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MA in Education



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Dissertation

How can I improve my practice as a teacher in the area of
assessment through the use of portfolios?

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I thank you all most sincerely.

I wish my work to be judged based on the following criteria.

A: Conceptual Domain

The assignment demonstrates that I, 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, perspective or theories showing the ability to synthesise and/or transform ideas in the process of developing an argument.

B: Literature domain

The assignment demonstrates that I, 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 the literature.

C: Contextual Domain

The assignment demonstrates that I, the student, have an awareness of the significance of relevant contextual factors (eg personal, locational, historical, political etc.) influencing the area of study and am able to critically engage with the contextual significance.

D: Research Domain

The assignment demonstrates that I, 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

The assignment demonstrates that I, the student, have awareness of ethical issues arising in or associated with the area of study, showing sensitive engagement with an appropriate ethical framework for the 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

The assignment demonstrates that I, the student, can clearly identify and analyse the basis of my 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

The assignment demonstrates that I, 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.

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Abstract

How can I improve my practice as a teacher in the area of assessment through the use of portfolios?

This dissertation addresses an area of personal and professional concern where my values were being denied in my practice (Whitehead, 1993). In educational terms, I had been paying too much attention to a small portion of the abilities of my students, the quantitative and verbal skills, and I had overlooked their capacities in other areas. I had been using an academic method of testing to assess the learning of my students and through my study of the theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983) I became worried about the inadequacies of such an academic method. This dissertation not only explores issues relating to assessment but it also traces the development in my own thinking in the course of the research.

I developed a new method of assessment using portfolios. The word assessment comes from the Latin word "assidere" meaning "to sit beside". Such a meaning suggests a sharing of experience which to me is exactly what portfolios can offer - to sit beside a student and share in their experiences, in the story of their learning, in their attempts at improvement, in their accomplishments as they also set possible goals for the future.

Kingore (1993) defines portfolios as:

systematic collections of student work selected to provide information about students' attitudes and motivation, level of development and growth over time. (p. 2)

I aim to realise this theory in my practice.

The methodology of action research encouraged me to ask questions about my own practice and to work out the answers for myself. It allowed me to conduct my study within a framework that was compatible with my own professional integrity and valuesystem. It was important to me that my students and their parents, and teaching colleagues be collaborative participants in my research

and that I would be at its centre. I believe I can claim that my research has led to increased knowledge for myself and my students and to an improvement in the quality of education in my classroom. I hope I have shown how I learned about my values and practice, revised my concerns, responded to students' personal and social needs and came to understand my own educational development.

Introduction

“Assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog” (Hargreaves, 1989, quoted in Hyland, 1998:vii).

My dissertation is a description and explanation of my professional life over the past year as I introduced student portfolio as a form of assessment. It is the story of my own learning and how my ideas change as I live through my experiences. It is the story of my own educational development as a teacher in Scoil Gharbháin, an all Irish speaking school in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford as I aimed to improve the quality of educational experience of my students. I chose the area of assessment for my dissertation because I believe I had denied my educational values of justice and equity in that I tended to rank, label and classify learners according to their results in standardised tests. I came to realise that there need be ways other than paper and pencil tests which I had been using to assess the process as well as the product of a child’s learning and understanding. For us adults, we tend to be assessed on our work performances and our accomplishments over time, not on the result of a standardised test. I certainly would consider myself therefore a “living contradiction”(Whitehead, 1993:56), holding educational values while at the same time neglecting and negating them. Because education is a value-laden practical activity we cannot say that a process is educational without making a value-judgement. Holding values such as democracy, justice and freedom are the reasons why I am aiming for change, aiming for a better assessment practice.

As the methodology of action research is a self-reflective process where one is constantly evaluating what one is doing with a view to improve the quality of life through taking time to reflect honestly and critically on what is happening and to change it if necessary, I chose action research as my research approach.

In Chapter One I explain the background to my research on assessment and I outline my rationale for undertaking the study in terms of its educational significance.

In Chapter Two I explain why I chose the area of assessment and my reasons for adopting the form which I chose. I consider the context of my practice as a teacher and the workplace dilemmas I encountered. I have also identified the need for responsiveness in my research design.

In Chapter Three I justify my choice of action research as my research methodology on epistemological, ontological and methodological grounds. I justify the paradigm in which I have chosen to work. I explain how my work has taken a 'paradigm shift' (Gipps, 1994:1) and I justify those reasons. My intentions in this chapter are not to undermine the more traditional paradigm as I realise that the more traditional paradigms are appropriate in particular situations but for me in this particular setting action research is more suitable.

In Chapter Four I describe the story of my research and the major findings which my study has produced. It tells the story of how I try to be a better teacher. It tells of my concerns regarding the statistical model of testing I had been using and my search for a method of assessment that would recognise, acknowledge and give credit for what students have achieved; a method that would contribute to pupils' personal development and progress by improving their motivation, providing encouragement and increase awareness of strengths, weaknesses and opportunities: a method that would help identify the all-round potential of the students and consider how well the curriculum, teaching and organisation enable pupils to develop. I include the development of my own understanding and development as I go about introducing portfolio work to my students and as I involve them in their own assessment and help them build on their skills of self-assessment.

In Chapter Five I outline the significance of my research project in my classroom and its impact on the school as a whole. On a national basis I think the process of building and using portfolios would have a very positive impact and I believe my dissertation contributes to the literature on portfolio work.

Chapter 1. Background

1.1 Rationale

At parent/teacher meetings in October 1998 I provided a report to parents on their children based only on results of standardised tests in English, Irish and Maths. On reflecting critically on this I believe I was doing an injustice to all my students. Why was I doing this? I had spent fourteen years of my teaching career providing information to parents on their children based solely on results of written tests. Written tests that often told more about students' failures, errors and inadequacies, than about their successes and did not take into consideration factors such as stress, anxiety and tiredness which can influence outcomes. I was not giving an overall picture of my students' abilities and what's even worse I was reinforcing the idea in parents' minds that to me, the senior class teacher, this was what mattered, this was what was important and their children's other abilities were of no importance.

I came to realise that it was time for me to move away from the traditional form of assessment I had been using and to find a more authentic method which would embrace learning experiences and provide evidence of performance beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge. I needed an assessment procedure that was comprehensive enough to allow for the full range of abilities across all the subjects of the curriculum. So for my research I chose the use of portfolios as a means of assessment which can be defined as

systematic collections of student work selected to provide information about students' attitudes and motivation, level of development and growth over time

(Kingore, 1993:2).

Therefore, I believe that my intervention was justified and that portfolios might offer a more equitable form of assessment that honoured students' abilities other than excellence in language or numeracy. I felt morally committed to act.

It is ironic that acknowledging my mistakes and understanding the nature of these mistakes through my values and beliefs have helped me to move forward.

This dissertation is a continuation of an ongoing research project which began in September 1998. At that time I was involved in an action research project to promote the teaching of art in my classroom (Ní Mhurchú: 1999). Prior to that action research I tended to use the more traditional didactic approach to teaching which involved a large core of class teaching and recognisably planned and sequenced teacher direction and paid little heed to aesthetic values, a teaching method that was geared towards dominant epistemologies. In my subsequent module “Teaching for Learning” (Ní Mhurchú: 1999) I was introduced to Gardner’s (1983) theory of Multiple Intelligences and as I embraced his theory, I attempted to apply it gradually in my classroom. I became aware of the wider picture which involved recognising student capabilities across a wide range, the benefits of using a variety of teaching styles and of the importance of non-academic subjects as well as academic subjects. I came to realise that I needed to extend the parameters of the educational experience that I, as a teacher, was offering to my students. I had previously held the view that “intelligence” was a “singular, unified entity which people possess in varying quantities” (Lynch:1992:135) which influenced my methods of teaching. It was while reflecting on the outcome of those previous assignments that I realised it was inevitable that I had to critically reflect on my method of assessment as it did not reflect my new values.

1.2 Structure

This dissertation is an action research project where I aim to improve the area of assessment in my classroom. I would like to get to know my own educational practice and more importantly to improve the quality of assessment for the children in my care. I am hoping that this project will promote greater flexibility in my assessment methods to respond to the varied talents of my students.

Thanks to the action research methodology “I” have been given the opportunity to account for myself and my work as a teacher, to account for my concerns in the area of assessment and to transform my educational knowledge through reflection and action and to continue reflecting and monitoring my practice and my educational values. On telling my story I believe I can claim to know my educational development and that I can contribute to educational knowledge.

By studying, describing and explaining my professional learning as I ask and answer questions of the kind “How can I improve my practice?”(Whitehead, 1989) I believe I have constructed a living educational theory. It is living because I am explaining a present practice

in terms of an evaluation of the past and with the intention of creating something better in the future (Whitehead, 1998:2)

in my own practice.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

There has been much talk of alternative assessment in schools particularly in the New Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999). Portfolios seem to be gaining credibility as a legitimate form of assessment. Through portfolios, I believe students themselves can be given the opportunity to monitor their performance and portfolios gives students an opportunity for self-reflection. Understanding that children have strengths and weaknesses I hoped portfolios could be invaluable as one looks at the whole child and that they would provide a more visible link between learning and its assessment, as well as acknowledging the wider range of student competencies.

In this dissertation I hope to show the developmental process of my own thinking and my own work while I introduced portfolios into my classroom as an alternative form of assessment and I believe that this research is my educational response to my realisation of having negated my values.

I hope to show how I learned about my values and practice, how I revised and evaluated my concerns and came to understand my own professional and

educational development. I believe that this dissertation is an educational response to the injustice I have done in not assessing fairly and honestly the abilities of the students in my care.

I believe I can show in this dissertation that a portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that shows growth, strengths and turning points and is aimed at reporting on a child's development in all the intelligences. I believe that assessment needs to be ongoing and the student should be provided with feedback about their own performance.

Chapter 2: Contextualisation

“Assessment operationalises our educational goals as much as it reflects them” (Murphy and Torrance, 1988, quoted in Hyland, 1998:vii).

2.1 Personal Context

My name is Siobhán Ní Mhurchú and I have worked as a primary teacher since I graduated in 1984, in Scoil Gharbháin, an all-Irish medium, co-educational school in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford. Since September 1997 I have taught the senior classes (5th and 6th class combined) in the school. I attended Mary Immaculate College of Education, Limerick between 1981 to 1984 and I recall little references to the area of assessment during my course of study.

I began my MA in Education with UWE Bristol in September 1998. During my studies I encountered Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and I realised I needed to transform my practice, as I had been putting a huge emphasis on the logical and linguistic skills in my teaching style, obviously to the detriment of other intelligences. By placing such an emphasis on verbal and mathematical intelligences I sadly might have been condemning those who do not have these abilities and therefore exposing them to a continuous experience of negativity and failure in school, doing very little for

their self-esteem and their self-concept. It challenged me, therefore, to think of new ways in which I could recognise all human intelligences. Having changed my teaching styles to accommodate my understanding of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983) I came to realise that my model of assessment was one of limitation and in contrast I needed a model that would support learning, as different styles of teaching and learning appear to require different forms of assessment.

During my preparation for a previous module "Teaching for Learning" I had listened to a colleague speak in great depth on his use of "portfolios" with transition year students in a second level school. The more I heard my colleague speak on the subject the more I liked the idea. I felt it would work well in a primary school situation and especially in my own situation as I teach the senior classes. I decided that this would be my new supplementary method of assessment in my classroom. I believed that by introducing students to portfolios as a means of assessment in the classroom and by including a wide range of subjects, intelligences and talents among the contents of the portfolios, I would be moving away from the idea that one's success in mathematics and linguistics are the only important successes in my classroom.

2.2 Locational Context

I have been teaching in Scoil Gharbháin in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford for fifteen years. This school was founded in 1982. I began in 1984 as the first assistant and I am now the deputy principal. Scoil Gharbháin is an all-Irish, co-educational school with seven excellent teachers and with approximately one hundred and sixty enthusiastic students ranging from the ages of four to twelve. Irish is the first language of the school and English is the only subject taught through the medium of English. At present I am teaching the senior classes in the school. Our school policy on assessment required us as teachers to test the students at the beginning of each school year particularly before our parent/teacher meetings which usually occur before the end of October each year. The standardised tests we used, namely the Micra T and the Sigma T

(data archive) assessed the students' verbal and mathematical abilities and we graded them in accordance with their results.

2.3 Government Policy

In the Green Paper, "Education for a Changing World" (Government of Ireland:1992) it recommended that

each school should have a coherent and consistent policy of assessing its students' progress to complement its curriculum and teaching methodology (p. 174).

It continues, stating

the assessment of students provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of the work of the school generally and it is absolutely essential in identifying those

students who may require particular help from time to time.

It is proposed to extend testing to all primary school students as a diagnostic aid. In

consultation with the NCCA, arrangements will be made with an appropriate research institute, which has the necessary expertise and experience in this area, to

develop a range of such tests which can be easily administered, scored and interpreted. The tests will be made available to schools, together with guidelines

and training in their use for teachers (ibid. p. 175).

Is it any wonder I evaluated my students' abilities in terms of results in standardised scores? While writing this I reflect critically on such a statement which reinforces students' self-concepts as being poor learners and fails to recognise success, let alone celebrate success.

The White Paper on Education "Charting our Education Future" (Government of Ireland:1995) recommended that

assessment should be diagnostic, formative and continuous and geared towards

providing information for teachers, schools, students and parents which will help to

improve the quality of education and educational outcomes (p. 29).

which undoubtedly was a more positive view than the Green Paper.

My introduction of portfolios in my classroom were well underway in November when our copies of the New Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999) arrived at school. I was curious as to what the Department of Education and Science would be recommending and I must admit I was very pleased. The Introduction stated that

assessment is integral to all areas of the curriculum and it encompasses the diverse aspects of learning: the cognitive, the creative, the affective, the physical and the social. In addition to the products, the strategies, procedures and stages in the process of learning are assessed. Assessment includes the child's growth in self-esteem, interpersonal and intrapersonal behaviour, and the acquisition of a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (ibid. p.18).

It continued to state that

in order to take account of the breadth and variety of learning it offers, the curriculum contains a varied range of assessment tools. These range from informal tools such as teacher observation, class work, homework and discussion with pupils to more formal tools such as diagnostic and standardised tests. Assessment tools such as projects, portfolios and curriculum profiles that can be used to link formal and informal approaches are also recommended. It is intended that in planning teaching, learning and assessment procedures, schools and teachers will select those that best meet their needs at a particular time (ibid. p.18).

The new Curriculum also recommends a greater emphasis on the area of assessment to assist communication about children's progress and development between teacher and child, between teacher and parent, and between teacher and teacher. Also the area of assessment seems to be moving towards making children more self-aware as learners with a view to developing powers of self-assessment. It also implies that assessment will ensure quality in education.

Having read the Introduction to the new Curriculum I must admit I felt very positive about my work and I was glad of the reassurance. It gave me greater confidence to continue with what I wanted to do. I wanted to test the

educational value of portfolio work, so I decided to undertake a research project with the students in my classroom. My research shows how recommendations in the New Curriculum (1999) can be put into practice.

2.4 Previous Research

I engaged with the literature of portfolios and found out more about portfolios and how I could go about implementing them in my classroom. I learned that the Education Department of University College Cork, Ireland had undertaken a project in 1995 called “The Multiple Intelligences Curriculum and Assessment Project” which aimed to

examine the application of the theory of Multiple Intelligences to curriculum and assessment in an Irish context (Hanafin, 1997:21).

The early stages of this project concentrated on the application of multiple intelligence strategies in classrooms at various levels. As they came to recognise the integral link between curriculum and assessment, they devised a more complex and integrated curriculum and assessment framework which was piloted by teachers in Cork during their second year in operation. The project explored the development of assessment techniques which would both reflect and enhance a variety of intelligences and portfolio assessment was among the various forms of assessment they explored. The approach the Multiple Intelligences Curriculum and Assessment Project took was based on the Teaching for Understanding Framework developed by researchers at Project Zero in the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This framework challenged teachers to focus on understanding goals, to develop teaching and learning strategies that would emphasise understanding and to develop a culture of on-going assessment appropriate to these goals. The project emphasised the importance of developing forms of assessment which are intelligence-fair, that is forms of assessment which take account of an individual’s understanding, as well as looking through the window of linguistic and/or logical/mathematical intelligence. On becoming aware of such a project so close to home, I was disappointed that so few people are aware of the work going on in University College Cork, as I believe it could have had a very positive impact on teaching

and learning in the Cork area, in the Munster area and even in a national capacity if only we had been informed.

Project Zero was founded in 1967 at the Harvard Graduate School of Education by the philosopher Nelson Goodman to study and improve education in the arts. Over the years, Project Zero has gradually expanded its concerns to include not just the arts, but education across all disciplines; to consider individuals in the contexts of classrooms, schools and other educational and cultural communities. For thirty years Project Zero has investigated the development of learning processes in children and adults. To this day Project Zero is building on this research to help create communities of reflective, independent learners; to enhance deep understanding within disciplines; and to promote critical and creative thinking. The material that I came across which was published by Project Zero was of great practical benefit.

On reading up on previous research on the use of portfolios as a means of assessment I reflected critically on my existing programme of work and believed I could build on it. The research from University College Cork and from Project Zero included many different directions and permutations from redesigning curriculum, to using portfolios, to emphasising the personal intelligences, to addressing genuine understanding, from which I came to learn a great deal. As my interest lay in introducing portfolios as a means of assessment I believe their work made me realise that what I was about to do would be a very positive experience for me and my students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“Assessment commonly has a backwash affect on the curriculum and on the processes of teaching and learning which go on within it” (Broadfoot, 1979, quoted in Hyland, 1998:vii).

3.1 Paradigms of Research.

Since my introduction to the MA in Education I became aware that there were three major paradigms of research in the literature of educational research. The paradigm within which we work determines what we look for, the way in which we understand and construe what we observe, and how we solve emerging problems. It constitutes the framework in which observations are made and interpreted, and directs which aspects we attend to.

Bassey (1990), Carr and Kemmis (1986), Elliott (1991), Ernest (1994), McNiff (1988), Melrose (1996), Usher (1976), refer to

The Empirical/Positivist Research Paradigm

The Interpretive Research Paradigm

The Critical Theoretic/ Action Research Paradigm.

A research paradigm, is according to Bassey (1990)

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

Each paradigm supplies a set of concepts or ideas, and preferred tools and techniques for the conduct of the research. I needed to place my research within one of the above frameworks which complies with the way I see the world. As my study in this dissertation is in the area of assessment I initially had to get to grips with the language of intelligence. I believe I can locate my understanding of intelligence and assessment against different research paradigms and that I can show my awareness of the epistemological, ontological and methodological base of each paradigm. In the empirical/positivist research paradigm the purpose of research is to observe,

describe, interpret and explain events without making value judgements about them. To the positivist researcher the world is a rational reality existing 'out there' irrespective of people so the researcher is not a significant variable in this paradigm which suggests that the epistemology of this technical and rational paradigm is external and objective. My previous methods of teaching and assessing students belongs to the empirical paradigm, also known as the scientific paradigm. As its methodology tends to be quantitative I measured students' abilities solely on right or wrong answers on standardised tests, which give little or no consideration or credit to strategies and processes. As Melrose observes

Positivists value concrete and factual bodies of technical knowledge and generalisations, arrived at by repeated experimentation and observation (1996:50)

so discoveries are expressed as factual information.

I was led to believe in training college that the child development theories, in particular those of Piaget (1970) was the way forward. Piaget believed that the intellectual development of the child occurred in a number of universal developmental stages and that these stages were observable. I began my teaching career pouring forth knowledge to my students from the top of my classroom believing by doing X I would bring them to level Y and so on. I diligently followed Piaget's theory, following a particular road believing I would get the answer that I wanted, the answer that is right and I was quite pleased with the results. The underlying notion here was that intelligence was innate and fixed and therefore it could be measured. My students may as well have been robots as I was not taking their uniqueness and individuality into consideration. My assessment methods reflected my teaching methods.

On reflecting on the validity or the usefulness of standardised tests to me, as a teacher with limitations in the way in which I could explain tasks to students; my inability to intervene or help; where issues such as the social factors which affect a child's attainment were ignored; where problems in teaching and curriculum were ignored I came to realise that issues of validity or usefulness to me were over-ridden or ignored. Researchers in the empirical paradigm also

believe that they can use the results of their research to control or predict the outcome in similar situations and they expect others to come to the same conclusions. With standardised tests there is an assumption of universality where a particular test score has essentially the same meaning for all individuals.

While looking critically at the norm referenced reading test I usually administer, I came to realise that these tests assessed only some material and only certain tasks were amenable to this method of testing. The Micra T I had been using assessed only one aspect of the reading skill i.e. comprehension. It did not assess

- a) the accuracy and fluency of students' reading
- b) their ability to attack or recognise words
- c) the student's interest in reading.

Therefore these results did not honestly represent the individual's ability to read in the widest sense and therefore the meaning of the score could not be universally understood, since the user of the score would need to know which aspect of reading has been tested. As it does not measure what it purports to measure then its use is misleading. Therefore this paradigm is no longer adequate for me as a basis for my theories of assessment. I came to doubt the use value of this approach.

As a teacher I have attended many seminars and courses with the aim to improve my work. Many of these "experts" who gave the courses were far removed from the classroom situation and even though their ideas may have seemed theoretically sound, I found it difficult to apply them to my situation. Many of these interpretive researchers aim to describe, interpret and explain events in an attempt to get shared meanings with others because they believe that people understand and interpret the world in ways which are often similar but not necessarily the same, as there can be different interpretations of what is real. Colleagues who attended the same courses often came away with a different interpretation to mine, which therefore made the ideas all the more difficult to apply.

Usher (1996) acknowledges that while empirical knowledge is linked with prediction and control and interpretive knowledge is linked with enlightenment, understanding and communication, neither however has an interest in research that changes the world in the direction of freedom, justice and democracy.

Both the empiricist and the interpretive traditions are grounded in subjects other than educational practice. They do not allow for such questions as “How can I improve my class practice?” or “How can I account for my own educational development?” - first, because it is not part of their methodological design to ask such practical, problem-based questions, and second, because it is not part of their conceptual repertoire to answer them (McNiff, 1988:18).

McNiff recommends a new educational tradition,

a coherent approach to the everyday practice and problems of teachers in ordinary classrooms who are trying to understand, make sense of and improve their professional lives (1988:19).

3.2 My reasons for choosing action research.

In my ontological perspectives in relation to education I regard the students in my care as individual identities. They each have their own personalities, their own backgrounds, their own abilities and interests and their own ways of knowing and learning. I respect each child in my care, and I value and wonder at the limitless capacity of their minds. My aim as their teacher is to provide the best possible opportunities to them in their learning in a classroom situation. I wanted to make a shift in my assessment practices from a testing culture to an assessment culture as my underlying conceptions of learning, of evaluation and of what counts as achievement are now radically different from those which are underpinned by the empirical paradigm. I am now shifting my knowledge base to creating my own knowledge as I work. I want to develop my own theory on how it is I work within the area of assessment. I would like to create my own theory because I am living this theory while I am living a particular experience, which I believe is making a difference in that, the assessment procedure I am now using is better than the previous one.

Action research has given me the opportunity to be involved in my own research, addressing issues of concern to me which have arisen within my practice, with the intention to improve my practice. It requires a commitment from “me” the practitioner, to investigate and reflect honestly and critically on my own practice. My research offers a description of and an explanation for my own professional learning. It has given me the opportunity to address issues while drawing on my own experience.

The methodology of action research is a self-reflective process where one is constantly evaluating what one is doing, evaluating solutions and self evaluation with a view to improve the quality of life through taking time to reflect on what is happening and to change it. This constant evaluation helps me make sense of how I am living my life. Once I identify an appropriate form of action, I implement it, and if the intervention is successful, a change in my practice may be necessary. This in turn may raise new problems which need to be solved and so on. If the answer does not work, then another way forward needs to be explored. These recursive processes make up what is known as the “action-research cycle”. According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995),

The principal features of an action research approach are change (action) or collaboration between researchers and researched. Action researchers are concerned to improve a situation through active intervention and in collaboration with the parties involved (p.27).

Action research is carried out “on-the-job”, unlike more traditional forms of educational and classroom research and the most important question that action researchers ask is “How do I improve what I am doing?” (Whitehead, 1993).

This common-sense problem-solving approach encouraged me to develop my own personal theories of education from my practice. Action research has allowed me to investigate, reflect honestly and critically on and to question my practice and change it while I learn. The reflection and questioning have come about because I realised my practice did not reflect fully my values and I felt unhappy within myself. I needed to rethink my values and to develop new

concepts of teaching and I also needed to explore my experiences of my professional life in order to understand it better. I set about changing myself and my practice for the better - better in living more consistently the set of values that I hold. It is educational because I act to change myself according to the educational values to which I am committed.

I am presenting my action research project as evidence of my own professional learning. I would like fellow professionals to learn from it. Even though my project is about me in a particular situation others who wish to read it may propose what might happen to themselves in a similar situation. I am concerned with the specifics of my research in my situation, not with generalities or with relevance to other situations.

According to McNiff (1992)

I do not initially aim to enquire into other people's situations to suggest to them how they might do things differently. I look first at myself, at putting my own home in order and then I feel I am justified in communicating to others how I carried out my own process of self-improvement so that they may adopt and adapt my idea if they wish (p.3).

I believe I can improve the quality of education of the students in my classroom through the use of portfolios and that I have substantiated my claim to knowledge with data and evidence collected through various means - interviews with students, an interview with a parent, an interview with a colleague, validations from MA colleagues, photographs and my personal journal. Because assessment is tied to the idea of what constitutes valid knowledge I believe that by addressing issues of assessment I have tackled wider issues of what kind of knowledge is taught and the purpose of education.

3.3 Ethical Issues

I am conscious that ethical considerations are of paramount importance for an inquiry-based research especially in relation to action research. As my research could not take place in a vacuum I needed to involve the students in

my classroom and a colleague. At first I spoke with my principal informing her of my research plan and I gave her a copy of my research proposal (Ní Mhurchú:2000) to take away and read. She returned it two days later to me, granted her permission and offered her help in any way that she could. I attended a Board of Management meeting on October 11th 1999 where I informed them of my research plans, my aims, my methods of data collection, my objectives regarding my research as in my research proposal (Ní Mhurchú: 2000). I also assured them that my research would not threaten school policy, management styles or individual personalities. I requested and obtained the permission of the Board of Management to research my work in the classroom. The Chairperson signed an Ethics Statement on behalf of the Board and I gave them all a copy of same (Appendix A). I also showed them a copy of the ethics statements I had prepared for the students, their parents and a teaching colleague (Appendix B,B1).

I had hoped that by involving a teaching colleague he/she would see the value of using portfolios as a means of assessment and that he/she might consider using portfolios to begin with in his/her own classrooms and would see their benefits for a whole school approach to assessment. I involved six parents as I was also interested in their views of portfolio work and I believe that parental involvement in their child's education is extremely important. To improve the area of assessment in my classroom I could not do so without the willingness of students, parents and a colleague to participate. I encountered no difficulties in gaining their support and I assured them my intentions were to observe good ethical practice throughout my research.

I distributed the ethics statement to the participants (students, parents, a colleague) informing them of my project and requesting their participation, guaranteeing confidentiality and allowing them the right to withdraw (copy of Ethics Statement in Appendix B). I informed them of my aims, my methods of data collection and my objectives as in my research proposal (Ní Mhurchú:2000) and assured them that my research would not threaten school policy, management styles or individual personalities. My intentions were to uphold and respect students' values in the classroom by encouraging democracy, deliberation and reflective equilibrium.

I involved all twenty two of the students in my classroom in the research as I believed it would be unethical of me to pick and choose among them. I believed that the use of portfolios would be of benefit to all my students, and I was willing to commit my time so that the experience of portfolios would be a very positive one for them. I included all my students as I value equally all of them and if I had only involved some of the students I felt I would be using examples of “good, average and poor” work which goes back once more to the idea of grading students which I would like very much to move away from. Obviously this notion presented research problems as it involved monitoring and rigorous sifting through considerable amounts of data to produce evidence, but I was happier doing it this way and I believed that portfolios would benefit them all.

As I was using standardised tests as my previous method of assessment, the students’ performances were judged with reference to the performance of others. To make the results of a standardised test valid, each student in the country should have equal access to schooling, equal access to learning and equal access to curriculum which in reality is impossible. I used the scores the students achieved in these standardised tests to grade and label them which was unethical and unfair.

Gipps (1994) comments that

assessment is a powerful tool: it can shape curriculum, teaching and learning; it can

affect how pupils come to see themselves both as learners and in a more general

sense as competent or not; through labelling and sorting pupils it affects how pupils

are viewed by others; it controls access to further education and high status careers

(p. 144).

On taking all this into consideration, a consideration of ethical issues and equity is highly pertinent.

To improve the area of assessment in my classroom I have chosen portfolios. Through the medium of portfolio work the students have had an opportunity to celebrate their abilities and achievements, to realise their weaknesses but yet believing that they can always aim to improve. They have shown great pride and ownership in their work which has provided its own stimulation for constant improvement (validation R. see appendix M). It has involved them in their own assessment and their skills of self-assessment are improving all the time (interview S. see appendix K). By introducing my students to portfolios as a means of assessment I believe I have given them an opportunity to identify their strengths, that I have minimised comparisons and that I have allowed room for student learning styles, aptitudes and interests which I believe supports fairness and equity.

I began by introducing the notion of portfolio work to the students in late September. I observed and monitored the process as students began systematically to collect samples of their work under many different categories. I observed them engaging in their learning content, guided them in learning the skills of reflection and self-evaluation, helped them in planning goals for the future and facilitated communication with parents. It was a great learning opportunity for me and for the students. We encountered difficulties in some areas but the methodology of action research lends itself to seeking and exploring new channels through which I could deal with these difficulties.

Chapter 4: My Project

“Feeling of worth can only flourish in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open and rules are flexible” (Satir, 1994:26).

In this chapter I will describe the process of action and reflection as I tried to answer the question at the core of my research - “How can I improve my practice in the area of assessment through the use of portfolios?”. I will show this process to be a series of “action-reflection steps” (McNiff and Collins:1994:5) as I will describe an enquiry into my own professional practice. I am seeking to improve my practice based on Jack Whitehead’s ideas (1989) on the value of the action reflection cycle, which educators use to present “their claims to know their own educational development as they investigate questions of the kind ‘How can I improve my practice?’”. I have used Whitehead’s question-orientated approach

I identify a problem when some of my educational values are denied in my practice;
I imagine ways of overcoming my problems;
I act on a chosen solution;
I evaluate the outcomes of my actions;
I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluation.
(Whitehead, 1993:69)

but I followed the action plan of McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996:137-139) in my writing.

What was your concern?
Why were you concerned?
How could you show the evidence around your felt need to undertake the research?
What could you do about it?
What did you do?
What evidence did you produce to show your actions and their impact?
What conclusions did you draw from your evidence? How could you judge your own effectiveness?
How could you show that you took care that your judgements were reasonably fair and accurate?
How did you modify your practice?

4.1 What was my concern?

My concern was that I had denied my educational values in the area of assessment in my classroom in that I had been using norm-referenced tests or standardised tests to assess the process and product of the children's learning and also I tended to rank, label and classify these children according to the results they achieved in these tests. I used these scientific results to provide me with information about the students' performance in relation to the performance of other students of the same age in the areas of English and mathematics. I believed I was doing a great job. I worked hard providing books that were of interest to students to help bring up their reading abilities and I worked hard ensuring that each child could understand and apply each mathematical concept. But I was forgetting to look at the individual as an individual. I did not include recognition of the uniqueness of each child and the importance of their holistic development. I was paying too much attention to only a small portion of the abilities of my students. I was doing an injustice to them because instead of using assessment to enhance their learning I was instead being too judgemental. I was paying far too much attention to the linguistic and logical-mathematical skills of my students and allocating little importance to their abilities, individual talents and also I was promoting linguistic and mathematical skills as being the most important skills in my classroom. I was also concerned that the children were not actively involved in their own assessment.

4.2 Why was I concerned?

At parent teacher meetings in 1998 I used the results of norm-referenced tests in English and mathematics, results of Irish, geography, history and spelling tests to inform parents of their child's progress in school. I informed them of the position their children held in class in order of success in accordance with their results in these tests (see appendix C). I included no information on their

child's ability in areas of physical education, art/crafts, music and I made no reference to their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

In October 1998 I undertook an action research project to promote art in my classroom (Ní Mhurchú:1999) which introduced me to Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983). Gardner (1983) asserts the existence of a number of definable categories of human intelligence, different ways of knowing the world. These are the linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily kinaesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal and more recently, Gardner has added to the list the intelligence of the natural scientist and spiritual intelligence. He suggested that people differed in the strength of any one intelligence. The idea of these intelligences challenged my previous methods of teaching where I assumed that everyone could learn the same material in the same way. It also challenged the education system because that system assumed that everyone can learn the same materials in the same way and that a uniform, universal measure was sufficient to test student learning (Government of Ireland, 1992:175).

I began to reflect critically on my teaching styles and realised that I was doing a grave injustice to the students in my care. On engaging with the literature I began to study different teaching styles and proceeded to put them in action in my classroom. I began to try to improve the situation in my classroom at first by attempting to move away from the more traditional didactic approach to teaching I tended to use, which involved a large core of class teaching, recognisably planned and sequenced teacher direction, to allowing students to participate in their own learning. I then began to put more of an emphasis particularly on art and craft, then music, dance and physical education as I had previously overlooked their importance not just as subjects but as methods of learning.

During parent / teacher meetings on October 21st 1999, I realised that while I had put a great effort into involving the theory of Multiple Intelligences in my work I was still determining the students' abilities in terms of linguistic and mathematical skills and choosing to consider their abilities in all other aspects

of the curriculum being of lesser importance. I did not take into account their abilities in areas such as music, visual-spatial and interpersonal understanding even though I did include the students' artwork in addition to the test results.

I went home from those parent/teacher meetings with mixed emotions. I was disappointed with my efforts of portraying my students' abilities in terms of scores on standardised tests. I had been working so hard to try and move away from the traditional styles of learning and teaching yet here I was assessing my students by focusing on a narrow interpretation of intellectual capacity. I was assessing and labelling children according to their abilities in academic subjects and their results in norm-referenced tests which ask specific questions and require a specific answer whereby the result is a score. But I had hope - I was in the very early stages of introducing portfolios as a means of assessment and I knew in my heart that my feedback to parents at parent/teacher meetings would never again be as limited.

While the Irish curriculum is broad and balanced and includes emphasis on social, emotional, creative, aesthetic, physical and cognitive development and across all areas of the same curriculum the learner is encouraged to become actively involved in the process of learning, I chose mechanical activities of measurement like norm-referenced tests which provided me with information about the children's performances in relation to the performance of others of the same age in the area of English and mathematics to inform me of their learning.

My assessment methods lacked democracy, justice, respect for others, freedom and individual integrity - all of the values that mean so much to me in my personal and professional life. I had denied these educational values in that I tended to rank, label and classify learners according to their results in standardised tests and I was not looking at the child as a whole. I was condemning those who were not strong in the linguistic and mathematical but who may be very strong in other intelligences. I was not giving them equal

opportunities or rights. I had unjustly penalised the children while reinforcing empirical forms of assessment.

4.3 How could I show the evidence around my need to undertake the research?

I have enclosed the records which I used to inform parents at the parent / teacher meeting in October 1998/1999 on the abilities of their children (see appendix C). Some of these tests show how I had ranked the students in accordance with their results. I have included

- Results in norm-referenced English and mathematics tests
- Results in spelling tests
- Results in history, geography and Irish tests.

4.4 What could I do about it?

To begin with I decided that I needed to engage with the literature of assessment and I decided I needed a better understanding of why children should be assessed. Having engaged with the work of Broadfoot (1979), Hyland (1998), Kingore (1993), Airasian (1996), Gipps (1994) I jotted in my personal diary (1/11/99) some reasons why I needed to assess children. The following are the reasons I jotted down

- to identify emerging potential
- to identify areas of learning difficulties
- to inform me of what the children have achieved
- to record their progress over time
- to gather information on the children so that I, the teacher, can better help them to learn
- to evaluate the suitability of the curriculum, resources, methodologies and approaches I use
- to support the process of teaching and learning.

Through reading those books I learned that there were two types of assessment

Summative Assessment

Formative assessment.

Summative assessment serves a summative function, that is, summing up what the student has learned at the end of a given period, which is what the term “examination” is concerned mainly with, which I had previously been committed to.

Formative assessment involves using assessment information to feed back into the teaching / learning process - finding out what and how children know, which helps the teacher to decide what and how to teach next.

I decided I needed to change my style of assessment as my previous methods were of little educational value as I tested the students, recorded the results and ranked them accordingly. I made these results available to the school principal, to the children’s parents and to successive teachers. This information paid attention to a meagre portion of my students’ abilities while I overlooked their potential in other subjects and skills. I had come to realise in previous modules that children learn in different ways so now it made sense to me that they should show their understanding in different ways. I needed a method of assessment which would stand in dynamic interaction with teaching and learning for the purposes of supporting learning, not one which stands outside as I had been using. I had administered standardised tests once a year which provided me with poor quality information for the purposes of communication and little or no support for the learning process itself. I needed a system that would embrace the work that was going on in school on a daily basis. I needed a method that would fulfil the above reasons for assessment; a method which would look at the individual as an individual rather than in relation to other individuals; a method which would identify strengths and weaknesses individuals might have, so as to aid their educational progress; a method which would look for “best” rather than typical performances; a method which would work in a relaxed atmosphere; a method which would aim to help rather than

act as a sentence; a method which would involve me as their teacher if only as a facilitator.

With a new curriculum being introduced in September 1999 I was curious as to what was to be likely future assessment practice in schools in the light of this new curriculum.

Having previously undertaken an action research project in my classroom to improve the area of art in my classroom I knew that this was the way I wanted to improve the area of assessment in my classroom. I could go back to follow once more the action plan of “What is my concern?” (Whitehead 1993) which had previously

inspired in me a living process towards better educative relationships

brought my values of democracy and justice to life in my classroom

3. uplifted and enhanced my work and my students’ experiences and had a very uplifting effect on the quality of educational experience.

In fact I believe that the improvement of assessment in my classroom was inevitable as it is a spin-off spiral from my previous action research project where my main issue was to find alternative ways of teaching and learning. I now needed alternative ways to assess the students’ learning and my teaching.

4.5 What I did.

I read a great deal more on the theory of Multiple Intelligences and continued to implement the theory in my classroom and also I searched within the literature for a method of assessing that might give a more complete picture of a child’s knowledge, skills, understanding, abilities or aptitude.

I discussed with my teacher colleagues my intentions of searching for another method of assessment as I was unhappy with the system of assessment in the school which emphasised linguistic and logical-mathematical skills alone. They

agreed with my thinking but did not have any ideas for me, but were very willing to help in any way they could.

During my preparation for a previous module “Teaching for Learning” I had listened to a colleague speak in great depth on his use of portfolios with transition year students in a second level school (see above). As I listened to him speak on the subject I felt - “here’s a system that recognises students’ experiences and honours their strengths. This could be the way forward for me”. I searched the literature for information on teaching through the use of portfolios and how I could go about implementing them in my classroom.

4.5.1 What are Portfolios?

I read Airasian (1996), Danielson and Abrutyn (1997), Kingore (1993), Lyons (1998), Pollard (1997), Stenmark (1991), Veenema (1997) and I learned that a portfolio is a

purposeful and systematic collection of students’ work that could tell the story of a child’s learning, progress and achievements (Danielson and Abrutyn, 1997:vi)

and it could also monitor the growth and developed understanding of each child as an individual. Portfolios deal with “the individual’s achievements relative to themselves rather than to others and it looks for “best” rather than “typical” performances”(Gipps, 1994:8). This method of assessment takes place in relatively uncontrolled conditions and the rules are very flexible. According to Pollard (1997)

To maximise the educational value, each child should be closely involved in the selection of evidence for inclusion in his or her portfolio, and in review of the contents (p.303).

I believe the process of portfolio assessment could help to identify the all-round potential of pupils and to consider how well the curriculum, teaching and organisation enable pupils to develop.

Before my introduction of portfolios to the classroom I felt that it would be important for me to deal with the following questions.

1. What would the portfolios contain?

Would they contain finished or/and unfinished items?

Should they include items from their lives outside of school

2. Who selects the work?

3. How long should the process go on for?

4. Why would students have portfolios?

5. For whom is this assessment being done?

6. Are the techniques valid and free from cultural bias?

7. How can the results be interpreted?

8. Are there any unforeseen effects of such assessment?

9. In what situations can this technique be used?

10. What can be most appropriately monitored in this way?

11. Is it demonstrably useful to teaching?

12. Is it manageable for me?

13. Is it ethically sound?

The questions were endless and at this stage I did not know the answers to many, but I felt it was manageable for me in my classroom situation and I knew that it would be a great learning experience for me, and I hoped that the use of portfolios would be of great benefit to my students.

I undertook this action research project on assessment where first of all I needed to investigate and reflect critically on my own practice. I realised that I could not do so in isolation without involving colleagues, students and parents. I approached my principal and discussed with her my misgivings about the system of assessment in the school and informed her of what I had learned about portfolio work. I informed her of my research plan, my aims, my methods of data collection and my objectives and I assured her that I would not threaten school policy, management styles or individual personalities. I also gave her a copy of my research proposal to read. I prepared an ethics statement for the Board of Management, and my research participants and informed them of my research and requested their participation (Appendix A, B, B1).

I involved the twenty-two students in fifth and sixth class in my research as I believed it would be unethical of me to involve only some of the students in my care, as I believed I would be spending extra time with those involved. I wanted them all to reap the benefits of what I believed was a very worthwhile initiative. I wanted to show them that I valued all their opinions from “portfolio work is not like doing school work” (see appendix D) to “our tests were put in the filing cabinet and we never again saw them” (personal diary; 13/3/2000) to “my portfolio is the story of my learning” (personal diary; 13/3/2000). It involved monitoring and sifting data from a large range of people and rigorous sifting through considerable amounts of data to produce evidence. By including the whole class in my research I believed it was an honest, fair, democratic and ethical way.

I introduced the idea of portfolios into my classroom on September 21st 1999. I explained to the students that from then on I would like them to collect a sample of their work and achievements. I believed that in time they would come to understand what can be learned from saving and reviewing their work. I did not mention the idea of assessment as I did not want them to see this as an examination or a test.

I sent a letter to the parents (appendix E) on Monday September 27th 1999 providing them with general information about portfolios, informing them of my objectives and explaining the process of data collection and asking them to encourage their children to include samples of their work or achievements outside of school.

While engaging with the literature of portfolios I considered four basic steps in the implementation of a portfolio development process.

- Collection
- Selection
- Reflection
- Projection.

4.5.2 Collection

The students and I discussed what these portfolios might contain and these were their suggestions :- art/craft work, projects, tests, computer printouts, poems they knew or composed, a list of the books they had read, book reviews, things they made, school reports, certificates of achievement, medals, songs/music on tape that they had learned or composed, letters from pen pals, photos, scrapbook, video recordings of events such as Christmas play, involvement in television programmes, involvement in concerts. I recall on noting their suggestions that we would need large containers to hold their enthusiastic plan of contents, so I then decided that if we reflected on and reviewed our work and achievements on a weekly basis we would not be including all our work, we would have to be selective.

I informed them that it was important that the products they might choose for their portfolios should demonstrate some form of learning or understanding.

I asked them to choose a day in the week which we could make our collection for the week and they believed Friday to be a suitable day. We discussed our methods of collection and talked about our method of storage.

They chose cereal boxes as their portfolio container on a trial basis and on Thursday October 23rd 1999 the students enthusiastically decorated their portfolio containers in their art class. Even though I believed that the type of container used was of little importance in comparison to what it contained the reality of storage in my classroom was still a small worry. But as cereal boxes were the option of the moment, they were of no additional expense and they could be readily accessible to the students in the classroom I agreed to give it a try. While the students worked decorating their portfolios they continued to discuss what they could put in their portfolios from that week.

I was apprehensive about finding classroom space for these portfolios as I was keen to keep them in the classroom so that the students would have access to them at will, to add items or to remove pieces to work with. I spoke with the

principal and she was willing to allow extra shelving to be constructed in the classroom in September and she approached me in February to find out if I needed more. I accepted the offer and I now have plenty of room to hold the containers from one year to the next. It was great to have such co-operation.

4.5.3 Selection

We returned to school on Monday November 1st after our mid-term break and it was my intention to begin the collection process on Friday November 5th. But my students had a different idea. They wanted to begin the selection process straight away. “Can I put this medal which I won last week in my portfolio?” asked student E. on Monday morning. “I think this is the best writing I have done in a long time, can I put it in my portfolio?”. Never let it be said that I would dampen the enthusiasm of my students. I asked them to record the date on any item that they would include in the portfolios so that later review of the portfolios would allow the “examiner” to see the changes in students. I also felt it would be beneficial in establishing the developmental progression of each student over time. On the following Friday afternoon we collected some more products and discussed different successes or achievements from that week. Under the different topics we discussed what may be considered good according to the students themselves. Looking back on the students’ selection process their first reaction was to select their best pieces with little regard for established learning objectives. They chose items which represented their best work. The atmosphere was positive and they were so proud of the items they had selected and were quick to show it to others.

We encountered a few difficulties during the first week. On reflecting at the end of the first week on their successes or achievements their samples seemed to contain a great deal of “written” products. This portrayed my previous methods of assessment and I began to feel a tad uneasy at this stage. I needed to change the focus somewhat. So I read through their list of ideas from September 21st (personal diary; 21/9/1999). Even though there was little movement away from “written” products it caused them to plan ahead for the following week’s collection.

The students had purchased tapes on which to record their musical abilities but due to the modern music centres in their homes these modern pieces of technology could not record from outside the system. So I made the classroom tape recorder available to them to take home with permission from the principal.

4.5.4 Reflection

A huge difficulty we encountered here was that students found it difficult to reflect on and evaluate their own work. I should have been expecting this as the notion of self-assessment was something they were unused to and they struggled to make sense of the notion of self-reflection. They were constantly coming to me asking me if I thought this was “good” or “which do you think is better?”. They wanted to rely on my opinion as they found it difficult to judge their own work. How could I help them to trust their own instincts? As an initial guideline I told them that they should ask themselves when choosing different items “Why did I choose this?”. I also told them that I would question them on why they chose different items and not others. I wanted them to increase their awareness of their own strengths and abilities and I wanted them to become aware of hopefully an improvement in their work but if not an improvement they needed to find the items that we needed to work harder at, to achieve an improvement.

I recommended to them to work with a partner or in a group so that they would not feel isolated or inadequate in their work. They still found the notion of reflection and evaluation difficult as they were unsure as to why they had chosen particular items so I then began to worry as to whether I had done the right thing. I presumed it would be easier to make my students believe that their opinions were valued by me and that I could show them that their opinions were valuable. Despite having made good progress, I began to feel very uneasy about the students’ ability to judge their own work. My students were enjoying the process so much and their enthusiasm was superb and I did not want to destroy these positive feelings. I did not want the work to become a chore.

“What am I going to do? - this is not working - maybe portfolios and self-assessment are too difficult for primary school students?”

On going home from school the panic had subsided and I kept telling myself there has to be a way to do this. On reflecting on the situation that night and on reading more material and many thanks to Kingore (1993) I realised that I needed to provide “meaningful and appropriate guidance”. I needed to establish a list of criteria to help them review their work and to analyse its merits.

For Friday November 12th I had prepared some key questions for discussion with the students, to help us establish a list of criteria. The following (in translation, to remind you, all our work is conducted through the medium of Irish) are the list of questions we intended to discuss.

- What makes something your best work?
- What samples did you want to hold in your portfolios to show what you had learned?
- How is this piece of work different from others?
- How does this item show something important that you think or feel?
- How does this product show something that you have learned?

I realised on going about it that I needed to deal with one key question per day as it was a time-consuming task but a worthwhile one.

Teacher: “What makes something your best work?”

Their suggestions were

- “work we received a good grade in”
- “work that was neat”
- “something without mistakes”

(personal diary; 12/11/1999)

On asking them if their best work could involve mistakes they found the notion difficult to accept but on looking at some students’ work and having picked out some mistakes in the work that they had chosen, they began to think and provided answers like

- Student O. - "Well if the work was very difficult and one did their best".
- Student R. - "If it had improved on previous similar work".

(personal diary; 12/11/1999)

I was very pleased with these answers as I felt that their reflection on what is "good" had moved on from believing that perfection was the only thing that was "good". I felt that their ability to evaluate and make judgements on their work with these ideas in mind were also of benefit to weaker students as they felt that they had little "perfect" work to put in their portfolios but had a great deal of work that had improved even if it still contained some errors. But now the pressure was off and they felt more at ease. With this better understanding of self-evaluation they tended to use more time when sifting through their work to reflect on it.

At later stages we discussed the following questions.

- What samples did they want to hold in their portfolios to show what they had learned?
- How is this piece of work different from others?
- How does this item show something important that you think or feel?
- How does this product show something that you have learned?

Some of the suggestions from the above questions are included in appendix F in translation, and the remainder are in my personal diary in my data archive.

As time progressed they learned to chose products which best represented their abilities, interests and accomplishments and during this time I came to know more about each student. I encouraged children during the selection process to include their best work at all times which motivated them to try harder all the time.

4.5.4.1 The inclusion of out of school achievements.

By late November children began to produce some unexpected or different products, as on Sunday October 31st 1999 one of the students was chosen to partake in a children's television programme. This student's portfolio was

particularly light as he does not excel in the academic subjects so you can imagine the pride and happiness in this child returning to school on Monday November 1st with a video recording of his debut on television for his portfolio.

At the end of each month we had a good variety of work which the students, initially with some guidance from me, sifted through to pick and choose their best efforts from. They wrote an account on what their portfolio contained and I also asked them to answer the following questions.

- * What is the best item in your portfolio this month?
- * Why is it the best?
- * What did I improve most in this month?
- * Did I include anything different in my portfolio this month?
- * What do I aim to improve next month?

(Appendix G; data archive)

On returning to school after the Christmas holidays in January we put together their efforts from the previous three months and I hoped that the students would be able to see an improvement in their work. I recommended to them to work in groups of three or four so as to have an opportunity to share, discuss, comment, help and choose. I noted the following points in my personal diary as they sifted through the material collected in three months.

“Can we show them to the other teachers?”

“Can we take them home to show them to our parents?”

“G read eighty two books in three months”.

“Can we do this for the rest of the year?”

“Why didn’t the other classes do this?”

“O. has 8 medals and 3 plaques. Wow!

(personal diary; 12/1/2000)

As I walked among the students while they reviewed the contents from the previous three months, even though I believed that the level of achievement of each student was excellent I felt it was important to look for quality of work, to listen to their opinions and attitudes towards learning and interests in specific topics.

I felt it was important for me to talk with each student about their portfolio at different intervals during the school year but in reality it was difficult to find the time in an already busy classroom. So I scheduled two ten minute slots per day within eleven days in January, giving the student the date of their presentation. During these times the remainder of the class were completing independent work or listened in. They loved the idea of being the expert regarding their own portfolio where I was the listener, learner and questioner. I have included some of the questions I asked as I listened to each child's presentation.

- * What would you like to show me first? Why?
- * What's here that shows something important you have learned?
- * Can you show me something that you can now do that you could not do before?
- * At the end of November you felt you need to improve in _____.
Has there been an improvement?
- * What would you like to achieve by the next time we meet?

4.5.4.2 The involvement of parents.

I gave the students the option in February to take home their portfolios and to share them with their parents. The students and I decided that Thursday night would probably be a good night so that they would have the portfolio back in school on Friday for the end of the week review. I informed the parents by letter two days in advance of the portfolios going home (Appendix P). In the same letter I asked the parents to spend fifteen minutes with their child on a particular night and I asked them to complete the review form which I included as I felt it would increase their understanding of their role as parents (Appendix H). By involving them in their child's learning I hoped they would praise and encourage their children, that they would concentrate on their child's strengths and encourage them to try harder in areas they found difficult. Children presented the contents of their portfolios to the parents so they could see first-hand the growth that their child had made from the beginning of the school year in September 1999. They got to see their child as someone who has talent and interest in other subjects and not just someone who scores on a standardised

test. It involved parents in the assessment process and it increased their awareness of the talents and abilities of their children. Sharing their portfolios with their parents gave the children a feeling of ownership of their portfolio and I believe it increases their responsibility for the quality of the work. The schedule was designed to allow five or six families per week to see their child's portfolio.

4.5.5 Projection

While sharing their portfolios I wanted the students to look ahead and set possible goals for the future. In this part I asked the children if there were areas that they may need to work harder at on seeing the improvement that had come about in another aspect of their portfolio, if they had realised that they were quite good at something that they had not realised before.

I believed that my students could have great input into what should or could be included in their systematic collection and that in time that they would be able to select their own work independently.

4.6 What evidence did I produce to show my actions and their impact?

I collected a great deal of data which enabled me to assess the educational value of portfolios.

1. - I monitored my practice by keeping notes and daily records in my personal diary from September 21st 1999 which consisted initially of preparation work I needed to do while preparing the students for the introduction of portfolios in my classroom. From then on it contains reflective comments and queries from the students, and observations I made throughout the year as they sifted through their products and assessed their work. I have recorded significant developments and events which revealed students being highly motivated as they moved from item to item, being responsible and making judgements while moving closer to the criteria (appendix I) they had chosen themselves which had been established for high quality. I extracted pieces from my personal diary and included them in my appendices; my personal diary is in my data archive.

2.- I have transcripts of interviews (in translation) with the students as they speak with great pride in their work as they celebrate their strengths and have come to realise that certain aspects of their work need further improvements (see appendix J)

3. - I invited colleague S. to be my critical friend in October and I have a transcript of an interview with her in which I ask for her views on my use of portfolios. S. is the remedial teacher in the school and had been promoting the use of traditional testing at the beginning of the school year (relevant sections transcribed and translated in appendix K).

4. - I have a recording and transcript of a presentation being made by one of my students to his parents which the student offered to do as I had asked them to remember comments that their parents made as they saw their portfolios. The transcripts in translation are available in appendix D and the tapes are in my data archives.

5. - I have reflection sheets from the participants where they recorded items they had chosen for their portfolios. They tell about the process they went through and they give reasons why they had chosen the items they did. These reflection sheets I believe have been excellent to record a child's understanding of their educational development. I believe these show the ability of each student to recognise their own learning, and the ability to explain how the learning took place and what the learning meant to them. I have included some of these reflection sheets in appendix L and the remainder are in my data archive.

6. - I have a validation from colleague R. who visited my classroom to attend a presentation of portfolios which is included in my appendices. He questioned the children on their portfolio work and he gave them the opportunity to express their opinions on the content and quality of their work. He found that the children were very proud of their portfolios and he referred to them as their "treasure chests". He maintained that the students felt a personal responsibility

and ownership of the contents because they had had the opportunity of selecting their own contents. He felt that some of the students were still relying on me as their teacher to finally critique their work and he felt that this was due to the newness of portfolios as an assessment technique in the classroom, yet he believed that others had little difficulty with the notion of self-assessment. He perceived that portfolios were instrumental in motivating the students to constantly improve their work and that the students were very aware of the improvements in work that would otherwise be poor. The students expressed their views to him on how they were motivated to work hard as their work would or could end up in their portfolios. He noted that the students were very supportive of each other, showing substantial interest in each other's work. He felt that there was ample indication of creative self-analysis borne out of an interest in looking for different or new evidence of achievements in areas not usually associated with school per se and he felt that this allowed each student to seek positive evidence of their own abilities particularly from an intrinsic perspective. He stated that the overall impression he felt in the classroom from the students was a positive awareness of their own learning and a feeling of empowerment to improve their learning (appendix M).

7. - I have samples of portfolios from students which they have allowed me to hold until September 2000 (data archive).

8. - I have Portfolio Response sheets from the parents which they completed on the night that their child made their portfolio presentation to them in the home. Even though some of these sheets were completed with minimal effort there was no negative comment among them. The view in general was that the portfolios kept a record of their child's progression, that they created encouragement for their children, that the children's pride in their hard work and achievements was apparent, the realisation of parents of the sheer amount of work and the variety of work going on in the classroom. I have included some in appendix N and the remainder are in my data archive.

9. - I took photographs of the students sifting through their portfolios as they work diligently to choose their "best" work, look for improvements in previous work and setting goals for future improvements (see appendix O; data archive).

10. - I made a presentation on our planning day of a particular student's portfolio to explain to the other teachers in my school what portfolios were and how they worked (validated by colleague R. in appendix M). As the New Curriculum is being introduced in Irish schools this year a comprehensive programme of in-career development for teachers was planned by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation. On January 21st and 22nd 2000 my teaching colleagues and I attended a two-day course introducing the New Curriculum and it was also organised that each school would then hold an in-school planning day. The idea of the school planning day was to provide schools with time to prepare for the implementation of the new Curriculum and to refocus school planning in the various subjects. As a staff we chose the area of assessment and a review of our school plan for our first school planning day on February 14th.

On the basis of the following criteria I offer the above qualitative and quantitative data as the most appropriate to validate my claims. I am claiming that the following happened:-

- a) the students were more involved in their own assessment
- b) I, as their teacher, had afforded them more learning opportunities
- c) their motivation to learn and improve their work had increased
- d) I had made my colleagues more aware of a means of assessment which included a wide range of abilities across all the subjects of the curriculum.

4.7 What conclusions did I draw from my evidence? How did I judge my own effectiveness?

Before introducing portfolios into my classroom, there was a gulf separating the daily practice in my classroom and the method of assessment I had been subjecting my students to. These tests did not reveal what my students knew, what they could do and what they were learning on a daily basis in school. I had been teaching a wide range of subjects but I was assessing their abilities in terms of results in standardised tests in English and Mathematics. These

tests had been judging the individual performance of each of my students with reference to the performance of others on the same tests. By engaging in the process of portfolios my students participated actively in selecting the contents of their own portfolios which showed evidence of their own learning and development across a wide range of subjects and they also included out of school products. They gauged the quality of their work against criteria which had been chosen by themselves. They were involved in assessing their own work across a wide range of subjects and monitored their progress towards instructional goals. Because they were actively involved in their own learning and assessment they worked hard, setting their own goals which may have been challenging but were also achievable and because they were achievable the end result was always success. Sometimes the success may have been small but they had evidence to show improvement. As Reason and Boothe (1994) maintain

Nothing succeeds like success. Pupils who make good progress take pride in their efforts. Their confidence in being able to complete a task bring them half-way towards doing so (p.20).

Through the medium of portfolios the students were highly engaged in their own learning and assessment through the steps of selection and reflection, and assuming considerable responsibility for their own learning. Through my observations, conversations and the presentations made by the students, I was able to evaluate the learning and understanding that had taken place and I believe that the students also came to appreciate their learning. By involving them in their own assessment I believe I gave them a sense of ownership and gave them a new purpose for completing and improving their assignments. They liked the idea of being involved in the process of assessing or the evaluation of their own work and they did not look at the process as an examination.

I think I am justified in saying that the portfolios encouraged student motivation, they encouraged attention to work of high quality, they encouraged the development of the essential skills of reflection and self assessment and they developed a different relationship between student and teacher, all combined

with pride in a job well done. The children came to me with great enthusiasm, showing me their progress, informing me of their achievements, secure in their opinions. The child who was doing well had an opportunity for private moments of recognition and encouragement. The child who was unsure of her/his progress could with my guidance compare earlier works with present work to validate improvement or growth. Reassurance helped to keep them motivated to keep trying. Portfolios have instilled in the pupils a feeling of self-worth while showing that their opinions are valued and that they are valued as persons. My previous role as a teacher in assessment had been one of a tester or a technician and I have now moved forward to taking on a role of a facilitator. I now work to support pupils' learning, encouraging them in their work and I have provided the students with an opportunity to show their learning.

Portfolios enhanced my awareness of the student as an individual. Through discussing their products I saw their hopes, their dreams, their fears and anxieties, their deep interests and sentiments. They revealed things that could have remained hidden from me in the course of everyday classroom life or they previously didn't get the opportunity to bring into the classroom. By including elements from the world outside of school allowed me to witness some things that are most important to the students.

By actively and collaboratively involving teachers, parents and students in the collection of work and the evaluation of achievement and growth, portfolios offered an opportunity to increase mutual understanding between teacher, parent and student. I as their teacher came to learn about strengths my students had that I was unaware of. Parents also came to learn things about their own child that they had been unaware of such as creative skills, and they were also made aware of the wide range of work that is covered in school. The portfolios served as a vehicle to focus the attention of students, parents and teachers on what students are learning, how well they are learning it and how they demonstrate that learning. Also the addition of a larger audience appeared to raise the stakes for many of the students which inspired them to work harder and to produce work of higher quality. By involving parents more in their child's education, the parents were given an opportunity to discuss their child's work

with them, to learn and understand what their child is learning and what they need to learn. They had an opportunity to recognise, acknowledge and give credit for what their children had achieved. The feedback from parents after the presentations in the home was very positive and I was glad to see more communication with families. Tony Humphreys (1993) believes that

How parents and other significant adults in the child's life respond to the child determines how the child will view himself/herself. Parental responses to the child are the looking glass through which the child evaluates himself/herself in terms of his/her lovability and capability. If the child is frequently scolded, ridiculed, criticised, compared, physically abused, has unfair expectations put on him/her then she/he will be convinced of unworthiness. Within the family a child's awareness of his/her psychological, social and physical characteristics emerges through his/her family experiences of either being loved/not loved and being seen as capable/not capable or clever/stupid etc.(p.110)

The advantages of portfolios in this sense is that the child's work is not being compared to anybody else's work.

When doing work initially, the students tended to take more care to ensure that the work was "good" as it may have been chosen in time for the portfolio. I believe they came to realise that whatever the level of their achievement and their efforts, they had the ability to make constant improvements even though these improvements may be small.

I received important feedback on my work as a teacher and made adjustments to ensure the success of each student.

This project made huge demands on my time, energy and commitment, but on reflection the benefits were clear particularly as the practice engaged students in their own learning, resulting in increased motivation and commitment allowing classroom time to be used far more productively than before.

4.8 How did I show that I took care that my judgements were reasonably fair and accurate?

The validation group which I initially set up involved the research participants (the students in my classroom), a colleague and a critical friend. But as the process of portfolio work progressed in my classroom, my principal and two other colleagues became very interested in my new method of assessment and asked if I would keep them informed on the development of the process of implementing portfolio work as a means of assessment as they liked the idea and were interested in promoting portfolios in their classrooms. My colleagues have been superb. They have a continued interest in my project, they visit the classroom to have a quick look in the portfolios from time to time.

I hadn't considered at the beginning inviting the parents to validate my claims but as the process progressed in my classroom I came to see the opportunity provided by portfolios to take the students' learning into the home where the child's work, interest and achievements would be acknowledged and praised. I became very interested in feedback from parents. The response sheets that the parents completed on the night that each student took their portfolio home gave me the reassurance that I had done something positive. They were grateful for involving them in their children's learning, they had come to know of talents that their own children had that they as parents were unaware of, they recommended that portfolios would be worthwhile as a whole school approach to assessment.

4.9 How did I modify my practice?

I introduced to children a method of assessment which gave them an opportunity to show what they know, to show what they have learned, to show what they can do and to show what they understand. I believe it is a more humane method and it is an alternative way of assessing children's rights to claim that they are worthwhile and it is a more effective method of assessment

than my previous method which only served to reinforce their self-concepts as being poor/average/good learners.

I gave them an opportunity to celebrate their successes as opposed to highlighting errors, failures and inadequacies.

I involved them in their own learning and assessment requiring them to select work that was evidence of their learning and requiring them to reflect on the strengths and challenges of their work.

I introduced a collaborative assessment approach involving students, teachers and parents and I am particularly pleased to see parents more involved in their child's learning.

I introduced the idea to my colleagues during our planning day on February 14th. I explained the process of portfolios, emphasising the benefits and then making a presentation of a portfolio. The staff were very impressed with the process. One teacher commented, "Very few educational innovations could make such broad claims". All the teachers were enthusiastic to get involved so portfolios were included in the school policy of assessment as of February 14th 2000.

4.10 Conclusion

This dissertation reflects the changing nature of my work in school and my role as a teacher researcher. It offers an understanding of professional development that took place in a school and is directly related to the learning of the pupils and the people within it. It shows how I have worked with students, colleagues, parents and a critical friend to improve the area of assessment in my classroom. I can make a claim to knowledge because with the support of these people I can show that I have improved my work. Through the medium of portfolios I have involved students more in their own learning and assessment as they select work that is evidence of their learning and to reflect upon the strengths and challenges of their work. Through the processes of thinking,

acting and making sense of my work, the narration of those processes and the changes that have taken place in my actions and understanding, show how knowledge can assume a living form because it is always being reformulated and reworked.

It tells the story of how I came to understand more fully my educational values and explains my educational development as I account for myself and my work. To carry out a piece of research as this, one that is my own, about an issue that concerns me has been a very positive experience and a superb learning opportunity. It has inspired a living process towards better educative relationships and a way of bringing my values to life into my classroom. It has uplifted and enhanced my work and my students' experiences and it has had a very uplifting effect on the quality of educational experience. This particular research has contributed to pupils' personal development and progress by improving their motivation, providing encouragement and increased awareness of strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. When children are motivated to find out more, to produce quality work because it seems genuinely worthwhile to them to do so is to me a wholly educative undertaking.

I introduced my students to the notion of self-reflection and self-evaluation which I believe are fundamental skills to excellence in any walk of life - be it analysing problems, proposing solutions, trouble-shooting, repairing equipment, communicating with others, managing resources of time and materials.

Their portfolios will provide positive information for successive teachers which will hopefully help facilitate continuity and progression.

Portfolios allow a sharing of the responsibility and accountability for student learning with the students themselves. Because they assume some of the responsibility for their learning the teacher's time can be used more beneficially towards the instructional process and towards ensuring that the learning difficulties the students have are dealt with.

The portfolio does not fulfil all the purposes of assessment nor is it claimed that it can do so and undoubtedly this more holistic assessment of a child's attainment will be of limited value if it is subsequently viewed through the lens of academic achievement only.

The research has raised new interesting questions for me. These include

- Can one form of assessment be relied upon or should a judicious balance of approaches be employed over time?
- If portfolio work cannot tell where the student stands in relation to a class average, or to a national norm, will standardised tests still be required for that purpose?
- If the public is demanding accountability are standardised tests here to stay?
- Is it possible that no one approach gives a complete picture of a child's knowledge, skills, understanding, ability or aptitude?

These questions will now become the beginning of new action enquiries.

Chapter 5 Significance

“Education is an art not a science, and fine teachers are wonderful artists who continue to grow” (New City, p.268)

5.1 The significance of this research for me.

In undertaking this research I believe that I achieved what I intended which was to bring about an improvement in my educational practice in the area of assessment in my classroom. It has been important in my professional development to focus on my values and examine my classroom practice in the light of those values. I have also revealed the nature of my values as the living standards of judgement I used in making sense of and explaining my educational development. The reflective nature of action research makes me constantly consider “What I am doing here?” and “How can I improve?”. The process is ongoing and I can honestly say that this is how I am living my personal and professional life.

I believe this action research which involved keeping an account of the action and reflection I undertook to improve a situation, has contributed to the development of my professional competence and to my sense of professional well-being. It has given me the opportunity to explain my developing educational values, practice and knowledge. In writing this research I believe I am developing a research-based professionalism in education.

I have learned a great deal about my assessment practices. I had believed prior to this action research project that I should be the person who could and should judge the abilities of my students but I now realise that by involving them in their own assessment they can see what and where they are at and what they need to do to improve. It's as if they are conducting their own action research. It has given me the confidence to accept that I was being unaware in my previous method of assessment and to believe that by working it through that I could improve the situation.

Action research has tapped into my life and it has empowered me to see the potential within myself, the positive power of assurance that there is nothing I cannot do if I believe in myself. I believe I have transferred this assurance onto the students and by involving them in their own assessment I gave them an opportunity to see the potential within themselves which motivated them, making them more responsible for their own learning and giving them an opportunity to see that there is nothing they cannot do if they believe in themselves.

I have learned that making time to celebrate their strengths and working on their weaknesses has been invaluable to the self-esteem of the students. It has raised my awareness that I need to constantly remind myself of the uniqueness of each student and that my approach should be person-centred as far as possible. By being aware of their needs helps me to understand better how to teach them and what to teach.

I have watched my students sifting enthusiastically through their work, seeking something good, something better, something they worked hard at, something they had achieved, something that was important to them or meant a lot to them as opposed to nervously scrambling through a standardised test.

I have watched them develop in their interpersonal relationships, sharing their work with friends, trusting them to reflect critically and honestly on each other's work, which has introduced them to the notion of collaboration.

I have watched my students trusting in their own ability to evaluate their work even if they still do have to look for guidance and help from me and from others now and again. But they are now less dependent on me and are more capable of reflecting critically on their work when evaluating it.

Carrying out this piece of research on an issue that concerned me has been a most exciting and worthwhile opportunity for me.

What shall I do next?

5.2 The Significance of Writing-Up the Research

It was only today 4/4/2000, that I sat down and read my dissertation from cover to cover. It is only now I realise what I have achieved in two years. I have brought new life into my classroom where achievements are celebrated and weaknesses are seen as a challenge. The writing-up has been significant for me in coming to understand my educational development. I believe I have developed my own living educational theory and I have moved beyond depending on the theories of others. I am now beginning to value the freedom I am experiencing in being able to stop and reflect, question and explore my own responses. I became a student again, learning to assess my practice, taking stock of my achievements and weaknesses, working on ways of improving assessment and teaching styles and standards in a coherent and systematic way.

5.3 The Significance to my Work Place Context

As I returned to school in September 1999 three colleagues were particularly interested if I was continuing with my action project from the previous year which involved the teaching of art in my classroom. I assured them that I was continuing with the art but I was also in search of another means of assessing students other than the system we had in the school involving standardised tests so I would be dealing with this recent concern through the action research framework. They willingly offered any help that they could and were keen to be kept informed during the year. I told them that I needed to do quite a bit of reading before I could attempt anything.

Giving credit where credit is due, they kept a constant eye on my introduction of portfolios as a means of assessment in the senior classes and regularly visited the classroom to watch the process progress. They were very interested

in my views as regards the practicality of the portfolios and the amount of work involved. On January 20th and 21st 2000 the staff in my school attended a two day conference on the Introduction of the New Curriculum. Also considering that we had gained a learning Support Teacher on staff since September 1999 who dealt largely with children who had difficulties in the areas of mathematics and English, as a staff we recognised that we needed to tackle the area of assessment as an issue for our school planning day on February 14th.

My principal asked me to make a presentation on the use of portfolios as a means of assessment to inform all staff members on the research I was undertaking. To begin the presentation I asked the staff to contribute to the aims and objectives of assessment and in relation to those aims and objectives I explained my shortcomings on the traditional method we had been using and the benefits of portfolios. But I did assure them that portfolios would not inform teachers where the students stand in relation to a class average, or to a national norm and that we should consider continuing also with standardised tests. They appreciated my knowledge and honesty and it was decided among the staff that they would like to involve portfolios in our reviewed whole school policy on assessment. It was agreed that they would start immediately in all classrooms on a lesser scale so as to introduce the notion of portfolios gradually to themselves and to the students and I offered to give them any help or advice as they progressed. It was also decided that the standardised tests would also be continued in each classroom in late September of each school year. Personally I was very pleased with the interest and support from my colleagues and I am delighted that action research has been instrumental once more in our school in breaking down the barriers that keep teachers isolated from their colleagues and giving us a sense of community. This research has provided a great opportunity for teacher collaboration and undoubtedly the whole must be better than the sum of the parts. By working as a team, as a whole school community we are sharing the collective expertise of all our staff. We are fostering and building on qualities of support, trust and openness between teachers and their colleagues and we are moving away from the “culture of individualism” (Hargreaves, 1992, quoted in Pollard, 1996) which isolates teachers from colleagues.

I personally believe that if you can give people hope when dealing with a particular problem, if you can show them a practical method, the problem can be overcome. It is interesting that teachers like to see something tried and tested on a practical level before they are willing to attempt it themselves.

I believe this research project has helped to inform my future practice in a positive way.

5.4 Contribution to Educational Theory

As a teacher, I have attended many courses and seminars in the area of professional development. I have listened and learned and enjoyed but I soon realise that the ideas that impressed me seemed to fizzle out because they lacked a practical method of implementation, whereas with action research it involves me as a teacher in my own classroom dealing with my own particular concerns.

If action research as a form of professional development was supported on a national level teachers' own self-perceptions would rise and we would be looking at an invigorated workforce that had the confidence to take a pro-active role in improving society. I believe that action research might be a much more viable option for the Department of Education in supporting professional development as it taps into a source of energy and goodwill that would enable people to innovate and manage change in their own educational environments. Now is the time for schools in Ireland to look seriously at action research. A new curriculum is being introduced and teachers are feeling the effects of a changing society. The traditional structured classroom or the traditional didactic style of teaching and assessing students no longer work effectively.

Even though I think portfolios as a means of assessment would be highly appropriate and attractive for primary schools nation wide it was not my initial aim to find a means of assessment which would be beneficial nation wide. It suited my situation and it has been a great learning experience for me, my students and their parents. I would like to make my research available so that the general workforce could see the effectiveness of doing this kind of person-centred work.

I have contributed to new forms of educational research and theory. I believe I have made a claim to knowledge, with the support of others, that I have improved the quality of educational experience for myself and my students.

I have come to understand that I can contribute to a much wider body of knowledge. Within the wider educational community I hope to share my learning with others who are interested in improving the area of assessment in their classrooms. Through the use of portfolios I believe the possibilities of whole school assessment could be continued in a new and creative way.

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Appendix A

An Ethics Statement

I Siobhán Ní Mhurchú am undertaking a piece of research to improve the area of assessment in my classroom as a part of my MA in Education with the University of the West of England, Bristol. The purpose of this project is to improve the quality of assessment and education for the children in my care. I would be grateful if you as the Board of Management would allow me to involve Scoil Gharbháin in my research. I will not be researching the children. I will be researching myself and my work in relation to them.

I promise to observe good ethical practice by guaranteeing the following:-

- I will not use any information given any child without parental consent.
- I will not reveal anything of a personal or compromising nature.
- I will not use a child's name or voice without parental permission.
- I will not use the name of the school without permission from you the Board of Management.
- I will not threaten school policy, management styles or individual personalities
- I guarantee that I will respect and protect the rights of all involved and if you wish to withdraw the school's involvement you may do so.

Having discussed the above with the Board of Management I, the Chairperson am granting permission to Siobhán Ní Mhurchú to continue with her research.

Signature: _____

Appendix B

An Ethics Statement

I Siobhán Ní Mhurchú am undertaking a piece of research to improve the area of assessment in my classroom as a part of my MA in Education with the University of the West of England, Bristol. The purpose of this project is to improve the quality of assessment and education for the children in my care. I would be grateful if you as a parent would allow your son / daughter to be a **research participant**.

Being a participant does not mean that I am researching your children, it means that I am researching myself and my work in relation to them.

I promise to observe good ethical practice by guaranteeing the following:-

- I will not use any information given by your child without your consent.
- I will not reveal anything of a personal or compromising nature.
- I will not use your child's name or voice without your permission.
- I guarantee that I will respect and protect their rights and if you wish to withdraw your child's involvement you may do so.

**I am willing to allow _____ to participate in your
action research project.**

Signature: _____

Appendix B1

An Ethics Statement

I Siobhán Ní Mhurchú am undertaking a piece of research to improve the area of assessment in my classroom as a part of my MA in Education with the University of the West of England, Bristol. The purpose of this project is to improve the quality of assessment and education for the children in my care. I would be grateful if you as a colleague would be willing to participate in my research as a critical friend.

I will not be researching you nor the children in my care. I will be researching myself and my work in relation to them.

I promise to observe good ethical practice by guaranteeing the following:-

- I will not use any information given by you without your consent.
- I will not reveal anything of a personal or compromising nature.
- I will not use your name or voice without your permission.
- I will not threaten school policy, management styles or individual personalities
- I guarantee that I will respect and protect the rights of all involved and if you wish to withdraw at any stage you may do so.

I _____ **am willing to participate in your action research project as a critical friend.**

Appendix C

Appendix C

Appendix C

Appendix C

Appendix D

The Presentation of a Portfolio in the Home.

This is an extract from the presentation of student B's portfolio in his home on 14/2/2000 which he and his mother were willing to record. The tape is stored in my data archive.

Parent: Tell me about the portfolio first of all - did you enjoy putting it together?

B: It didn't seem like school work and I liked putting all my things together and it was fun.

P: Show me your best work.

B: Well, these are my Maths tests - I've really improved in my Maths.

P: Could you make out the average for me for the month?

B: I can do it in my head - yes 82%.

P: That's great.

B: This is my best story.

P: What was the best book you read?

B: Babysitter Two. Look I did my book report on it.

P: How many book reports did you do?

B: Just one.

This is my nature diary - I filled it in recently when the lady came from Sherkin.

P: Tell me about the day the lady came.

B: She told us all about marine biology.

P: What is marine biology?

B: Studying all underwater life.

P: That will be a nice diary to keep now for Spring.

B: And this is my marine biology quiz.

P: You learned a lot from that didn't you.

B: Yes.

P: Do you remember the time we went to Sherkin Island?

B: No.

P: We were down in Skull - we went across in the boat - I think you were three at

the time. We went across in the boat for the day - it was beautiful.

B: Look, this is my best writing, hasn't it improved.

P: Very good! I'm delighted to see the writing getting a little bit bigger - it's not as scrawny looking as it was.

B: Here is an account of my football matches, my league matches, cup matches and what the score was, that I played in.

This is my book list from October.

P: How many books did you read? - 14 books.

B: And this is my list from November.

P: Very good - you're great for the books.

B: This is my favourite picture.

P: Oh! That's beautiful. Tell me how you did that now - maybe I could do it in school.

B: First you draw twenty boxes the same size.

P: Did you use your ruler to measure them or did you fold over the page.

B: I used my ruler

P: What size is each box?

B: Approximately 6cm. squared. You can use any two colours you want.

Then for

the first box the background is green and the writing or the picture is the other

colour and then you switch around for the next box.

P: And you made the pattern?

B: Yes.

P: That is beautiful. You picked any two colours you liked?

That is lovely.

P: What is KANE.

B: He is a wrestler.

P: A wrestler!

P: Oh this guy is lovely - he'd be a lovely mobile if you punched a little hole in

him there.

How did you make him?

B: We drew from the templates - cut them out- painted them and then stapled them all together.

P: The little green man. We must hang him up as a little mobile down in the kitchen. OK?

B: These are my spelling tests. Look I have my best dates marked out.

P: Very good.

Oh now we are coming to the plaques and the medals. This was the plaque you got in?

B: Ferrybank - I came second - cross country.

P: Lovely - Beautiful.

B: That's my football medal.

P: I definitely remember that day.

B: And this is my Munster medal - I came third.

P: This is the heavy one.

B: And this is the article in the paper about it.

P: The running will be starting soon again, won't it?
That's a right selection isn't it?
Which was your favourite?

B: Well my best accomplishment is the Munster medal.

Appendix E

27/9/1999

A Chairde,

The products children produce during the year help us gain a better understanding of children's needs, interests and progress. The actual work that children complete over time provides a richer and more authentic way than tests alone to assess what they are learning and the depth of their thinking.

This year, I hope that the children will collect and store many of their products in all subjects across the curriculum. This collection is called a **portfolio** and will contain items which hopefully will better show how your child thinks, works and how much your child is learning. This portfolio will be largely managed by the children to help develop organisation skills and will hopefully extend their responsibility and ownership in their work. Children will be encouraged to produce their best work and to select items for their portfolio which show how capable they are.

The children will keep their work at school for several days before they review it to select particular items for their portfolio. If your child produces some things at home that show their talents, please encourage them to include these in their portfolio. At particular intervals during the school year your child will take home her/his portfolio to share with you the growth your child makes this year.

The introduction of portfolios is a new venture for me this year so I ask you for your support and help as I believe that they can encourage your child to work harder and give them a great sense of pride in their achievements.

Is mise le meas,

Appendix F

The answers to the following questions are recorded in my personal diary. We dealt with each question on different days.

(18/1/2000)

2. What samples did you want to hold in your portfolio to show what you had learned?

O: We learn something new in most things we do in school so we have a lot of different samples as we do a lot of subjects and most of us are involved in different things after school.

R: We learn something different in all subjects - sometimes it is something new, sometimes it is something we have forgotten but it is still learning.

L: Most things I am involved in, I look at it from the point of including it in my portfolio particularly if I have learned something, or if I was able to do something that I had not been able to do before.

S: Before these portfolios we took learning for granted or I didn't even realise that I was learning, but when you become aware of your own learning you become very conscious of knowing or being able to do something that you weren't able to do before.

S: I loved putting in samples of work which showed an improvement from previous months' portfolios. I learned that I can always do better than what I am doing.

D: I have photographs of myself in the Christmas concert. I know everybody else was in the concert but I loved being on stage and it was my first time.

D: I learned by being on television that it is very hard work when you work on television so I have my video to show that.

As I walked among the students observing them assessing their work I stopped and asked the following question of some students.

(19/1/2000)

3. How is this piece of work different from others?

(sample of a piece of art work)

S: It is my own original work.
This picture tells my story but somebody else could interpret it differently.

(medals, certificates, personal achievements)

B: I won this myself, people helped me to train and showed me how to do it well but at the competition it was up to me to do my best and win.

(Spelling results)

L: You only need to look at how much I have improved.

(24/1/2000)

How does this item show something that you think or feel?

- S: My picture is a happy picture.
C: Because my work has improved a lot it makes me feel good.
K: I was disappointed that I didn't do better but I am going to try so hard again.
A: These maths were very difficult, I really had to think but I did ok.

(25/1/2000)

How does this product show something important that you have learned?

(medal, certificate, award of achievement)

- S: I learned that by training hard, believing that I could do it, by doing my best I have as good a chance as any body else. I have also learned that if you put in a lot of effort one can always improve.

(clay pot)

- O: I never made anything with clay before. We first made a base and then we made a long worm with the clay which we then rolled out. We wound it round and round to make a pot and then we made a lid. The feel of wet clay in my hands was lovely.

Appendix G

As I walked among the students on 9/12/1999 they sifted through their work and I had also asked them to think about the answers to the following questions which I placed on the blackboard as they were working. I recorded the proceedings for approximately half an hour. These replies are extracts from that recording which I have translated to English and the tape is stored in my data archive. These are also extracts in translation of accounts which each student wrote on their own portfolio which are through the medium of Irish and are included in my data archive.

1. What is the best item in your portfolio?

Video tape of my appearance on television
a variety of medals
my spellings - I got them all right on the 26/11/1999
my maths - I did really well last month - I got 100%
clay pot
an invitation to the county football trials
my writing

2. Why is it the best?

In general their replies varied from improvement, success, something new in their lives, something they did that they were previously unable to do.

3. What did you improve most in this month?

Spellings	dancing
mathematics	my English essays
tin whistle	my oral Irish
the amount of books I read	my running

4. Did I include anything different in my portfolio this month?

A video of my first appearance on television
A script of a play I wrote a video of the Christmas concert
A poem I wrote for a competition
Certs - attending a French course; fasting for Concern;
solo verse speaking a letter from my pen pal

a piece of art work plaques and medals
a letter giving me a place on the team for the Primary Games

5. What do I aim to improve next month?

Spellings Tin Whistle Geography
Mathematics I would love to win a medal for something!
My history - I need to work much harder at history
My behaviour in class.

Appendix H

8/2/2000

A Chairde,

Your child will bring home his/her portfolio to share with you on Thursday, February 10th. Please plan to set aside 15 minutes to review the portfolio together so it may be returned to school the next day. This is a special opportunity for you to model to your child that school and learning are very important to you.

To encourage organisation and responsibility, help your child handle the products carefully and return the portfolio the next day. I would also appreciate if you would note your views on this method of assessing your child and return your comments to me.

Is mise le meas,

Appendix I

criteria (in translation) chosen by students - 11/1/2000 (personal diary)

- is this a good effort
- did I do my best
- could I do better
- is there evidence of learning here - what did I learn
- is there evidence of understanding here - what do I now understand
- is there evidence of thought here
- can I explain why I chose this item - can I give a reason
- is there evidence of improvement - how has this work improved - an understanding of how it could be improved
- is there room for more improvement
- quality?/variety?
- is it creative and/or original

Appendix J

Interviews with some students regarding their portfolios.

As the Irish language is the first language in our school I believed it would be unethical of me to interview the students through the medium of English. The Irish version of these interviews and the tape are in my data archive.

11/1/2000

Student S.

Teacher: List the items in your box for December.

S: my book list
a play I wrote for the Christmas concert and I typed it on the computer
my biology quiz
my pot made from clay, designed, painted and glazed
My nature diary
my tape where I played the tin whistle, sang, recited some poetry
my best maths test

T: What is the best item in your portfolio?

S: The play I wrote for the Christmas Concert.

T: Tell me about the play.

S: The name of the play is Aladdin. The girl in the play gets a genie and the genie

gives her three wishes.

T: Where did you get the idea?

S: From the story Aladdin.

Student M.

M: The best item in my portfolio is my under 11 hurling medal.

I won it while playing with Abbeyside against Dungarvan.

T: Where were you in the field?

M: I played in the forwards.

T: Did you score?

M: No, I did not.

Student D.

D: The best thing in my portfolio is my participation in the trials and it is the item

in my portfolio which is different to anybody else's.

T: Trials for what?

D: Football.

T: Are you good?

D: Yes.

T: These are trials for what - a place in the Waterford team?

D: Yes.

T: Was there anybody else from this school chosen to attend these trials.

D: Yes. S. from fourth class.

T: How many trials did you attend?

D: I am not sure. I went to at least five. I must go back again at the end of February.

Student E.

E: The best item in my portfolio is my medal.

T: What did you win this medal for?

E: I won it while playing football with Abbeyside against Ardmore in the under

twelve's.

T: Where in the field were you playing?

E: I was the goalie?

T: How many times did the ball pass by your legs?

E: Three times.

T: But obviously your team was better.

E: Yes, we were better.

T: Did you win anything recently in the hurling?
E: I won a medal recently with Abbesside.
T: Where were you playing that day?
E: I was playing centre field.
T: You obviously can play anywhere in the field.
E: Yes, I can.

Student A.

A: The best item in my portfolio is this photograph of me playing the piano at a concert in the Park Hotel.
T: Tell me about this concert.
A: My piano teacher asked me to play as the Choral Society were organising a concert using local talent.
T: What are the names of the pieces you played?
A: Tiger Blues and Summer Nights.
T: Were you good?
A: Yes.
T: Did you make any mistakes.
A: Yes, but I don't think anybody noticed.
T: It must have been a great honour to be invited to play at a public concert.
A: It was. Ristard was also invited to play at the concert.

Student O.

O: The nicest and best item in my portfolio is my clay work. I made a container from the clay which dries when for some time. To begin with we got some clay

from which we made a very long worm and we wound this around and around

until we had made a container. On the following week we painted and designed the container, inside and outside. On the following week we glazed

the pots. My pot is very tall but I do not have a lid for it.

T: Who has seen your container?

O: Just my class?

T: What did they think?

O: They thought it was beautiful. In fact most of them thought mine was the nicest

in the classroom.

Student L. 13/1/2000

T: Today you were looking at the contents of your portfolios from October, November and December. From the time we began these portfolios has any of

your work improved?

L: From the time we began using portfolios my tin whistle playing, my spellings, my penmanship, my reading and my history work have improved.

T: Wow! How many things is that?

L: Six things.

T: How come so much of your work has improved.

L: I have really tried my best. I want to put my best work in my portfolio and I

want to be good at school and I believe I have improved a lot at school.

T: How come your tin whistle playing has improved so much?

L: I practice for one hour every night.

T: One hour! Phew! That's a lot of practice.

When you say you have improved at school, what do you mean?

L: I don't get into trouble any more in school. Last year I was always in trouble. I

listen and I learn and I sometimes get 100% in my Mathematics and my writing

has improved and I really try harder.

T: Do you have anything in your portfolio that nobody else has?

L: I have the sounds on tape. Remember, for the Christmas play. I recorded at

home the sounds of a hammer, a saw and a drill and on the night of the concert

I was the sound engineer.

Student G.

T: Have you improved in your work since we began using portfolios?

G: I have, particularly in my English, my Mathematics and in my tin whistle.

T: I heard the class saying that you could be in the Guinness Book of Records.

What have you done?

G: I read eighty two books in three months.

T: Wow!

Do you do anything else other than read?

G: No, I don't.

T: When do you read?

G: When I'm in bed, in the car, when I'm at home before the dinner?

T: Have you anything else in your portfolio which is different to the items in other

students' portfolios?

G: I wrote this poem. Can I read it? (recorded on tape)

Student R.

T: What are all these medals for?

R: I go for piano lessons and I won musician of the week four weeks in a row, so

therefore I got musician of the month.

T: What grade are you doing in the piano?

R: Grade 3.

Appendix K

Interview with a teaching colleague S. whom I asked to be my critical friend. S. was appointed as the Learning Support Teacher in our school in September 1999. As Irish is the language of our school this is a translated version of the interview which is in a tape in my data archive.

M. = Me

S. = Critical Friend

M: How do you see your role as the Learning Support Teacher in this school?

S: I believe I have many roles in my job from a teaching role to a complimentary role, to a supportive role, to an advisory role. I provide assistance to learners particularly those who have difficulties in the classroom in the areas of English and mathematics. I believe I can guide the learner towards success by finding their level and working forwards from there.

M: How did you go about finding their levels?

S: There is a policy in the school that the students from 1st class upwards are tested using standardised tests in their own classrooms at the beginning of the school year and with support from teachers we discussed their achievements in such tests and chose students on that approach.

M: As your work is largely based on subject areas such as English and mathematics what is your honest opinion of my use of portfolios as a means of assessment?

S: I believe your work in developing portfolios as a means of assessment in this

school has complimented my post. Guidelines from the Department of Education and Science regarding learning support deals only with the subject areas of English and mathematics. I believe that portfolios have transformed the learning environment in your classroom. They allow you to evaluate a wide range of outcomes and they have afforded you the opportunity to see your students grow and blossom. Because they select their own products for their own portfolios you have involved them in the

realisation of their own learning and how well they are learning. You have also introduced the idea of self-assessment to them which makes them evaluate their own work and learning. You have taught them to look critically at their own work and to help them gauge what is good or what needs to be improved. Your students speak very positively about their own portfolios - as it's all about success and achievements and positive learning I think they are a wonderful idea.

M: How would you compare them to testing students?

S: Well, I must admit I did some amount of testing on the students who came to me in September but the reality of the situation was that I did not know any other way. By administering tests to students they do not see their success but these portfolios are a visual thing, the children can see their own learning and success and show it to others. It is a gradual progress of building on their own level. As portfolios include all areas of the curriculum it compliments the theory of Multiple Intelligences by displaying their achievements in a variety of different ways.

Students have come to me in my room speaking animatedly on something

positive they achieved or were involved in even outside of the school.

Their

highlight is that it will be included in their portfolio - it has done wonders for

student self-esteem.

They show a huge sense of ownership in their portfolios - it is theirs - it is their achievements - it shows their learning and improvement over time and it belongs to them. Portfolios give them a responsibility to take all aspects of their learning seriously and they show a belief that they can improve in any subject if they try harder.

I have been amused watching them sift through their learning, picking and choosing and comparing. They have become their own teachers.

Appendix L

Appendix L

Appendix L

Appendix M

Appendix N

Appendix N

Appendix N

Appendix O

Appendix O

Appendix O

Appendix P

10/2/2000

A Chairde,

Your child is eager to share this portfolio with you. As you review the portfolio together, please remember that your child has worked very hard to complete this portfolio. It contains what your child has chosen as some of her or his best work and shows how much has been learned and accomplished since the beginning of this school year.

Consider the following suggestions to ensure a positive experience for your child.

1. Let your child lead the portfolio sharing.
(Ask - What do you want to show me first?)
2. Other questions you might ask your child are:-
What kind of work do you most like to do?
Which item in your portfolio is your favourite? Why?
Can you explain to me how you did this?
3. Find as many positive points to respond to as possible.
Encouragement will help your child know you are proud of what he or she has learned. Your positive feedback will help your child feel eager to share with you again at a later time.

Please complete the enclosed sheet and if you have any questions or concerns please let me know.

Thank you for participating in your child's education.

Is mise le meas,

Appendix ?

1. What really makes something your best work?
2. What examples do you want to keep in your portfolio to represent what you are learning throughout the year?
3. What subjects have we not represented so far?
4. How does this product show something important that you think or feel?
5. How does this show that you have learned something?

I chose this for my portfolio because _____

Roghnaigh mé é seo do mo bhosca mar _____

I chose this for my portfolio because _____

Roghnaigh mé é seo do mo bhosca mar _____

I chose this for my portfolio because _____

Roghnaigh mé é seo do mo bhosca mar _____

Appendix N

Portfolio Response

10/2/2000

I want to thank _____ for sharing this portfolio with me.

One of the products I especially enjoyed was

because

_____.

What I liked about the whole portfolio was

_____.

I think Scoil Gharbháin should / should not continue to use this method of

assessing the students because

_____.

Other questions or comments:

_____.

(Signature)_____