

***Chapter preview***

*This chapter tells how I continued to collect data as I investigated my practice as a developing critical educator. Because I now regarded my work as research-based, I aimed to collect data in order to create an evidence base through which I would test the validity of my emerging claims to knowledge. The chapter contains the most significant data of my research, which form the grounds for my claim to be living my values of justice and inclusion in my practice.*

This chapter tells the story of Nell. It contains information that holds significance about the purposes and directions of my work. Because it is so important, I recount events in some detail, without offering explanations for the actions and reactions recounted. In Chapter 8, I analyse the story, as well as my other case stories, and begin to explain the significance of my actions and my learning for my living theory of practice.

I need to say at this point that, although the story told here is a true story, and happened some years ago, I have withheld any information that could identify people and places. I have therefore not inserted dates for my data, and all names are fictitious. The originals and copies of letters and reports are in my data archive, and can be produced on request. All persons mentioned in the story have given their permission for the story to be told, including Nell and her mother, Maggie. My journal, listed as Appendix 12, is in my data archive.

I am also inspired by existing stories in the literature that tell of struggles like mine, where committed teachers refused to give up on those they cared for. For example, Helen Keller (2002) tells how Anne Sullivan enabled her to lead a full and productive life; and Christie Brown (1998) tells how his mother enabled him to go on to become established in Irish literature. Both succeeded in spite of what seemed like insuperable odds.

So here is Nell's story.

When I first met Nell I was working as a mainstream class teacher. Nell was special, in that she not only seemed to have learning difficulties, but also behavioural difficulties. She became a special case for me, because not only did Nell learn about her own capacities for learning and self-direction, but also Nell's mother, Maggie, learned something similar, as did also Nell's special needs care assistant, Betty. Most importantly, Nell contributed to my personal and professional learning. Nell in fact provided the focus for a constellation of learning.

I had transferred mid-year between schools to find myself in charge of a class who were a few months away from receiving First Holy Communion. Very little preparation had been done, because, I was told, they had experienced some problems and needed an experienced teacher who would be able to prepare them for the Communion appropriately and speedily. It was also mentioned that a special-needs assistant (SNA) worked in this class with a rather difficult Traveller child. Having taught for almost twenty years, I was not alarmed at the prospect of one difficult child. However, the idea of having another adult (the SNA) in the room at all times instilled a greater sense of anxiety, as this was beyond my current experience.

Nothing could have prepared me for the situation I was about to encounter. On entering the classroom I found Nell, the Traveller child in question, sitting in isolation in one corner of the room with her special-needs assistant beside her, effectively blocking her exit or any possible contact with the rest of the class.

No information was available about her problems, needs or individual programme of work. Her Special Needs Assistant (Betty) seemed determined to share as little information as possible. When I asked Betty about herself and about Nell, she informed

me that, 'We will do whatever work you find for us during the day. Otherwise we sit here and try to keep quiet.' (Journal entry)

I later succeeded in obtaining Nell's portfolio, which turned out to be a collection of unrelated loose pages taken from several sources, all at pre-school level, with no pattern of progression or learning goal. Betty informed me that Nell had 'no actual books, no individual programme of work and no specific allocation of teacher time.' She did, however, attend the resource teacher for travellers (RTT) for twenty minutes a day. This evidently gave the class a break. No wonder this child was disruptive, I thought. She was frustrated, alienated and unchallenged.

I decided to try out a range of strategies to achieve some modicum of educational justice on behalf of Nell, so I spoke with senior colleagues to see whether I could find ways of encouraging an improvement in behaviour or learning. I received the message, 'You're wasting your time with her.' I was also advised not to erode class time as 'the other children have suffered enough putting up with her for so long.'

Over the coming weeks I put together a program of basic literacy and numeracy work for Nell. I assigned her individual tuition time each day as I attempted to teach her the alphabet and the numbers one to ten. Betty worked tirelessly with Nell on consolidation activities and practice sheets. Slowly, a relationship of trust began to develop between Betty and myself. Only then did I learn the extent of Nell's difficulties and hear the story of her previous years of schooling. This is what I learned.

Nell began school reluctantly at the age of six plus, at which time she was placed in junior infants, the reception class. It soon became apparent that she had no experience of, or interest in books, toys or jigsaws. She also displayed very poor social skills and refused to make eye contact with the teacher. This was further compounded by a pattern of irregular attendance. In all, she attended only forty days in her first year of schooling.

When present she made a huge impact. She displayed no interest in any of the class activities and amused herself by inflicting pain on the other children by pinching, biting, walking on their toes and punching them. She had no concept of ownership, believing that she could take and keep any object she desired. She regularly destroyed classmates' property. In the schoolyard and during free activity periods the situation was dramatically worse giving rise to real concerns about the safety of other children.

The class teacher (or supervising teacher in the yard) could not control this whirlwind and serve the interests of the other children at the same time. Indeed, one person, even on an individual basis, could not cope with the huge demands and needs of this child. I visited the home to try to find parental support for Nell, but none was forthcoming. Her parents insisted that Nell was perfectly well behaved at home. Whatever was wrong was school related. Nell's mother Maggie made excuses on a continuous basis. My visits met with animated argument and usually resulted in a prolonged absence by Nell, so I abandoned this strategy.

Because Nell was a member of the Travelling community it was generally anticipated in school that she would be behind her peers in terms of academic achievement. It was also expected that her behaviour would be in need of improvement and that socialisation into the classroom culture would be necessary. Because older siblings had already attended the school it was assumed that Nell, like them, would be below average ability.

The class teacher struggled through the forty days, mentally drained from the effort, protesting that the child could not function in the mainstream classroom. Besides, there appeared no solution within normal educational provision, because:

- Nell was too young to be assessed.
- The assessment process was not suitable for members of the Travelling community.

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- Nell's parents did not support the efforts of the school and denied vehemently that Nell had any problems.

Nell's aggressive behaviour and physical strength in comparison to her classmates made her the dominating force in the classroom and soon led to complaints from parents of other children. Yet Nell really was beyond help in terms of normal school provision.

Policy mandates that Traveller children be placed in age-appropriate classes (Ireland, DES 2005a: 27). Consequently, Nell skipped a class and was placed in First class after having completed less than a year in school. She therefore missed out on almost all her infant education, and was prematurely promoted to first class, a position occupied by children in their third year of formal schooling. Added to the denial of a full infant education experience (which includes a lot of play, socialisation, pre-reading and pre-number work), Nell was now expected to function in a much more formal school setting. No provision was made to compensate for the preparatory work she had missed and nobody in her home environment was equipped to address her specific needs. As the second youngest in a family of seventeen children she was unlikely to receive much individual attention.

Within class Nell's behaviour deteriorated to the extent that the teacher was unable to teach a class. She acted out, had temper tantrums and behaved inappropriately and dangerously. Nell was performing significantly below the levels expected for her age / ability level.

In theory this meant she should receive extra support from the learning support teacher, in accordance with Department of Education policy and school policy. In reality however it meant nothing. Nell was not given extra resources because as a Traveller child she was already attending the Resource Teacher for Travellers (RTT) and it was felt that would be unjust to allow Nell to benefit from both RTT and learning support services while other

children had access only to the learning support teacher. This issue arises in some schools, due evidently to a misconception about the role of the RTT (as explained in Chapter 2). Some staff view the RTT as a learning support teacher whose sole function is to cater for the academic needs of the Traveller children. In reality this is not the primary aim of the RTT, who caters for social needs, helps in the process of adjusting to school, acts as home-school liaison, acts as advocate for the children, and mediates the culture of the school. The RTT tries to promote self-esteem amongst Traveller children, encourages them to take pride in their own culture and identity and tries to promote cultural diversity and so avoid alienation from the settled community. Any concern that relates to Traveller children in school is usually dealt with by the RTT. In addition, the RTT also tries to support the children's learning, but this is not a discrete service dedicated to this purpose. Ironically, this distinction does not seem to apply to the non-national children currently attending our schools. Many of these children attend the Learning Support teacher even though they also attend the Language teacher for non-nationals. This is, I believe, an unfair practice. The criterion for attending the RTT is to be a member of the Travelling community. To attend Language support one must be a non-national, displaying significant problems with the English language. To attend Learning Support the child must score below the tenth percentile on a standardised test. Need determines access. It is a source of considerable injustice that Travellers are denied this service despite meeting the necessary criteria.

Back to Nell. It was accepted that Nell, (aged almost eight), had very poor social skills, limited oral ability and was unable to function within the parameters of school discipline. Following a range of case meetings, a number of recommendations were made:

- An SNA would be appointed on an individual basis.
- Nell should attend any support teaching services that were available in the school.
- Her learning support teacher and class teacher should collaborate on individual programme planning

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- Her SNA would support the implementation of her individual program of work.

Nell therefore became Betty's responsibility. Betty told me, 'When I took this job I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I didn't know that the teachers had given up on her. I was supposed to implement her individual education plan (IEP) but there was none. Nell was to get help from the support teachers but they won't tell me what to do with Nell and I don't know how to teach her myself. After all, I'm not a teacher!' (Journal entry)

I now joined Betty in caring for Nell and I was determined to do my best for her. Full of arrogance and my own self-righteousness I set about changing things. As previously mentioned I devised and taught an IEP with Betty's help. I tried to include Nell in general class work but frequently had to remove her due to her disruptive behaviour. I searched in vain for an incentive to encourage positive behaviour to no avail. 'This child had no concept of *carrot*,' I thought. The promise of any activity or reward meant nothing to her. She responded only to *stick*. I carefully recorded my thoughts in my reflective diary.

Betty also kept a diary which reads like a running record of verbal abuse. In April she wrote:

'To-day Nell spit in my lunch box and called me an f\*\*\*\*\* w\*\*\*\*. She said she is going to bring the teacher and myself to court for hitting her and she will get lots of money. At lunch break she hit Ann across the face splitting her lip and told Mrs X that I had done it.' (Betty's diary, April)

In the classroom one day while working on a practice activity Nell let out a loud shriek and exclaimed, 'Mrs. O. pinched me!' I knew this to be untrue as I was actually watching her at the time and Betty hadn't touched her.

Claims of this nature were frequent and had to be investigated, which wasted a huge

amount of class time. (Betty and I still wonder if such claims will come back to haunt us. We often wondered what kind of stories the other children brought home to their parents in the evening.)

While behaviour continued to be erratic and beyond my control I aimed to accelerate academic progress as much as possible. I therefore approached the resource teacher for travellers (RTT) regarding Nell's poor level of progress, hoping that we could co-ordinate our efforts and raise her levels of literacy.

'It's not my fault,' she stated. 'She does a lot of work up here.' A request that Betty remain in the room with Nell during her lesson was rejected. 'I'm not here to show the SNA how to teach,' she said. 'I am the teacher. She can go to college and train like the rest of us' (Journal entry). Later I learned that the work consisted of social skills, which involved talking with Nell or allowing her to play with the toys. I appreciated the tremendous need to develop Nell's social skills, but I also recognised that her poor behaviour was also due to her frustration at her lack of success in school and her inability to integrate with the class.

It was after this episode that things began to deteriorate more rapidly. Nell would be a model student during our individual tuition time but refused to work on her own or with Betty. She demanded my undivided attention and prevented me from working with the class.

Here is Nell's weekly diary of disruption.

Monday: Having completed an individual lesson with Nell I began a maths lesson with the class. Betty was working with Nell to complete an assignment I had set. Objects began to fly towards the students as Nell flung everything within reach. A tirade of abuse streamed from the corner, forcing me to return to calm the situation. I turned my attention



back to the class when Nell started to emit a humming noise, which grew progressively louder. Hoping she would either stop or run out of breath I ignored it. The noise grew louder and louder as my voice rose, until finally I had to stop and address the problem.

Wednesday: Father N. visited today to speak about Holy Communion. Again Nell did her hum. Nell pinched Betty when she asked her to stop. She swore loudly at me when I asked her. Father N. left the room.

Friday: Nell was quite strange today claiming that a man was trying to take her away. After lunch it was as if her pent-up energy exploded. She ran around the room, calling on Betty and myself to catch her. She climbed on chairs, tables and window ledges. She balanced precariously on the high cupboard while doing a tight rope act. (Journal entries)

My journal recorded that I was running out of strategies. As I vented my frustration and sense of failure in the staff room my colleagues told me:

‘It didn’t take long for her to get the better of you.’

‘What does she want education for? She will be married off in a few years time anyway. It's not as if they make any use of it.’

‘Well, I’m telling you all now I will not have her or any other Traveller in my room. I just couldn’t cope!’ (Journal entry).

And so on.

Nell's span of concentration was very short. She sought constant attention and could not adjust to the structure and requirements of the school situation. At this stage I felt that more individual teaching would benefit Nell but I was restricted from using any more

class time. I again requested that Nell be allocated some of the Learning Support teacher's time. The refusal was instantaneous.

'She's going to the RTT. That's all she's getting. ... What about the ordinary child in the class? Who stands up for their rights? What about responsibilities?'  
(Journal entry)

Arguing that resources were to be allocated according to greatest need I insisted that the law would uphold Nell's entitlement. I was reminded that I was the most junior member of staff and bound by institutional decisions. Nell was to be sent to the RTT. I objected to this on the grounds that it was an inappropriate role for the RTT and was rather a drastic sanction as it meant Nell would be missing out on class activity altogether.

I did, however, on occasion resort to this measure myself when my patience ran out. The result was extraordinary. Behaviour deteriorated dramatically, and was such that it merited banishment to the 'sin bin' every day. I felt that Nell wanted to be removed to the RTT room, viewing it as a treat rather than as a sanction. Finally, following a whole day of conflict, which culminated in Nell kicking Betty, spitting and cursing at me, stealing property from two pupils and breaking a number of classroom objects, Nell was finally sent to the RTT, but for a limited fifteen minute cooling-off period. I asked Betty to remain in the room with the RTT, because I wanted to know what went on there and what sanctions were imposed, and I felt that an extra adult was needed in the room due to the severity of the tantrum.

Returning more defiant than ever Nell wreaked havoc until home time and on dismissal announced that she would go straight to the RTT room in the morning.

On arrival home that evening I dissolved into tears. 'I'm a total failure as a teacher,' I sobbed. 'I've tried everything. I spend hours each night preparing for one child, and she

has beaten me. I don't know what to do. I might as well give up.' (Journal entry)

Still dejected the following morning I spoke to Betty, hoping for an insight into where I was failing. The result wasn't what I expected.

'Julie (the RTT) gives her sweets and lets her do whatever she wants,' said Betty.

'Of course she wants to go there. You expect her to behave and even to do work!'

'But she won't learn any thing otherwise,' I protested.

'No one gives a damn if she learns anything or not,' said Betty. 'So why are we bothered? We try to help her and all we get is abuse. No-one wants her here anyway!' (Journal entry)

It was Betty's use of 'we' that renewed my determination. We did care. It is my professional responsibility to care and to educate. Betty cared. She believed teachers had a duty towards Nell and was frustrated that this duty was being ignored by some. I recognised Betty as an educator and my greatest asset. Nobody knew Nell as well as Betty did. She sat beside her for every minute of her working day. She constantly encouraged, cajoled and coaxed Nell in an effort to get her to learn. In return, she received verbal and physical abuse at a much greater level than I, or any of my colleagues had been subjected to. I was ashamed that I had considered giving up.

I decided again to seek parental involvement. Her parents refused to call to the school so I was forced to make a home visit. It was an interesting experience. Father was absent but mother and other family members left me in no doubt about their feelings towards 'that school' and 'my kind' who 'bullied little childer every day.' 'What good did it to any of them girls to go to school?' mother asked, as she pointed out four siblings aged from 17

to 13. 'None of them can either read or write. No teacher bothers with the Travellers. They are just left sit at the back of the class! What do you care about the likes of us? You all think you're better than us Travellers' (Journal entry).

No support was forthcoming so we pushed ahead with our efforts at school. Unacceptable tantrums and loud outbursts during practice for First Holy Communion in the church followed. It was however incidents of serious misbehaviour in the school yard that led to more parent contact, now an executive decision. This time, to avoid a home visit, mother arrived at the classroom door, clearly annoyed and agitated. Nell, sure of her mother's support, gleefully confessed to all charges. Only when suspension was mentioned did mother exhibit any disapproval of Nell's actions. To my horror, she slapped the child hard about the head, legs and hands, leading to heart-rending wails in the school corridor.

I endured two further similar episodes. On the third occasion I had to physically intervene. Mother told me in future to hit her a few slaps myself and not to bother her any more.

I was now told that I had lost all hope of control as without the threat of corporal punishment Nell would run wild. I admit that I was worried. Yet I knew that I wanted support from home in the form of involvement and understanding, not physical abuse. I believe corporal punishment is inappropriate for children but especially for a child whom I felt had no real understanding of right and wrong.

Following First Holy Communion Nell's behaviour improved slightly and some work was achieved each day with Betty's help, without whom no progress was possible. Betty and I confided in each other, shared our frustrations, planned and revised every activity and tried to shield Nell from the attention of other staff members. We struggled to the end of the year. June came. The family moved off for the Summer. I worked on to the end of June with a feeling of relief mixed with frustration and a growing sense of failure. I had

failed this child. I had failed in my professional responsibility towards her. And then, at the end of term, I was informed that my teaching post had been suppressed.

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A year passed. The following January, I found myself working as a Resource Teacher for Travellers (RTT) within the same school complex. So in January Nell and I began working together again.

I made the following resolutions.

- I would work closely with those involved i.e. the class teacher, any other learning support teachers, and above all the Special Needs Assistant.
- Try to involve Nell's family.
- Try to improve personal relations with Nell.

Year one lasted from January to June and included a number of absences due to family crisis situations. The class teacher gave me general responsibility for literacy and numeracy, with Betty implementing the agreed programme within the classroom. I also negotiated Betty's presence in the Resource room during Nell's tuition time. In this way she knew exactly what I was trying to teach Nell and how I went about it. More importantly it made Nell aware of the respect I had for Betty and the value I placed on her input. A reward system was operated by Betty and myself, which rewarded behaviour and effort both in the classroom and in the Resource room. Nell could no longer play one situation off against another and Betty was the vital link between both contexts. The system was re-designed almost every other week. Yet behaviour continued to be an issue.

While social skills, motivation and time on task improved there were still outbursts within the classroom and resource room. I now adopted a firm, consistent and transparent manner, and this seemed to bring some improvement. Nell began to show an interest in

some class activities and, most importantly, seemed to understand that her actions carried consequences. Her interest in Physical Education and Art grew and yet, despite her professed interest, she frequently misbehaved and was excluded from lessons. This led to frustration: 'It's not fair. I always get thrown out. Teacher does it because she don't like me.' (Journal entry). I decided to investigate this apparent contradiction. I paid close attention to the context and saw that Nell's own over-excitement, coupled with lack of comprehension of instructions, were part of the problem, so I put in place specific lessons on associated vocabulary and preparation. Finally and importantly, we put a sanction/reward system in place. Perhaps it had been a case of lack of readiness on Nell's part, or a lack of awareness on mine, that such a scheme had not already been put in place, but now it seemed to be meaningful.

Within the resource setting I began to introduce Nell to paired and group activities, which slowly developed into real interaction with other children. In my field notes I recorded the following:

Nell brought no materials for today's art activity. The lesson was facilitated by Eimear, another of my Traveller children who had struggled with issues of confidence and self-esteem, exacerbated by years of school failure. I did not intervene even though it was likely that Nell would become disruptive as she could not partake without the materials. I was amazed that she sat attentively during Eimear's ten minute demonstration. On completion Eimear invited Nell to use some of her materials to which she replied 'Yes please!'

Throughout the activity Nell maintained a conversation with Eimear, checking constantly that she was doing well, and she finally completed the task successfully. Eimear was thrilled with the success of what she saw as *her lesson*. As I complimented her on her kindness to Nell she replied, 'Oh, she's OK once you get to know her.' This was a significant step forward in that now Nell had recognition and acceptance by a peer.

Nell's growing success and interest in school began to spark her mother Maggie's interest. On the academic front, I sought every opportunity and means of teaching the alphabetic principle and basic sight vocabulary to Nell. I spent hours creating novelty activities and books of personal interest to her. I created a series of readers about Nell and her family and a group of activity workbooks to accompany them and consolidate vocabulary (see Appendix 10B). My colleagues were amused by my efforts. 'Well, it's OK if you only have a few children to cater for,' said one. 'The rest of us have to get on with real teaching. I can't give every child VIP treatment' (journal entry). I tried to explain that a typical reader was of no interest to Nell because of her cultural ethnicity. 'Travellers aren't an ethnic group,' she informed me. 'Culture? What culture?' (Journal entry)

I was, however, content in the knowledge that progress was being made. With the support of her Special Needs Assistant, that she seemed to be integrating better in class, and was achieving some success in word recognition. She was able to maintain concentration and her writing skills progressed significantly. Her behaviour had improved, and she was using a personal computer to support literacy and numeracy work.

Finally, Nell began reading. The class teacher and Betty implemented and monitored her IEP, acknowledging and rewarding effort and achievement. With my close support, the class teacher insisted on a reasonable level of behaviour and participation. She put a reward system in place and stuck with it.

September saw a new classroom and regime. Unfortunately it also saw a regression on all fronts, because of a variety of circumstances, including an inexperienced class teacher and family difficulties, but most importantly, the withdrawal of support by the special needs assistant. Within this classroom there was no value placed on Betty's input. In fact she was often reprimanded for her efforts to help Nell. Her situation became so untenable that she began her own work to rule, where she interpreted the class teacher's instructions literally.

Within the classroom, the class teacher, having heard the school lore about Nell, decided to avoid confrontation. Her solution to Nell was to avoid asking her to do anything that she disliked. Instead the teacher provided activities of a non-challenging variety such as colouring pictures and making jigsaws. She communicated with Nell as if she were a four-year-old. She set no expectations regarding behaviour or participation. Nell's response was to push the limits. Meanwhile, Nell's IEP was not being implemented. No consolidation work was done in the classroom.

Betty grew confused and frustrated. She tried to implement the IEP, but was reminded by the class teacher that she was the teacher, and that her duties did not include teaching (Betty's diary). However, Betty persisted in her attempts to continue with Nell's IEP as agreed between key stakeholders. Eventually, the teacher reported Betty for being unprofessional and refusing to take direction in the classroom. Betty was instructed to comply with the teachers's instructions, so withdrew her support for the IEP.

No consolidation work was then done in the classroom. Nell was totally dependent on her thirty-minute sessions with me. Progress was effectively sabotaged.

Later in the year, the appointment of a new Visiting Teacher for Travellers (VTT) brought benefits, in the form of Kathy, whom I had previously worked with, and who was appointed to the district. Together we developed a strategy for home involvement in Nell's education. Kathy was key in encouraging Nell's mother to consider becoming involved in her education. Kathy brought Maggie to visit during one of Nell's sessions. Nell displayed her growing bank of words, rhymes and written work. Kathy and I showed Maggie Nell's portfolio of work. She was genuinely amazed at what Nell could do. 'I didn't know she could do all that,' she said. 'She's learning a lot.' She also added, ''Tis the first time I was in the school without someone giving out about Nell. 'Tis great.' (Journal entry).



More visits followed and Maggie and I began to form a working relationship. I always ensured that there was a positive message on every visit, but gradually we also tackled indiscipline, lack of effort and other issues. Gradually, Maggie's trust in me developed and she confided in me regarding issues affecting her life. Living in our small town meant that we often met out of school, and we chatted in the supermarket, after Mass and casually on the street. Maggie seemed comfortable in my company, and grew to accept that I had Nell's best interests at heart. With Maggie's support both Betty and I found it easier to work with Nell.

The problem of non-implementation of Nell's IEP in the classroom remained unresolved and progress suffered. Despite attempts to find one, no resolution presented itself. Maggie did not have the confidence to insist on it as Nell's right, and other stakeholders chose to ignore the situation. I knew that Nell's idleness in the classroom would lead to trouble. I spoke to the class teacher about letting Nell spend the whole afternoon on colouring activities or joining dot-to-dot pictures. She replied, 'It's not my fault that she's not able to do anything. You had her last year. What did you teach her?' (Journal entry)

Finally, annoyed by my constant complaints, a group meeting was convened. It was stated that 'constant complaints about non-implementation of Nell's IEPs were futile. The emphasis now for Nell was to be on containment within the classroom while the class teacher did her teaching diploma.' My suggestion that the inspector supervising this diploma should not overlook this kind of treatment of any child led to a compromise. Betty would be allowed to work on the IEP but if this led to problems then Nell and Betty would be sent to the resource room to do the work.

Nell was shocked by the sudden change of policy and refused to undertake any work in the classroom. This led to Betty and Nell spending the majority of the school day in the resource room. Nell's progress began to accelerate and she soon returned to a pattern of work. However, I had strong concerns regarding her social isolation from her class.

Having established a routine of work, Nell was reintroduced to the class, in the belief that the situation was now resolved.

The class teacher then adopted a different strategy. Nell would arrive regularly in the resource room, with no work done protesting, 'I hadn't time. I had to do my class work first.' Betty reported that the teacher insisted on Nell doing class work, which in reality consisted only of transcription exercises, none of which Nell could read.

As the more experienced teacher, I explained to the class teacher how irrelevant these exercises were. While fully supporting Nell's involvement in the class in the form of oral work, physical education, and art, the insistence on incomprehensible transcription exercises would only lead to frustration. I urged her to allow Nell to work on her IEP tasks or on her computer while the class engaged in lengthy written activities. My suggestions went unheeded and the practice continued. Within a short time Nell's frustration manifested itself in increasingly severe tantrums and bad behaviour within the classroom.

Within the staffroom I was subjected to a daily litany of complaints about my star pupil. I suggested that it was management of Nell's learning that was the problem, and pointed out that, within the resource setting, she was working quite well. I suggested that an input from the Learning Support teacher be considered as Nell responded very well to individual tuition. This proposal was rejected. However, I argued that, in effect, Nell was receiving about 50 minutes teaching daily with almost half her school day spent on transcription exercises. Acknowledging that the class teacher, faced with a diploma exam and catering for a large class, didn't have the time to address Nell's individual needs, I as RTT had done this and all that was required was the implementation of the IEP. My suggestion was refused.

Somehow, in the effort to reach a solution it was agreed that Nell's IEP would be implemented, but responsibility for behaviour was to be mine. All incidents of misbehaviour were reported to the resource room, and I imposed sanctions. It became increasingly difficult to present the resource room as a safe haven. Maggie grew frustrated by the apparent persecution of Nell but continued to support me.

During the month of February Nell spent thirteen afternoons in the resource room due to 'aggressive, disruptive and abusive behaviour in classroom' (Journal entry). Feeling victimised and deprived of class activities, Nell went to pieces. She refused to come to school. In April she was found hiding in the school grounds. She told Maggie and myself, 'I don't want to go to school. I'm always in trouble even when I'm doing nothing.'

Numerous appeals went unheeded and Nell, feeling punishment was inevitable, continued to misbehave. Within the classroom Nell was sitting in isolation. On one occasion, Nell went into a forbidden section of the school complex and stole property from one of the classrooms. I took her home. On another, she tore another child's copybook during a temper tantrum. In the yard, she bullied some of the junior children, forcing them to give her their sweets. She was taken home.

Maggie was nearing breaking point and vented her frustration on the resource room. It seemed as if I was about to lose her support. Thankfully, Kathy intervened to explain the situation to Maggie. With parental support/pressure we secured a compromise which ensured a quota of positive activities every day for Nell, dependent on compliance with the school rules. Within the resource room, we struggled to deal with Nell's frustrations. Together, Betty and I shielded her as much as possible from the attention of other staff members, while trying desperately to maintain a positive attitude to school. This would have been impossible without the support of Kathy. Academic progress was minimal but we persevered until the end of the school year.

### *Year three*

Another newly appointed inexperienced class teacher decided that avoidance was the best form of defence. Nell was not expected to do any work as long as she kept quiet in class. Non-implementation of an IEP (which was created in consultation with the class teacher) again became an issue. Numerous complaints went unheeded. Finally, having managed to convene a case conference, I was informed that the emphasis for the remainder of Nell's schooling was on containment within the classroom and avoidance of confrontation. There was to be no pressure to do any work. The class teacher had no time to implement an IEP and if its implementation required motivating Nell and checking on her progress it couldn't be done.

As with the previous year, progress was seriously hampered by lack of consolidation activities outside of Nell's resource hours. Betty could do nothing. Nell however learned to trade off work for non-disruption of the class. Released from the burden of work in the classroom, Nell then decided that she didn't wish to 'do any of that stuff' in the resource room. She wished to spend her time playing computer games, colouring and making jigsaws. I struggled to get her to partake in any activity. Everything was presented as a game. Even then if Nell felt it was challenging she would fight to play with marla (plasticine) or paint. At this point I began to use cookery as a means of teaching maths and reading. Maggie's input ensured that Nell continued to make an effort yet I was unhappy about Nell's level of progress. Others felt that lack of progress was 'her own choice' and of little consequence as long as she did not disrupt the class. I did not regard this as an educational option.

In later discussions I again appealed for support on the grounds that Nell's behaviour would deteriorate in class if she lost interest in learning. My insistence on Nell's application to work within the resource room led to growing defiance. On one such occasion I noted:

‘Nell refused to sit down today... she dragged everything off the shelves. She hurled abuse at Betty and myself and threatened to report us for child abuse. She threw a chair at me and laughed as she tore the pages from her reader.’ (Journal entry)

I shared my concerns that this behaviour would soon spread to the classroom once Nell tired of the novelty of the activities being presented there, but I was told, ‘Let it go. It’s time for you to accept that this isn’t the place for her’ (Journal entry)

It was by chance that I discovered the hidden depths of this statement. Unbeknownst to myself, a portfolio of behaviour and lack of academic progress had been compiled as evidence of Nell’s unsuitability for mainstream schooling. Shocked at the devious nature of such a project I immediately enlisted the support of Maggie and Kathy who mobilised the strength of the Visiting Teacher Service to prevent Nell’s removal from the school. Maggie, unfortunately, had been hospitalised, the victim of domestic violence. She was unable personally to attend the case conference but she was represented by Kathy and her eldest daughter, who was very forceful in her refusal to even consider special school.

At this point I need to clarify my position in relation to special schooling for Nell. I felt it would be of tremendous benefit to her but I also knew she would not attend, so I was determined to keep her in mainstream schooling for as long as possible. I also believed that Nell would benefit more socially from attendance at mainstream school than special school where she was likely to adopt the lowest standard of behaviour. I had spoken to Maggie on several occasions about special school as an alternative to a large academic secondary school. I knew that Nell would not attend a secondary school unequipped to deal with her needs. All of her older siblings had dropped out of school as no programme was available suited to their needs. Their father would not allow them to attend a Youth Reach programme in a nearby town as one of the girls eloped with a young man she met there. One of the local special schools operates a FETAC (Further Education and

Training) programme which would allow Nell to gain a qualification and be placed in a job. Traveller culture however militates against this option. It is considered shameful to attend special school, carrying the stigma of mental handicap. Any trace of mental problems reduces the family's standing in the community and limits their marital prospects. Should Nell attend special school, it would be almost impossible to find her a match. Being unmarried would deny her the most revered role amongst Traveller women, which is having babies. To force such an option would carry lifelong consequences.

Having succeeded in securing Nell's position in the school and alienating myself even further from the dominant voices, I returned to the task of improving her educational experience. I understood that her behaviour was affected by events at home, particularly violence towards her mother. Violent incidents in the home were increasing. Nell's response was anti-social and violent behaviour. I believed that these incidents would spread to the whole school context and become habitual for Nell if we didn't intervene.

Things deteriorated quickly with Betty bearing almost daily physical violence from Nell. Within the classroom Nell refused to sit down, interfered with her classmates and their property, shouted abuse and had on occasion to be physically restrained. We were back to square one. Bullied at home, Nell exercised her dominance in school.

2<sup>nd</sup> February: Nell was defiant in the yard and left the school grounds without permission. She brought cigarettes and matches into the toilets.

10<sup>th</sup> February: Nell was sent to the office following removal from the classroom. She swore at the teachers and swept everything from the desk.

16<sup>th</sup> February: In the resource room she covered her ears refusing to listen to me. She kicked my chair repeatedly and squirted paint on the table. Later she became so agitated and violent in the classroom that the others were removed while I went in to calm her down. I found that physical exercises helped to calm her and I incorporated these as much as possible into our sessions together.

I grew increasingly frustrated as this pattern continued. No one seemed interested in a long-term solution. We just struggled from day to day while Nell dealt with her demons.

18<sup>th</sup> February: Nell spent the morning running through the classroom. She was uncooperative, disruptive, oppositional and defiant. She was finally brought home. Still, there was no change in classroom policy and things continued to deteriorate. Nell's behaviour grew intolerable in the classroom and she was again consigned to the resource room for most of her school day. Her sole aim now was to get 'barred from school' like her older sister. She did everything in her power to push us towards suspension.

11<sup>th</sup> April: During a school fair Nell surpassed herself by stealing from some parents who were in attendance, making sure she was caught.

Within the resource room Nell was defiant. Every session became a battle of wills. Within the classroom she made life as difficult as possible for everyone. She was excluded from Art, Physical Education, choir and drama activities. The final straw came when she was prevented from going on a class trip with the rest of the children. Even though she had known for weeks that she was excluded she arrived on the day of the trip with the required items, demanding that she be allowed on the bus. As the class left Nell was sent to the resource room as the principal insisted she remain in school for the day. Betty and I will never forget that day. Both of us gave her our undivided attention just to prevent her from wrecking the room. Nell was furious, shouting and kicking. She pushed and slapped Betty, while cursing at me.

She shouted that she would use her brother's gun to kill us. She threatened to burn our houses and cars. Nell refused to sit down, grabbed everything around her and flung it across the room. She writhed on the floor as if trying to escape from manacles while arguing incessantly with herself.

What was the answer? Lock her up? Get rid of her? How do you deal with people who just don't fit into the normative expectations of a society? Make them invisible? How? Why?

It was obvious that something had to be done for Nell. In desperation, I decided to force action by refusing to take Nell. This meant that pressure began to mount to solve her discipline problems. Suspension was not an option as Maggie would fight it. The school psychologist was unavailable. Maggie, feeling Nell was victimised, refused to cooperate on improving her behaviour.

Nell was brought home on a regular basis due to misbehaviour in school. Maggie visited the school to demand Nell's return to my support. I assured her that I would resume but only if Nell's IEP was supported within the classroom.

Maggie made her views known in the school. When approached to take Nell, I traded for concessions. I refused to act as the sin-bin. I insisted on implementation of the IEP. I insisted on the implementation of a reward and sanction system in a fair and transparent manner.

And so, with the ground rules set, and supported by Maggie, things began to settle again. Slowly Nell settled into a routine. Behaviour improved and progress accelerated.

Once again, the summer holidays intervened. And I was informed that my position was no longer available in the school.

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September therefore found me in a new school, again as a SET, which by chance included Nell in my caseload. Previous years had taught me that my most important task



was to win the support of the class teacher. With Maggie and Betty already on board this task was considerably eased. An IEP was formulated, agreed and signed by all concerned. A whole programme of work to occupy Nell during any free time within class was agreed. Once again Betty took responsibility for implementation of the IEP and acted as liaison between the class teacher and myself. A new system of rewards and sanctions was introduced. For the first time in her school career Nell had been given a job just like all the other class members. She began to take her responsibilities very seriously. Exclusion from the job rota had been enough to ensure compliance with school rules.

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After that we worked on targets in all areas of the IEP. Nell was 'no bother in class' (Journal entry) and took part in all class activities, including the school concert. We had minor upsets but these were dealt with by a united front. Nell's absenteeism dropped and her progress was encouraging.

Maggie has decided to return to education herself. She is currently attending a literacy course for Traveller women. Maggie visits regularly to speak about Nell's progress and report on her own achievements. She recently passed her driving test.

A recent incident illustrates her growth in many areas. Unsolicited, Maggie came to speak about Nell's secondary education. She accepted now that Nell was different and wanted the best possible future for her. Maggie requested that I set up a visit for her husband, Nell and herself to a special school, which places a huge emphasis on practical learning, to enquire about future possibilities. Nell and herself had discussed it. She wants to work in a bakery.

Surprised by this request I inquired about the repercussions amongst her community.

'Well,' said Maggie, 'I want to do what's best for Nell. This will make her happy. Getting

a husband that will beat her can wait. She won't be able to look after ten or twelve babbies anyway!

Unfortunately her husband didn't share her view. His response to her invitation to visit the school was to beat Maggie. She rang from the hostel for battered wives, explaining Nell's absence from school.

Nell has since gone on to second level and is attending on a regular basis. Maggie has continued with her course of study also in spite of the protestations of her husband. Maggie has maintained contact with me, calling regularly to report on Nell's progress or to discuss any difficulty she might be having. It is intended that Nell will undertake the Junior certificate examinations and then proceed to a local Youthreach program. Maggie hopes to study for a formal qualification in the near future.

### **Summary**

So this is the story of Nell. Nell was a special challenge, in that she was from the Traveller community, and also displayed considerable behavioural difficulties. It would have been easy to give up on Nell, but we didn't. We kept our faith that Nell could and would improve, and we were right.

There are millions of Nells in our schools and cities, each crying out for care and attention. They are systematically excluded because they do not fit in anywhere, and so come further to exclude themselves through their desperate efforts to grab someone's attention. How to break the vicious cycle of exclusion, and find ways of inviting someone into the conversation, without requiring them to relinquish their dignity or personal identity? I think I have found a provisional answer at least in the idea that we do our best for the other, we just keep trying in love and faith. It took me years of dogged determination not to give up on Nell, and to win the support of others so that we

presented a united front on her behalf. I believe that my story of Nell shows how I have managed to live the values I outlined in Chapter 3. I turned the lofty-sounding value of inclusion into an everyday experience, in spite of almost insurmountable odds, and managed to make life more liveable for one child, as well as the people who orbited around her. We coalesced into a community of learners, united in our efforts to achieve educational justice, and we succeeded.

These values became our living standards of practice. We showed how we made judgements about our practices in relation to the extent to which we achieved those values. They also became my living standards of judgement for my research. I judge the validity of my claims that I have developed my living theory of inclusional practice in relation to these values.

These issues of demonstrating the validity and significance of my research now become the focus of my next chapter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ESTABLISHING THE VALIDITY OF MY CLAIMS TO KNOWLEDGE

#### *Chapter preview*

*This chapter deals with issues of validity. I engage with issues of demonstrating the validity of my claims to knowledge, prior to placing them in the public domain for academic legitimation. This involves producing my evidence base, and stating my standards of judgement against which I show how I ground my claims in my evidence base. I conclude by explaining how I believe my claims may be seen as my original contribution to knowledge of new forms of practice and new forms of theory.*

In all research, the aim is to make an original claim to knowledge of the field, and to demonstrate the capacity for critical engagement. My claim to knowledge is to do with how I have developed a form of inclusional pedagogical practice that has implications for the field of education, and that I have engaged critically in my own learning, and with the literatures that have contributed to that learning. The implications are in relation to the research base of learning, practice and policy. I explore these issues in depth in Chapter 9.

If the claim to knowledge is to be taken seriously, it has to be shown to be valid, that is, it can be taken as the truth. Not to demonstrate its validity would be tantamount to presenting my claim as my opinion, without a firm evidence base and expecting others to believe it. Quality scholarship needs to be grounded in a firm evidential base (Furlong and Oancea 2005), especially new scholarship forms of enquiry that are, in some places, still struggling for recognition.

By establishing the validity of my claims, I also hope to feel better qualified to state the possible significance of my research. I believe that my research is significant in terms of demonstrating the potentials of new forms of practice as well as new forms of theory. I explain these issues below.

In this chapter, therefore, I consider some of the claims I am making, and I also show how I adopted rigorous procedures throughout my research process to test my claims to knowledge, against the insights of the literature and against the critical feedback of others, and how I therefore believe that I am justified in making my claims.

I begin with my evidence base.

### **The evidence base of my claims to knowledge**

My practice encompasses a range of contexts and personnel. I have worked with children, teachers, parents and other stakeholders. Most importantly, I have worked with myself. I am claiming that I have included all participants in my research, in relation to developing new insights and new practices. I have contributed to their education, in the sense that I have enabled others, including myself, to become aware of their own capacity for the exercise of original thinking and critical engagement, and have learned to exercise that capacity for the transformation of their lives and circumstances, in terms of developing their agency to transform existing structures and norms into forms that can contribute to well-being. This is encapsulated in comments such as this from a colleague about the transformation in the children:

‘Their failure in academic subjects was overturned as artistic, musical and modelling activities allowed them to be the best’ (Appendix 9C).

This comment is especially apposite for this chapter, where I am speaking about validity, in that the colleague speaks about the need for people to be ‘the best’. I agree, but, if I am to influence others to be their ‘best’, I first need to establish what I understand by ‘good’, so that I can show how ‘good’ transforms into ‘best’. It is also important to establish what

I mean by ‘the good’, in that I am seeking validity for my claims, which are to do with how I have developed a ‘good quality’ practice and how I am presenting my research also as ‘good quality’.

In dominant literatures, the good tends to be understood as an abstract concept. Philosophers through the centuries have argued about what constitutes the good. Grayling (2004) offers a comprehensive analysis of ‘the good’, and Arendt (1971) speaks about the nature of evil, thus contrasting what may be understood as ‘good and evil’. I appreciate that there are vast literatures about the topics of good and evil, some of which I have read, but here I wish to focus, in a quite simplistic way, on how I understand ‘good’, as I have learned from engaging with the literatures, and the relevance this has for my life and, in terms of this chapter, its relevance to testing the validity of my claims to knowledge.

Like McNiff (2007b), I do not understand ‘good’ as an abstract entity. Although it is important to understand its normative linguistic meaning for purposes of communication, I prefer to think of ‘good’ as embodied in human practices. I have used this research to find ways of improving my practice, which implies that I need to explain how I understand my practice to be good, in order to establish how it is now better and therefore improved.

I have said that my view of education is to encourage what I see as the latent potential in all humans to exercise their originality of mind and capacity for creative engagement. Like Dewey (1966), I do not believe that education is ‘for’ anything, and definitely not to get a job or advance a career, as many contemporary business-oriented discourses maintain. This tendency is especially noticeable in an Irish context, where the purposes of education are seen as for economic sustainability (Fitzgerald 2003, 2004), and the purpose of higher education is to promote a competitive edge in world markets (OECD 2006). I believe education is for its own purposes, of encouraging people to grow. The aim of education is to promote further education (Dewey 1966). Like Dewey I believe

that education must break down rather than reinforce the gap between the experience of schooling and the needs of a truly participative democracy (Flanagan 1994: 2).

The good in my practice, therefore, resides in finding ways of realising my ontological values, to do with the uniqueness of the individual, in relation with others, and to realising my epistemological values, to do with encouraging the potential of all to learn and to use their learning for ongoing education. My understanding of good practice is that I can show the processes of how I have encouraged this growth, and also encouraged others to see the potentials in their own capacities for encouraging their own and others' growth. I can point to the comprehensive evidence base of my research to show that this happened. I will analyse this evidence base in terms of how I have contributed to education – my own education, the education of others, and the education of social formations. I will then go on to show how I have tested my claims, grounded in my evidence base, that I have made such contributions, in order to test the methodological rigour (Winter 1989) of my research. By demonstrating this kind of methodological rigour, I hope also to establish that my research is good, that is, it generates a form of theory that enables me to engage in good quality practice. I therefore organise my text in relation to how I have contributed to education, and how I have contributed to theory, and the potential significance of both domains.

### **How I have contributed to education**

I am saying that I have contributed to my own education, the education of others, and the education of social formations.

#### **Contributing to my own education**

I have contributed to my own education in the sense that I have learned from interrogating my practice, and testing its validity against the critical feedback of others such as students, colleagues and parents.

I have grown in my capacity to develop inclusional practices. I explained in earlier chapters how I had been marginalised in my early school years because of the social stratification that existed at that time, mainly in relation to one's class positioning and capacity for the acquisition of wealth. This social stratification seems not to have changed in modern times (see McWilliams 2006), although its basis and public face have changed in relation to how those of any class, nationality or religion may now find social standing through the capacity to generate money. Money still talks, and is used to denote who counts as a worthwhile citizen. Knowledge of how to make money has come, in many quarters, to override knowledge of how to care for others. Chomsky speaks of profit over people (1999). This is the case in many quarters in contemporary Ireland. O' Tuathaigh, writing about contemporary values, suggests that what is missing in many communities in Ireland today 'is a rooted sense of collective responsibility and capacity for building their own community' (2001, p.48). A sense of community, illuminated by principle and informed by responsibility and care, according to Greene (1998), is a core aspect of the democratic project for education. Like freedom 'it has to be achieved by persons offered a space in which to discover what they recognize together, appreciate in common' (Greene 2001: 146). It cannot be produced through rational formulation. Greene espouses a conception of education that allows for the flourishing of human freedom (Greene 1995) but is conscious of the obstacles that challenge people's endeavours in the context of modern post-industrial societies. The technician and functionalist emphases found in our education systems provide little opportunity for developing a sense of community, fostering of personal and social development or furthering of equality and respect for others (Drudy 2003). Teachers are asked to teach to the end of economic competitiveness, while ignoring the importance of increasing social inclusion and developing social capital in society (National Economic and Social Forum 2003). Educational productivity is high but the needs of marginalised students remain unanswered (Fitzgerald 2003). Their exclusion negates the realisation of the democratic project in education. Professor Collins (National University of Ireland) recently commented that our education system contains not only the successes of modern Ireland but also the failures presenting as.....



... the disadvantaged children; the children who at the age of six are already being prepared for early school leaving; the children who are being neglected; who simply do not have the background of cultural and social support to sustain them through education (*InTouch* 2007: 33).

These children remain marginalised. As educators we must respond to those ‘once called at risk, once carelessly marginalised, as living beings capable of choosing for themselves’ (Greene 1995: 42).

I also explained how, as a teacher, I have been marginalised because of my insistence on valuing all children, regardless of their social background, ethnic heritage, or intellectual strengths. This refusal to give into established cultural and social norms got me into trouble with my institution, and also with some parents of the children I taught. I was disciplined, and alienated within the school, and my sense of wellbeing was compromised through the threat to my personal and professional identity. This, accompanied by ongoing illness, has often reduced the amount of energy needed to continue the struggle, but it has never reduced my resolve or levels of commitment. I have found the ability to tap into my own resources and to come back, inspired always by the vision of a better world for children who cannot stand up for themselves.

I have learned a great deal about myself in the process. I have learned to value my personal knowledge, and, like Polanyi (1958: 327), ‘having decided that I must understand the world from my point of view, as a person claiming originality and exercising [her] personal judgement with universal intent,’ I have resolved to pursue research that engages with the process of showing what can happen when I do so.

From such experiences I have learned to value myself as a person. Foucault (1988) speaks of the need for care of the self, and regards ethics as the will to exercise one’s freedom, in spite of the frequent constraints of institutional and economic structures. I have learned how to do this. I have taken care of my own sense of well-being, in terms of how I have

focused relentlessly on achieving my sense of a substantive good, that of enabling others to achieve their potential as human beings in spite of background or social positioning, or bureaucratic obstacles, and also on achieving my sense of the procedural good, that of finding ways of realising my values in my practice.

My evidence base for these claims that I have contributed to my own education resides in personal documents, such as my journal and my correspondence with my supervisor.

As recorded in Chapter 7, I wrote in my journal: 'I'm a total failure as a teacher. I've tried everything. I spend hours each night preparing for one child, and she has beaten me. I don't know what to do. I might as well give up.'

However, I was desperate for Nell to make progress. In February the following year I wrote: 'Today Nell stayed on task for ten minutes! This is great! Betty and I are getting through.'

I was learning to have confidence. I still viewed the children's learning as my responsibility and my success, but in earlier days I had been concerned about my colleagues' perception of me. The concerns gradually gave way to positive feelings, such as when I noted, 'Comments in the staff room regarding my *care-bear* philosophy and *Traveller crusade* were numerous. I refuse to take it personally. Class teaching can be so frustrating with difficult children in the class. I won't give up. Maybe I could do more to support the class teachers ...'

My evidence base shows signs of increasing self-awareness and self-esteem. For example, in May, in discussing the job with Betty, I declared myself to be more comfortable in the role. 'It's not about me or what others think of me. It's about the kids and how I can help them to find their way of learning. For the first time in a long time I feel I have something to offer to the children I teach' (Journal entry).

Correspondence with my supervisor, Jean, also indicates growth. Following a long period of indecision and lack of clarity in my research writing, the following correspondence from my supervisor led me to believe that I was in fact learning, growing and influencing others.

‘You show how justice informs your wish to undertake your research into your own practice, because justice is denied to the young people in your care ... You challenge the established order.....Yet you also show throughout your work how you intend to hold onto your own vision of social hope (Rorty 1999). You are doing wonderful things for people and making a difference for good in people's lives’ (e-mail from supervisor 20.5.200x Appendix 11A).

In August 200x Jean agreed with my perceptions regarding my own growth, and that I had finally ‘come to understand the nature of power relationships, and the strategies that those in power use to keep others under control. You are proposing a new theory of education that celebrates the capacity of all to know, and the power of teachers to enable all children to enjoy loving relationships and fulfil their potential’ (e-mail from supervisor 28.8.0x; Appendix 11B).

Evidence of personal growth can also be found in my printed documents, such as this thesis and my masters dissertation (Cahill 2000). I can show, through the processes of writing, how I have developed confidence in my ideas, and in my capacity to generate my own living theory of practice. No one has done this for me. My learning has been born of the struggle of having to make sense of ongoing problematic situations from within. I am claiming here to have done that, and to know more now about my situation and myself than I did before I began my formal research programme.

The ‘good’ in my practice is that I include others, and affirm their worth through that inclusion. The ‘good’ resides in my ontological values of inclusion and affirmation, and my personal good is in my capacity to live these values fully in my practice. I stayed true to Nell, and to myself, in spite of the temptation to abandon us both. I stayed true to all

**the** people in my care. I lived out my good, for the benefit of myself and others, as my data archive shows. My practice has improved in the sense that I began my research with a clear sense of ‘the good’ in relation to my values; it has improved in the sense that I have lived out my values, as I hope this thesis has demonstrated.

### **Contributing to the education of others**

I am claiming that I have contributed to the education of others through my research. The others in question are my students, my workplace colleagues, and parents.

### ***Contributing to the education of my students***

I have contributed to the education of my students in the sense that they have learned what it means to be included. Those who were previously excluded have learned what it means to become one of us, without losing the integrity of their own identity, the ‘one of me’, that is important for realising one’s own capacity for a fulfilling and productive life. Those who previously actively excluded others have learned the importance of inclusion, in relation to how an open society (Popper 1968) needs to include all its members for its own sustainable well-being. This learning is of a lasting nature, so that what they learn in school may well serve them for the rest of their lives. What they have experienced in their classroom interactions may well travel to how they treat the other in their life circumstances, how they learn to overcome prejudice, and not to get drawn into easy categorisations on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, colour, or any other marker of ‘difference’. It is my sincere wish that they have learned to become more compassionate, more loving in their interactions. I can show that this wish is well-founded from the following evidence.

Students have communicated to me their learning about the experience of working with one another. Comments (to be found in full in Appendix 9B) include the following:

‘Learning was more fun. I really enjoyed it... it was better the way we did our

work in groups. Everything we did was brilliant. We all had great ideas and put them all together' (LM)

'I learned by discussing things with the group and also by talking things through with my partner.' (SW)

'I thought that pairing up and group work was a good idea. We got a lot of work done and people learned more quickly. Learning was more fun this way and I think that I learned more this way.' (AM)

(Appendix 9B based on Project in mainstream class)

Within the resource setting improvement in levels of co-operation were probably most significant in the case of Nell, whose story is told in Chapter 7. Following failed attempts to integrate with her class Nell was described as being;

'inattentive and over active. She displays impulsive behaviour and oppositional tendencies. She lacks the ability to apply herself to any task. Behaviour, social skills and academic progress all remain at very low levels.

( See Appendix 10A)

I introduced Nell to paired and group activities, which slowly developed into real interaction with other children. I told in Chapter 7 how I included Nell in an art lesson presented by another student called Eimear, who shared her materials with Nell to ensure she could take part in the activities. She guided and encouraged Nell towards the successful completion of her task. On complimenting her on her kindness to Nell she replied, 'Oh she's OK, once you get to know her.' This was a significant step forward in that now Nell had recognition and acceptance by the group, while for Eimear and the other children in the group learning in the areas of tolerance and respect has also been significant.

Later observations confirmed that these gains were not confined solely to the resource setting.

'During observation Nell was engaged in three different learning tasks, one oral and two written. She was working with the class on one of these lessons and on her own programme for the other two lessons. She made better eye contact and interacted more openly ..... (Journal entry).

Similarly, Tia, whose story is outlined in Chapter 5, was socially isolated and regarded as a bully. Her friendship with Chloe changed her attitudes to school and towards others. In a conversation with my critical friend JB Tia reported,

'I hated school because I thought that I couldn't learn anything and the others were always laughing at me. I used to get sick thinking about the tests and stuff. The teachers were on at me all the time. They didn't believe I was sick. I didn't mind doing things in Miss Cahill's room because there was no one looking at me or laughing at me. Even when others were there they had their own stuff to do and they had trouble with their lessons too. Miss Cahill let us help each other and didn't give out too much. Me and Chloe worked together a lot and when I went back to class we sat together and we help each other all the time. We always stay together in group work but now I like some of the other girls too. They don't laugh at me any more because everybody gets stuck sometime. It don't matter, you can't be right all the time. I just do my best ...'

(Tape recorded conversation between Tia, Chloe and JB, 20.2.2002)

In the same conversation, Chloe reported, 'Tia is not a bully. She gets upset when she gets stuck so I help her. Everyone used to laugh at her because she would say rude things to the teacher. Nobody would play with her or ask her to their house because she was always in trouble. Now I know her and we are friends. I think we should try to be friends with everyone' (Appendix 13).

I believe all these children gained significant insights in the areas of co-operation and inclusion.

### *Contributing to the education of colleagues*

I can also show that I have contributed to the education of workplace colleagues in the following ways. Betty, the Special Needs Assistant for Nell, wrote the following:

‘I was treated like a second-class citizen until Margaret arrived and made me feel that what I was doing was worthwhile. I think she really cares about Nell and the other children. She thinks about how to encourage them to learn. They love coming to her. Personally, she stands up for me and forced the teachers to take me seriously and give me some respect. I now know that my input is of value and that I can make a difference to the children. I’m not just a babysitter.’ (Betty’s diary; Appendix 14A)

This perception of the SNA as a babysitter for bold children did change dramatically as attested to by BB, a teaching colleague.

‘Without Betty, I could never have coped with Nell. She was vital, making sure that both Margaret and myself were aware of everything that went on with Nell. Having her in the class was of tremendous benefit to the other children also. Working with another adult in the classroom was refreshing. It allowed me to check my responses and reactions on an ongoing basis.’ (Journal entry; Appendix 14B)

Other colleagues with whom I worked also learned, as these communications attest. In the mainstream context, some of my colleagues, in particular MS and colleague X have been encouraged to become reflective practitioners with MS reporting:

‘I learned so much about what I actually do rather than what I think I do by writing a diary,’ and, ‘I find it easier to justify my practice now, because I think

about it more. I also have courage to try new methodologies and to value my own opinions' (MS Diary).

Colleague X reported using more participative methodologies and reported:

'They worked well in Miss Cahill's room and the parents requested them. They thought they were great.' (Correspondence from X; see also letter in Appendix 14C)

The fact that one such parent was a representative on the Board of Management actually ensured that such approaches were included in the future. This was reported by MS following my departure from the school (see Appendix 14C). This also led to the establishment of a parent council and real communication between parents and class teachers.

Amongst other colleagues that I claim to have influenced are BV, a Resource Teacher for Travellers, appointed while I was still a mainstream teacher. As a young and inexperienced teacher BV was willing to accept any advice or support offered and indeed frequently requested it. Faced with Nell in her role as RTT, she soon found herself at the end of her tether. Frustrated by Nell's behaviour, BV asked :

'How do you get Nell to do stuff? She freaks me out and then I hear her over here reading and spelling... and I feel useless ...' (Journal entry)

I invited BV to join us for a session, spoke about the strategies I used and gave her some material I thought would be suitable for Nell. She said she found the materials, advice and support beneficial.



I have a good deal of data to support my claim that I have influenced the professional learning of colleagues, much of which is to be found in my data archive and appendices. For now, I wish to make the following points that I believe are most significant.

I have encouraged a sense of optimism and hope among less experienced colleagues. For example, BV commented:

‘When I first came here, no one told me how to do anything. No one was interested in Traveller education. I was terrified facing Travellers. I didn’t know what to expect. Mags gave me confidence to deal with the situation, to realise that these children are just like the others and will respond to respect and interest. Mags gave me great practical support ... loads of ideas and notes and materials that I still use in my class today. Best of all she showed me how ... How to actually teach certain things ... how to deal with tricky situations. She encouraged me to respect the children, to treat them as worthwhile individuals, and that no matter how great the difficulties the child has, good teaching can help. She restored my sanity in dealing with Nell, saving me from nagging sarcastic responses that left me drained and guilty ... So that instead I went home feeling good at the end of the day.’ (Tape recorded conversation with BV; Appendix 14D)

I have encouraged the adoption/adaptation by colleagues of specific strategies and methodologies in the resource teaching context. I perceive that my role as adviser to colleagues regarding special needs pupils is increasing, but much needs to be done to develop collaborative strategies between mainstream and special education teaching. From my experiences, I have learned that persuasion and gradual change can be preferable to confrontation. Attempts to compel mainstream teachers who may lack confidence or who feel that they already have enough to cope with in their daily job to adopt approaches that are foreign to them have, according to Ainscow (1995), the potential for damaging the whole support process.

I believe that I have had some influence in encouraging the development of collaborative teaching. Initially, all pupils were catered for through a withdrawal strategy, which, while having its own particular benefits, also served to isolate some children, such as Tia, Christy and Tanya. Awareness of the need to reintroduce Tia to her class had prompted me from the outset to include the class teacher in some of our sessions and to arrange case conferences involving the class teacher, parents and Tia. A good working relationship with CH (class teacher) allowed me to take other children as part of our learning group, which eventually led to a friendship between Tia and Chloe that acted as a catalyst for her reintegration into the classroom and re-engagement with learning (Appendix 13). CH has allowed me to co-teach within the classroom and teach the entire class as strategies to ease Tia's anxieties within the classroom. Modules of collaborative teaching are now used in three classrooms. Teacher MP reports:

‘This has helped to develop my competence in teaching special-needs children. It is a basis for the future. I am much more confident in this area now’ (Tape recorded conversation with MP)

I believe I have also pioneered the use of peer tutoring. I involved Betty, the special-needs assistant, as a tutor partner for an individual (Nell) or group of children. This practice continued throughout Nell's school career as outlined in Chapter 7. Nell was in fact instrumental in leading class teachers to recognise the value of peer teaching and the invaluable contribution that a special needs assistant can make, and she also contributed to the acceptance of an in-class model for support, as follows.

I initially began working with colleague BB following her request that I teach a lesson, while she observed. This led to further lessons, then to co-teaching in a variety of subjects areas, utilizing our different areas of expertise. BB's comments on the value of this work encouraged other colleagues to avail of collaborative work. This is a significant event which allowed the utilisation of expertise, and also the development of collegiality as

teachers worked together, sensitive to each others' insecurities and need to learn. Allowing BB and others to observe and participate in discrete support lessons boosted their confidence in their own abilities to support children, including Traveller children and those with special educational needs. Of greater significance, it developed an awareness of the complexity of the role of learning support and resource teachers, of the importance of an appropriate IEP and of the value of the class teacher input in the education of the child with special needs of any kind.

'I never knew there was so much involved in this work. It's important we work together and are honest about progress or lack of it. As teachers, we don't realise the resource we have in you. You really helped me in the class. With a co-operative effort we can make a difference to Nell and to others at the same time.'

(Conversation with BB; Appendix 14B)

My influencing of attitudes is perhaps best displayed in relation to the enrolment of a Traveller child with severe behaviour difficulties. A mother approached me in the supermarket, saying: 'I want to start Mary to school. Can you do something with her like you did for Nell? She's terrible wild and bold, but I'll do whatever you think ... 'Tis the only chance she'll have ...' (Journal entry). I took the case up with a senior manager, who suggested that I should consult with the class teacher about the best way forward.

As a staff we seem to have learned from experience too. There were no protestations about enrolling the child. Instead the focus was on preparation. The class teacher requested collaboration on the IEP and my support with behaviour management. Even though some might feel that all this may be a waste of resources the issue was discussed openly. Methods of interaction with the child were discussed. It was suggested that extra supervision should be provided by teachers on the yard while awaiting the appointment of a Special Needs Assistant. Colleague FA commented, 'We don't want things to get out of

hand. Let's be prepared and intervene early to make sure learning is a positive experience for her' (Journal entry).

Letters from class teachers also highlight the development of an open attitude and willingness to learn from each other (Appendices 15A, B and C).

I have many letters from colleagues, expressing their appreciation of what they have learned with me. These letters are to be found in my data archive.

### ***Contributing to the education of parents***

As well as influencing the professional learning of colleagues, I believe that I have influenced the education of parents. Importantly, the parents of children communicated that they had learned how to value their children and themselves more. Maggie, Nell's mother, went from viewing me as one who 'bullied little childer every day, ... who didn't care about the likes of us' ... who believed myself to be better than travellers to accepting me as a confidante. As time went on, she was increasingly genuinely amazed at what Nell could do. 'I didn't know she could do all that,' she said. 'She's learning a lot.' She also added, 'Tis the first time I was in the school without someone giving out about Nell. 'Tis great.' (Journal entry).

Maggie came to speak about Nell's education on a variety of occasions and no longer feels threatened when visiting the school. She came to accept that Nell would benefit most from a practical education and valuing Nell above the possible repercussions amongst her community declared, 'I want to do what's best for Nell. This will make her happy. Getting a husband that will beat her can wait. She won't be able to look after ten or twelve babbies anyway!' (see Chapter 7).

Maggie's own sense of self-worth also increased. I received an invitation to her daughter's wedding, and Maggie told me, 'I'd like to have you there. Sure you're my friend. You've

been very good to Nell and me. I've been all my life looking after the childer and doing what Tom says. Now I'm going to do something for myself. You believed that I'm not stupid and I'm not. I just never had a chance to learn.' (Journal entry)

As reported in Chapter 7 Maggie has decided to return to education herself. She is currently attending a literacy course for Traveller women. Maggie visits regularly to speak about Nell's progress and report on her own achievements. She recently passed her driving test. She has read this report and has given full permission for me to tell the story of herself and Nell.

Following the project in a mainstream class (reported in Chapter 6), I was also delighted to receive feedback from parents in relation to their pleasure in their children's improved learning. Rachel's mum wrote to me, saying,

'She loves group work. It's the first time she was interested in homework, and she seems to be making friends.' (Appendix 9A)

My data records show that some parents said it was the first time they had seen their children motivated and looking forward to school. Parents insisted that their children learned a great deal and that they themselves were learning too.

'School was never this much fun when I was going ... It isn't just information ... good practical knowledge ... it involved me as a parent in her education.' (Appendix 9A)

Parents declared it 'a wonderful way for a child to learn involving me as a parent, in her education. I learned as much as she did.' Parents also believed that the child 'gained confidence ... learned how to research, work in a group and listen to others' (Appendix 9A). Parent validation extended to requests for a continuance of such activities. 'I do

hope there will be more projects in the future ... would welcome the opportunity to participate in completing another project' (Appendix 9A).

This also contributed to the establishment of a parent council in the school.

'Parents felt it would be fairer if they were more involved in the school and have more contact with individual class teachers ... They want more involvement in the children's education. Some would like to volunteer to help in classrooms, like those who came in to tell your gang about their visits to Egypt etc. ...' (Letter from colleague MS; Appendix 14C).

Further letters and testimonials fill my data archive. I hope I have provided sufficient evidence to support my case that I have generated evidence to ground my claim that I have contributed to an enhanced educational experience for others and myself, with profound implications for the future wellbeing of the children in our care.

I now wish to turn to a further area in which I believe I have exercised my educational influence.

### **Contributing to the education of social formations**

I am hopeful that my thesis will contribute to the education of the social formation of the teaching profession, with possible transfer to other contexts, where inclusion is at issue. I am hoping especially that its timeliness will inform matters in relation to the inclusion of non-nationals, and their presence in schools. Like McNiff (2005b), I believe that the education of social formations begins with each participant learning to recognise themselves as other to the other.

I spoke in my Introduction about the tensions that can exist in civil society when a Government does not deliver on its promises to provide an appropriate form of education

for those with special educational needs, or from ethnic groupings for whom the present system is inadequate. Currently in Ireland litigation is running at an all-time high, when parents challenge decisions of the government in relation to failure to deliver appropriate education provision for their children. However, the nature and form of this education provision itself is at issue. It is not sufficient only to provide material goods in the form of additional resources, or additional staff. Those staff also need to be educated in ways that will enable them to develop inclusional practices, as I have demonstrated in the story of Nell. It is a case of enabling staff themselves to see how and why they need to practise in ways that encourage inclusion, and how to develop pedagogies that will ensure the inclusion of all in their learning. To do this means allocating funding for the professional education of teachers, on a systemic basis, so that professional learning becomes an in-built feature of professional life, and not simply an add-on. Professional education also needs to shift from a focus on subject knowledge to knowledge of practice, where teachers can claim not only to know their subject content but also their practice. This carries its own implications, in relation to the need for all teachers to study their practice, in order to see inclusion not only as a word, used in rhetorical statements, but as in their own practices, as they work with children and each other on a daily basis. I say more about these issues in Chapter 9, but here I will say that I can claim that my research demonstrates how this can be achieved.

In my struggle to secure educational justice for Nell, I resorted to desperate measures, where I refused to continue with the present regime unless Nell and her situation were taken seriously. I enlisted the help of other like-minded colleagues. This action in itself can be seen to be a change in normative practices in the teaching profession. Together we combated the indifference of bureaucracy, to the extent that action had to be taken to retrieve the situation from descending into chaos. Our small group itself changed attitudes and practices, through exercising our capacity for political action for social justice. I know that the colleagues involved continue to exercise their capacity for political action today. The action we took and the precedents we established have paved the way for

further cases like Nell to be taken more seriously, and to receive earlier attention. Although we were only a small group, our influence has been considerable and lasting.

However, this action was possible only because we were prepared to adopt a mindset that sees all people as worthy of care and attention, and all as deserving of justice. This in turn involved the exercise of a form of epistemology that appreciates the contradictory nature of life itself, the inherent disorder of social practices, and the unpredictability of human interactions. This form of epistemology is different from the currently dominant form of epistemology of traditional Irish school life, which expects that there is a place for everything and everything should be in its place. It is the kind of epistemology that Schon (1995) spoke about, as necessary for the transformation of the new research university. I would maintain that it is also necessary for the transformation of everyday school life. But a consideration of how this may be possible also involves a consideration of the need for practice-based forms of research. This links me with my second point, about the potential significance of my research for the development of new living forms of theory, and this constitutes my second claim.

### **How I have contributed to new forms of theory**

I have spoken throughout of how I have generated my living theory of an inclusional practice. By the form of words ‘living theory’, I refer to my Chapter 4, where I explained how new scholarship forms of practice-based research enable practitioners to offer descriptions and explanations of practice in the form of their personal theories of practice (Whitehead 1989). These theories are living, in that they are part of the lives of the practitioners themselves, and so are dynamic and transformational (McNiff 2007a).

A living form of theory is grounded in a form of logic that sees all things in relation with others. This is different from traditional forms of logic that see things as either-or, where any ‘differences’ are rejected as aberrational. The response to aberrations is that



something needs to be fixed. In the case of children such as Nell, the child has to be fixed, and this means subjecting her to the normative expectations of institutional regimes that seek to contain her within normative structures. Nell of course refused to be contained, strongly resisting any attempt to normalise her, and insisted on exercising her own creative capacity to live in the way she chose, albeit disruptive of contextual stability. The response to Nell's insistence to be treated like a 'normal' human being who was different from other 'normal' human beings meant that I had to develop a practice, rooted in my own refusal to accept a normative form of normalcy, that spoke to her uniqueness and honoured her capacity and right to be different. That this was the right thing to do is demonstrated by Nell's continuation in mainstream education. She is now a mature, confident and competent person. I will not take credit for her development, but I will take credit for enabling her to achieve this state by offering the kinds of conditions, including my own logic and values, that were appropriate for her needs.

The kind of epistemology I am speaking about is necessary, I believe, for the teaching profession. Teachers themselves need to be encouraged to examine their practices, which include their form of thinking, so that they will interrogate whether their current practices are appropriate for the job in hand. If teachers continue to adopt the same form of divisive and exclusionary logic of binary divides, they will probably continue to adopt the same form of divisive and exclusionary practices that currently exist in many contexts. The teaching profession itself needs to develop new forms of epistemologies, grounded in inclusional logics and values, that will enable them to examine their practice to see whether or not it fulfils those same values, and to use these values as their standards of practice, and also the living standards of judgement for assessing the quality of their practice-based research.

I speak about these issues further in my final chapter, but for now, I wish to return to the issues of demonstrating the validity of my claims to knowledge, and also their legitimacy.

### **Demonstrating the validity and legitimacy of my claims to knowledge**

I now need to address the idea that my claims represent my truth and are therefore capable of attracting belief. Once believed, and approved, they may enter the public domain, where they may be further legitimated.

To demonstrate the validity of my claims, I have produced evidence, drawn from my database, and tested it against my identified living standards of judgement. These standards of judgement are grounded in my values, so that my values can be seen to have transformed into the same living standards of judgement. I show how inclusion and social justice can become living experiences, and not only abstract words on a page. I show the potential influence of such practices for the continuing education of children, colleagues, parents, and the teaching profession.

I have demonstrated also how the validity of my claims rests in my capacity to make judgements about the methodological rigour of my research. I have shown how I adopted a systematic approach to my research, taking care in all methodological aspects (Winter 1989). I have also shown how I am able to generate my own living theory of practice, grounded in my capacity to undertake methodologically rigorous research, and I have tested the validity of those claims against the critical feedback of my peers, including my PhD study group at the University of Limerick, my supervisor, and now the wider community of educational researchers through the submission of this thesis. I am claiming truth-value for my claims. Once that truth-value has been established, I can then claim legitimacy for my research and my ideas, and go further in placing them in the public domain.

I believe that my research has much to contribute to new policy in Ireland, to move from the currently conflictual experiences as recounted in my Introduction, where citizens and the State are now often in conflict about the right of all children to be included in public life and the allocation of appropriate resources to enable them to be included. My final

chapter develops these themes, and in doing so, I hope to show how my research has something to contribute to public debates about the nature of education and the nature of the people involved.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MY RESEARCH

#### *Chapter preview*

*In this chapter I set out how I am developing my ideas and practices in the light of the new learning generated through my evaluation of my practice. I explain the potential significance of my research for new thinking about new practices in Ireland, especially in relation to the development of new forms of thinking for inclusional education, and for the development of the new Teaching Council.*

In this chapter I discuss what I consider to be the potential significance of my research for new practices and new thinking about inclusion in education, and especially for the new Teaching Council of Ireland and its policies regarding teacher professional education. I return to themes visited throughout the thesis, about the need to show the relationship between how practice and research are judged in relation to the values that inspire them, and how this integration is essential if teaching is to be legitimised as a research-based profession.

I organise my chapter in terms of the significance of my research for

1. New practices in inclusional education
2. New thinking for inclusional education
3. New directions for the Teaching Council

I believe that, if the significance of my research can be appreciated in these contexts, it may go some way to healing the rift between policy and practice, and return Irish education to the vision outlined in the Introduction, about an integrated society whose concerns are more about people than about money, and that offers a welcome to all that choose to make it their home.

## **The potential significance of my research for new practices in inclusional education**

There has never been such need for the development of new inclusional practices in education. The rate of immigration is at an unprecedented high, as are rates of absenteeism, suspensions, and truancy. New government initiatives to try to stem disputes about teachers' pay and conditions do little towards preventing a general feeling of disaffection among the teaching force, and teachers are resentful of being positioned as all things to all people. It is not only a case of teachers having to include all children in their classes, but also of teachers needing to feel included themselves, both within their classes and in terms of being in control of their professional lives.

My research has demonstrated, I believe, what can happen when a teacher retains her sense of mission and commitment to education. In my case, I had to struggle to secure these goods for myself. How much more would teachers be served if the conditions for their celebration of their professionalism were established as policy recommendations.

I found out for myself how to work inclusively with young people, staff and parents. I believe I had always been a caring teacher, but my research emphasised for me the need for care and compassion as the basis of practice. This meant developing pedagogical practices that focused on the needs of the child, rather than my own needs, as demonstrated in the cases of the children I have mentioned, when I had to learn to work from their spaces and develop discourses that were appropriate for those spaces. This in turn meant becoming aware of myself as potentially engaging in colonising practices that excluded rather than included. By positioning myself as 'the knower' in the classroom, I was effectively positioning myself as superior to them, and in a position of power where I could dictate norms and standards (Lynch 1999, Young 2000). Without realising it, and by conforming to normative expectations of me, I had been insidiously attempting to colonise the minds of my children by imposing my own discourses and practices on their minds, so that they would come to see things in the way I felt was appropriate, rather than

learn to think for themselves. As discussed previously, I see education as a form of critically aware emancipatory practice (Russell 2002, A. N. Whitehead 1967), so, by engaging in oppressive and colonising practices, I had been denying my own values, albeit in an unconscious way. This was no excuse, however, and the kind of consciously critical thinking I developed through the process of doing my research enabled me to theorise my practice so that I developed new emancipatory practices that aimed to celebrate the children's capacity to learn rather than my capacity to instruct.

These, I believe, are the kinds of practices that need to be developed among the teaching workforce. If Ireland is to move itself out of its current doldrums of social alienation, we must develop new critically emancipatory practices that are grounded in understanding the other as friend, not adversary. Existing practices, especially assessment practices, which in themselves drive pedagogical practices, tend to be adversarial in that they focus on the hierarchical values of norm-referenced tests and the consequent allocation of people into categories of appropriate and inappropriate fit. A child's life is in real danger of permanent distortion on the basis of allocation by normative testing procedures. Changing such practices, however, begins not in the practices themselves, but in a change of attitude of teachers and their perceptions of the other, away from an adversarial stance towards an inclusional stance, where all are celebrated for their natality (Arendt 1958), their potential to make a worthwhile contribution from their very position of being human. Changes in practices begin in changes in people's minds, and this, I believe, applies especially to pedagogical practices, which are to do with exercising influence in learning. For such influence to be educational, teachers themselves need to develop new practices that focus on exercising their influence in learning in an educational way, that is, in a way that encourages children to think for themselves and not as the teacher thinks. This in turn implies changes in policy regarding the professional education of teachers.

Current policy is still rooted in a view of the teacher as the most important person in the classroom, a deliverer of knowledge, who engages in didactic transmission pedagogies to

communicate that knowledge. In the same way that the quality of children's practices is assessed by means of norm-referenced and skills-focused tests, so also the quality of teachers' practices are assessed by means of norm-referenced and skills-focused tests that check whether or not they are performing appropriate to identified standards of practice. Teachers are still expected to fulfil the normative requirements of 'good teaching' in relation to establishing order and compliance among children as passive recipients of knowledge. By and large, teachers are not expected to think for themselves, but to teach according to 'teacher-proof' textbooks that set their own standards for what counts as quality pedagogy. Teachers' thinking and practices inevitably influence the learning of students, in that students learn to become obedient and uncritical. These are practices that deny the natality of individuals and whose alienating influence is reflected in our current social practices of alienation and civic unrest, exacerbated, as outlined above, by a growing lack of homogeneity among school populations as a reflection of the wider fragmented social population.

What is needed, in my view, is a focus on the individual as a singularity among, and living relationally with, other singularities (Kristeva 2002). This has always been my focus. Through my research I learned to position myself in the space of the other, to focus on their learning, to see them as valuable in their own right, and not to give up on them, in spite of their own sometimes destructive tendencies. Significantly, I have learned the same about myself, and I learned about the importance also of not giving up on myself as a valuable person, in relation with those whose potential giftedness I was valuing. I encouraged them and myself to celebrate our giftedness in our individual and collective ways, to make our contributions, and to come to see ourselves as worthwhile people in our own right. The development of such insights, I believe, needs to be at the heart of teacher professional education, where teachers can come to interrogate and critique their values, and bring their new learning to new practices. If teachers can come to see the

giftedness in all, and to celebrate and encourage that potential, the quality of children's learning stands a chance of enhancement.

To achieve this vision, however, means developing an action research stance towards teacher professional learning programmes, where teachers are expected not to adopt the thinking of others who are positioned as superior to them in status, knowledge and expertise, but are expected to become critical and to think for themselves, making decisions about practice based on a wish to realise their values as real-life practices. It means teachers placing their own 'I's at the centre of their enquiries (Whitehead 1989) and focusing on their own learning, in relation with the students and others whose learning they are also encouraging, and conducting research into their practice to assess the educational quality of those practices.

This means, therefore, putting in place new standards of practice for teachers that are values-based rather than norm-based. If inclusion is seen as a policy imperative, new forms of professional education need to be developed that focus on the practice of inclusion, and new forms of professional assessment and appraisal need to focus on whether or not those values are being realised in the practice. The values themselves need to come to act as the living standards of judgement used to judge the quality of the practices, and this will mean new forms of evaluation, beginning with the self-evaluation of teachers. The findings of self-evaluation can be critically considered by groups of peers, acting as validation groups, to see whether the claims of teachers to know their professional practices and to be acting in the direction of their values can be tested against the evidence base they produce from their practices. This means, in fact, encouraging a research approach to professional education, where teachers systematically investigate their practice, and produce authenticated evidence, in relation to their identified standards of judgement, to check the extent to which they can say that they are living in the direction of their values.



To achieve this situation, however, means developing new epistemologies for the teaching profession, and this brings me to my next section, about the potential significance of my research for contributing to new thinking and new theory about inclusion in education.

## **2 The potential significance of my research for new thinking in inclusional education**

As noted, it can be claimed that new practices are grounded in new epistemologies, on the basis that how we think influences how we act, and new epistemologies are themselves grounded in particular values and practices (McNiff 2007a). The development of inclusional practices therefore needs to be grounded in the development of inclusional epistemologies, informed by inclusional values and logics, which, in relation to the new forms of teacher professional education I have discussed above, would mean a shift away from the traditional exclusional logics and values of normative didactic forms and their technical rational assessment procedures towards the development of a research base to professional education. This in turn would require a new focus on theory generation as the anticipated outcomes of teacher professional education.

When I speak of theory generation as the outcome of professional education, I am referring to ideas already established in the literature (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, Whitehead 1989, Whitehead and McNiff 2006), about how the form of theory that informs professional education needs to move from its traditional propositional form to a new living form, where this living form is inclusional and relational. The living theories that teachers can generate from studying their own practices can be shown to contain the descriptions and explanations they offer for those practices. In my case, I am claiming that I have generated my own living theory of inclusional practice, since inclusion is the

main value that informs my work. Others may take a different focus from their own values, such as Sullivan (2006), who speaks of a living theory of a practice of social justice. Whatever may be the key value in question, the form of theory generated is living, and any assessment of the theory in terms of the validity of its knowledge claims needs to be understood as dynamic and relational. Thus, standards of judgement used to judge that validity need themselves to be shown as dynamic and relational. I am doing this in my thesis. I am claiming validity for my knowledge claims that I have developed a practice that includes all and that is grounded in relational epistemologies. I wish the quality of my research to be judged in these terms. Thus I can show that my practice and my research should be judged in terms of the underpinning core value of inclusion and relation that inform the work.

What I am doing here, and what I am suggesting could have significance for new forms of theory that will inform the professional education of teachers is to show the relationship between the values that inform practice and the values that inform research, and to show the integrated nature of the relationship between the two. Furthermore, the articulation of such a relationship needs to form the basis of teachers' claims to know their own practices. Teachers need to be able to explain why they believe they have achieved a quality practice, and this automatically requires explanations for why they believe they have achieved a quality research practice. Explanations for practice must be embedded within explanations for why the practice was undertaken and how it was achieved. Teachers need not only produce their living theories of practice, but also their living epistemologies of practice, a superb example of which can be found in Glenn (2006). This would mean raising the stakes not only for the teaching profession, but also for implications about the foundations of teacher professionalism. This in turn has implications for the new Teaching Council in Ireland.

### **3 The potential significance of my research for the Teaching Council of Ireland**

A Teaching Council has recently been formed in Ireland. This Council has responsibility to

- promote teaching as a profession
- promote the continuing professional development of teachers
- establish and maintain a register of teachers
- establish, publish, review and maintain a Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers which will include teaching knowledge, skills and competence
- regulate the teaching profession and
- maintain and improve standards of teaching, knowledge, skill and competence.

([www.teachingcouncil.ie](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie))

In the Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers (Teaching Council 2007), which include standards of teaching, knowledge, skill and competence, the core values are identified as

- The Educational Experience
- Educational Outcomes
- Relationships

These in turn are identified as

- Commitment
- Quality of education
- Student-centred learning
- Responding to change
- Professional development
-

- Holistic development
- Cultural values
- Social justice, equality and inclusion
- Collegiality
- Collaboration
- Respect
- Care
- Co-operation

What is notably lacking in the documentation, however, is any suggestion about how this may be achieved. Realising these values will not be achieved by remaining with current forms of professional education, much of which is currently construed in terms of one-off days focusing on subject knowledge, after which the teacher is supposed to return to class in order to apply what they have learned. While such forms can be useful, the limited focus on content can often dissipate in the harsh light of the reality of everyday work. There is no mention in the documentation about developing sustainable forms of professional education which encourage teachers to reflect on their practice in a sustained and systematic way. Nor is there any mention about the need for teachers to theorise their practices and to produce their scholarly accounts of practice to show how they hold themselves responsible for what they are doing, and to explain why they are doing it.

This, I believe, is where studies such as mine can inform new thinking in the Teaching Council for Ireland and in similar agencies. If this thesis is legitimated in the Academy, it will enter the public knowledge base (Snow 2001) of accounts written by teachers for teachers, as shown, for example, in the databases of [www.actionresearch.net](http://www.actionresearch.net) and [www.jeanmcniff.com](http://www.jeanmcniff.com). This knowledge base contains the validated accounts of practitioners who have produced their masters dissertations and doctoral theses, to show how they are realising their values in their practices, and can itself provide strong empirical evidence for recommendations to the Teaching Council and other such agencies

for how and why they need to develop sustained professional education programmes for practitioners who are serious about demonstrating their accountability for sustainable social change. Here is a valuable opportunity for Ireland to position itself with the key thinkers of the day, in relation to developing sustainable forms of teacher professional education that actually can inform practice and theory. The greatest challenge currently, in my opinion, is for policymakers to find ways of linking standards of practice and standards of judgement in relation to forms of research. If the Teaching Council of Ireland can show the development of those links, and show that serious attempts are being made to assess quality in educational research, and establish the validity of its own claims to knowledge, that it is fulfilling its mandate in relation to the teaching profession as set out in its own documentation, then this would go far in establishing the credibility of the Teaching Council as a progressive agency whose knowledge claims about its own accountability could themselves be rooted in a strong evidence base, drawn from its own practices. Doing so would set the Teaching Council at the cutting edge of developing innovative practices in professional education and in new thinking about how agencies themselves can demonstrate their social and epistemological responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

So I come to the end of my study. I have traced the development of my thinking and practice in the area of inclusional education. This journey has taken ten years, since I began my masters studies, and now comes to a position of consolidation as I draw the different strands together, as my claim to know my practice and to have generated my living theory of inclusional practice. Perhaps a key significance of my study at this point is that I am able to articulate what I know and how I have come to know it, and to see its significance, as outlined above, for new forms of practice and theory.

Yet my research does not stop here, with the summative assessment of what I have done. This summative assessment rapidly dissolves into a temporary, formative form, as I consider the implications of my findings, and imagine new ways in which I can develop my work for sustainable education and sustainable social transformation. In this way, I return to my beginnings, as Said (1994) says, where new beginnings are always immanent in endings, and I now wonder what I can usefully do tomorrow.

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