an educational situation. However, many interpretivists share with empiricists the desire to remain detached and objective observers in the hope that this might ensure a greater degree of validity (Candy 1989, cited in Melrose 1996). As regards data collection, interpretive research does not favour any particular method. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, cited in Hitchcock and Hughes 1995) state that qualitative (interpretive) research is difficult to define clearly.

It has no theory, or paradigm that is distinctly its own…it does not belong to a single discipline. Nor does [it] have a distinct set of methods that are entirely its own
        (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995: 27).

Weedon (1993) says that very often teacher involvement in this type of research is passive. The teacher is involved, he says, simply because she represents the interface between the providers and recipients of formal education. He observes that quite often the teacher is an object of outsider research. He argues that this kind of research is fundamentally flawed because those who are not practitioners are investigating praxis and so lack the commitments, insights and practical understandings that make up an essential part of praxis. Praxis is defined in Melrose (1996: 52) as the idea that personal theory and practice grow, develop and adapt in unison and are not artificially separable. McNiff (1988: 51) contrasts the Aristotelian idea of *'techne'*, the mastering of and application of techniques, with *'praxis'* a concept that she describes as 'a wise and considered practice'.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) also accept that until fairly recently most educational research has been carried out by outside professional researchers. Data collecting methods are qualitative rather than quantitative and include questionnaires, interviews, case histories, field journals and biographies. The researchers often moved into the school, controlled the research process and departed the scene once the data had been collected and, perhaps findings were not relayed to the stakeholders in the research – that is, the teacher and the pupils. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) refer to this approach as '*smash and grab ethnography*' (p 40).

 I do not wish to carry out a piece of research-for-the-sake-of-research in my classroom but rather, I wish to inform and transform my practice. If the researcher's interpretation of events taking place in a classroom are considered valid in this paradigm then who better to do the research if not the teacher? She, after all, knows and possibly loves her pupils and she can perceive nuances of behaviour and intuitively gauge reactions that are perhaps not obvious to an outsider. At the heart of my study is change - change in me.

I agree with McNiff (1992: 18) who says that neither the empiricist nor the interpretive approach gives me a framework into which I can '*fit myself and my practice'*. Therefore rejecting interpretivism leads me on to an examination of the third major research paradigm.

The action research paradigm

With concepts like commitment, improvement, change, development, values, ethics, responsibility, care, justice, all being integral concepts of this paradigm, it is apparent straightaway that it is extremely personal and value-laden. According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 27) the principal features of such research are '*change'* (action) and '*collaboration'* (between the researcher and the researched). McNiff (1988) states that when action research is applied to classrooms, it is an approach committed to improving education through change. She adds that action research is effective because it makes teachers become aware and critical of their practice and encourages

them to be open-minded to the possibilities of change and improvement in that practice. Because it involves the teacher being in control of her own enquiry it is emancipatory and participatory. It is collaborative in that the teacher shares the enquiry with others, usually her students. It is 'research **with**, rather than research **on**' (p 4). It produces a lot more than the findings of a piece of research. It quickly becomes a way of living one's practice.

The elegance of action research is that it possesses within itself the ability to incorporate previous approaches because its focus rests on the enquirer rather than on his methodology
(McNiff 1998: 8).

My action research design

If the idea of improvement in my practice is the focus of my research question 'How can I improve…' then I wish, as Eames (1990, cited in Twomey 1997: 26) says, *'to evaluate and improve my practice in a methodological and rigorous manner'*.

In my case, this evaluation assumes that

- In my initial action reflection cycle, I observe and reflect on my practice.
- I identify an area where I see a weakness in my practice. In my case I realise that I control most discussions and I do not allow enough time and space for dialogue, and reflection on that dialogue, to take place
- I propose an intervention in my practice. I imagine some solutions to this problem. I begin to study what stimulates discussion among my pupils; I try to find the best way to get them talking with the minimum input from me.
- I try out these ideas and by collecting data, in collaboration with the children, I evaluate the outcomes.
- A new question arises: they are talking more but how can I improve the quality of their dialogue? How can I help them to develop their thinking so that they are beginning to philosophise and use higher-order thinking?
- I identify criteria by which I can evaluate the quality of the dialogue. I provide scaffolding (Bruner 1960) to help them achieve a better quality of dialogue. I am

applying what Vygotsky called the ZPD – the zone of proximal development where, bit by bit, I can remove the scaffold until I judge that they are beginning to instinctively use higher-order thinking.

- I gather data during each of these action reflection cycles in collaboration with my pupils in order to evaluate the work.

- I analyse my data and, based on the evidence in my evaluations, I modify my practice. As Bassey (1990: 17) puts it this enhances the 'quality of the action'.

Not all action researchers would completely agree with this methodology. There are three distinct movements within the action research paradigm:

- **Interpretive action research** as espoused by Elliott and others. Elliott (1991) sees action research as a facilitator for helping others to do research.

- **Critical theoretic action research** as evolved by Carr and Kemmis (1986) and others, in which they see action research as a tool for investigating and challenging the power relationships in our social situations.

- **Living theory** (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead 1996) in which action research is a *lived* practice - not merely a rhetorical or theoretic exercise.

This ***living theory*** form of action research is the methodology that I have chosen to carry out my study. I see it as being the most practical way for me to seek real improvement and development in my practice along with the chance to form a reflective and personal educational theory about creating a climate for philosophising in my classroom.

As I am using action research as my broad organising framework I use a variety of methods to collect both empirical and interpretive data. I have used field notes in the form of a research diary that has been invaluable to me for reflection. I have used both audio and video recordings, transcripts of 'Thinking Time' (Donnelly 1994) sessions, photographs of the evolving geography of the classroom, interviews with children, parents and colleagues - both from school and from my MA Ed study group. I have also used structured questionnaires, analyses of children's artwork and classroom observation. I have shown videos of three 'Thinking Time' sessions to parents. Excerpts from Parents' evaluations of these videos are in Appendices 2.1 and

2.2. Teaching colleagues - whose evaluations are also in Appendices 3.4 and 3.5 - filmed two of these videos.

My research participants were my class of twenty-four boys aged between six and seven years. I tested several different ways of stimulating classroom dialogue to see what worked best. I selected some transcripts of these dialogues, to seek evidence of philosophising. Then I concentrated briefly on three particular children. My validation groups consist of parents, teaching colleagues, MA Ed. colleagues and the school inspector (Appendix 2.3). I have met with the parents on a regular basis informally as often as daily in the case of some parents. My MA Ed group meets every six weeks on average but I have been in touch by phone with two critical partners on a bi- or tri-weekly basis. I have daily contact with my teaching colleague critical partners.

Ethical Considerations

Action research is open, democratic and above all ethical. I have observed the highest standards of ethics in relation to my study. I have sought and gained permission to carry out the research from my principal and school manager. I have written confirmation of permission from the parents. I have regularly made my students aware of their role as collaborators. In all cases the research participants were aware that I was the focus of the research and that the aim of it was an improvement in my practice. I have included all of the above permits in my appendices (Appendices 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4). I have observed strict confidentiality and do not name the students, their parents, the teachers or the school.

In my research diary (29-2-00) I wrote

*Today I showed the children my report and pointed out some of the transcript excerpts to them. I emphasised the confidential nature of the report. They could see their words on the page without their names. They amazed me by recalling accurately and instantly who said what, even from transcripts a few months old. This work had **meaning** for them.*

Action research is not without its critics. Viewed from the standpoint of the dominant empirical model and with its criteria judged against the normative criteria of this paradigm, it has been said, for instance, by Hitchcock and Hughes (1989), Hammersly (1986), and others, that action research is 'bad' research because it doesn't meet with these normative criteria – for example it is not objective, value-free, generalisable or replicable. However this viewpoint depends on one's values position. Action research challenges the very assumptions behind the empiricist stance. It challenges the ownership of knowledge. It refutes the idea of reified knowledge or the concept of there being a fixed reality 'out there'. By its very nature action research cannot be judged by criteria from other paradigms. Winter (1986) says that action research is a new paradigm with a sound theoretical base. This is not to say that empirical data is not sought. As with all research, evidence must be produced to support a claim to knowledge. Where some of the divergence occurs is in the whole idea of what counts as evidence.

My educational theories are imbued with my values. The principles of democracy and the development of personal autonomy inform my practice. Action research, as per McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) enables me to realise these principles in a very personal and practical way.

<u>Chapter Four</u>

The Study

Introduction: A chaotic beginning

Because I am writing up this report after the research has happened, it may appear neat and focussed and nicely wrapped up. In reality the process was often chaotic, messy and blurred. This was partly due to the fact that I began gathering data before I knew what *exactly* I was looking for.

What I wanted to show

I knew I wanted to improve my practice in relation to giving the children more scope in class for pondering, speculating, wondering and questioning. I wanted them to experience what it was like to do this as part of the society of their classroom –in their own community of enquiry. I wanted them to experience the dignity of speaking to an actively listening audience. I wanted them to do their thinking and enquiring in a safe and free environment. I also wanted to use the sessions as a way towards developing confidence and a positive self-image in children who might be lacking these feelings. And I wanted my report to show *everything*. This kind of work with children yields masses of data, many aspects of which would be interesting to analyse. I collected transcripts of every session, hoping that a succinct and clear research question would present itself.

What I need to show:

Then I reflected once more on what I need to show through this report.

- I need to show the development of *my* professional knowledge. *I* am the focus of this study.
- So, as well as showing that I understand more about doing research, I have to show that I understand more about teaching, particularly the teaching necessary for doing a programme of philosophising with young children.
- Along with showing that I understand more about research in general, I must *demonstrate* through this study that I understand action research in particular.
- Parallel with my development as a *teacher*, it must be apparent that I am still developing my *learning*.

If these qualities are obvious from this report then I consider the report itself to be the strongest piece of evidence in my claim to personal educational knowledge.

The truth is, that action research has become for me more than a just a *way of doing*. It is also now a *way of knowing*, a *way of showing* and a *way of living out my values in my practice*.

In this report I try to explain how doing an action research project has led to *my own educational development*. This is not merely that I have added to my own knowledge base by engaging with the epistemology of philosophising with children; or with the assumptions on which research paradigms are built. Rather it is more to do with the fact that I have revealed to myself the values that inform my life and the 'living educational theory' (Whitehead 1993) in which my personal and professional life is grounded, for I cannot extricate one from the other. When I say, *'I am a teacher'*, the *'I am'* is just as critical as the fact that teaching is my chosen profession. The kind of teacher I am is dependent on the kind of person I am. The things that affect me affect my work and vice versa.

[Dilemma: The idea that in action research I am at the heart of the enquiry and that I am more a learner than a teacher has caused me many hours of reflection and

puzzlement. If I am at the core of the enquiry or rather, if my practice is what's under scrutiny, why should so much emphasis be on my learning? And if I am the focus shouldn't somebody else be doing this study on me in parallel with me doing it on myself?]

When I discussed this with a colleague in the MA programme we eventually concluded that when we present our enquiry for scrutiny to our MA colleagues and engage in dialectical discourse with them, this, in effect, is what is happening. When I am pressured to provide criteria to support my evidence, and evidence to support my claim to knowledge, then both my professional knowledge and my practice are pushed onto a new level.

I have also come to understand now, that through my improved practice that is - teaching - my pupils' *learning* grows and develops. Through showing that growth or change, my improved practice - my *professional development* - is exposed. As my own professional learning grows my teaching improves and my pupils benefit. That is what I hope will emerge as you read this report. At least, that is the ideal I aspire towards.

Let us examine what happened.

My action research project

Aims

My **general aims** in undertaking this study are twofold;

- I wish to generate my 'own living educational theory' (Whitehead 1993) about philosophising in the classroom
- I hope to improve my own epistemology of practice while helping my pupils to improve their learning.

In writing up this report I have adopted a 'narrative enquiry process' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: xiii). In setting out this report I will use the template as presented in McNiff et al. (1996: 136) i.e.

- *What did I wish to investigate when I undertook this piece of learning?*
- *Why did I wish to investigate it?*
- *What did I think I could do about it?*
- *What did I do?*
- *What did I learn?*
- *How can I show that learning?*
- *How can I evaluate the impact that the investigation had on my professional practice?*
- *How has it extended me as a professional?*

What did I wish to investigate and why?

My research question or as Lomax (1992: 118) puts it – the '*educational intention*' at the heart of my enquiry is 'How can I improve my practice so as to help my pupils to philosophise?'

I wished to investigate my practice, first of all, to see what was I doing to encourage my children to improve their thinking. The aspect of my teaching that I was least

satisfied with was that I seemed to be doing most of the talking in the classroom - and this in spite of all my reading of education theory.

To reach this conclusion necessitated a process of **reflection**. Conscious reflection does not come easily to me. I tend to be an impulsive person. I go with my hunches, relying on my *'tacit or innate knowledge'* (Polanyi 1959: 24) or simply trusting in my instincts. Polanyi (1959) also says that tacit knowledge can be made explicit and articulated only with reflection.

According to Rudduck (1991) many experienced teachers do not see the *'capacity for analysis and reflection as part of their mainstream image of professional practice'(p 324).* However, reflectivity should be viewed as an essential component of a teacher's practice. It is, states Rudduck, a robust and developmental action not a *'flabby armchair aspiration'* (p324).

Covey (1989: 24) says that each of us has several maps in our heads. These, he says can be divided into two main categories: 'maps of *the way things are*, or *realities*, and maps of *the way things should be*, or *values'*. We are often unaware that we have these values. This is true in my case. I held personal values but I was never forced to enunciate these - even to myself – at least, not until 1998 when I first met Jean McNiff and embarked on this MA Ed course.

Rudduck (1991: 322) states that consciousness is only possible through reflection. On reflection then, I am now conscious that the values that I hold as a person and as a teacher are informed primarily by my Christian faith.

These are my values:
- *I believe that every person is a unique creation, deserving of dignity and respect.*
- *I believe in fairness. I try to apply the dictum "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you".*
- *I believe that as a teacher I should live this in my practice and lead by example.*
- *I believe that I have a moral obligation to try to ensure that each child in my class is free to reach his potential.*
- *I believe that children have a democratic right to the best possible education.*

- *I believe that no child should be afraid in my class.*
- *I believe that children have a right to be heard as well as seen.*

Along with my own set of personal values I would also feel obligated to include some aspects of a personal professional **Code of Conduct**. For example, I would have to aspire towards

- *the full discharge of my contractual duties to the best of my abilities*
- *ensuring as far as possible that no personal bias or prejudice will affect my work (this **could** include the doing of my research study - for example while immersed in it I must not lose sight of my main educational goals)*
- *striving to develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to remain competent and confident in my practice*

One of the learning outcomes of doing this study is that I would also add to my list of personal values the belief that the social development of the children in my class is every bit as important as the academic development. This addresses the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of the children.

I am realistic about this. I am aware that, to a great extent, this is dependent on factors outside of my sphere of influence and I realise that I cannot rewrite the nature and nurture blueprints of the children. What I *can* do though, is try to ensure that for the year that I am their teacher, these children will be given opportunities to develop as people in my classroom.

Was I living out my values in my practice?

When I evaluated my practice - with special reference to the provision of opportunities for thinking and talking - in the light of articulating these values, I found a discrepancy between my rhetoric and my practice. I was *not* allowing each child's voice to be heard. I did *not* allow enough time for the children to engage in higher-order thinking. I did *not* teach them the skills necessary for abstract, critical or creative thinking. I was *not* doing enough to develop the interpersonal and

intrapersonal relationships in my class. The social or affective education I was giving the children was being neglected in favour of the cognitive. My values, in these respects, were *not* evident in my practice. This then answers **why** I chose to investigate thinking in my class.

[Dilemma: In much of the literature around action research I have read the phrase 'My values were being denied'. I am uneasy about this. Who is denying them? As teachers we have a great amount of autonomy. The only way in which I can see that it is possible for me to pass the blame on, like this, is in the fact that until recently I didn't reflect on my values very much. Therefore, I could say that ignorance caused my values to be denied. Through reflection, I now have an informed conscience, so that I can see now that I was the one doing the denying. I should say instead 'Unconsciously, I denied and belied my values by my practice'.]

Even if I went no further in this study, I consider that my personal and professional knowledge has already been improved by doing this very active reflection.

What did I think I could do about it?

This step involves **planning.** I set about devising ways of developing both the cognitive and the affective learning in tandem. First of all I decided to investigate ways of improving my practice in relation to doing a programme of thinking and talking with my class. This programme is based on the work of the Philosophy with Children movement (see Chapter 2). The particular investigation at the outset was to examine various ways of stimulating discussion in the classroom.   The first avenue to explore was to establish who or what could help me to do this.

Who can help?

The first people to help me would of course be my pupils and, indirectly, their parents. Because my broad organising framework for carrying out this study is an

action research one (see Chapter Three) I first of all examined the ethics of doing this work. This led to my establishing the moral and ethical constraints within which I would operate. My ethics statement grew out of this reflection (Appendix 1.1).

Ethics

Part of the ethics of doing action research involves getting permission from the school authorities to do the study. I wrote out my ethics statement and letters seeking permission and presented them to my principal and to the manager of the Board of Management. In these, I agreed to observe strict confidentiality stating that I would not use the school name or the names of my pupils (Appendices 1.3 and 1.4). As my study would involve the whole class I gave a similar statement to all the parents and sought written permission to collaborate with their children in reviewing my practice. I emphasised that I would be the focus of the study and again stressed the confidential nature of the study. I also assured them that they had a perfect right to withhold permission (Appendix 1.2).

NB. There was no hesitancy in granting permission on the part of any of those from whom I sought permission.

[Dilemma: Educational action research is described frequently as being a 'bottom up' enquiry' carried out by practising teachers in their own classrooms, rather than a 'top down' type of research carried out by professional researchers on behalf of the universities or the DES. And so it is…but even though I am just a primary school teacher, very low in the education hierarchy, once I go into my classroom and close the door I am in an extremely powerful position in relation to my pupils and their parents. This is especially true for me because I am teaching in an area of social disadvantage where parents would not have the education or affluence to provide them with the confidence to challenge me. So how free are they <u>really</u> to withdraw their children from my study?]

Planning the initial intervention in my practice

Having negotiated permissions and access I then got on with more planning. I established a list of resources, people and literature; I fixed time schedules and arranged permissions; most of all I needed to identify a research question. This culminated in the writing of 'Preparation for Dissertation' (Roche 2000b).

The intervention in my practice was influenced first of all by reading around the topic of Philosophy with Children, reflecting on it and finally engaging with the theory that underpinned it (see Chapter Two). Richardson (1990), cited in Rudduck (1991: 329), says *'Experience is educative only with reflection'*.

Donaldson (1978: 122-125) recommends that children should be encouraged to ask questions and to express themselves spontaneously in an uninhibited way. Within a classroom discussion format, opportunities exist for children to do all this and more, but if allowed to do this in an unstructured and undisciplined way it would quickly descend into chaos with the louder and more dominant children ruling the group. Finding a method to put my theory into practice was therefore not simple - spontaneity and lack of inhibition are fine in theory but might be uproar in practice.

From Dewey, Vygotsky, Bruner, Holt, Donaldson and Gardner - to Fisher, Lipman, Murris, Donnelly, Meadows, Bonnet, Tough, Egan, Matthews, Quinn, Cam, Splitter and Sharp, the trends common to all these researchers are, in my opinion

- *that children's voices need to be heard;*
- *that children need to be given opportunities to enhance their innate creativity;*
- *that children need to be encouraged in thinking creatively, abstractly and critically.*

I believe, that, when I provide my pupils with the opportunity to engage in the activity of talking and listening and thinking in a caring and trusting community of enquiry, I am addressing many of their cognitive and affective needs.

Who else can help?

I talked with two like-minded and sympathetic colleagues in school who agreed to be sounding boards and observers/witnesses and validators of my trials and errors when testing out my theories. The children in my class would act as research participants and also as validators through their parents. (I approached some parents during parent/teacher meetings who willingly agreed). Two parents agreed to sit in discussion sessions. My critical friend in the MA group also agreed to be both validator - and dialectical partner. My tutor Jean McNiff was invaluable in listening and providing support as I discussed the feasibility of my research ideas with her. Jean's strength is in the intelligent way she used invisible - but, on reflection, tangible - scaffolding while I got on with constructing my project. However, I was always sure of her safety nets should I attempt to climb too high for my own good.

What did I do?

Resources

The second part of the planning stage was to **review the resources** available to me and to make a list of those I'd have to beg, borrow or buy. I had already bought a large selection of reading material. Doing an out-reach course has its drawbacks, in that library access can be problematic.

After doing some initial discussions and trying to record the speech of the children in shorthand, I came to the conclusion that my research diary/field notes were inadequate for the purpose of capturing dialogue. My 'wish list' of resources, as a result, included a camcorder and a hi-tech tape-recorder.

Our school tape recorders have neither microphones nor counters so I borrowed a 'ghetto-blaster' from my daughter. After discovering to my dismay, in January, that a lot of previously recorded dialogue was virtually inaudible because of 'hiss', I bought a small tape-recorder. (With hindsight, I realise that I could have prevented a lot of

frustration and saved a huge amount of time if I had listened to and transcribed the tapes on the day of recording).   The school has a video player but no recorder, so after trying unsuccessfully to borrow one for an extended period, I had to admit defeat and buy one. A colleague lent me a tripod.

The next purchases were teaching resources – storybooks, picture books, books about thinking and stories specifically for teaching thinking. I decided to buy these myself rather than approach the principal for funding, because I wanted to keep them in my personal resource bank. The traditional fairy stories were simple to find and I chose to buy a set of Ladybird Favourite Tales. I located several books by the author Anthony Browne, Fisher's (1996) 'Stories for Thinking' and Cam's (1997) 'Thinking Stories' via the Internet.

With my research group and validation group in place and with access and permissions agreed and with resources sorted out, I then began my second active bout of reading, this time focussing on *facilitating* discussion in classroom settings with young children. From the many theorists who support the doing of thinking in a classroom I devised my initial action.

 I decided to start by using the following methods of stimulating discussion: -

- **Using creative visualisation/meditation**: I worked out a series of lessons based on Garth's (1997) 'Earthlight: New Meditations for Children (Data archive 2).
- **Using specific 'stories for thinking'**: I also devised a series of lessons based on Fisher's (1996)'Stories for Thinking' (Data archive 2).
- **Using abstract topics:** I planned a series of discussions using such topics as 'Rainbows', 'The tide', 'What if there was no sky?' (Data archive 2).
- **Using traditional stories**: I worked out a series of lesson plans based on the retelling of the traditional stories of Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, The Sly Fox and the Little Red Hen and The [other] Little Red Hen (Data archive 2).
- **Using pictures**: I enlarged and photocopied some pictures from *'Zoo'* by Anthony Browne (1992) and from *'I wish I didn't have to sleep'* by Haring (1997) and devised some discussions around them (Appendix 4.5).
- **Using poems**: I planned to teach the children the poem 'Mr. Tom Narrow' and 'Worms' (Appendix 4.4) and base discussions on them.

- **Using the children's own suggestions**: I planned to elicit questions from the children and to select some of the most interesting ones for discussion (Appendix 4.3)
- **Protocol**: I planned to devote one session to setting up with the children our rules and protocol of doing class discussions (after we had done a few) (Appendix 4.2).

Time Table

At the beginning I thought it would be possible to do the whole study in one grand action cycle. But as I tried to plan this I realised that I would soon run into difficulties. For example how could I analyse all the scripts with a view to searching for evidence of higher-order thinking if in fact some of the means of stimulating dialogue were not effective? Therefore it was necessary to do the project in two stages or cycles.

The time–scale involved initially was October – December 1999 for the first intervention/observation. This was followed by a second action cycle from January to March 2000. I decided to call the first study **Action Reflection Cycle One**. In it I simply experimented with all the various methods of stimulating dialogue and tried to establish if any one method was better than all the rest. Initially this also helped me to sort out problems with tapes, transcripts and the time needed for these. It was also a getting-to-know-the-class period. **Action Reflection Cycle 2** involved analysing the data against certain criteria to see if, in fact, I could claim that the children were using higher-order thinking

An interesting phenomenon occurred as the research developed. Three very timid little boys with learning difficulties began to contribute to the discussions. My observations of their progress form three small vignettes that I call **Action Reflection Cycle Three**. These cycles were all progressive and developmental - even transformational. The confidence and ease with which the children began to use the language of *'I agree/ I disagree', 'I wonder'* o*r 'What if?';* the increase in self-esteem of the three students in Action Reflection Cycle 3, in particular; and my own increasing professional knowledge –which will emerge as you read further - are all evidence of the transformational nature of the study.

How can I show what the situation was like prior to carrying out the research?

The short answer is that I can't actually *show* what the situation was like. I can *tell* you what my perception was, based on my memories and on what I wrote into my diary and field notes. These latter, however, relate mostly to the data gathering I was doing rather than to the situation in general. They provide an overview that is less than comprehensive. I can *describe*, with a measure of shame, the chasm between my values and my practice in relation to allowing my pupils to speak. I can *let* the accounts of the parents of the three children in action reflection cycle 3 speak for me as they describe how their children *were*.

A preliminary effort - using meditation and using a story as stimulations – helps to show what the situation was like….

- **Using a meditation**

I commenced gathering data on 4-10-1999 with a creative/visualisation lesson taken from Garth (1997). The children all have pillows or cushions in school and they lay on these while I read aloud a creative visualisation story. An excerpt from my field notes (4-10-99) reads:

This initial session was a fiasco from a teaching perspective. The class seemed to me to be determined to be as obnoxious as possible. They giggled, poked each other, whispered, begged to go to the bathroom…The dialogue following it was driven by me. While the children responded to my questions they didn't volunteer any statements of their own. They need practice at this…

- **Using a story as a stimulation**

On 6-10-1999 I read a story from Fisher (1996). The story told of a faithful hound, Gelert, who gave his life to save the baby son of his owner. Using the teaching plan in the book (p 22-23), I asked the children specific questions and tried to engage them in discussion.

I was disappointed because so few of the children responded and those who did seemed to me to be doing so from a 'pleasing the teacher' perspective, rather than using any great thinking powers. I feel panicky… Am I wise trying to do a thinking programme with this particular class? What if all it shows is my inadequacy as a teacher? I am finding this class to be very difficult to teach.
    Field notes (6-10-99)

Referring to my field notes for this period, several things emerge. In retrospect some of these make me cringe with guilt i.e. the entry for 4-10-99 also says
 They're unruly, undisciplined, wild, loud and totally unsuitable for doing this kind of research. I wish I had last year's lot again. Very few of them paid attention. N and

N were quiet. N nearly drove me mad. In exasperation I put him out into C's room. But this broke the mood of the group. They were so restless I abandoned it. I was ratty and moaned to C that this research was going to be an ordeal...

Facilitation:

For the discussion on the story of Gelert, I allowed the children to sit in their ordinary places while I read the story. I figured that getting them to go into a circle formation would involve so much disruption that the discussion would suffer.

Seating arrangements as they were in October 1999. This photo is "staged" insofar as I re-arranged the seats deliberately for the photo in February 2000 because I hadn't had the foresight to take one in October.

As the study progressed, the geography of my classroom has changed several times and now the children remain in a circle for most of the day.

The entry in my research diary for 6-10-99 adds

Not a lot of interest. Story too difficult? Some Questions:
        Why did they all leave the baby alone?
        Why didn't the Mum stay?
        Where was his Mam?
        Why didn't they just close the door? Wolves can't open doors.

In retrospect I see now that the children were more than likely responding to non-verbal clues from my behaviour and body language. They probably sensed my antipathy and were upset by it. Also, I was so preoccupied with getting the children talking that I failed to see the significance of these very perceptive questions.

The situation as it was and the picture of it that emerges is a bleak one; I didn't relate well to this group of little boys and they seemed to sense this and live 'down' to my expectations. It could be viewed as a typical example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. I am appalled now in retrospect at the wide divergence between my values and my practice. Dadds (1995) referred to teachers' untidy lived realities. My reality is that I was living in untidy chaos both at home and in school. This doesn't exonerate me but perhaps it sheds some light.

Major house renovations had been dragging on at home, for months longer than I'd anticipated. In school, I was so conscious of doing a 'good' research project and so busy wishing that I had last year's class back, that I was failing miserably to appreciate the personalities and uniqueness of the children in front of me. I should have had more faith both in them and in me. I can clearly remember the feeling I had of being overwhelmed at the magnitude of the task before me, not just in doing this study, but in getting the syllabus covered with this class.

The class has one child who is very disruptive and comes from an extremely disturbed background. He suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder and is very difficult to manage. He attends a 'special needs' teacher for 90 minutes each day. I try to cram as much as possible into these 90 minutes of relative peace. There are three children who attend special reading classes each day for 30 minutes. Seven other children are

reading 'below their ages'. Three children attend speech therapy outside of school. Several children are poor articulators and have poor vocabulary. Several children come from homes that are affected by social disadvantage i.e. whose parents are currently splitting up or whose mothers qualify for deserted wives allowance. And these are the problems I know about…

Finding a time that is suitable for doing the Thinking Time sessions is a nightmare...
*I am firm in the conviction that **all** of the class should participate.… It would be*
easier to do this when disruptive children are attending other special needs classes
but this would negate the ethic I hold about justice...
     (Field notes 13-10-99).

However, I think I have now given you an idea of what the situation was like before I began in earnest.

Action Reflection Cycle One

From October to December 1999, I carried out a few Thinking sessions every week. Some of these were informal sessions early in the morning before formal lessons began. Some took place during wet lunch breaks when the children were in need of some diversion. Most were formal and timetabled as English: language development.

The initial focus was to establish what stimulus is best, given the following criteria, for getting the children talking. I am aware that this is difficult to evaluate given several variables, such as the number of interruptions, the time of day, whether the weather had prevented the children from going outside (this generally has a major influence on concentration and attention) etc. But overall, I wanted to see if any one method was easier to use with the children and more productive of dialogue.

Criteria:

Does the topic engage the children?
Do the children carry on the discussion without much input from me?
Is it a discussion or a merely a Question and Answer exercise?

- **Using an abstract topic.**
Facilitation: Circle format on cushions

The first method I tried after the previous two debacles was a lesson based on an abstract topic entitled *'What is the sky for?' and 'What if there was no sky?'* This took place on 11-11-99.   The topic had been introduced the day before and the children were encouraged to think about it overnight.

This discussion was very interesting for a lot of reasons. One was that the children strayed off the topic onto 'If there was no sun' frequently but returned to the 'sky' again without my intervention. Also I introduced the words *agree* and *disagree* but the children largely ignored them. I pushed them on this a little, such as when I asked one child

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T: *- Do you agree with what N. said - that if we had no clouds we'd be able to*
            see God?
            -   Child mumbles
T: *- I can't hear what you're saying, You don't agree?*
            - Child nods.

Clearly this child isn't sure what the terms 'I agree' and 'I disagree' mean. Later on in the discussion this is borne out when another child says

            -   I don't disagree
T: *- You don't **dis**agree... does that mean that you think he's right or you think*
            he's not right?
            -   I don't think that he's not right.
T: *- O...kay. That means you think he's right?*
            -I don't think he's right

When this is compared with transcripts from later on in the year the development, in this skill alone, is remarkable, as the children begin to use these terms with ease and obvious comprehension e.g. on 23-2-00 (Research diary):

            -   I agree with N and N because they said……and I think that too and I
            disagree with you N.
            -   I agree with N because he said….
            -   Actually I disagree with myself now and I agree with N too.
            -   I disagree with you Miss and with N
            -   I think I agree with N because I think….too

To return to Tape Number One (11-11-99) - again, my field notes for that day record:

The children began by sitting on their cushions listening to soft music and I instructed
them to think about the topic quietly for a moment or two. What was interesting for
me was the fact that at the beginning I hardly had any input into the conversation.
    (Research Diary 11-11-99)

Consider the following extract:

T: *What do we need the sky for?*

- It's God's floor

T: *It's God's floor?*

-   He stands on the clouds

-   It's nice to look at, the sky.

-   The sky makes it morning….(interruptions) – God makes it morning!

-   I know why, I know why God made the sky! To shine the sunlight down on us.

-   It's for the stars.

-   If there was no sun and no light it'd be pitch dark and if you were going…you'd be walking into cars and stuff.

-   Pass

-   If there was no clouds, if there was no …if there was sun there'd be all sun crowding…shining out

T: *Any ideas about the sky, N?*

         -   If there was no sun, all there would be is night.

I noted in my diary:

The children were clearly engaged with this topic, in fact the entire discussion went on for 30 minutes. The interest level was sustained despite several interruptions by children leaving to go to the reading room, a milk delivery, the secretary calling in for roll numbers and a parent collecting a child for a dental appointment. My input increased as the discussion developed but this was not intrusive as we were not in a real circle format and 'Thinking Time' rules had not yet been established formally. The listening was remarkable. At one point Sean referred back to something Craig had said 54 'inputs' previously

     (Research Diary 11-11-99).

In retrospect though, I think I allowed the discussion to go on too long and the children were remarkably patient and well behaved considering the duration. I think that this was because the topic was abstract and had no 'right answer'. Therefore they could speculate and be creative without fearing ridicule from the others. However

some of the more timid children 'passed' consistently and despite my encouragement refused to be drawn into the discussion. Other abstract topics that stood out for the quality of the engagement and for the almost invisible role I played in them were: *'Tides', 'Dangerous creatures', 'What if you could be God for a day', 'Thinking and dreaming: I wonder if they're different'* and *'What if we had wings for a day'.*

- **Using the traditional stories of Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, and The little Red Hen Stories.**

Facilitation: The children remained in their own seats.

The children seemed to enjoy listening to the stories but again, I had to drive the discussion along and it became a Question and Answer session. For example:

T: *Was Gretel right to push the witch into the oven?*
Emphatic "Yesses"
T: *Is it right to kill someone if they're bad, do you think?*
          -Yes
T: *Did the father in this story love his children, do you think?*
          -Yes but he was too poor really.
T: *If the father loved his children as you say he did, then why did he allow the*
          stepmother to persuade him to lose the children, I wonder?
          -Because she was the witch in disguise
          (Field notes 17-11-99)

'Cinderella' was likewise enjoyed but again, the discussion did not flow from the children (Research Diary 18-11-99).

Referring to my field notes for 19-11-99 I read

The 'Little red hen' stories did not capture their imaginations as much as the previous two stories. I had to ask continuous questions and even then the answers were rather flat. N asked a question 'Why are foxes so mean to hens?' But nobody answered. When I asked him if he had an idea he 'didn't know either'.

I mentally filed the question away as one that might be suitable for an abstract topic-based discussion. This in fact happened when we had a discussion following the teaching of the poem 'Worms', in which a chick concludes that to be happy, he only has to eat worms and goes on to describe them in gloriously slithery detail. I asked the question *'Do you think that its fair to worms that birds are allowed to eat them?'* (Research diary 12-1-00). (This discussion is described in '**Using poems'** p 62**)**.

However if my criteria are addressed, the traditional stories fail on all three counts because I had to push the discussions along with questions. While the answers often showed real signs of thinking and reflection, they did not count as a discussion, in my opinion.

- **Using pictures a/**

Facilitation: The children stood informally around a child's table and I put the book down in the centre of it.

This series of sessions took place on consecutive days. The first of these took place early in the morning with a group of ten children initially, that expanded as more children arrived in school. The first book used was Haring, (1997) *'I wish I didn't have to sleep!'* In all I chose four pictures for discussion.

The children spoke freely and often all at once as various aspects of the pictures caught their attention. The first picture, entitled 'Radiant Baby' is taken from Keith Haring's (1997) *I Wish I didn't Have to Sleep.*

-It's a baby crawling
-I think its not a baby. They don't have all spots on them.
-I know why there's spots. He's in his playpen
-Yeah, the bars…
-I goes [sic] in my playpen - I still has it for no reason. I turns it upside down to make a camp
-Miss! You're such a fast writer!

-Watch now. - She'll probably write down 'you're such a fast writer!' (Laughs)
(Field notes 12-11-99).

I have included this extract because it shows not only the excitement of the children but also the growing awareness they had of their responses being recorded. It is worth noting this, as it might have a bearing on the quality of the dialogue. When I discussed this with a colleague (research diary 6-12-99), she agreed that seeing me taking notes of their speech might work to promote better efforts from the children who might feel affirmed and proud that I think highly enough of their ideas to note them.

- **Using Pictures b/**

Facilitation: For this session the children were shown the picture just before home time (field notes 30-11-99). I told them in advance that I was going to let them see a picture. They were asked to look at the picture in silence. Then they were to go away with this image in their heads and think about it. I said we would have a 'Thinking Time' session about it the following day.

The picture in question is taken from 'Zoo' by Anthony Browne. It shows a night scene. I had the picture enlarged and laminated. The children had no idea of the context, as I had not let them see the book.

The discussion was interesting for me because Karin Murris had used this picture in Oxford in July 1999, to demonstrate to a large group of teachers and practical philosophers how to use pictures to facilitate Socratic dialogue. The first question from the educated and sophisticated adult group was 'Why is the tree in a cage? Remarkably, it was also the first question posed by my (mostly disadvantaged) six-year-old boys!

(Research diary 1-12-99).

I then formed the class into three smaller discussion groups (in small circles) and gave them three different pictures to discuss. The ensuing discussions were again driven, however by my questions and their answers. (Excerpt in Appendix 4.5).
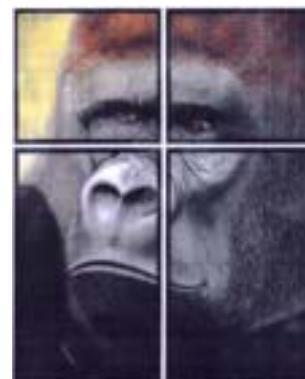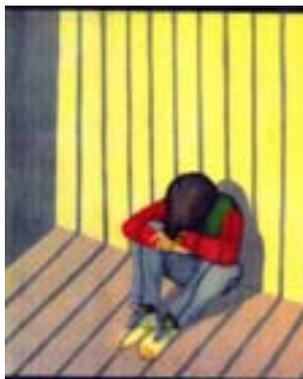
While the children were engaged and vocal, the discussion, though valuable, still needed a lot of teacher input, so it does not meet my criteria.

- **Using poems.**

Facilitation: Children were in their regular seats for the poem and then in circle or 'Thinking Time' format for the discussion.

The poem 'Mr. Tom Narrow' (Appendix 4.4) has delighted children in my classes for years. Tom goes about the town, wheeling his grandmother in a wheelbarrow, ringing a bell and shouting *'Grannies to sell! Old Grannies to sell!'* The very thought convulses most children, who, no doubt, visualise their own Nan in the barrow and themselves 'at the helm'. The poem goes on to describe the attitudes of neighbours; some are scandalised and some pragmatic ones decline to purchase because they see no possible use for the old lady. In the end Tom sends Granny back to bed and sells his barrow.

The discussions possible from a reading of this poem will no doubt add to cognitive development, but this poem is also excellent for examining moral issues and attitudes: for instance, our views about old people, particularly old women, and ageism in general. (How funny, for example, would we find the poem if Ms *Thomasina* Narrow

tried to get rid of her elderly grand*father*? Rather more pathetic, isn't it? Why, I wonder?)

Well, my six year olds, as I expected, didn't come to grips with the *feminist* aspects of ageism but they did reveal remarkable insights, for instance, about unconditional love and about respect.

I asked the question 'Are Grannies useful or useless or does it matter?'
(field notes 13-12-99).

> *-Grannies are useful for helping. They have loads of time, they're too old to work.*
> *-I agree with what N. said, because my granny has a broken leg and my godfather thinks she's not useful but then when I go out there she has all things for me and she (pause)... be goin' in shoppin' (pause)...she brings me out bars when I don't even ask her an' she brings me out dinkies an' stuff.*

J: *-I keep them (grannies) because they are people too, like us...if you   sell your granny you should be ashamed of yourself*
*-I agree with **J**... same people as us... when we grow up we'll get old.*

T: *How will we feel?*
-Old and old and broke.
-I agree with N. because his Nana goes shopping and he gets dinkies   an' bars
-I agree with N. too because he said that his Nan buys things when he don't even ask for them
-my Granddad and Nan, they always have time for me

T: *How does that make you feel?*
-Kind and gentle

(Note: J is one of the three children mentioned in Action Reflection Cycle 3).

The second poem I used, entitled 'Worms' (Appendix 4.4), was not recorded on tape, but I jotted down comments from the discussion of *'Do you think that its fair to worms that birds are allowed to eat them?'*

> *-It's not fair I think*
> *-It's the worms' own fault. They should dig down deeper*
> *-We can choose our food and birds can't, so they have to eat worms even if*
> > *some of them maybe don't like the taste ….but they still have to eat*
> > *them.*
> *-I don't agree, they eat peanuts and crumbs up in my garden*
> *-(interrupts)- and flies and spiders!*
> *-I agree with N, cos we shouldn't hunt really for fun, animals have to -*
> > *otherwise they'd die*

(Field notes 12-1-00).

These discussions came nearer to meeting my criteria. The children did not need so many questions from me as they had in other topics.

I realise that perhaps comparison of these different stimuli may be less than scientific - insofar as the conditions were not the same in each case - for instance, the facilitation varied. Overall, the **Abstract Topic** method appears to meet with all three of my criteria. However, I must qualify that by saying that maybe if the children had been grouped in an identical manner for each discussion, they might have taken more autonomy for keeping the dialogue alive. I don't know.

I am inclined to *think* however, that it is the abstractness of the topics that engaged them. Purely cognitive or comprehension questions were often answered woodenly, and questions of a moral type were also answered somewhat tentatively. Perhaps the children feared a trap. Perhaps they felt that there were 'right answers' and that I knew them. I don't know. I *do* know, however, that questions, like *'Why, I wonder do we have a sky?'* have no 'right answer' as far as children of that age are concerned. They are free, therefore to ponder and speculate to their hearts' content. This is, I think what drives the discussion along with little input from me. This is why it meets with all three criteria, also.

Learning outcomes from Action Reflection Cycle A:

All of the discussions above have been valuable and all are worth doing in whatever format. The fact that the children were thinking is valuable in itself. However, *I* have decided that the best way *for me* to get *my* pupils talking is by setting abstract topics - or by allowing the children to do so, (see action cycle 2), - and by seating them in a circle with me as merely a participant of that circle. In other words - I adopted the Donnelly (1994) 'Thinking Time' format. The children have learned to listen better as the transcript excerpts show. By saying *'I agree with N, because...'* they demonstrate that, not only have they found an ease in using this language but that they have listened to what another child has said, thought about it and found a match with their own thinking. Similarly to say *'I disagree'* shows that they have engaged with another child's ideas and realised that they differ and have the confidence to say this and to support it with a reason.

Through listening again to the tapes from the distance of a few months, I have noted that my style of asking questions is developing into a more holistic and open-ended one. From asking, for example, *'Why didn't Cinderella go to the ball in her raggy clothes?',* I have moved onto saying, *'I wonder why...'* This, I feel, is a gentler and more vulnerable way of saying the same thing. But for a timid child listening and trying to summon the confidence to answer, it might make all the difference. I also say 'I don't know' more often. As teachers we often find ourselves with the feeling that we should know all the answers. I don't think that children mind at all.

The kinds of questions teachers ask tend to be of the rhetorical variety for example . questions to which we already have the answers, according to Splitter and Sharp (1995: 51). They advocate more open questions. They categorise these into **'open procedural questions'** such as **'What do you mean by…?'** and **'open substantive questions'** such as **'Can you think without words?'**. Asking these kinds of questions is, they say unusual in modern educational practice. Relentless rhetorical questioning, they think, and I agree, *'may induce a sense of impotence on the part of students'* (Splitter and Sharp, 1995: 51).

Who asks the questions determines to a great extent who is in power and control in a classroom…In such a disempowering situation…the emphasis is placed on the answers that have been seen as important by the teachers. In that sense the education children get is very close to indoctrination
        (Murris 1997: 131).

I have noticed that elements of thinking time are beginning to creep into daily classroom discourse. I have overheard children at lunchbreak saying *'I think Pikachu is the best'* (Pikachu is a Pokemon character from this year's fad). Another boy replied '*I disagree with you, N. Its Ditto - he's better!'* (Field notes 23-2-00).

These outcomes may very well be particular to *this* group of children and may not be the case next year –but that's why an action research methodology is so apt for an enquiry like this. Next year I will have this much knowledge *before* I begin and so, my practice will be affected. I can't go back to a situation of *'not knowing'*- so next year's knowledge will build on the learning I got this year and my practice will, hopefully, be further improved. This then, is evidence of the way in which action research can *generate* living, personal, professional knowledge. It is context-based and value-laden, in a way that is particular to *my practice*, *this year with these particular children.*

Action Reflection Cycle Two

How can I show that the children are philosophising?

Fisher (1996: 16) describes how a community of enquiry develops:

…the children take some thinking time to devise their own questions and to discuss them. The group meets regularly. The questions get deeper and more thoughtful. The pupils' discussions get more disciplined and focused, and yet also more imaginative.

In Chapter 1, I defined philosophising (using Sutcliffe 1999) as

Conversations or communal dialogues in which children and teacher… explore their sense of wonder and practise the discipline of thinking well together.

'Thinking well together', I said, 'involved…

- o open, fair and democratic discussion,
- o in which it is necessary to listen actively
- o give reasons for opinions;
- o to hypothesise,
- o to ponder or speculate,
- o and to ask questions'.

I would also add that where the children are…

- o reflecting through the use of terms like 'I wonder';
- o where they are making statements and offering clarifications;
- o where they produce analogies or make comparisons or offer examples; where they make inferences or connections;
- o where they use syllogisms and begin to hypothesise…

 then there is evidence of philosophising or of higher-order thinking.

If we take these as **criteria** by which the dialogues can be evaluated, and examine a selection of excerpts from various discussions, I think it will be clear that in fact, philosophising is alive and well in my class of twenty-four six and seven year old boys. Having read the transcripts, listened to the tapes and watched the videos again over the past few days, I feel that by showing a sample of statements from a few transcripts I can demonstrate what I mean by highlighting those instances where the children exhibit some of the critical qualities.

The following excerpts are all taken from discussions that took place between October 1999 and February 2000.

(Note: I have inserted 'then' into the dialogue because it is implied. Cork children wouldn't normally use it. Similarly, they often omit 'because' also or say 'cos' or 'thas's (sic) why' instead).

'Sky': 11-11-99

-*If we had no clouds [then] we could see God*

-*If there wasn't any sky,[then] the sun would be shining out and God would be up higher than the clouds. He's not on the clouds…he's over the clouds.*

-*I don't agree cos then if all the clouds were gone [then] you'd see God*

-*If we had no sky [then] God wouldn't have nothin to walk on*

-*He could fly*

-**I don't agree** *with N. [because] he said God wouldn't have nothing to walk on…He doesn't need to walk…any way if he walks on the clouds [then] you'd see him walking past them*

-**What if** *they're all joined together?*

-*God doesn't need to walk on the clouds at all***. [Because]** *He just walks…he could walk on the blue too*

-**I don't agree** *– if he walked on the blue [then] he'd fall down through*

-**I disagree** *with N., cos if God was walking on the clouds [then] you'd see his footprints going up and down*

-*God's feet are huge…gigantic …***co***s when you see the church that's what size he is…the church and the door…***lik***e the giraffe house in Fota.*

-I think God is invisible *so* his footprints are invisible too

-I saw a photograph of him.

T: a photograph? Of God?

-Yeah, a very old photo that they found somewhere.

T: Are you thinking about Jesus now?

- No, God. [Because] He wears much different clothes to Jesus.

-I have something to say. If there was no sun, no clouds and no sky and if God had no feet … [then] he'd just fly around all day

'Worms': 12-1-00

-Who tells people that it's ok to eat animals?

-What I'd like to know is when did birds start eating worms…which bird got the first worm idea?

-Why did God make worms? I know why he made birds.

T: You do? Can you tell us?

-Yeah - for making songs and eggs…I suppose anyway

'Trees': 9-2-00

-I wonder…why the…What I would like to know is who planted the first tree.

-I think I can answer that question.

'Dangerous Creatures' : 24-2-00

-I think some animals are only looking for attention.

-I think some animals are dangerous cos circus trainers whips em to make em do tricks

-I agree with N and N and I disagree with N. Because N. and N said ….and N. said

'Cinderella': 18-11-99

-If she went in raggy clothes they might have laughed and [then] that would hurt her feelings

-No way would the prince have danced with her in her raggy clothes…cos his friends would all be mocking him -(a very 'masculinist' perspective!)

-It doesn't matter what you wear. Its…how you…think

*-You **could** have a ugly face **but** you could still be good and…you could…your face could fool others*

*-**I agree**, look at N.(child in class). He have(sic) a ugly face, kind of, and he's a very nice boy*

'Thinking and Dreaming': 20-10-99

-Thinking is inside of dreaming

*-You do need words in dreams**, if** you're talking to someone*

*-Thinking is kind of the same as dreaming**. [Because]** In the two of them you need pictures*

*-**I think** they're the same**. [Because]** When you dream you think of something but it's happening by itself. You make yourself think.*

*-Thinking about cartoons…thinking about what comes next **is kind of the same as** dreaming*

*-It's not the same**. [Because]** When you think, you **know** what to do. When you dream, you're like... getting chased. It's like action pictures.*

*-**I think** they're not the same.**[Because]** When you dream you can't control it but when you think you can control it …sort of.*

*-No, they're not the same**. [Because]** When you're thinking you can stop it but when you're dreaming it keeps on going until you wake up*

*-Dreams keep on going on and on...**[because]** you're in charge of your thoughts*

'Flowerpot': 12-11-99
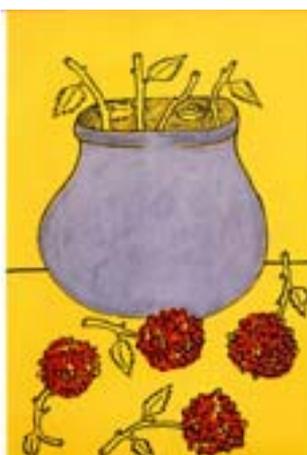
-It's a dead flowerpot

*-No – **[because] Then** that'd be dead.*

*-The flowers is dead. **[Because]** They're picked-ed (sic)*

-Its alive, but chopped off

*-**Maybe** they're in the garden and its outside-They were bad. **[Because]** You only cut flowers if they're bad*

*-I **think** someone angry cut them*

'God for a day': 14-2-00

> *-I agree* with N. *[because]*
>
> *-I don't agree* with N. *[because]* Bad boys aren't always bad. Sometimes good boys be bold
>
> *-I agree with myself*, still.
>
> *-I know I agree* with Greg but I can't remember what he said, but **I agreed when he was saying it**

'Questions for Thinking Time': 7-2-00

> *-I wonder* what age is God
>
> *-Why* are there dangerous creatures in the world?
>
> *-I would like to know why* grass is green and not purple or something?
>
> *-What if* we could take off parts of our bodies?
>
> *-What if* we had wings for a day?
>
> *-What if* there was no such thing as trees?

I could provide as many more examples of such pondering, wondering and speculating. I could show lots more examples of children agreeing and disagreeing, cordially, and supporting their statements with reasons. But even from just the snippets listed above, I think it could be argued that there is evidence of emergent hypothesising. I think that real thinking was going on and higher-order thinking at that.

If we bear in mind that these children have only been doing this kind of work for five months then it is all the more remarkable. If we extrapolate and try to imagine what they could do if they were to have a programme of thinking like this for every year of their primary schooling …then we could hazard a guess as to the development of thinking that would be apparent by sixth class.

Action Reflection Cycle Three

Three children have blossomed since this work began. In Appendix 3.6 I have included extracts from parents' letters to show how things *were*. These three children have all now begun to contribute regularly to the Thinking Time sessions. One boy – S - remained silent until early February and has only now begun to add his timid voice. Appendix 3.6 also shows excerpts from his mother's letter as she describes his confidence now.

I began to perceive signs of increasing confidence in W. to the extent that he began to show more willingness to try reading aloud. The remedial teacher noticed this too (Appendix 3.2) as did his mother (Appendix 3.6). I now have a video of him reading aloud to a rapt class seated around him. I also have a video of him watching himself on TV when I played the video for the class. He looks proud enough to burst. An excerpt from a transcript of an interview I had with him as he described how he felt is in Appendix 4.1.

A third child J (who was very unhappy in school and who had confessed to his mother that nobody would play with him, because he was 'thick'), see Appendix 3.6, also showed signs of increasing confidence. He began to blossom as other children agreed with his views (see p 62). He reached a real personal pinnacle of success when he was asked for his assistance in art one day. He made a particularly good clay model. 'How did you make it?' asked one of the brightest children in the class. J replied *'Come on, boy, I'll show ya'*. (Field notes Jan 2000). I have already described his happy, though late, arrival into school one day as he greeted me by name - to the shock of his mother who had had to coax him into school previously.

These three little boys used not to like school. Now they do. Their parents have remarked on the changes in them (Appendix 3.6). How do I know its because of doing 'Thinking Time'? I don't for sure – but my tacit and innate knowledge from twenty-eight years of dealing with little boys on a daily basis must count for something.

Monday March 13th 2000 was a very special day. Parents were invited to come along to the classroom to watch three video excerpts of 'Thinking Time' sessions. Seventeen parents (all mothers) turned up and watched in the tapes with their children. This was edifying. The children behaved impeccably and sat watching with pride. Later I spoke to some parents over a cup of coffee in the Parents' room (Appendix 4.6). It was very encouraging, also, to read their evaluations next day. Excerpts from these are in Appendices 2.1 and 2.2.

I'll leave the last word to the children

> *-I think its nice – thinking time - cos… people that are talking... the other people can't talk, cos they didn't get the tip*
> *-I like it cos everyone gets a go and only one at a time. Its interesting. Its fun. Its very good an there's no messing around.*
> *(Research diary: 20-10-99).*

> *-…[thinking time]… makes you brainier and if you didn't think you wouldn't know anything*
> *W -Thinking time makes you get better and better…at learning*
> *J -Because… it makes you brainy …when you try to think about a topic its like making a picture*
> *-I think by doing thinking time you get smarter and smarter and smarter and smarter and then …brainy*
> *-I like thinking time because when someone talks they might give you an idea*

(Research diary 13-3-00)

Chapter 5

Significance

Personal significance of the study

If I had to prioritise how the learning outcomes from this study have impacted on my practice, I would place at the top of the list the knowledge that I now hold about the value of active reflection. For the first time in my career I have articulated and made explicit for myself the values that I hold as a teacher and as a person.

The next major impact on my practice has been a pedagogic shift from a technical and operational style towards a more holistic social-constructivist style. Included in this shift in practice, is a shift in perception about the role of school in society. I am conscious, to a much greater level than ever before, of the need for a curriculum that is built on the importance of seeing school as a social learning environment. I value especially the awareness I now have about the Vygotskian (1978) idea of the teacher as an interventionist and learning supporter.

I had tacit knowledge about both my values and my pedagogic style, I think, but I had neither the theoretical framework nor the confidence of an epistemology of practice to 'examine my conscience' as it were. To search for a mismatch between values and practice assumes at the outset, that one can recognise it when one meets it. This mismatch could not come to light without reflection.

Up to recently, practical 'know-how' comprised most of my knowledge. Then, with this degree course, I began to denigrate that in favour of theoretical 'know that'. Ryle (1949) cited in Becher (1989) *marks a cognate distinction between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that', according the former a far from subsidiary role* (p 19). As a result of doing this study I have come full circle and with the confidence gained from engaging with education literature, I now value my practice far more than I used to. I realise that by reflecting on my practice - and on educational theory insofar as it underpins and affects my practice - I have reformed my assumptions about how learning takes place. I have now gained personal, professional knowledge that is

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specific to my context and laden with the values that I hold. Like any living organic thing, this personal knowledge is evolving all the time, even now - as I am wrestling with this articulation of it.

My practice has also changed in specific ways. For instance, I have noticed through listening to the recordings of 'Thinking Time' sessions from October 1999 to early March 2000, that my question-asking style has evolved into a much softer and open style. I am far more likely to begin with *'I wonder'* or *'What if?'* I am also more likely to say, *'I don't know'*. I don't glance frantically at the clock so often, when the children try to engage me in conversation. I have noticed that I now pay more attention to what the children are saying even informally (see epilogue). I am more conscious of the geography of my classroom. I try to maintain the democracy of a circular seating plan now (except for art or other co-operative activities).

I also value the study enormously, because, through doing it, I have come to like and respect the personalities of the boys. From almost actively disliking this class back in September/October I have come to being really fond of them and proud of them. They're still noisy and volatile and need supervision *all* the time - but now, through 'Thinking Time' I've been given an opportunity to see inside their heads and they're fine people. I have begun to *care about* as well as *care for* these children. Along with an improved interpersonal relationship between us, has been a real development in inter-child relationships.

My claim to knowledge

So what is it that I claim to know as a result of doing this study? I claim to know how best to stimulate philosophising in my classroom. Through carrying out my study I have demonstrated to myself that my practice in this regard is paradoxically at its best when I 'do least' - that is, when I simply allow the children to discuss and develop their thinking aloud together, with as little input as possible from me. I have stated that I was least satisfied with myself as a teacher because I monopolised the talk in my classroom. Through examination of my values I have come to see that monopoly as an abuse of my position of power in the classroom. Now, through the

implementation and facilitation of a structured and fair discussion programme, I have devolved some of that power back to my students. In doing that I took a pedagogic risk. But it has paid off –handsomely. I have gained insights into my own teaching and into my students' personalities. I have come to the knowledge practically - rather than from reading it in the theories of others - that each child is far from being a *tabula rasa* waiting for me to begin writing upon it. I realise that I underestimated the depth and scope of a child's capacity to ponder and speculate, to imagine, to postulate and to reflect.

Through engaging with as much of the literature of this kind of work as I could in preparation for doing this study, I have come to *know why* this work is valuable and necessary. Through carrying out the research project I have come to *know how* best to implement such a programme. Now, I *propose that* I know how and I know why. This theorising or meta-cognition sounds arrogant. I also would hasten to add, in all humility, that I also *know that* there is much more to learn.

The writing up of this report has revealed to me many of the insights gained from the study. From wrestling with syntax, form and structure, through to grappling with theories and ideas, while all the time struggling with concepts and puzzling over apparent paradoxes, I have begun the process of making my new knowledge explicit for myself.

This report is not the *product* of the study but the start of a new *process* as I continue to apply my knowledge in practice and further modify it to suit each new intake of pupils.

Significance of the study for my work place:

As I have already outlined in Chapter One, my workplace is a 'disadvantaged' school where the all male pupils are, to a great extent, taught in a pedagogic style that is not conducive to allowing the children time to talk and think. Lipman and Sharp (1976: 8) state that *'if children find the education they are being given meaningless, they will distrust it'.* Many of our pupils are quiet, timid children who, I am convinced, would blossom in confidence if such a programme were to become school policy. With the

understanding I've gained through doing this study and with the confidence from my new epistemology of practice, I feel that I am now in a stronger position to make a case for including this kind of work into the syllabus. I am further heartened by the fact that the Revised Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999) recognises the value of and recommends the introduction of such programmes in our schools.

We must teach children to be independent thinkers and divergent thinkers. We owe it to them to aid their development as critical, abstract and creative thinkers. Philosophy encourages us to ask questions. According to Bernstein (1991: 3-4) it is questioning that sets philosophy apart from other disciplines. He states

Today, when there is so much ambiguity, confusion, anxiety and uncertainty about what we do and how we live, the philosophical task of questioning/thinking matters more than ever
(Bernstein 1991: 4).

To include a programme of philosophising in the syllabus of each class in my school for as little as thirty minutes a week is one of my intentions now. I aim to put myself at the disposal of any staff members who need help in facilitation or ideas for seeding discussion. A recent conversation with my principal shows signs of support (Appendix 3.1).

Significance of the study for the wider educational field:

More and more teachers are aware of this work through the increasing frequency, for example, with which articles about Philosophising with Children are appearing in '*In Touch'*, the Journal of the Irish National Teachers Organisation. Membership of the Association of Teachers of Philosophy with Children has increased to such an extent that it is proposed that extra branches of the Association be set up throughout the country. I have been approached by the committee to help set a branch up in Cork. This dissertation may contribute to the growing body of knowledge about philosophising with children

Teachers in Ireland are currently undergoing in service training in the implementation of the Revised Curriculum, the aims and objectives of which underpin this dissertation. The staff of another school has asked me to help them plan the oral language section of their English programme, following my description of my study at the English in-service day. My principal has agreed to allow me time off to speak to them at their planning day next month.

In 'Growing up with Philosophy', Lipman and Sharp (1978: 8) say that the introduction of philosophising into schools will help children find meaning in their lives.

Children are curious …The child's persistent 'Why?' expresses a profound need to get at whatever meanings the world has to offer. This is why the child cannot make do with less than philosophy.
(Lipman and Sharp 1978: 8)

I have barely touched the tip of the iceberg of philosophising. I am filled with ideas and enthusiasm for doing more research. I want to do a long-term study on how doing 'Thinking Time' - throughout their entire primary school career - would impact on the development of a group of students. I have now begun with the first step by identifying what works best in practice and showing that the quality of thinking *was* creative, critical and abstract.

Using this as a basis, I would like to devise lessons and ideas for use from infants to sixth class, and evaluate and develop them through an ongoing study. I will continue to reflect and intervene in my practice to add to the process of development already underway.

Conclusion

So, this project has not been some kind of ad hoc solution to a vaguely articulated problem or a brief, novel interlude in my teaching life from which I'll soon 'recover' and slide back into my 'normal' mode. I am convinced from all I've read and from my study, that children need thinking lessons systematically throughout their primary school careers. I am equally convinced that teachers need to do regular action research - individually and as teams or - ideally with the whole school staff. This kind of honest, collective collaboration - with the children and their parents as partners in the process - would be so powerful. I would love to be part of such open-minded, just and democratic reform. In our school we have a long way to go but there is hope.

Since I began learning about action research and the power it has for professional transformation, I have come to realise that the function of my practice is not *just* to deliver a syllabus or to implement a curriculum. I also have to be the generator and creator of my own theories of teaching and learning. Obviously, I must reach this goal while fully and honestly complying with the terms of my contract as a teacher. But I now realise too, that my professional development is not achieved solely by attending summer courses or reading educational journals. These are valuable, certainly. However, *real* professional development for me has come through this action research on my practice. I have not tried to improve my practice because somebody else thinks it desirable. I have begun a holistic transformation of my own practice because I can now see clearly - through this action research process of reflection, intervention, action and evaluation - that my values and my practice were at odds. They are now more in harmony and I feel better, personally and professionally.

Epilogue

A 'Pringles' box sits on my desk. It is covered with coloured paper and bears the label 'Thinking Topics'. Little pieces of paper get added to it regularly. It gets a vigorous shaking every Tuesday afternoon prior to a topic being selected for Wednesday's Thinking Time. On Tuesday 21 March 2000 a child selected a piece of paper.

He read: What if we were as big as giants, and Miss and our Mams and Dads were as small as mice?

One day, recently, I began to eavesdrop on the chatter going on in the little queue waiting for corrections at my desk:

-'What if we were tall enough to reach that top shelf?'

-'That'd be cool!'

-'Yeah, what if we were as big as houses and people like our Dads and Mums and Miss were like mice?' (They chortled delightedly at the very notion).

-'Yeah, we could carry them around in our pockets …or in our lunch box'! (More laughs).

-'Then we'd hear them munching away. Hey you! Teeny tiny Dad! Leave some for me!'

-'We'd have to mind them from cats and stuff…'

-'Sposin they got lost!…You go to a cop and say …Hey! I've lost my Mum…An' he'd be thinking that you were lost!'

'But the cops'd be tweenchy too!'…

-'Oh wow!'

(Research Diary 6-3-00)

I regret to say that in my pre-MA Ed days I would quite likely have said 'Oh, come on Boys! Don't be silly!' The idea of arranging to have a classroom discussion around the idea of giant-sized children and microscopic adults would never have occurred to me. Nowadays, however, I stop whatever I'm doing and suggest that we add this idea to the several others in the Pringles box. It's equally likely that the children would suggest this too.

How far we've come in five months! They too have learned to recognise a 'good' topic – often a farfetched abstract impossibility, but at six…who cares? They don't know that inherent in the discussion about giant children, for example, might be an engagement with topics like 'Why must children be cared for by adults?' or 'The structure of society' or 'Safety'. They don't know that we will, in fact, be philosophising.

This kind of work is now given a thirty-minute slot in my weekly timetable. I value it hugely. I look forward to it as much as the children do. Before doing this degree I was unable to theorise and therefore justify this work. Now, through the reading

for this study and carrying out this action research project in my classroom, I have gained practical and theoretical knowledge that has led to a whole new personal, professional epistemology of practice.

Mary Roche Thursday, 30 March 2000

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Appendices Table of Contents

Appendix 1

Appendix 1.1 Statement of Ethics

I am a primary school teacher, in charge of a class of twenty-four boys aged six to seven years. As a teacher, I am aware that I am in a position of responsibility and of trust. I realise that I have the power to influence children.

Therefore, it is my promise that, while carrying out this research, I will observe the highest possible ethical standards. I will maintain the highest integrity at all times regarding data gathering. I will only report information that is in the public domain and within the law.

I will avoid plagiarism and fully acknowledge the work of others to which I have referred in my report. I will report my findings honestly and truthfully. I consider the research project worthwhile and of benefit to my students. Covert data gathering will not be a feature of my study. While acknowledging the rights of all the research participants, I also retain the right to report, providing that I have complied with all the ethical protocols outlined here.

- I acknowledge that I am the focus of the research, which is being carried out with a view to improving my practice

- The permission of my Principal and of the School Board will be obtained prior to the research study being carried out

- The permission of the children and the written consent of their parents will be obtained prior to the study

- The improvement in the learning of the children is of paramount concern to me.

- The children, as collaborators in the research, will be made aware regularly that research is going on

- At no time will the research detract from the normal work of the class

- Strict confidentiality will be adhered to: neither the children's names nor the names of the school or its staff will be divulged

- Parents will be kept appraised of all stages of the study and will have the democratic right to withdraw their children from the project at any time

- Videotapes and audiotapes will not be released without the written permission of the children's parents

Appendix 1.2 Copy of Parents' Consent Form

Dear Parents,

I am currently doing a course of study leading to an MA Ed. degree. As part of this course I am carrying out a small piece of research in my classroom. The focus of the study is myself and my own practice as a teacher. I am investigating how I can improve my teaching in relation to stimulating dialogue and discussion in the classroom.

To carry out this investigation I will be using a variety of data gathering techniques. These will include audio and videotape as well as transcripts of the class discussions. I am trying to improve the quality of thinking skills in the class in general and how I can best use my teaching skills to promote good thinking.

In writing up the report of my study, I will observe the strictest confidentiality.   At all times the school and the children will remain anonymous. No child will ever be asked to say anything of a private or a confidential nature. Any feedback from you the parents will also remain anonymous.

I am the focus of the study, not the children, but I need their co-operation and yours in order to carry out the study. They will be trying out my new techniques and by observing them and listening to their dialogues, I will be able to gauge how effective my teaching has been. As such you and they are collaborators and have a right to read any transcripts at any time. You are perfectly welcome to access all of my report should you wish to read it.

You also have a perfect right to refuse permission for your child to cooperate. This is your democratic right and will not in any way affect my relationship with you or your child. Please feel free to ask questions at any time. If it is possible I will present a report to the parents as a group next term and if the videos are of good enough quality, perhaps we can watch them together. We do our "Thinking Time" sessions on Wednesdays generally. The children usually know on Tuesdays what topic will be discussed next day.

Thanking you for your co-operation

Mary Roche

☐   ☐

I do   I do not   give permission for my child to collaborate in this research project

Signature of Parent

Appendix 1.3 Request for Consent of School Principal

For the attention of the School Principal

Tom, a chara,

I wish to carry out a small-scale research project in my classroom as part of an MA in Education. I would be grateful for your permission and support. I am the focus of the research and I aim to reflect on, evaluate and hopefully, improve my practice. In this study I am investigating using a programme called "Thinking Time" to promote philosophising or higher-order thinking in my students. By so doing I hope to improve inter-personal relationships in the class generally, as well as contributing to better self-confidence in particular children. This work is in line with the aims and objectives of the Revised Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999).

My data collection methods include audio and videotaping, photographs, observations, interviews, research diary entries and anecdotal reports. I have sought and gained parental permission. I guarantee confidentiality of information. I will only report information that is in the public domain and within the law. I will not reveal anything of a personal or comprising nature. If I intend to use information that is in any way sensitive I will seek the permission of the originator before using it. There will also be total confidentiality of pupils' names and I will not give the school name without permission.

Is mise, Le meas,

Mary Roche

To whom it may concern,

As Principal, I give permission to Mary Roche to carry out small-scale research, in her classroom and in this school, as described above.

Signature of Principal

Appendix 1.4 Request for Consent of Board of Management

For the attention of the Chairperson of the Board of Management

Anna, a chara,

I wish to carry out a small-scale research project in my classroom as part of an MA in Education. I would be grateful for your permission and support. I am the focus of the research and I aim to reflect on, evaluate and hopefully, improve my practice. In this study I am investigating listening and verbal skills in my class with the intention of promoting better pupil/teacher and pupil/pupil relationships. By so doing I hope to raise the confidence and self-esteem levels of the children.

My data collection methods include audio and videotaping, photographs, observations, interviews, research diary entries and anecdotal reports. I have sought and gained parental permission. I guarantee confidentiality of information. I will only report information that is in the public domain and within the law. I will not reveal anything of a personal or comprising nature. If I intend to use information that is in any way sensitive I will seek the permission of the originator before using it. There will also be total confidentiality of pupils' names and I will not give the school name without permission.

Is mise,

Le meas,

Mary Roche

To whom it may concern,

As chairperson of the board of management I give permission to Mary Roche to carry out small-scale research as described above.

Signature of Chairperson

Appendix 1.5 Copyright Permissions

THE RANDOM HOUSE ARCHIVE & LIBRARY
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23 February, 2000

Dear Mary Roche

RE: ZOO by Anthony Browne

Thank you for your e-mail message requesting permission to include 4 pictures and corresponding text (as reduced size colour photocopies) from the above in your dissertation for your MA Ed degree.

I am pleased to be able to grant the permission you require, subject to acknowledgements to the author, title and publisher. No alterations should be made to the original text without prior consent. I understand no commercial gain will be made from your work.

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TOTAL P.01

Appendix 2 Evaluations

Appendix 2.1 Evaluation Sample

One parent's evaluation of 'Thinking time' video.

You have just watched a video of your son and his classmates taking part in "Thinking Time".

1. What are your overall impressions of the video?

I was very impressed with the video. I expected to be amused, but I found their concepts very concise and I thought they put their case forward very well.

2. Did you think the children were listening to each other?

Yes, children remembered which child said what and held a certain thought for a long time until their time to speak came.

3. Did you think the children were interested in the topics?

Yes, my own son comes home and ponders on what he heard and uses the family as a sounding board. His older brother then adds his opinion.

4. Do you think that I am justified spending 30 minutes per week on doing "Thinking Time"?

*I think it is one of the most valuable lessons the child will ever learn. They learn to respect another persons point of view even if they disagree. They also learn to have confidence to express their opinions without ridicule. Children, especially boys, have very few avenues to voice their ideas and concerns. All their activities and games are within the confines of rules (real or imaginary). Football, hurling etc. have specific rules. Imaginary games i.e. cowboys and Indians etc. have set rules also, 'good **versus***

evil', 'the hero wins the day'.   Little girls, (I'm no expert I have no daughters or sisters)
have creative escapes in singing, dancing, speech, drama etc. but this is the only time I
have seen little boys with this forum to speak and express individual ideas.

5. What effect, if any, do you think will doing "Thinking Time" regularly have on the children?

I think the two main things it will teach are
    1.   To respect each others opinions
    2.   To have the confidence to give your opinion. The concept will teach more
       confident children to give shy children a chance and give shy children
       confidence to speak.

6. Do you think you would have enjoyed doing this in school? Why?

I would have loved this concept at school. I would have loved the chance to express my
ideas. My family was very strict and would never have considered my opinion or ideas
as a child.

7. Has your child ever spoken to you about "Thinking Time"?

N thinks about each subject testing the water with his ideas. We never correct his ideas
and wait for Wednesday to hear all the opinions.

8. Any other comments about the video or about "Thinking Time" in general?

I think it should be available all through school. I think it would reduce peer group
pressure. Children would see they can disagree and still be part of the group.

Appendix 2.2 Excerpts from Parents' Evaluations of 'Thinking Time' Video

Q1 What are your overall impressions of the video?

They were very interesting. Also I was very happy to be able to see A. and his classmates communicate and discuss topics among themselves.

The video of children was great and it is good to see them thinking and listening.

I think some of the children were very creative and really used their imagination...

Very good.

Very good.

I was very impressed. The children are at the right age to be on video. Any older and they would have been a bit inhibited by the camera.

It was great to hear all the different answers.

The children were very involved with what was being discussed and really didn't appear to be afraid to say what was on their mind. They also were very good to stay seated and talking for such a long time at their age.

I thought the video was very good. It definitely brought a lot of children out of themselves.

Very interesting to hear them talking about themselves. The video was very good overall.

I found it interesting to hear the boys speaking in a group situation.

I thought it was very interesting.

Q2 Did you think the children were listening to each other?

Yes

Most of the time but as it was going on a bit they started to get restless.

I did think the boys were listening to each other.

Yes. Some agreed and some disagreed but they were listening to each other.

Yes. You could tell they were listening because they could remember what another boy had said earlier.

Yes. They were able to remember comments made earlier.

Yes.

Yes, I do think the children were listening to each other. This is very obvious when one of the boys –8th to speak – can remember what a boy - 2nd to speak - has said and gives his comments.

Yes.

I did think the children were listening and also thinking and remembering what the other boys were saying.

Yes but I think they were looking for the teachers answer too.

Yes especially if some boy had something unusual or funny to say.

Q3 Did you think the children were interested in the topics?

The topic 'Trees' - very interested. 'Adam and Eve' - it took some time to get their interest.

Yes

They did seem interested in the topics and it was interesting to hear them elaborate and also to come up with new topics from the original.

Some of the topics

Very much so.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes, I did, because the ('what if?') questions are very good because you can see the child is trying hard to come up with the best answer. It really gets their imagination going which is great.

Yes. They were interested and had quite a lot of different ideas.

On some topics they probably would have more to say. I felt they were unsure when talking about Adam and Eve.

Yes.

Q4 Do you think I am justified spending 30 minutes per week on doing 'Thinking Time'?

Yes. When you think of the time spent on doing academic work 30 minutes spent on doing 'Thinking Time' is nothing. It gives the children a chance to speak in a relaxed manner.

Yes.

Yes, I do.

Definitely.

Yes, I think it is great quality time spent with the children. Not only do you see each child participate but also see how different each individual is.

Yes.

I think it is a great idea and you done an excellent job.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes. The children love it and anything they like they learn from.

Yes. Because my child who is a very quiet child went up on the stage at Christmas and in front of everyone could recite a poem, I just could not believe my eyes.

I think it is well worth spending this time as it gives them time to show their individuality and give their opinion about the subject being discussed. I also think it would be great if it could continue until 6th class and make them confident.

Q5 What effect, if any, do you think, will doing 'Thinking Time' regularly, have on the children?

It will encourage the children to speak more freely and not be afraid to speak their own minds and also not to worry about disagreeing with someone.

It will help them to think for themselves and always have an opinion of their own.

It will help give them confidence to speak in groups; to use their imagination; to remember what people have said and not be afraid to disagree and give the reason why they disagree.

It helps the boys to learn, for a start. It also helps them to listen to others in a group situation plus voicing their own opinions on certain topics.

It will teach them always to speak out when they feel they need to and I also think from doing this from a very early age they will always debate the meaning of 'I agree and I disagree' with what is to come in front of them in life.

It gives them time to understand each other and to use their minds.

I think its good because it will make them more aware of what's happening around them.

It will teach them to question things more with each other. It will also help the children to be more outgoing.

Getting to talk to each other. Getting more confidence.

It will help them to have the confidence to speak in front of people and to form their own opinions.

I think it will encourage them to be open-minded to another person's point of view.

It will give them confidence and also make them realise that everyone is entitled to their opinion and one's own idea is not always the one that's right.

Q6 Do you think you would have enjoyed doing this in school? Why?

Yes. Doing something that is different from ordinary school work is always welcome.

Yes. It would have helped us communicate with one another.

I would have enjoyed this in school. Why? Because it would have given me the confidence to speak at meetings etc. in the workplace and allowed us to use our imagination.

Although an excellent idea – personally I would have been quite shy to give an opinion in a group situation. However if it was done once a week, as in this case, I'm sure it would have built up my confidence to speak up on issues.

Yes of course! When I went to school you just went with the flow, you would never question anything or anyone. I did not know any better. We were never allowed to question anything.

Yes because it helps to bring our self out to each other.

Yes, because it is a lot of fun as well as being interesting.

Yes very much. When I went to school there was no fun in it. It was all work and no play.

Yes, something new to do.

Yes. It would have been great to have your own opinion and not just the teachers.

When I went to school you listened and were not encouraged to have qan opinion on anything. I would have loved an opportunity to have done something like what you are doing.

Yes because we were told to sit and not give an opinion. We were never allowed to disagree with what an adult said as we were supposed to keep our mouth shut and do what we were told when we were told.

Q7 Has your child ever told you about 'Thinking Time'?

Yes – very often.

Yes – but very little.

Yes he has.

No – unless I ask him about it.

Yes he has, many times. Especially when most of the class agreed with him on something, which makes him, feel very good about himself.

Yes and sometimes he thinks he's got all the answers.

Yes.

Yes.

No.

Yes - tells us what was discussed. Has even asked us to do it at home.

Yes and he looks forward to it every week.

Yes and he loves doing it very much. He sometimes talks about the topics and tells his ideas and speaks how some boys thought he was right and some thought he was wrong.

Q8 Any other comments about the video or about 'Thinking Time' in general?

Children need to think about things we take for granted and so do adults. Often we just fob our children off when they ask questions or say we will talk to them later, but children like to be listened to and I feel ' Thinking Time' gives them this opportunity. Very enjoyable.

Keep up the good work – it is great.

I thought the video was a great idea as it puts the boys in a situation 'on film' and I also think 'Thinking Time' is an excellent idea as it helps them 'use their heads'!

Overall I think it's a fantastic idea and not only are the children thinking but they're learning a lot as well from the different topics and it also develops their knowledge of language.

That it is good for the children and for some that are quiet it helps them to come out of themselves and they enjoy being videoed.

I think it's a really great idea.

I think it was a very good video and I would like other classes to have a chance of doing it. I would also like one of the topics to be maybe about some form of bullying in school. Just to see some of the actions that the children would take, if any. Because it is an ongoing thing in all schools today. Maybe it would make children more aware of it and that there is people there to help them with this. Maybe they could even help each other.

Very enjoyable. A great asset to the kids.

It was great and really surprising what some of the boys had to say.

It would be great if it was carried on from class to class.

I think you are very good to put the work into this. It must be very hard work but very enjoyable, I would say as well. It must be good to see you can make a difference to children's lives.

Appendix 2.3 School Inspector's Evaluation of a 'Thinking Time'

A Chigire,

You participated in a 'Thinking Time' session with my first class today. I would be most grateful if you would take the trouble to evaluate it using the following criteria:

Do you think that the children were actively participating?

Yes

Do you think that they showed signs of 'good' listening?

Yes – the children were able to remember both the points others had raised and who had raised them.

Do you consider that the discussion engaged the children in such a way that they kept the dialogue going without continuous input from the teacher?

The method used – round-robin – kept the conversation going and teacher only had to intervene to try and draw children's attention to the original question.

I am claiming that there is evidence of emergent hypothesising in the way the children ponder and speculate. Was this your impression?

Yes. The children showed evidence of reconsidering their positions and put forward new hypotheses. Very important learning framework here.

Given that the language of 'I agree/I disagree' would not be their normal parlance – do you consider that the children used these terms comfortably and with understanding?

Yes.

The children themselves decided on the rules and protocol for these discussions. In your opinion were they respectful of each other's views, quiet during others' contributions and well behaved, generally, during the session?

Yes, the children were very well behaved and they were respectful to each other.

I consider that this kind of talking and thinking programme is underpinned by the recommendations of the New Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999). Is this true, do you think?

Yes – very much so.

Any other comments?

The children became genuinely interested in the topic even though the original question/topic may not be one that arises from an on-going class topic.

(Signature of inspector)

Thank you for your co-operation,

Maire de Roiste

22 March 2000

Appendix 3 Validations

Appendix 3.1 Excerpt from Conversation with School Principal.

(Research diary Wednesday 23rd February 2000).

Principal: *"The academic benefits of doing this kind of work are fairly obvious, I suppose. Anything that stimulates and activates their creative and imaginative thinking is worth doing. Anything that prevents them from being passive and silent all the time is to be welcomed...*

But I think that this work has another side to it too. It appears to me that what you are actually doing is fulfilling almost a parental role, insofar as you are probably the only person who talks in a serious non- condescending way with these children. I sometimes think that some of these children rarely get the chance to converse. They get spoken to but I imagine they don't often get listened to. For a lot of our pupils, sadly the main 'voice' they hear is that of the television, the video, the playstation or the computer...

Take J for example. When that child came into my class last year I didn't know what to expect because he hadn't gone through the Junior Infant class here. He was completely silent. Sometimes I even thought he was deaf. I never heard the child's voice at the beginning. So I gave him a few weeks to get his bearings and settle down and I supposed he'd speak eventually. No. He never said a word except to answer a question and even that was rare. And here he is now talking in a group and volunteering his opinion. That's fairly amazing when you think of the way he was last year...

For that reason, I think that by providing them with this 'thinking and talking' programme, you are almost helping to rear them. Long ago ours was an oral tradition. When I was young you'd think nothing of conversations that lasted three or four days. People would visit each other's houses by night and speculate and ponder on something or other. If a conclusion wasn't reached they simply took up the topic next evening. That's how they passed the time. Actually they would be philosophising - except back then they didn't use that word. Children would see this and take part and realise it was of social importance. Television fairly well ended a lot of that tradition. In a small way you are replacing this oral tradition for them".

Appendix 3.2 Validation of Remedial Teacher

29 March 2000

Having worked with S since September 1998 and with J and W since September 1999 I can see a gradual, steady improvement in their reading, writing and behaviour.

S was very shy and timid and has recently become more outgoing and confident in himself.

J and W were initially very restless and found it difficult to concentrate for any length of time. They have settled a lot in the past few months and are more interested and motivated.

W in particular, is more calm and steady. He has matured a lot and is now glowing with an inner confidence. His active participation in the reading class is also giving him leadership qualities within the group. I can see a tremendous improvement in him.

Signature of Remedial Teacher

Appendix 3.3 One parent's Validation Following Participation in 'Thinking Time' session.

1 March 2000.

Listening to some of the boys I felt they put a lot of thought into the topic of discussion. Each boy had a chance to put forward his own ideas and in turn to listen to what the other boys had to say. I felt they knew they could disagree with the teacher if her idea differed from their own. Some of them really used their imaginations and it didn't matter how far fetched their ideas were they could still say them.

There was no pressure on anyone to say something and I think the boys knew this and found it easy to talk.

Appendix 3.4 Validation of Teaching Colleague (Paula)

February 24, 2000

Paula,

You were kind enough to videotape a session of "Thinking Time" for me. The topic, "Dangerous Creatures", was suggested by a pupil and chosen by consensus, by the class. Could you evaluate the session using the following criteria, please?

Did it appear that I was controlling the discussion?

No, it did not appear that you were controlling the discussion. At times, individual children needed a little direction but not the discussion.

Do you think the children were listening to each other?

Most definitely! I was amazed to hear the children being able to carry through a certain train of thought, that another child might have initiated.

Do you think the children understood the idea of a class discussion?

The children have arrived at a situation whereby they now understand the idea and value of discussion. Certain children, by their nature will enter into discussion more readily than others, but that is not to take from the sense of interaction that the others feel.

Did you feel that the children understood the language of 'I agree/I disagree'?

Before observing the discussion I would have imagined that 6-7 year old children would have difficulty understanding this language. However having listened to the boys voice their opinions with their various supporting arguments, I believe they have achieved this understanding.

Were the children enjoying the session, do you think?

In general, I think the children were enjoying the session. The very fact that every child voiced an opinion and didn't 'pass' to me substantiates the fact that they all felt comfortable enough, and were enjoying the session enough, to fully participate.

What, if any, do you think are the benefits of such a programme?

Having previously taught this group of children, I was amazed to see and hear how 'vocal' certain children had become. Shy, retiring, unassuming children had blossomed so much – it was marvellous to see.

Would you see any possible use for such a programme to be implemented throughout the school?

I could definitely see the benefits that other children would gain from such a programme. If such young children can develop and open up, I would love to witness how other/older groups would benefit.

Any other comments?

In a discussion with some of the parents at a later date, I discovered that two children, as a result of this class discussion, had formed strong personal opinions with regard to a visiting circus. When asked if they would like to attend the circus they said 'No, thank you, I think it is cruel to the animals'!

I appreciate your co-operation, Paula,
Thank you,

Mary

Appendix 3.5 Validation of Teaching Colleague (Catherine)

February 9, 2000

Catherine,

You were kind enough to videotape a session of "Thinking Time" for me. The topic, "What if there were no such things as trees? ", was suggested by Colm and chosen by consensus, for discussion, by the class. Could you evaluate the session using the following criteria, please?

Did it appear that I was controlling the discussion?

No. You made quite sure that everyone participated.

How did the children interact with me, do you think?

They were relaxed and friendly and didn't see you in role as 'teacher'. It didn't seem like school work at all.

Do you think the children were listening to each other?

Yes they were able to comment on each other's suggestions and had respect for each other's opinions.

Do you think the children understood the idea of a class discussion?

I'm not sure – it seemed they were used to the format

Did you feel that the children understood the language of 'I agree/I disagree'?

Yes – they responded meaningfully.

Were the children enjoying the session, do you think? How did they interact with each other, for instance?

Yes their attention span was very good. They took their turns respectfully.

What, if any, do you think are the benefits of such a programme?

It teaches them to think, which is fundamental to learning. They are attuned to problem-solving at an early age. It teaches them to respect others' opinions.

Would you see any possible use for such a programme to be implemented throughout the school?

I would like to see it continued through the classes. It would teach
Children to recognise their own capabilities for future productivity and skills. It would give all children a voice in the classroom and would lead to social justice for all.

What effect has the circular seating arrangement - with the teacher being on an equal basis as the children –have on the discussion, do you think?

It gives a sense of empowerment and equality to the children, I would imagine.

Any other comments?

I have seen a 'skills transfer' of this work. I have the class you had last year and during a group discussion one day, I witnessed one group of children taking turns to speak using a 'talking object'. It was very democratic. The others listened while the child with the object spoke. It was wonderful to see this transfer to a lesson outside of 'Thinking Time' and in another classroom, where it is rarely done - and a year later too. Thank you Mary for your inspiration. Wishing you all the very best –

Catherine.

I appreciate your co-operation, Catherine,
Thank you,
Mary

Appendix 3.6 Validation of Parents of Children in Action Research Cycle 3

Validation from W's mum

There's no doubt about it, he's like a different child. You know the way he was; you could get nowhere with him and he was always getting his poor brother into trouble.… Now he's like more thoughtful – more considerate and he's happier looking too. You wouldn't think he was the same child even my friend Rose remarked on him. She was always saying how he was a handful. Honest to God he's away better. And the reading is coming on great. He read the whole lot of his library book from start to finish for us…perfect. We were amazed. He was never much good at the reading. Get him to read it for you tomorrow – it's the one called Mess Monster.…

 (Excerpt from conversation with W's mother following Parent/Teacher meeting. Research diary 21 January 2000)

Validation from S's Mum

I think he's getting a bit better at talking up definitely. He wouldn't say nothing before. He was very quiet – too quiet! If someone asked him something he'd hang his head, at least he talks now. I'd say the talking game in school is definitely helping him to get a bit of courage. He likes it anyway...

(Excerpt from conversation with S's mother following Parent/Teacher meeting. Research diary 21 January 2000)

Validation from J's Mum

Jonathan is away happier in school. He used to hate school. He was always saying that there was noone to play with him over him being 'thick'. He told me that. He said 'they won't play with me Mam cos they said I'm thick'. That's an awful hard thing... to hear your child saying that he's thick and he only six. I know the boys don't mean to hurt him but they did.

Then he started asking me questions about something to think about ...the tide coming in or something... and he wanted to know all about it for his thinking in school. Then he was all excited about this because the boys were saying he was right. After a while he was looking forward to it. Sure I nearly died when he shouted to you one day...there's no way he would ever have done that before. Not a bother on him now. I think he even plays with some few fellas in the yard. That's a great load off my mind. It's great to see him happy.

(Excerpt from conversation with J's mother following Parent/ Teacher meeting. Research diary 21 January 2000).

(Soon afterwards J joined a karate class and now attends weekly sessions).

Appendix 3.7: Copy of Validation from MA Ed colleague

Dear Mary,

Thank you for sharing your project with us. I talked to you on previous meetings about your research that started with 'How can I improve listening skills in the classroom?' You developed that into investigating teacher listening; and then into exploring how interpersonal relationships in the classroom could be improved by the setting up of a programme of talking and listening with the children – or, as you describe them, the people with whom you share your classroom. It has been clear to me that all along the way, you were evolving your own personal theories of why this work was needed.

Now you have developed the project further into investigating the possibility of using these discussion times to improve the children's thinking powers. It was very interesting to see how the topics that were chosen by the children turned out to be the most lively in terms of better quality discussions and less teacher control. It was also interesting to see your struggle to stay out of the discussions as much as possible and not to let them be turned into 'lessons'.

It seems to me that your project has followed the path of all action research, the original leading into all different paths, not unrelated but evolving and moving further on from the first work. In the process you seem to have reached a new level of professional development where you are very conscious of the need to let the children's voices be heard and where you have changed your teaching methods to accommodate that. Your willingness to engage with the children and to improve your own method of teaching is admirable. Your total commitment to improving life/learning for the children in your care comes across very strongly.

Thank you for your continued support and help which has contributed to my enjoyment of the study group.

Good luck in the future

Signature of MA Ed Colleague (1)   25 March 2000,

Appendix 3.8: Copy of validation from MA Ed colleague

Dear Mary,

Thank you for the wonderful insights you gave me into your life and work with children. Your work on developing thinking skills has clearly impacted in no small way on your professional and, I would think, personal development. I can see your progression from the initial observation you made on the school trip, back at the beginning of this course, to your present classroom of vibrant and bright young children enjoying their thinking times, as a hugely significant experience – a progression from latent potential to active and self-directed learning for the children.

You observed a weakness in your teaching – one many of us share – teacher over-talk – and out of that grew not only a strategy which 'switched the children on to talking' but also gave an opportunity to many shy and timid children to open up and to get them all thinking more actively. Your own practice, I would think, has benefited hugely as a result.

I could sense your initial lack of confidence and the feeling that this work was not new. Indeed it may not be new - but the implementation of it in your class is new, thus for you and for your children it is new. Things have changed and reports from parents and teaching colleagues bear this out. You should celebrate that achievement

Good luck with your work in the future,

Signature of MA Ed Colleague (2)   29 March 2000.

Appendix 4 Miscellaneous

Appendix 4.1. Excerpt from Conversation with W. Regarding his Improved Reading Prowess.

(Research diary Wednesday 29th March 2000).

T: Do you remember the day; it was ages ago now, when you said that you would read the book for the boys. Can you tell me a little bit about why you decided that you could read this book out loud for the class?

W: Em, Paul read it to me first and then he learned me and then he said 'say it by your own' and then I - em - sayed it.

T: At home was it? Who's Paul?

W: Paul Durkin.

T: And did you find it hard to do it. Or were you surprised that it came easily to you?

(W nods)

T: You'll have to say Yes. You didn't think it was going to be so easy then?

(W. shakes his head)

T: So how did you feel then when you started to read it for the class?

W: I feeled happy.

T: I see, why?

W: Cos I love reading it.

T: Do you? Had you ever read a book out loud for a whole class like that before?

W: No cos I couldn't read one, then I started getting reading books and got better at it.

T: Oh right. Tell me how do you think you got the confidence to do that, to read out loud?

(W. shrugs)

T: And did you tell your Mummy when you went home, that you had read it?

W: Yes.

T: *And the other question I'm going to ask you is do you remember I took a video of you reading it and then I showed the video on the television. How did you feel when you were watching that video?*

W: *(smiling broadly) Happy …and …and …shy.*

T: *OK, so have you read any other books since then?*

W: *The one em..the one what you gave me when we were down there.*

T: *Right. What was that called?*

W: *The alien one.*

T: *The alien with the green socks is it?*

W: *The one with the green face…the girl.*

T: *And were you able to read all the words in that? Good. Well if you find another one that you'd like to read, tell me and you can read it for the boys.*
(W smiles and nods)

T: *So do you think... would you say... that you're not as shy as you used to be?*

W: *(emphatically) No!*

*T****:   So you're not as shy and you're happier…isn't that wonderful? And how about doing the thinking time. At the start you used never, ever talk….how do you feel now? Today I heard you saying loads of things in the 'thinking time'. I even heard you disagreeing with N!***

W: *It's easier now cos I can think of loads of things.*
(The class getting noisier and noisier in background forces this conversation to a conclusion).

T: *Good boy, thank you.*

Appendix 4.2 Rules for Thinking Time Decided by the Class

Wednesday 12 January 2000

1. We must be quiet. No talking when people are talking. If boys won't be quiet Teacher should ask them do they want to stay in the Thinking Time circle or leave the room and go to another teacher's class. If they say they want to stay then there's no second chance.

2. Only the boy who has the 'tip' can talk.

3. After the 'tip around' then boys who didn't have a shot at talking already can go first.

4. We must be serious about it. There must be no messing and no saying funny things just to get a laugh.

5. We must show good listening.

6. We shouldn't agree with someone just because he's our best friend – only if we *really* agree with what he says. The same goes for disagreeing, no disagreeing with someone just because he's not your friend.

Appendix 4.3 Topics Suggested By Children

February - March 2000.

Why are girls and boys different?

What if you could take out some of your bones?

Why can girls wear skirts and trousers and boys can only wear trousers (except in Scotland)?

Why did God make scary dreams and nightmares?

Why can't we be invisible?

Why isn't the school building (or most other buildings) round?

Why did God make the stars?

Why can't we have 9 lives like a cat?

Why did God make birds?

How did God make up all the words in our languages?

What did God make the moon for?

Why didn't God just make all men and no women?

Why can't animals speak?

I wonder why God made the earth if he didn't know what it was?

What if we could have different shaped bodies?

Why do teeth fall out – why didn't we just get the right ones first?

How did God make the sky?

Why can't we stretch really long like elastic?

What if you could have magic for just one day?

Where does magic come from?

How would it be if we could understand what animals think and feel?

If you could invent an animal, what would it be?

Why did we make cars?

If you were magic and you changed peoples language what would happen?

Why did God make both people and animals, why not just people?

What will happen when the last person on earth dies?

What would it feel like to know you were the last person on earth?

How come children's bones are stronger than adults?

Why did we invent trophies?

If you had magic what would you change people into?

If children's bones are stronger than adults' are then why aren't children stronger than adults?

Why isn't the sun red or blue?

What if there was no such thing as money?

Why does a camera come out with colour pictures?

Why is everybody's language different?

Is the story of Strega Nona true? Could there be a magic cooking pot?

Why are some clowns good and some bad?

Why can't flowers have faces?

What if dogs had no faces?

Why can't flowers talk?

What if cats could talk?

Why can't chairs and cars and everything talk? Is it because they can't think?

Can animals think? What would fish think about?

Why can't we see when our eyes are closed? Can we see when we are dreaming?

Why are people different colours?

What if you could tunnel through the ground?

Why can't we burn and stay alive?

Why couldn't the world be made out of chocolate?

Why can't we turn into other creatures like squirrels?

What if you could be a horse?

What if you could be a bird for one day?

What if wishes came true?

What if you could be a Pokemon for one day?

Why can't we lay eggs?

Why can't we all be like Moses?

Why did God give himself magic powers and why didn't he give some to us?

Why can't we be unhurtable?

Why is the moon always bright?

Why does the moon change its shape sometimes?

What if we could touch the stars?

What is weather. Why do we need weather?

Do the seeds know that we planted them. Why do they wait until they are planted to begin growing?

Appendix 4.4 Poems Used As Discussion Stimuli

Mr Tom Narrow

A scandalous man
Was Mr Tom Narrow,
He pushed his grandmother
Round in a barrow.
And he called out loud
As he rang his bell,
'Grannies to sell!
Old Grannies to sell!'

The neighbours said,
As he passed them by,
'This poor old lady
We will not buy.
He surely must be
A mischievous man
To try for to sell
His own dear Gran.'

'Besides,' said another,
'If you ask me,
She'd be very small use
That I can see.'
'You're right,' said a third,
'And no mistake –
A very poor bargain
She'd surely make.'

So Mr Tom Narrow
He scratched his head,
And he sent his grandmother
Back to bed;
And he rang his bell
Through all the town

Till he sold his barrow
For half a crown.
James Reeves
A Puffin Quartet of Poets
(1958: 60)

Worms

Nobody loves me
Everybody hates me
I think I'll go and eat worms.

Big fat squishy ones
Little thin skinny ones
See how they wriggle and squirm.

Bite their heads off
'Schlurp!' they're lovely
Throw their tails away.

Nobody knows
How big I grows
On worms three times a day.
Anon.

Appendix 4.5   Small Group Discussions (Excerpts)

Picture 1 Large Gorilla
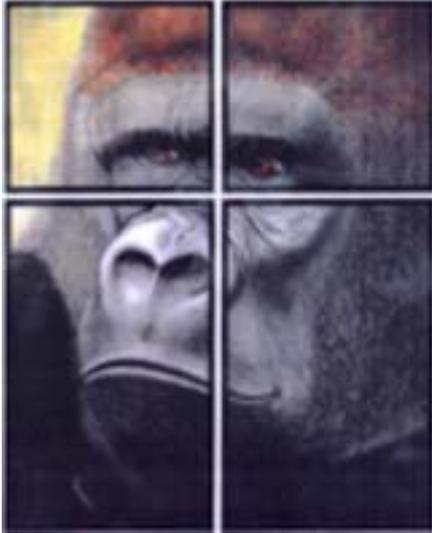
- His nose is all wrinkly.
- He's sad.
- I think he's sad cos his mouth is sad.
- None of his friends will play with him.
- Maybe his baby is lost.
- Yeah, I think he's lost his baby too.

Picture 2: Orang Utan
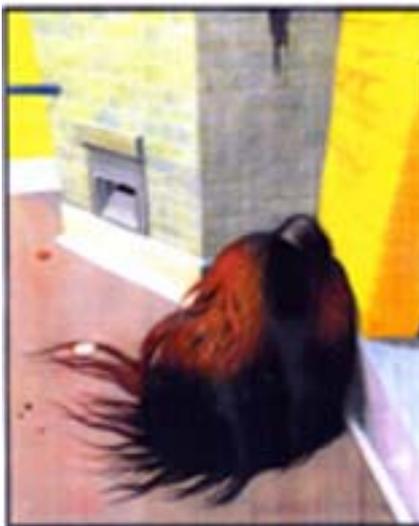
- I think it's a witch's dog.
- Oh I think I know now – his wife might be dying.
- I know, he might be in some kind of trouble.
- I recognise that – it's an orange skin. Maybe he ate a poisoned orange.
- I think it's a laundry-chute or maybe a letterbox.
- What might be making him so sad?
- They took him away and they put him in a different place.
- He's young because he is crying.
- No, they're not his grey hairs – they're off a dog or some other white animal.

Picture 3: Boy in cage
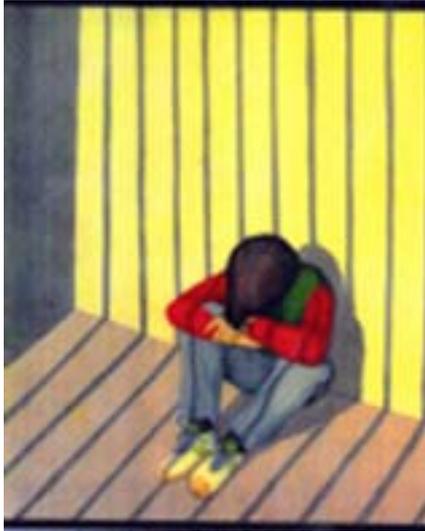
- It's sad because he looks like nobody cares about him.
- I think its interesting and sad both…interesting because its such a sad picture but such happy colours.
- I think he's about 7 or 8.
- 12, I'd say.
-
-

- I was going to say that it's very difficult to figure out because you don't know why he's in there.
- Maybe he's not in there, maybe it's the shadows of the bars of a cage.
- His Mum and Dad probably own a zoo and he works there and he's tired.
- No. He's not just tired. I'd say he's very sad.

All the pictures are from **Browne, A.** (1992) *Zoo.* London: Red Fox Books, Random House.

Appendix 4.6 Excerpts from a Dialogue with Parents

Research diary and tape 13 March 2000

(Following a viewing of the videos in the classroom, 10 parents had coffee with me in Parents Room)

P: I was very surprised at how they could keep the discussion going so long.

T: Well, they are good now but I would hate anyone to see the ones we did last October!

P: I can't get over my N. He used to be so timid! I mean I'm amazed. Even last year Mr. O'H was afraid he'd be bullied in the yard he was so quiet – and now to see him on the video …it's just unbelievable!

T: Yeah, he was a very shy child, he was.

P: Do you think it would be interesting to put the older boys in a circle like that to see if they could actually do it without the prompting of the training you give them in the circle?

T: Good question, I don't know.

P: One thing I noticed was in the age difference with N. cos N now is the youngest I'd say...

T: Yes, he is.

P: But I could tell the difference straightaway between his immaturity. and the older boys in the class, looking at the video. Straightaway I could see it…it was interesting for me to see that.

T: Yes the thinking is much more developed in the older fellows, that's true. I have films of last year's class and if I were to show them to them now they would laugh – their thinking has developed so much. Even a few months at that age can make a real difference.

P: Yes that was the one thing that stuck out in my head when I was watching it was that gap in the ages.

T: To go back to what you were saying about the older boys. I actually did a topic with fourth class before the summer holidays. It took much longer to get the discussion

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going …so I think what happens too in 4th, 5th and 6th is that they have inhibitions built up by this stage. Whereas if they could do this from Junior Infants up, whether they have a speech defect or anything else would be immaterial, they could still listen to each other without inhibitions…it would be brilliant

P: You know down in the bar (this parent owns and runs a pub) if somebody's relationship was going wrong. There is no sentiment whatsoever…its just in for the kill…all done in a mocking kind of way but so hurtful. They could do with a few lessons in respectful listening!

P: I was just saying there a while ago, ye were on about the cruelty to animals all week when N was asked if he wanted to go to the circus 'No, way am I going to go up there and have them animals locked up…

P: N was the same. I presumed that ye'd discussed it in school. We passed it last night and it was lovely all lit up and he went 'Oh but there's a fairground in there as well!'

T: Well we didn't make much of it – we had a story about a zoo, where two children went to the zoo. They wanted to eat their bars of chocolate but they had to go and see all these 'boring animals' first. And their Mum said 'Ok you can have your lunches' and you could see the excitement on the children's faces. Then they saw more 'boring animals' and on the way home their Mum asked what they thought was the best bit. They replied that it was the lunch in the café and the gift shop. Now we discussed then was it right to have animals locked up in cages so that children could have lunch in a café and a visit to a gift shop. And we had a chat about animals' rights and the whole idea about owning an animal. Now a year ago I'd have said that you couldn't do that sort of discussion with children so young but they actually came up with some very insightful reasons and the whole area of responsibility and rights.

P: Yes, on the video today some child said that some animals are dangerous because they get whipped to make them perform. N. said that that was one of the reasons he didn't want to go to the circus..

T: So you don't mind me spending a half an hour a week doing that?

P: No! I thought it was great

P: Brilliant!

P: No its really good.

T: I always wanted to get children to talk and I'm an awful talker…I never shut up so it was a big hard thing for me to do to stay out of the discussions and wait my turn.

P: I don't have any daughters or sisters either but I think there are loads of things for girls…I don't think little boys have an outlet to shine like, whereas you can send little girls to dancing or speech and drama, which is great for their confidence and stuff. Little boys only seem to have sports, but they all have domineering things all the time, and they don't have the stage to be themselves like the ballet or the speech and drama stuff. It's either sports or, if they're not interested in sports … then they don't have that 'centre stage' opportunity like girls have.

T: That's a very good point, I never thought about it like that

P: And in sport there's constantly rules and being told what to do and as you say little girls go out and shine.

P: Yeah! They can its true.

P: If I could actually send my children to something it would be speech and drama, especially for N. my older boy – he's crippled with shyness…he does the flute as you know…he's a brilliant musician but he's not a performer…he only plays for himself. It's such a shame. I think if you can give a child any gift it would be confidence.

Appendix 5 Contents of Data Archives

Data Archive 1

Signed permissions from parents.

Signed permission of school principal.

Signed permission of Chair of Board of Management.

Signed evaluation from the school inspector.

Signed evaluations from parents.

Signed evaluations from teaching colleagues.

Signed validations from MA Ed colleagues.

Data Archive 2

Lesson plans for Action Research Cycle 1.

Data Archive 3

Research diary

Field Notes

Audio cassette recordings.

Video cassette recordings.

Transcripts of dialogues.