

## **Introduction:**

This is an account of a research project carried out by me with a Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) class in an inner city school from December 1999 to May 2000.

## **Outline of how the dissertation is structured/overview of the chapters:**

**Introduction:** To the research project.

### **Chapter 1:**

Here I reflect upon the values I hold that inform my practice as an educator. This chapter also deals with **why** I want to research this topic and my values underpinning my research. It explains the **aims and objectives** of the research.

### **Chapter 2:**

Contextualisation: This chapter deals with my present context as class teacher, year head and the JCSP co-ordinator in an inner city school designated disadvantaged. It allows the reader to connect with the relevant background of the school. The descriptions here will act as the background for the research and indicate the reasons I give for the course of action taken during the research project.

### **Chapter 3:**

Methodology: This chapter deals with issues of methodology and epistemology. I describe the three main educational research paradigms and compare and contrast the advantages and limitations of each paradigm. I show my responsibility as a researcher by providing an analysis of the main research paradigms, which will include a short history of their origins, and I explain my methodology stating why I have chosen action research and the problematics of action research. I describe in this chapter how important ethical values are to my work and how I maintained them throughout the research. I aim to support my claim that an action research methodology was the best form of research for me to use while I researched this question.

### **Chapter 4:**

The project: Here I tell the story of the project. My research question is: **How can I raise the level of self-esteem of second year JCSP students and create a better learning environment?** This chapter describes how I set about researching this question and how I discovered through critical reflection and moved on and explored alternative ways of improving my practice, such as encouraging more student participation. I have also described the data gathering methods I used and their value to me and I supported my descriptions with evidence and validation to show that the claim to improvement in my practice can be reasonably justified. This chapter is built on an action research plan:

1. I experienced a problem.
  2. I sought a solution.
  3. I implemented the solution.
  4. I evaluated the outcomes of my actions.
  5. I re-formulated the problem in the light of my evaluation
- (McNiff 1988: ch.5).

I present my findings as a result of this analysis, and show the evidence of my findings.

### **Chapter 5:**

This chapter deals with the significance of my research for the JCSP class and myself. I hope to show the relevance and significance of the study, show my own professional learning and what it has done for my workplace and me. I hope to do this by reflecting on, observing and evaluating the feedback from the students.

### **Conclusion:**

I hope to show progress of how I changed my practice and moved from using an authoritarian teaching style to a more caring teaching style. By implementing a class code of good behaviour I have learned the importance that a positive approach can have on the students and how they can benefit from this approach. I will return to my aims and objectives and see how far I have fulfilled them. I will critically review the limitations of the study, and indicate avenues for further possible research.

### **Chapter 1:**

Bassey (1990:2) states:

Research entails systematic, critical enquiry which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge.

I hope to show in this research study how I have moved towards becoming a critical teacher (Freire 1972) bringing about improvement by a willingness to commit myself to change and to take a risk. To risk experimentation in my teaching was an important aspect of promoting critical openness in the students.

**Focus of my research:**

The focus of my research study is an attempt to create an active learning environment where the students I teach will become autonomous in their learning and I hope to learn a new role as facilitator of the learning process. I hope this will contribute to lowering the aggression levels of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) students and make learning and school a positive experience for these disaffected students. The National and Social Forum Report in 1997 (Report, No:11, :39), found that 3,200 students left school before the Junior Certificate Examination and a further 2,400 failed to get at least five passes in that examination. The JCSP is targeted at schools with a serious problem in early school leaving. The aim of the JCSP is according to Cassidy (1997:155):

To provide an alternative approach to the Junior Certificate Programme, especially for those young people who show signs of school failure or early leaving.

The content of the curriculum is based on the Junior Certificate syllabus but extends the range of knowledge and skills and students get credits for a wide range of achievements. Literacy and numeracy are highlighted as well as personal and social development (Appendix 1 shows the statements the students are working on).

Assessment of the JCSP is continuous. Subject teachers keep a profile of each student. This profile consists of a series of learning targets or statements that the student can aim towards. These statements provide the basis for curriculum planning, monitoring and recording of students' achievements. These statements also make the student aware of the aims for the term and the year. Finally, the student is given a folder containing a standardised document, agreed by the individual school authorities and validated by the

Department of Education and Science which describes the knowledge, skills and achievements that the student has attained. In addition if the student completes the Junior Certificate examination this is also included.

The philosophy of the JCSP programme is that every student is capable of success in school, and that they can have a positive experience of education, if conditions are favourable.

**My values:**

I believe that learning should be shared in the classroom so that everyone is equally involved in the learning strategies and have some control over their own learning; where students and teachers respect one another, where there is a sense of belonging; where there is communication between the students and the teacher; where students and teachers talk with one another and not at one another. There must be respect for one another's experiences, knowledge, values, needs, weaknesses and capabilities. The Department of Education and Science (Government of Ireland 1996:10) White Paper stresses the importance of this:

Schools provide opportunities for students to learn basic personal and social skills, which will foster integrity, self-confidence and self-esteem while nurturing sensitivity to the feeling and rights of others.

I feel if the students are to appreciate fully what they are learning, it is important that they are given time and encouragement to discuss, share and analyse/evaluate their discoveries. Furthermore, I hope that with these discoveries will come hopes, thoughts along with other emotional needs. I have encouraged the students in my class to keep a diary to record their feelings and thoughts. This record will I hope be helpful in developing in them a sense of responsibility for their learning. I hope the diaries will help the students to reflect and evaluate in a non-judgemental way while also developing responsible judgement. I hope the students will see this exercise as a chance to express themselves freely away from the pressures of examinations.

### **How can I develop my practice in order:**

- To make the class a more caring creative environment.
- To help students develop understanding, tolerance and acceptance of other students.
- To help them develop effective communication skills.
- To help them develop positive self-awareness and independence.
- To challenge students in all areas of their development.
- To develop and encourage a more holistic approach to education.

### **My research question and overall aim:**

My research question and overall aim is how I can improve my work in order to raise the level of self-esteem of second year JCSP students and create a better learning environment? How can I encourage and support these disinterested, disaffected students to become less aggressive, more assertive and enable them to benefit from their time in school.

I decided to deal with my research question through using teamwork with other teaching colleagues, because of the mixed ability of the class and degree of absenteeism, which lead to further problems such as homework often not done, or not written into homework journals, or incorrect books in school for that particular day. I hope to facilitate learning through teamwork and peer teaching. I want to encourage participatory learning, to have more flexibility in the class, to allow the students to mix together more and become more bonded, which is a very important part of my classes. My esprit-de-corps is autonomy for the class with maximum co-operation between the class and myself.

Having worked with this group of JCSP students for the last year, I have noticed the following:

- Some students lack self-confidence and a true sense of themselves.
- They need time to grow in self-understanding.
- They need to develop the ability to work together as members of a team.

- Relationships with peers, teachers and parents/guardians need to be looked at as these are often quite negative and can mitigate against the student's progress.
- There is a need to foster and encourage a positive attitude of contributing as good citizens, to the school and the whole of society.

All the above points are about what the students need to do. I need to look at ways in my teaching that will empower these students. As Hopson and Scally (1981:79) state:

Self-empowerment begins with oneself and spreads to others, but self-empowered behaviour is most effectively developed in systems that are structured to encourage, reinforce, and teach it.

I am using these points as indicators of improvement in my practice. If students fulfil these aims, I will consider I have succeeded in improving my practice.

**My concerns:**

I particularly want to ensure that the quiet, introverted, willing student or indeed the slow learner is not left feeling inadequate in the class, when the more aggressive student voices/forces their opinion. I hold it as a value that no student in my class should be made feel less than unique and special, whatever their academic ability is.

From my experience of teaching mixed ability classes, I know that the weak students can be left behind in the need to progress with the syllabus. I want to redress this problem; by raising the students' sensitivities of the whole class each to help the other. Traditional teaching methods using lecture style format only make it difficult to cope with different academic levels, with the stronger members forcing the pace, to enable the syllabus to be covered.

My core value is the development of the whole person. I want to create opportunities for students to reflect on their behaviour and focus on their strengths. The under-control students whom Humphreys (1993) describes as aggressive, insolent, bullying and full of hyperactivity are the ones with the highest referrals to the form tutor, year head, junior co-ordinator, school counsellors and back up psychological services. The over control pupil, on the other hand, exhibits shyness, over diligence, perfectionism.

Because they do not upset the classroom they often go unnoticed, and often do not get the help they need.

I looked at the conduct report sheets (Appendix 9) and picked out five students with the highest number of report sheets. During tutorial sessions I asked these students to reflect on their behaviour and I tried to find out what were the 'hidden conflict issues', unique to each student that gave rise to what Humphreys refers to as 'maladaptive behaviour'. Humphreys (1995:91) states:

These symptoms or behaviour signs will continue to exist, despite punishment, as long as the student's underlying conflicts or needs are not met.

The steady increase in the number of report sheets on certain students bore this out. It is important to me that the students' basic needs of survival, fun, recognition, freedom, belonging and self worth are met, yet that this must not impinge on the rights of others. My values of justice and fairness impel me to ensure that the students can reach their potential, develop the skills which will enable them to benefit from their present schooling, continue this personal development after they leave school and enrich their own lives and that of their community. A caring, person centred approach is very important for learning to be effective. Personal worth is a core value in my educational philosophy. The Department of Education and Science (Government of Ireland 1996:121) White Paper states:

A teacher has the onerous responsibility of imparting knowledge and equally importantly of organising learning in the classroom, taking account of their students' wider experience at home and in the community.

I also looked at my relationship with the JCSP students. Having read widely on disaffected, maladaptive behaviour and participating in a course on building self-esteem organised by the 'Pathways through Education' team I grew to understand that a common complaint JCSP students have is that many of their teachers are unable to relate to them, and treat them in a negative manner. Education researcher Scott Boldt (1994) told us teachers may need to be more understanding of their students, give them attention, and help them to learn and make class interesting and relate to what is happening in their lives. The most important tool a teacher has is their relationship with the students and when this relationship is valuing and caring in nature students'

behaviour may improve. Looking through the students' diaries it became obvious to me, that if I wanted to help the students build their confidence and reduce the maladaptive behaviour, I had to stop being negative and try and be valuing, caring and affirmative on a consistent basis. I am trying to work on exercises with the help of the school counsellor and the Pathways through Education team where the students are given opportunities to stop being aggressive and negative towards each other and to work together, to solve problems. We are trying to empower the group. Trying to empower the students I believe shows a shift in my methodology from content/curricula based to student orientated pedagogies.

One tried and tested method of helping people cope with aggression has been put together in Aggression and Replacement Training (Goldstein and Glick 1987). The authors (Goldstein and Glick) believe that the perpetrators of aggression frequently possess a series of interlocking and often reciprocally compounding deficiencies. In response to these deficiencies (the lack of socially cognitive skills, a deficiency in anger control, a primitive level of moral reasoning) the authors target the enhancement of pro social skills, the heightening of anger control and the advancement of moral reasoning. The Pathways through Education team with the JCSP class used this method extensively.

As a teacher of this 21<sup>st</sup> century, I constantly have to meet change in many different ways and areas of my professional life. Two decades ago when I graduated from training college, I faced my entry into teaching with some fear and trepidation but also with a certain degree of excitement and eagerness. My role as an imparter of knowledge has changed over the years, certainly with the introduction of the new Junior Certificate Syllabus, which is designed to provide a wide variety of learning experiences such as investigative, creative, analytical, managerial, evaluative and technological skills. The key principles underpinning curricular development at this level are those of breadth, balance and coherence (Appendix 2, Department of Education and Science Junior Certificate Home Economics syllabus 1990).

I am a product of a traditional convent education. I admired the sisters' devotion to learning as shown in their patient supervision of study and their care for us students during examination time. As a student I experienced the skills-driven curriculum where



the teacher was in control of the learning and transmitted information, which I received without question. In those days I believed education was about having enough information to pass examinations, and passing examinations led to a sense of achievement.

I have very happy memories of my primary school days. I remember the school (my last three years there in particular) as a place that provided a sense of belonging, achievement and security, which stimulated a sense of learning. This is what I am trying to aspire to where the students will achieve and be happy.

However with the introduction of the new Junior Certificate Syllabus, I realised the need to change my teaching style as stated earlier from an authoritarian style to a more caring, supportive style. I believe care is the basis for creative learning for the students. It is my responsibility as their teacher to develop teaching methodologies and curricular approaches, which will involve the students in their own learning, and encourage them to see the relevance and meaning of what they are learning for their own lives. I see the necessity of collaboration as a resource and of being open to accept my role and change it to suit the needs of the students in my care.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Contextualisation:**

This chapter describes the context within which I am researching my work.

#### **The school context:**

The school featured in this study is a modern Inner City Vocational Post Primary School, situated close to the merging rivers Dodder and Liffey. It was officially opened in 1983 replacing the previous school, which was in existence since 1893. The school is under the auspices of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (C.D.V.E.C.). The CDVEC is the local education authority for Dublin City and its inner suburbs. Looking after the educational needs of the socially and economically deprived of the city's children has been its priority since its foundation. The passing of the Vocational Education Act 1931 was a milestone in the history of Irish education. With it came access to secondary education for all regardless of class or creed and corporal punishment was not tolerated in vocational schools. Vocational schools opened their doors to communities at night where adults could pursue either hobby or academic courses. Initially vocational schools were built in rural or poorer areas of the larger towns and cities.

This new building replaces the original school, which was built in 1893. Throughout the years the school changed direction many times as society changed and new opportunities presented themselves. The school now provides co-educational junior and senior cycle courses incorporating post leaving certificate and repeat leaving certificate. It has a current enrolment of 300 students, 23 wholetime teaching staff, 2 part-time and 2 eligible part-time teachers. Unemployment is a major problem in the area and education is not seen as a priority. In an effort to help the students to study for their examinations the school has introduced supervised study for examination classes two evenings a week (two hours in duration). Approximately 50% of the students avail of the study period.

**Curriculum context:**

The core of a post-primary school programme must of necessity be defined by curricula as required by the Department of Education and Science. The Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes are the nucleus around which the school is structured. However, within these confines it is necessary to adapt and introduce programmes, which will be particularly relevant to the current needs of the students (Appendix 3, Programmes adapted by the school to suit the current needs of the students).

When the new school opened in 1983, a policy of 'streaming' was introduced and junior and senior classes were categorised into ability bands ranging from 'A' to 'D'. Now with the falling numbers in these classes there are only two bands this year (1999-2000). The school prides itself on its ability to adapt to a changing educational environment. A number of years ago courses in computers, electronics and European Studies were introduced. Students therefore are able to take a number of subjects at leaving certificate level, while also having the opportunity to develop new skills in areas of particular relevance to them. In the school year 1998/99 the JCSP was introduced and in the school year 1999/00 the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) was introduced.

The LCVP has a strong vocational dimension. It provides students with the opportunity to release their potential for self directed learning, for innovation and for enterprise.

The Department of Education and Science (Government of Ireland 1996:9) state:

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme was introduced in response to the changing needs of Ireland's education system and the changing work and business environment. The programme aims to prepare the students for the real world where the ability to cope with rapid change is of increasing importance in preparation for social and economic life.

LCVP students must take at least five subjects for the Leaving Certificate Examination. One of these must be Irish. LCVP students take between five and seven Leaving Certificate subjects plus Link Modules. The Link Modules are on enterprise education, preparation for work and work experience. The LCVP strengthens the vocational dimension of the Leaving Certificate by linking subjects into vocational groupings. The three link modules sharpen the vocational focus of other subjects that the students study thus enhancing their employability capacity.

Numbers permitting, management hope to introduce the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in 2000/01. This programme is aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. Emphasis is put on forms of achievement and excellence which the established Leaving Certificate had not recognised in the past as stated in the White Paper on Education (Government of Ireland 1996:6):

The Leaving Certificate Applied was introduced to recognise the talents of all students and provide opportunities for development in terms of responsibility, self-esteem and self-knowledge.

An advantage of the LCA is that it focuses on the talents of the individual student and helps students apply their learning in the real world. This is paramount in enabling students become employable. Information technology, the arts and leisure and recreation are required courses for all students. Courses in the LCA are offered in three main areas: vocational preparation, general education and vocational education. This would be very advantageous for those students following the JCSP programme. The aim of the school is to give the students as many opportunities for success as is possible. In this way the school will add to their self-esteem and establish a firm foundation for their life after school.

The normal procedure in my school is that the form teachers and year heads normally begin with a first year class and teach them through until third year. In this way a form teacher can establish a classroom code with them as soon as they enter secondary school and in this way increase their awareness of their responsibilities. As form teacher and year head I wish to have an understanding of each student and the situational context, in which they find themselves.

All students sit an external examination, either junior or leaving certificate. This section of the school is often referred to as the 'junior' or 'our own students', while the repeat and post-leaving certificate students are referred to as the seniors.

**The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP):**

The programme is a way of working within the Junior Certificate; the JCSP is specially designed to help young people who have had a difficult experience of school. It provides students with an opportunity for success in school and rewards that success with an official record of their achievements, validated by the Department of Education and Science. The development of a positive relationship between the student and the teacher is central to the success of the programme. (Appendix 4, JCSP philosophy).

**My personal context:**

I was employed in 1982 as a Home Economics teacher. I still teach Home Economics along with Social, Political and Health Education (SPHE) and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). I have identified a research group from my CSPE class who are following the JCSP programme. There are 13 in the group (6 girls and 7 boys). They are in their second year of the three-year junior certificate course. I am their form teacher, year head and co-ordinator of the JCSP. The roles of the form teacher, year head and junior cycle dean of discipline has always been the cornerstone in how effectively the school operated. My main aim as form teacher is to get to know the students, their background, abilities and weaknesses. Having a knowledge of the students' background and abilities will enable me to have a better understanding of the student if and when problems arise. In the school where I teach the tutor and class meet once a week, and through the use of the Substance Abuse Prevention Programme (SAPP) explore some of life's questions, which are relevant to their age group. As Collins (1993:43) states:

The tutor is the subject teacher who recognises that there is an emotional dimension in teaching and who is courageous enough to educate within that framework.

The form teacher is responsible for monitoring the students' attendance, punctuality, uniform and their general adherence to school policy. The class tutor is the contact person for parents to sort out individual problems. As co-ordinator of the JCSP I can call once a term profile meetings with the other subject teachers to monitor progress and discuss achievements. A class tutor stays with the class for three years, and a new class tutor is appointed in fifth and sixth year. Marland (1974:10) sees the tutor as:

The focal point of a child's school life; the person who provides liaison between subject-teachers, housemasters, parents and

school hierarchy.

I want to develop an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, to develop the JCSP students' sociability and to multiply the learning resources throughout the class, empowering the students to help themselves, with particular attention given to the weaker, less vociferous students in the class in an unobtrusive and caring manner. I want to improve the educational experiences of the students, moving from teacher control to student autonomy; from discrete subject matter to integrated themes; from a passive student role to an active role. I want to be a guide, a facilitator, where professionalism and growth are the order of the day. I hope to create a learning atmosphere with caring and sharing as its cornerstone in order to encourage these values to become reality. I would like to emulate Rogers (1986:99):

Where motivation for learning comes from within, and the role of the teacher can be to hand the locus of control to the learners, to achieve what they need and what they want to achieve.

Irish education is currently facing into a period of change and renewal. With demands in the recent Department of Education and Science White Paper (1996) for increased parental involvement in education, a greater measure of accountability by teachers and participation by all is envisaged. This means an intense focus on the quality of what schools provide. Schools to-day are confronted with challenges and problems that argue for the appraisal of their basic purposes and their performance, as they cope with the perplexing breadth of talent and motivation among their students. The desires of today's reform for schools require highly skilled teachers, who understand learning as well as teaching and who can address student needs, together with the demands of their disciplines. Before starting this MA in Education I did not engage in practical reasoning with regard to the changing context of my work. I took my training, the claims of efficiency and theories upon which it is based, for granted. This course and action research has contributed to the development of informed judgements and ultimately to a rethinking of my professionalism.

**My involvement in the research:**

The conviction that I could make a difference to the educational development of the students I teach came partly from my involvement with the methodology of action research (Nugent, 1999). My view of teaching has developed especially in recent years since I took part in the school based action research project (Nugent, 1999). I realised that I could search for the generative notions (McNiff, 1988), the theories, which would assist in clearing a pathway towards a better future for the students and myself. The research imperative has been one of the factors which has moved me towards actualising the elements of Mc Gregor's theory (McGregor, 1960, cited in Kavanagh, 1993) which he stated as follows:

Under proper conditions the average individual seeks responsibility and is motivated by the desire to realise one's full potential and to experience the satisfaction of a job well done.

Furthermore, within my practice there are more elements now than merely the subject element, which was my first experience of teaching. In his analysis of teaching, Whitaker (1995) identifies within the skills category the requirements of occupational skills, personal skills and managerial skills. As a teacher with almost full hours teaching duties, my year head and class tutor duties have highlighted the requirement for skills beyond the occupational skills required within the classroom and the requirement for those skills in a context both inside and outside the classroom. The spill over effect of being a year head and a teacher of a class in that year group adds a further dimension to both the problems and the skills required. The struggle to both practise and understand the required skills necessitated a structured systematic approach, which is to be found within the paradigm of action research.

The benefits I hope the students will achieve from this action research is an increase in confidence and social awareness. There also has to be self-development of the teacher (Stenhouse cited in Elliott, 1991). This is a value that I came to realise through working with a previous research project (Nugent, 1999). For me it was an educational research in the sense that I was educated by it, educated through it, and located it within an educational setting (McNiff, 1993). By systematically reflecting on my own practice and finding ways to improve it I will concentrate on building up the strengths of the student.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Methodology:**

This chapter describes and deals with the issues of planning, methodology and epistemology. It is generally held that there are three main education research paradigms.

#### **The three main educational research paradigms are:**

- The empirical approach (scientific/positivist/quantitative)
- The interpretive approach (different interpretations of what is real/qualitative)
- The critical theoretic approach (which some people equate with action research).

Action research is one kind of research. There are many other kinds. In this chapter I want to point out that there are many ways of doing research and why I have chosen an action research methodology. I intend to justify my choice of action research as my preferred methodology by considering the different paradigms and making a case for action research as my preferred methodology. Before beginning this piece of research I was worried that I had chosen a methodology most suitable for my research and I agree with Walker (1985:46) who states:

....a key decision in any research project involves the selection of methods...and once made is not easily reversed though it may be enhanced by later addition of supplementary methods.

As I intended to elicit the views of students to produce evidence of my own improvement of practice, I felt also that the following points needed to be considered:

- That any research must be for the good of the school and the students.
- Any research using students' time must be justified.
- I needed to complete the research within the time limit.

The choice of methodology was quite deliberate. I became conscious of the need to have my work evaluated. Besides the class's evaluation I felt a personal need to evaluate at a deeper level, a level that inquired into the values and overall direction of the work in which I was involved. I found myself asking questions such as:

- What do I hope for the students I teach?
- In what ways am I developing and learning?



- How can we (the students and myself) collaborate in such a way so that we arrive at a desired result for all of us?
- How can I make the quality of class enjoyable yet educational for both students and myself?
- How can I help the students I teach to become more socially aware?

I hope to encourage the students to become autonomous citizens through education.

I like to think I am a responsible researcher. As a responsible researcher, let me now explain my understanding of the three major educational research paradigms, so that I can justify my choice of an action research approach to my research.

A paradigm is a set of ideas, theories or an approach. A research paradigm is as Bassey (1990:13) states:

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

Sometimes researchers feel so strongly about their particular paradigm that they fail to see the worth or value of other paradigms. As research in education comes in many forms it is important to be as clear as possible about the meaning of educational research. Stenhouse (1975:67) states:

Research entails systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. The purpose of research is to find out something new, something that was not known before and that 'something' may be about the researcher.

In this section I wish to outline the characteristics of the three main educational research paradigms.

### **The empirical paradigm:**

The assumptions of the empirical approach are that knowledge is external to us, it exists outside ourselves; the researcher and the knowledge are separate. There is a discrete body of knowledge that is appropriate for all situations.

The empirical research paradigm deals mainly in facts and figures, a quantitative approach to research. Furthermore (Bassey, 1990: ch.1), the quantitative researcher's world is rational. The quantitative researcher observes and describes reality. The purpose of this paradigm is to describe and understand the world and to share this understanding with others. This helps the researcher to explain how particular events occur and predict what may be the outcome of future events.

In the empiricist view (Eisner, 1993:5-11), the researcher approaches the subject matter from an objective viewpoint and describes, interprets and explains events without making any judgements. The empiricist may do so in order to add to existing knowledge or to prove a particular hypothesis. In empirical research the subject matter of the researcher is the most important element; the researcher is outside looking in, like a neutral observer. Bassey (1990:12) describes a theoretical researcher as one who:

Tries to describe, interpret and explain events while evaluative researchers describe, interpret and explain events so that they or others can make evaluative judgements about them.

It is quite clear from an empirical point of view that the researcher is outside the subject matter of the research completely. Data collected in this paradigm is suitable for statistical analysis and because of this the empiricist methodology is often referred to as quantitative. The empirical researcher tends to write in the third person. Research in this paradigm is about other people. The object of the research is not allowed to interfere with the process and their opinions might as McNiff (1988:11) states:

...skew otherwise objectively determinable facts.

Likewise (Hitchcock and Hughes 1989: ch.2) the researcher avoids the use of personal pronouns. Researchers in this paradigm can create new knowledge about problem areas in education such as truancy, absenteeism and early school leavers. New initiatives can be tested for their effectiveness such as, for example, research carried out on traveller education, home school liaison scheme and the stay in school retention initiative, which is ongoing, and EU funded. Typically, it also assumes a determinism, as Cohen and Manion (1994:13) state:

Events are explicable in terms of their antecedents.

In the field of education these conditions do not apply to all aspects which may be studied. Believers in the positivist paradigm claim that this is the only true method of

acquiring perfect knowledge (Cohen and Manion, 1994:12). However, it is possible to adopt a systematic approach and not be confined to the self-imposed restrictions of the positivists.

I wanted to undertake a piece of research into my practice as an educator. While I initially had no clear idea which educational paradigm I was going to follow I think I drifted in and out of the interpretive and critical theoretic approaches. The empiricist approach was not suitable for this piece of research because it deals in the main with facts and figures. I am dealing with students and feelings. I think these cannot be measured scientifically.

**The interpretive paradigm:**

Another research approach is that of the interpretive paradigm. It takes a predominately sociological perspective. Results are interpreted. The methods of empiricist research operate from a statistical, quantitative base, whereas the interpretive research operates from a more qualitative analysis of data. The interpretive researcher, while listening and working with the subject of the research, will still impose a framework into which the researcher must fit their practice. Action research on the other hand, tries to put the subject of the research at the centre. In the words of Somekh (1994:2):

.....that underpinning action research there is a set of democratic values, which endow the action researcher with the right to take control of the research process and make decisions about the full range of methodological issues on the basis of careful judgement and contextual knowledge.

The interpretive approach agrees that people see the world differently. Bassey (1990:42) states:

Because of differences in perception, interpretation and in language it is not surprising that people have different views of what is real.

The researcher in this paradigm sees language as a more or less agreed, symbolic system, in which different people may have some differences in their meanings. In consequence, the sharing of accounts of what has been observed is always to some extent problematic, because of differences in perception, interpretations and language. It is not surprising that people have different views of what is real. The interpretative

researcher sees the purpose of research to describe and interpret the world in order to get shared meanings with others. As Bassey (1990:16) states:

Interpretative researchers seek systematically, critically and self critically to describe and interpret phenomena, which they take to be in the same world, which they inhabit and which therefore may be disturbed when they try to investigate it.

Data gathering techniques in interpretative research are usually verbal, fieldwork, notes and transcripts of conversations. This type of research is usually not open to statistical analysis used by empirical researchers. The interpretative paradigm is usually described as qualitative.

Positivist and interpretive approaches have different purposes. As Bassey (1990:16) states:

The positivist view of the social world can be understood in terms of causal relationships expressed in universal generalisations.

People are not treated as inanimate objects but subjects in themselves with complex responses and configurations of interactions (Cohen and Manion, 1994:27). Thus, replicability is not expected. Prediction is fraught with uncertainty. The qualitative method of measurements is as acceptable as the quantitative. The validity of qualitative measurements must be established on their own criteria that is, in my opinion, truth, integrity, empathy, authenticity, critical analysis, confirmability, responsibility, identifiability, localisation rather than generalisation, immediacy rather than predictability, uniqueness rather than replicability.

The purpose of positivist research is to quantify the person as a limited object. The purpose of interpretative research is to explore the human spirit as an infinite possibility. But neither of these methodologies is sufficient to satisfy the intention of the teacher and educationalist. Until the advent of the teacher as researcher movement in the 1960's (Elliott, 1991: 24) the relationship between the teacher and the researcher was conceived in disjoint terms. Research by teachers was done on their practice rather than done as their practice (Elliott, 1991:14).

In a sense historians and anthropologists were early interpretative researchers. Their main aim was to interpret what happened in the past and put it into present day contexts. This paradigm sees the researcher as the central figure interpreting what they see in relation to their culture or society. The positivist and interpretive paradigms involve the researchers describing what they see or do.

I did not use this type of research because it does not involve efforts to change practice as process. This form of research deals with understanding situations. I wanted to go beyond passive understanding to a critical engagement with how to theorise my own management of change. What I wanted was to move on to change my practice so as to improve the educational experience of the JCSP class.

**The action research paradigm:**

The action research paradigm is about researchers trying to improve their practice. It needs to be recognised that introducing action research values and methodologies into workplaces can be problematic; since practices of collaboration and openness require negotiation in what may be seen as hierarchically structured cultures. As Carr and Kemmis (1986:64) state:

Action research is not about verification from the given event, but about intelligent action coming from wise judgements arising from immediate location of the event itself.

**The development of action research:**

It is important to state from the beginning that there has been an evolutionary development in the field of action research. Out of this development there are a number of differing perspectives on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of action research. Therefore it will be helpful to outline some of this development before progressing to an adoption for the purposes of this study.

Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, was one of the first pioneers of action research. He felt that people should be involved in their own enquiries about their own lives. His work focused on social issues. His main interest was to encourage people, through a process of collaboration, to look to themselves to identify problems and overcome

difficulties. Lewin (1946) identified a framework for action research, which included a four-stage spiral of steps:

- planning
- acting
- observing and
- reflecting.

Having confronted a difficulty, the action plan was implemented, observed and reflected on; further evaluation would occur and a second cycle implemented, if necessary. These stages can be seen as a basis for many of the more modern models of action research (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1982; McNiff, 1988; Elliott 1991). Kemmis and Elliott based their ideas on Lewin's concepts and applied them to education. Any research enquiry, as Chomsky (1965) cited in McNiff (1988:43) suggested, should involve three levels:

1. observation
2. description and
3. explanation.

The systems of Kemmis and Elliott fail to include the third level. McNiff's critique (1988:43) addresses the key issue that:

They do not attempt to explain the educational phenomena they are dealing with and therefore they cannot be said to be truly educational.

Their schemes do not encourage teachers to account for their own personal development. There is a danger here that it becomes too much like empirical research.

The work of Stenhouse in East Anglia in the late 1960s and early 1970s revived the fortunes of action research for the purposes of education by placing the teacher into the role of researcher as McNiff (1988:25) states:

His central message for teachers was that they should regard themselves as researchers, as the best judges, of their practice, and then the natural corollary would be an improvement of education.

Nonetheless the faith in a teacher to interpret their research was not fully present. Teachers still needed full time researchers to complete the work according to Stenhouse. Stenhouse had involvement with many other researchers who are today

central figures in the field of action research especially Kemmis and Elliott. Through their work action research was established as a significant approach to educational research.

Kemmis further refined the spiral nature of the research 'mode': added a fifth step to Lewin's four steps, that of re-planning. Re-planning in my opinion, would have to take into account what was learned in cycle one and look at different solutions or even redesign one's research question in light of what one learned in cycle one. McNiff, while recognising the significant contribution of Kemmis, points to a weakness in his system, which she identifies as (1988:25):

Its supposition that life goes along only one track at a time, forgetting that related but dissimilar problems will arise and oust the main focus and that real people will have the flexibility and creativity to move more easily to the new problem and then return to the original one. His system does not allow for such contingencies.

McNiff, influenced by the work of a very active contributor to the area of action research Whitehead (1993), is convinced of what Whitehead terms the 'living' nature of action research. It is constantly in an evolutionary state both at the personal level of the researcher and at the level of action research as an approach to practitioner's reflection. Whitehead (1993) contends that the 'living I', as he terms it is at the centre of the research. This 'living I' is one who holds values and strives to live out of them, yet often sees the gap between the reality of their professional practice and these very values. It is this gap that promotes action to improve practice and leads then to an evaluation of the action and the values. The following quotation captures this perspective in a form that is both informative around his understanding of the framework and leads to a necessary investigation of a comparison with other traditional research methodologies: Whitehead (1993:3) says:

I am convinced that you might recognise your use of a common-sense yet disciplined form of action and reflection cycle as you resolve practical problems and attempt to improve the quality of your work. I think you will have expressed a concern that something needs improving when some of your values are not being lived as fully as you wish. You will have imagined ways forward, devised an action plan and acted. You will have evaluated the outcomes of your actions in terms of their quality and effectiveness. If you do not recognise this action reflection cycle in your

professional life then a fundamental assumption of my work is destroyed.

Another concern of McNiff is that the schemas produced by Elliott lack a specific educational component. McNiff (1988:36,7):

It is not that the schemes are faulty; it is that they are deficient. They do not have the explanatory power to enable teachers to generate their own educational theory from their own educational practice.

Elliott, working in the English context, has developed a more complex system. He has furthered the notion of placing the teacher at the centre of the research process and has developed networks to support teachers in their efforts to be engaged in action research.

McNiff (1988) traces the development of action research in education and shows how it has moved from Lewin's initial conceptualisation, through the teacher as researcher approach by Stenhouse (1975) and into action research where the emphasis is placed on the practitioner as researcher. This approach is different from both the positivist and the interpretative approach, both of which rely on outside agencies and researchers for their results. Action research encourages practitioners to do their own research on themselves by reflecting on their practice. As Carr and Kemmis (1986:64) state:

The whole idea of action research is to improve practice on the basis of a dialectical critique of practice, to improve understanding on the basis of a dialectical critique at understanding and to improve the teacher's situation on the basis of a dialectical critique of the situation.

For this reason I feel that the Whitehead's emphasis on the 'living I' stresses the importance of identifying one's professional values and also the level of their practice in the professional life of the practitioner. This then leads to an acknowledgement of the gap between articulated values and the living out of those values. At this stage a plan is adopted to work systematically towards realising values in practice. Whitehead is anxious to keep the teacher at the centre of the enquiry. He maintains that unless we keep 'the living I' in our educational discussions action research loses touch and becomes an academic exercise. The argument that Whitehead (1993) makes is that action research must be educational and help teachers make sense of their everyday



practice. He has introduced a formula for tackling practical problems in a systematic way. There are five main steps in this process:-

1. I experience a problem when some of my educational values are denied in practice.
2. I imagine a solution to a problem.
3. I implement an imagined solution.
4. I evaluate the outcome of my actions.
5. I re-formulate my problem in the light of my evaluation.

**This can be tied in with the following set of questions in McNiff (1988:38)**

1. What is my concern?
2. Why am I concerned?
3. How can I show evidence around my felt need to undertake the research?
4. What could I do about it?
5. How could I check that my judgement about what has happened is accurate?

Action research involves action which links back into the situation and can lead in unforeseen directions. These actions are then followed up because it seems to the practitioner at the time to be worth following. Therefore action research is to do with discovering hypotheses and ideas as well as with trying to test them. One major problem for busy teachers with this is the amount of time required to discuss and research the next move as the research develops.

I realised that my needs were based around my practice rather than adding further theories to complement those of which I was already aware. With McNiff (1988:10) I agree that:

Action research is probably more useful to the needs of teachers in the living systems of their classrooms than theories that are often more sociological than educational.

My concern was to improve my own practice and create a better learning environment for the JCSP class with myself at the centre. As Lomax (1994:3) states:

Action research involves the researcher as the main focus of the research.

The best person to find a solution and probably the most effective solution to my

problems in teaching is myself. I have done a lot of soul searching and self questioning to find solutions to my problems and realised that the most effective solutions would have to come from myself. I will identify my needs and concerns and seek to address them in my own context. I will examine through action research my own values. Everyone needs to monitor their own work and improve it. I felt I am responsible for my own improvement.

Action research enables me to reflect on my values, to evaluate and articulate them. More than this, I am invited to move from reflection to action by putting my values into practice. Action research also involves other people: others provide information, others validate and evaluate my practice. A critical friend validates my actions and also supports and challenges them through the process. S/he accompanies me through the process and listens to my ideas, challenges them and suggests alternatives.

#### **Action research as opposed to traditional research methods:**

Action research is becoming increasingly well known as an approach that encourages practitioners to be in control of their own lives and contexts. As stated earlier it came to prominence in England in the late sixties and early seventies. Now in the year two thousand its influence is substantial, and is spreading to almost all areas where personal and professional learning is undertaken. There are a variety of approaches to action research, as is true of scientific enquiry in general.

McNiff in her work on action research (1988:12) tackles the concern of the appropriateness of this form of research in relation to others, in particular the empiricist and the interpretive forms of enquiry.

The management of an educational research situation, following the empiricist tradition, is geared towards answering the questions of the external researcher, rather than those of the teacher.

It is the perspective one brings to research that leads one to choose one form of research over another. In the empiricist view of research the individuality of the teacher is minimised or even removed from the enquiry, to prevent interference with the quest for generalization. Students, according to Ernest (1994:22), are research objects not subjects. This tradition of research has many applications where concerns are around data collection and statistical analysis. An empiricist approach will make a significant

contribution to understanding such questions as, *how many students achieved grade A in Leaving Certificate 1999 in Social and Scientific Home Economics higher level?* but will not easily provide answers to issues concerning my practice and how it is influencing students in achieving their goals. I am concerned about improving the quality of students' educational experience, which is an issue of quality. I am not so much concerned with gathering quantitative data. McNiff (1988:14) states:

The theory that results imply control: it does not encourage teachers to be adventurous and creative in their practice, nor to be personally reflective and critical of that practice.

As the focus of my research is to be an inquiry into my professional practice it was clear that I needed a methodology that encouraged flexibility, creativity and attention to the many levels involved in any action as Somekh (1994:4) states:

...unlike traditional research, the validity of action research does not depend upon measuring the extent and frequency of phenomena over a period of time...(it) is concerned with exploring the multiple determinants of actions, interactions, and inter-personal relationship in unique contexts.

### **Critique of action research:**

It is important to briefly note some of the major criticisms of action research. Perhaps its best critics are those who reflect with an action research outlook, not accepting the ideas of either action research itself or of its opponents. Webb (in Zuber-Skerritt, 1996b) gives a detailed account of Gibson's (1985) critique of the action research model supported by Carr and Kemmis in *Becoming Critical* (1986). It is, Gibson says, characterised by lack of modesty and privileges its own view of reality while being naïve about group processes. There is always the danger of 'group think', the evidence of a cult outlook. Webb (1996) refers also to the fact that even the well-intentioned precept of working with groups and the ideals of equality, democracy and emancipation may each be subject to critique.

Hopkins (1993) doubts the real freedom of the models employed by action researchers. At best he states they provide an initial guide to action, at worst, they keep the researcher within a set of assumptions that bear little relationship to their reality and, therefore, constrain their freedom of action. This criticism provides a challenge to action researchers to ensure that the models they use are not an end or the main purpose

of the research but rather a flexible or creative means for the research. Somekh gives another important cautionary point when she warns against an exclusive focus on self. She advises action researcher to go back to the foundations of all research that it is essentially an inquiry into phenomena, practice or concepts, and its focus is outward looking. As Somekh (1994:13) states:

Too much emphasis on the importance of self in action research can distract the practitioner-researcher from the substantive focus of the study. There is a tendency for some action research to become ingrown and 'contentless', so that self-exploration and personal growth seem to become the whole focus and the purpose of the research. This may be effective as a form of therapy, but it is difficult to justify calling it research.

My research is self-study and I do not consider it to be self-indulgent as Somekh implies. I am the content of my research. The justification for educational action research lies in its focus on education. No one can doubt that in the current climate of uncertainty and question of all 'hand-me-down' truths (Handy, 1995) there is nothing less beneficial to society or the individual than the continued preaching of those 'truths' without educating the receiver so that they may be enabled to reach themselves. This means analysing more thoroughly the mechanisms of teaching and learning. There is every justification in trying to move towards a paradigm, which is based on reflection and understanding reached through a social process. The paradigm of action research is capable of accommodating such a process.

While there is a tendency to see action research within the educational arena, if not as a method of curing all ills then at least as Noffke (1997:311) states:

As a form of professional problem solving.

I maintain that the focus must be on the 'action' rather than the 're-action'. Educational action research is motivated by the search for new actions, which will not be simple reactions to the injustices visited upon us. In this manner it heads towards freedom in a non coercive manner (McNiff, 1992). It is with this intention that I adopted the methodology of action research in examination of my work as year head and class tutor.

### **Choosing a particular action research perspective:**

At present it is clear that there are a number of different perspectives in looking at action research with some major thinkers taking a quite sequential approach, such as Somekh, (1994) and Elliott (1991). Another perspective highlights the value-laden nature of action research and the centrality of what Whitehead (1989) calls the 'living I'.

The sequential approach of people such as Somekh, Elliott, Carr and Kemmis sees action research as a means of systematically addressing problems of practice in order to bring solutions forward. Elliott describes one of the difficulties in educational development as curriculum development and the optimum solution being an action research framework (Elliott 1991: chapters 7-9:52). Nonetheless, his framework still places the self-reflective teacher at the centre of the research:

Action research improves practice by developing the practitioner's capacity for discrimination and judgement in particular, complex human situations. It unifies inquiry, the improvement of performance and the development of persons in their professional role.

Finally I would like to outline the perspective of Whitehead and McNiff with an emphasis on critical self-reflective practice. McNiff's contribution highlights, among other concerns the generative transformational nature of scientific enquiry, the importance of the reflective self, the values that underpin our practice and the standards of judgement necessary to allow research reach its full potential. Whitehead's methodology (in McNiff 1988) is the methodology I will follow in my research. The following is a resume of this methodology.

I aim to make a claim to knowledge. This process starts by identifying a research issue. McNiff (1988) outlines this and the other key elements of the research in question form: **What is my concern?** Here the context for the concern, is elaborated upon in order to clarify the boundaries of the research. My research question is:

***How can I raise the level of self-esteem of second year JCSP students and create a better learning environment?***

**Why am I concerned?** Here in this section I hope to state my values. This section will identify the gaps between the values that I hold and practice. This section is very important to the process. It provides the impetus as well as the sense of direction.

**How can I show the evidence around my felt need to do this research?** Here I need to show in an objective way a picture of the concern/issue/problem. A range of evidence is to be presented and validated underpinning the research issue.

**What can I do about it?** Here a range of solutions will be proposed. A rationale will be given for the chosen set of actions.

**What will I do?** Here I hope to give an account of the procedure of the action plan.

**What evidence do I produce to show my actions and their impact?** As stated earlier, evidence is required to show the effectiveness of the action plan. A range of data gathering techniques are used including diaries, conversations, report sheets and conduct sheets. I need to have established criteria by which to choose from among the range of data.

**What conclusions do I draw from my evidence? How can I judge my own effectiveness?** Here I will put forward reflections based on the research. I need to be involved with others in this reflection. In a particular way, what is termed ‘critical friend’ is very important to the process at this stage. The critical friend ‘lives’ within the area of research. The critical friend is a sounding board for me through the whole process of the research and acts as a validator of the research.

**How can I show that I took care that my judgements were reasonably fair and accurate?** In action research others are in a sense co-researchers as Lomax (1994:4) states:

Action researchers....seek to relate their own value stance to that of other professionals and wider institutional policies and practices. For this reason action research is a collaborative activity rather than one in which people engage in isolation...

Another crucial engagement of others is in the area of validation. It is demanding yet supportive and challenging to ask others to reflect on the research process right through the process. My own learning in this current project would have been a lot less if it were not for the help and support of the MA in Education study group.

Validation is a key aspect of research. It involves the researcher making a claim to knowledge and subjecting that claim to public scrutiny and approval (or not). It is clear that research by its very nature will reveal certain kinds of ethical issues. It is important that I have a clear grasp of ethical issues. As Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:44) state:

It is easy to forget the very subject matter of educational inquiry, namely education, is itself fundamentally a moral enterprise. That is everyone regards education, though obviously not in the same way, as having to do more or less with the good of society and the good of the individual.

A particular resource in this area of validation is the critical friend. The words in the term are chosen deliberately to emphasise support and challenge in the whole research process.

**How do I modify my practice?** Here the concern is to show the impact of the learning on present and future practice.

**What is the value of learning?** In this final section an evaluation of the learning at a personal level is discussed. The value of the learning to other contexts is central. In this form of particular research, generalisation is achieved by showing the use value in terms of people's lives through doing a piece of research on a single issue and then showing how other people may learn from this experience. It is this methodology, I hope to apply to my research in developing a more caring and understanding group of JCSP students. I think Collins describes the relationship between action research and educating the whole child when she states (1995:4):

The values and principles that inform action research broadly overlap those that inform pastoral care. The core values and principles would be that value the person, values such as care and respect for the individual, acknowledgement that the individual has the right to make his or her contribution.

## **Ethics:**

Ethical considerations are important in undertaking social research. When starting a piece of research it is important to establish boundaries about what can and cannot be written. Honesty is vital; the researcher should always notify authorities, colleagues and students of any change; and should not use names of any kind as McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996:31) state:

Do not reveal the real names of people or places unless you have specific permission to do so. Do not give participants fictitious names; those names may belong to other people somewhere.

It is important always to get permission to use an organisation's name. Most organisations are happy to have their name used. It is important to keep checking with participants that they are happy with procedures and let them know they can withdraw at any time. It is important that everyone knows from the beginning what you (the researcher) are doing. It is important at the beginning of the research to have a plan and that it is available to the research participants. Have regular progress reports, make these available to the research participants but limit distribution only to those involved in the research.

It is important that the participants see you as a person that can be trusted and that you will keep to your 'word' on the important issues of :

- Negotiations
- Confidentiality and
- Reporting.

Do not assume anything, keep checking with your participants. If there is any area of doubt always check it out and ensure that it is approved by all the participants. It must be remembered that education takes place in a variety of contexts e.g. historical, political, socio-cultural and economic contexts. Ethics refers to questions of values, beliefs, judgements and personal viewpoints. As a researcher I am accountable to my participants. It is important that I act in a responsible manner and with ethical awareness. Furthermore as Bassey (1990) says, researchers must be aware of the right of the participant not to become involved. Action research is a value-laden activity (McNiff, 1988) and as such high moral and ethical standards are demanded in both my



teaching and researching. I have produced an ethics statement, which I presented to all my research participants (Appendix 5).

**My own ethical conduct:**

The following are the ethical values I aimed to maintain and developed while doing this research.

1. At the beginning of the research I sought and obtained permission from the principal of the school to conduct the research (Appendix 6).
2. I informed the Pathways through Education team of my intention to research into my own practice with the JCSP class and invited them to collaborate with me by identifying areas of concern.
3. I sought and obtained permission from the parents and students to gather, use and interpret data in an acceptable form for this research. I asked the parents and students if they would sign a letter giving me permission to carry out the research. A number claimed they wanted no more 'bits of paper'. I persuaded them in the interest of openness and accountability I would be happier they signed a letter giving their permission (Appendix 7).
4. I gave the students the opportunity of putting their names on the questionnaires if they wanted to. (I told them I did not require any names)
5. A central part of my research is to encourage more student participation in class. I allowed students to develop their own ideas in an environment that was free from intimidation at all times.
6. The students were encouraged to maintain their own critical reflective diaries and discuss issues that concerned them in class. The students agreed to work with me and participate in the research.
7. I gave each of the participants the following ethics statement (Appendix 7).
8. As I am in a position of influence I will be vigilant that I do not impose my ideas on the students or on my validation colleagues.

By using an action research methodology I am now closer to understanding those issues and values, which surround my own practice. As a responsible practitioner I was able to extract data to support my claims that improvement did occur in my practice. By

being able to adopt the cyclical process of acting, planning, observing and reflecting (Lewin, 1946), I was able to see this improvement in my practice.

I will finish this section with the words of McNiff who gives me hope for this piece of research (1992:63) when she states:

We are action researchers because we adopt an open, questioning frame of mind, because we are open to our own sense of process, because it is our practical intent to improve the quality of our own lives for the sake of others.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Analysis of the Data: Findings/Themes.**

#### **Here in this chapter I tell the story of my research project.**

My concern is centred on the number of students who try to prevent other students as well as themselves from learning through aggressive negative behaviour. I am concerned because of the importance I believe education plays in making young people happy and for their own personal development and self-esteem. Thus, the title I have chosen for my action research is:

#### **How can I raise the level of self-esteem of second year JCSP students and create a better learning environment?**

This research project is all about my struggles to create a better learning environment for this group of students.

The American social psychologist Cooley (1902) introduced the theory of the 'looking glass self', with the idea that self-concept is significantly influenced by what the individual considers others think of him/her. The mirror would reflect the imagined evaluations of others about an individual. Cooley believed that there is a connection between self-awareness and the imagined opinions of others.

Mead (1934) further developed Cooley's theory into a more comprehensive theory of self-development. He claimed that individuals develop an attitude towards themselves which is consistent with that expressed by others. This remains true whether that attitude is negative or positive. Mead suggested that each individual has numerous social identities, which afford a major link between self and society. For Mead self and society are inseparable.

Goffman (1959) like Mead considered self and society to be inseparable and that they interact in short scenes where an individual puts on a show for others and varies that show for different people. To be socially competent is to be able to act appropriately in social situations and to be self-confident. Self-confidence stems from self-esteem.

Poverty and deprivation block self fulfilment and it is important to address such issues. This point is made by Holland in the foreword to 'Rutland Street' (1979: xi) a report on an educational experiment on disadvantaged children in Dublin in 1969-1974.

A strong positive relationship between the socio-economic status of parents and the scholastic achievement of their children has long been recognised. The children of well off parents generally do better at school than those of poorer parents....the rapid economic progress made by Ireland during that period has served to bring into sharp focus the plight of a number of Irish children who because of the adverse conditions in which they live, are unable to use the school system to achieve their full intellectual potential.

Disadvantaged children develop their modes of perceiving and thinking about the world from the learning experiences of their environment. The report acknowledges that social conditions come into sharper focus in an urban setting rather than in a rural setting. Today, almost thirty years later this is still a problem. There is a much sharper divide between classes in urban areas and much less integration. It is therefore no surprise that young people in urban areas experience more social problems. Also it is still only a very low percentage of children from lower socio-economic groups that go on to third level education. Humphreys (1993) suggests that it is as low as 1%.

**How can I as form tutor/year head help raise the level of self-esteem of second year JCSP students and create a better learning environment where all students have an opportunity to succeed?**

Here the focus is on me, as a teacher and my role as form teacher/year head. Since I have the JCSP students for three subjects, it is important that I give of my best to them as a teacher. Since beginning this MA in Education, in particular since doing the two research papers on 'Researching Education' and 'Education for Learning' (Nugent, 1998, 1999), I have come to a far deeper understanding of what it means to be a subject teacher, form tutor/year head and my understanding of that role (Collins and McNiff, 1999). I was teaching the subject matter but the students were not learning effectively. As Perrott, (1982) suggests, there was no connection or bridge between the teacher and the learner. I was not encouraging the students to explore their potential for questioning and to develop their own thoughts and ideas in the classroom.

This was evident from the students' personal diaries and a class survey on 'how they find school'. I decided to ask the students about their experiences in school. I carried out a survey (Appendices 8 questionnaire and 15 main findings of questionnaire). To do this, I used a questionnaire from Boldt (1994:57). One of Boldt's research conclusions is that quite a number of young people leave school early because their teachers cannot relate to them.

All twelve students (who were present that day) answered the questionnaire. Five students said that 'a good teacher'..

'is strict, have a laugh and still get the work done....'  
'you can talk to them...they are patient'

From reading the students' responses to the questionnaire I began to reflect on my own teaching style. I would see myself as a strict teacher. Examination results are important and I would not have much time for a laugh in examination subjects. I am impatient and I continually have to check myself; I have noticed that, if I get angry, I often try and 'drive' students. This makes them resentful and aggressive. It became quite clear to me from reading the responses that the students want to be encouraged and praised rather than 'driven'. I became aware of where my values were being denied. I decided to focus on those students in particular I considered to be at risk and the class in general.

### **Identifying students at risk:**

Here I imagine a solution to my problem. I needed to re-evaluate my practice concerning my dual role as year head and subject teacher and also to re-evaluate my pre-conceived notions of hierarchy and discipline. My focus here is on the early identification of students with problems e.g. maladaptive behaviour in order that they may remain in education. In the past, I would have been asked to identify students who were or would be potential 'trouble makers'. My hope/aim would be the early identification of any difficulty that would put any student's education at risk. As Humphreys (1993:120) states:

Early identification of at-risk students will prevent escalation of maladaptive behaviour.

From my own experience, I have realised that any class can have a powerful influence on an individual or on individuals, be it good or bad and this can affect the students' progress in school.

**Other important people in the lives of the JCSP students:**

Here I mean the important adults in the students' life and the bearing they may have on the students' education. Here I am concerned with the students' parents, other subject teachers, junior certificate co-ordinator, counsellors, pathways team, deputy principal and principal. These are all linked to the student and the relationship they have with one another influences the students' school life.

**Responding to the students' needs:**

By 'needs' I mean every student in the JCSP class who is at risk or is experiencing difficulties that are hindering their learning. I hope that the 'learning environment' would cater for students' individuality. The JCSP programme believes that every student is capable of success. Schools are there to provide a learning atmosphere for students, whatever their ability. It is commonly accepted and demonstrated by the recent O.E.C.D. report (1992), that those who leave school early and with no formal qualification have more difficulty in getting full time employment than those who have some academic qualification. Statistically, early school leavers are more likely to experience social exclusion and unemployment or underemployment. While attaining a formal qualification does not constitute a guarantee of success and social inclusion, it is recognised as an important indicator on many career paths.

**My values:**

My values as a form teacher/year head are:

- ✓ That all the students in my year would sit and pass their junior certificate examination.
- ✓ That the students, would see schooling as an educational journey.
- ✓ That they would see that I as their form teacher/year head, and the school as a whole are there to help them along their journey.

My aim is to care for each individual student in the class/year. To do this, I need to get to know the student. To get to know the student, I need to listen and give time to him/her. I need to spend 'quality' time in his/her presence, I need to make situations where I will get to know each student informally. The class needs to get to know each other, so that they, in turn, will end up caring for and respecting each other. The move towards a new discipline would not take place through constant proclamation. It could only take place through constant small actions designed to demonstrate clearly what I meant. Reading the questionnaire responses made me aware of the slippage between my values and practice. This inspired me to begin working out a new theory of practice, which was informed by my values of justice and care.

I work in an inner city school, which brings with it its own values and outlook. I am very fortunate that this group of students had the Pathways through Education team working with them. They (the Pathways team) had a new approach (team teaching there were always at least two of them with each class) and time (they did not have an examination syllabus to follow) in helping students to deal with their emotions and feelings. This course and the Pathways team have helped me enormously to understand the schooling process and to at least approach it with a different attitude. I was becoming more convinced of certain insights I had myself, but was afraid to put into practice. Even in extra curricular activities and in front of the class, I had to play the teacher role, the role of the one in charge, controlling the situation, keeping the students in order at arm's length. When a problem arose I tried to implement some type of solution. Dealing with the JCSP students calls for a more caring attitude than ever before. With the ongoing change in society and the ever increasing demands that are made on young people, a caring, valuing education that is student centred must be put in place. These views were further enhanced by reading Collins (1993:6):

Young people spend valuable formation years with us in school.  
They are learning how to be. They are in every sense of the word  
becoming.

I realised I needed to modify my practice and find ways in which I could become a more caring teacher.

### **Looking at the conduct sheets/reports: Implementing the action.**

The conduct reports/sheets are behaviour monitoring forms issued by teachers on students who misbehave. The function of the conduct sheet/report is to monitor students' behaviour. Teachers' issue conduct sheets to students who misbehave. I decided to look at the conduct sheets to help me to identify the students most at risk. The number of conduct sheets/reports a student receives is a major factor in deciding whether a student stays in school or whether his/her enrolment for the next academic year is deferred or not. The conduct sheets are made out in such a way (Appendix 9) that misbehaviour is recorded as easily as possible. The reason why the student misbehaved is rarely filed. The teacher filling out the report rarely gets time to have the student reflect on or to analyse the event. For the students own personal growth and self esteem it is important that they take responsibility for their actions and as their class tutor it is important that I afford them every opportunity to do this by reflecting on their behaviour.

### **What I have learned from this first action step: Evaluating the action.**

- I learned that a student who is misbehaving is more likely to receive a conduct report than a student who does no homework.
- Conduct reports exclusively focus on the student's misdemeanours. 'One's maladaptive behaviour' according to Humphreys (1993:76).
- Students identify themselves to the school through problematic behaviour. They are seen as students causing problems to the school rather than the school trying to find out what is causing them difficulty.
- Weak, passive students rarely get a conduct report. Their academic progress is often poor. Because they do not misbehave, they are often overlooked.
- There is no time built into the system to get students to reflect on what is happening, to understand their role, to help them overcome or cope with their problem.



- Two students have received sufficient negative reports to have their enrolment for the next academic year deferred (they will receive a letter from the school during the summer informing them if they are allowed to return the following September, certain conditions concerning behaviour may apply).

### **What I learned about the report forms: Evaluating the action.**

I learned that the school system, was over concerned about the students' misbehaviour. No one was asking the question or trying to answer the question **Why were students misbehaving?** When I became class teacher and year head I was also adamant that students kept the school rules and behaved themselves. Humphreys (1993:151) states:

Sanctions must educate for responsibility. Frequently remind students of their classroom responsibilities and the sanctions for irresponsible behaviours.

This was the beginning of my shift of perspective towards a student centred process curriculum (Elliott, 1998; Stenhouse, 1975).

### **Different behaviour monitoring forms: Second cycle of action research:**

Having discussed my problem with the 'Pathways through Education team' they gave me a number of ideas:

- ✓ Develop a classroom code of discipline with the students.
- ✓ Non verbal communication, maintain eye contact.
- ✓ Assertive discipline and response styles.

As Canter (1992:23) states:

Most students can behave. Those who do not either choose not to, or have not been taught.

They also gave me a number of behaviour monitoring forms (Appendix 10). After a period of trial and error, I decided to adopt form 1 for the following reasons.

- The student got one form every day for one week. At the end of each day the form was returned to me.

- The student was responsible for recording his/her behaviour, good or bad; the subject teacher at the end of each class gave their opinion.
- Students spent some time with me discussing and analysing the report forms. Conduct sheets were now only given if a student caused a major difficulty. The cycle of giving conduct reports was partially broken and some students began to see light at the end of the tunnel. Students are happier with this system, and were very happy when they got ten out of ten for their behaviour. Evidence of this can be seen in the students' diaries and their conduct reports.

The school is involved in the 'Stay in School Retention Initiative' (SSRI) and I am hoping that this report form will be used throughout the school from September 2000, in helping students to modify their behaviour and stay in school. (Appendix 11, SSRI document)

**Imagining a way forward:**

I tried to create opportunities, to have one-to one talks with misbehaving students in order to discuss their reports. During these sessions the following came to my notice:

Students' positive behaviour was also noted and this gave me an opportunity to affirm the students rather than be negative towards them.

Teacher: Is it important to have rules?

Student 1: Yeah the class would be in bits

Student 2: The class would run amuck

Teacher: Would school life be better or worse?

Group: Worse, a lot worse (Appendix 12, classroom code).

One of the teachers of the JCSP class told me they were nearly 'ambushed' at the end of class by two students' for a good report because Mr X had given them a good report (see diary May 12<sup>th</sup> 2000).

- ❖ Some teachers, by just filling in their part of the form, began to realise that some students were not always bad, or at least not 'bad' all of the time. (Appendix 13, report from a teacher).
- ❖ Students were able to point to their good behaviour in certain classes, which showed they were not necessarily totally to blame (Appendix 14 profile cards).
- ❖ This report form brought home to me that one teacher had a poor relationship with the class, and this was causing major difficulties. As Humphreys (1993:120) states:

Beware of creating a destructive type of relationship with students in the classroom as it will only generate low self-esteem problems in the students.

I learned that I had to be very careful in my role as form teacher/year head not to be taking on other people's problems and in this way creating a hostile relationship between the class and myself. I wanted the students to have a more positive outlook and to improve the quality of their learning, their work and class time. Discipline in a school should only be there to benefit and teach the students, i.e. to teach the students right from wrong regarding their peers, staff, families and the outside world. My concern flowing from my values was the mismatch between my values and what was happening in the JCSP class. I am now trying to encourage the students to find discipline in themselves and not to expect me or any other teacher to impose it.

**Implementing the action:**

I felt that I should develop a more caring attitude to the class and that their pastoral care education should be enhanced through the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and pathways class. There is a lack of self-confidence in the majority of the class. I constantly hear phrases such as:

'I can't do that'  
'Miss don't ask me to do that', (see diary 18<sup>th</sup> April 2000).

I got the class to fill in a questionnaire (Appendix 8) outlining their needs, both academically and their expectations of the class in general. I asked the class to write what they desired for the class (each student was given a diary to keep/record their feelings).

I hoped this would outline for me how they felt academically, personally, emotionally and what they wanted from me.

**Main findings of class questionnaire:**

Q.1 How do you find school?

Most students seem to be happy with school. Three found it boring, two hated school. One of these was determined to get out of school and needed immediate attention (see Appendix 15, and part of transcript below).

Q.2 What kinds of things do you like/not like about school?

In answer, most students were happy with the choice of P.E. and new subjects. Quite a number of students did not like two or three subjects; it was revealed later that they did not get on with the teachers of those subjects.

**Observations of the class:**

The evidence, which I gathered through observing the class during class time (using the Canter method of placing a 'tick' beside their name in my diary when they misbehaved and a praising them when they were well behaved) i.e. their unruly behaviour, bad language, gruffness, cheek, their inability to gel together and apathy towards work made me feel very strongly, that there was a need for something positive to be done. There is a lack of a class spirit and instances of them 'slagging' one another, particularly two girls being targeted by three other girls and one ringleader. I felt that I needed to work with them in a pastoral way in class through adopting varying techniques to make them respectful of each other and less unruly and help them to develop a more positive attitude. I knew that I needed to change my practice and the class and I needed to work at finding the best possible result.

**Plan of action: Imagining a solution.**

I decided I needed to change my teaching methodology in order to ensure the full participation of the students. I felt from the evidence gathered (the students' diaries, conduct sheets and my own reflective diary) that not all the students were participating

actively. I also wanted to encourage them to be more responsible for their own learning, by doing group work, class activities with the class.

I realised that I had been too focused on the content of the lesson and not on the students. I wanted to change this. I tried to adopt an attitude and a teaching technique where I was facilitating their learning rather than teaching and not solely talking through the whole class myself. I wanted them to be active learners and learn through their own activities.

I spoke to the pathways team and the counsellor. We discussed who in the class needed attention and to be monitored. Through my teaching techniques I tried to develop good communication techniques. There were still a few students who had not accepted the various interventions.

These interventions included (i) meeting to discuss various incidents, (ii) imposing various sanctions, detention note to parents, (iii) putting students on report, (iv) meeting parents, (v) meeting with junior certificate co-ordinator, guidance counsellor and (vi) deferred enrolment.

I spoke to these students who had an adverse attitude to work and school. After several interventions they agreed that the class on the whole is disruptive because of them, they agreed that they would make a greater effort, listen and be more co-operative.

I have had to change course from time to time when for example they would get bored or a particular topic was not working for whatever reason. The group work was difficult. The students saw it as an opportunity to talk about outside school interests. It was difficult to get the students to ask each other questions and tease out answers among themselves. It was difficult to get them to enquire from each other and reach conclusions among themselves. It took a lot of patience on my part to persevere with it and patience from each other to listen to one another. I had hoped that they would

enquire more from one another and come to conclusions themselves. They are improving at listening to one another and they are becoming more respectful to each other (Appendix 12 classroom code).

**What I have learned:**

While the above plan has not been completely successful it has had a positive influence on the class and on myself, and is still ongoing. Three pupils in particular need to be helped in ways of respecting others. They were not co-operating fully. While two of the three have become more respectful and co-operative (Appendix 16, JCSP statement on Positive Communication) than before they are still quite truculent and require a lot more help and assistance. Unfortunately two have had their enrolment deferred, one of those has been suspended. The student that I am referring to refused to accept into any intervention (this student threw the re-enrolment form back at me!!) that the school put forward.

While believing that the plan outlined has had a positive influence on the students and myself I feel there is a lot more work to be done. For this to happen we will need to continue it into next year. The students have become more tolerant, respectful, co-operative and appear happier in themselves. Evidence of this is shown by the way they behave, move around the school and speak to one another and their teachers. On my way into class (10-05-2000) one student told the class to stand back and allow me to get into the classroom. After working on the 'Identity and Self-Esteem' booklet from the Substance Abuse Prevention Programme (SAPP) the students seem to believe more in themselves and seem delighted that they are achieving results that they had previously only dreamt were possible. Their summer reports showed an improvement on their Christmas reports (Appendix 17).

The class are calmer, more obedient, tolerant and respectful of others and me. They are no longer as abusive with their language, they are less teasing of one another, and in a sense less wary of me. Evidence of this is (12-05-2000) **one of the students asked me if they could give my name as a referee and if I was contacted to say they were**

**sixteen years of age; this particular student is fourteen!!!** Is this trust and being less wary of me?

I am trying to establish an empathic relationship. From my own experience as a student, I admired those teachers who got to know me and listened to me. I am aware that problems have to be viewed on different levels, the behavioural level, the self-esteem level, the conflictual level and of course the learning level. I saw the importance of getting the level of demand that I made on the students right and that unrealistic demands can lead to self-esteem problems but equally no demands can do likewise. The relationship a teacher has with their students is very important and when it is valuing and caring in nature students' self-esteem is elevated. School should be like a big family where you can make mistakes, learn from them and move on. As Collins (1993:6) states:

Young people spend valuable formation years with us. Education is not a preparation for life. It is life.

I found it important to be aware of the present level of functioning of the student and to work out from there in a realistic manner. It is important not to use criticism, sarcasm, cynicism, and comparison of students or negative labelling. My main focus and what I concentrated most on in the classes was the desired outcome i.e. that the students were learning something worthwhile. I felt by engaging some of the students then some of the others would be more likely to join in. Therefore when it was not absolutely necessary to correct behaviour I did not do so. I concentrated on moving on the subject of conversation and working with the students who were engaging in the class and the others usually followed suit. In retrospect I think this worked well.

I have started looking at school as a journey that all young people are expected to make. This journey is more important than reaching the end. One may have to step out of that journey for one reason or another or it may be a continuous one. I now believe it is how one copes with that journey, enjoys it and learns from it that is more or as important as reaching the end of the journey. I used to focus on the end result, the examination, not on how well the student was participating. It was with this attitude that I would try and respond to those students I considered to be at risk.

### **Focus on the students I considered at risk:**

I responded to the students whom I considered had particular difficulties. I agreed to meet them after school on one of their early finishes and tried a number of monitoring behaviour form sheets. As Humphreys (1993:153) states:

Jointly (teacher and student) explore what underlies the student's disruptive behaviour.

These students are quite weak but they do no homework. On examining their journals I found that they rarely if ever wrote in any of their exercises. Their parents told me that they did very little work and they appeared to get no homework. I have met their mothers; they are very vociferous. One mother is quite understanding of her child's problem, and claims that she too has a problem with this child. The other mother claims that her child is no angel but we (the school):

‘are doing it all wrong we do not understand her child’.

It is very difficult to get this particular mother to listen. She goes off on a tangent and it is very difficult to make progress with her. This particular student's home is quite chaotic. The father is not there and there is little contact with him. The student is very self-willed and when agitated there is no point in talking to her. When relaxed it is possible to do some positive work with this student.

I have met all the parents of the JCSP class and there was 100% turn out at the last parent teacher meeting. This particular meeting was very positive because I had met all the parents earlier in the year in an informal way at the ‘Christmas celebration’(Appendix 18, Christmas celebration invitation).

- All parents came to the meeting and there was open discussion.
- Parents of the ‘better’ students were delighted with the school and their children's progress.
- Quite a number of parents were concerned about homework; some spent a lot of time in their rooms ‘studying’ but were making no progress.
- Every parent was anxious that his or her child would do their Junior Certificate examination and were hoping that they would stay on for the Leaving Certificate (Personal diary 25-01-2000 after parent teacher meeting).



**Plan of action: Focus on homework:**

After this parent teacher meeting (ptm) I decided to look at the students' homework/study patterns. I decided to carry out a short survey under the following headings (Appendix 20):

1. When do you study e.g. (i) immediately after school or (ii) after your evening meal?
2. Where do you study?
3. How long do you study each evening?
4. How long do you spend on each subject?
5. How many subjects do you study each night?
6. Do you think you get too much homework?
7. Which is your favourite subject to study and why?

**The results were as follows:**

- Four students were doing no homework, four were spending one hour, one thirty minutes and one student spent twenty minutes.
- Some students only studied the subject or subjects they liked.
- Most students only did their exercises for the following day (not necessarily on the day they were given)
- Study, for nearly every student, meant doing a written exercise, (revision, reading back over notes was rarely done).
- A number of students said they liked maths, because they were easy and you could see what they were doing.
- In general, those who did not study straight after school, or who had not got a definite time for study, spent the least amount of time studying. Most of those who left it until after the evening meal were distracted by television or by friends calling.
- Some left it to do in school the following morning.

Armed with the results of the survey I asked five students to describe to the class how they went about their homework/study. The students were chosen based on the information

received in the survey to give a range of examples. I decided to do it this way because I wanted the students to give the answers rather than me telling them. My aim was to respond to the parents' concerns: (i) to help those students who found it difficult to study and (ii) to organise themselves and to do a small piece of study at a time.

**With a little prompting from the class, the following was the plan to tackle study:**

- It was important to take some exercise when one got home. A break was required because of the time spent sitting in class during the day.
- The majority agreed that they would try and do half to one hour after their evening meal.
- The most time they considered spending on each subject was ten to fifteen minutes (the JCSP students have three practical subjects that do not require homework they are Materials Technology Wood, Metal (previously known as woodwork and metalwork) and Art).
- By spending fifteen minutes on each subject, a student could study four subjects in one night.
- The students considered a short break between each subject would be necessary.
- Studying with music in their room was the most preferred option.

During the first year of the JCSP I had attended an in-service on study skills and the SQ3R study method. I decided to return to it and remind the students of this method.

<b>S=</b>	Survey:	Identify the main headings/aims of the topic.
<b>Q=</b>	Question:	Ask questions about it
<b>R=</b>	Read:	Aim at understanding, make notes/diagrams/summaries.
<b>R=</b>	Recite:	Test your learning by repeating diagrams/close tests
<b>R=</b>	Revise:	Use diagrams to check what you need to re-learn.

One of the difficulties the students had with CSPE was the number of questions they were expected to answer at the end of each topic. Sometimes I (I preferred if it came from the students themselves) would identify what we considered were the more

pertinent questions. This was helping the students I believe and they were partially using the SQ3R method. The students were deciding their own exercise and choosing the questions, which would give them the best understanding of concepts and knowledge of a chapter.

Having agreed with the class on the above method of study, I checked their journals to ensure that they were recording their exercises.

**Focusing on myself: reflective learning:**

I feel very challenged having to focus on the JCSP class and then having to examine myself. Before starting this course of study I never really focused on my relationship with any class. I tended to get to know the classes so that I could teach them better, they would be well behaved and cause no real trouble. In knowing them better, they would be easier to teach and this would help in getting better results. In my role as class teacher and then year head I would have on most occasions sided with the school rather than support the individual student.

In discussing with the MA in Education study group it became evident to me again that I wanted to go off on a tangent and deal with the system, but not look at myself. I could continue to look at the students' learning, or their inability to learn, but not on my relationship with the students and how that affected their learning. It was at this time that I began to read Humphreys' 'Self-Esteem, The Key to Your Child's Education' (1995) and 'A Different Type of Teacher'(1993). By self-esteem Humphreys means developing self-confidence, in one's self and in one's ability to do things and to make decisions, to identify one's talents and develop them.

According to Humphreys, personal development and self-esteem are the key ingredients necessary for a student to benefit fully from schooling. The above writer has also shown that many learning difficulties are related to low self-esteem and the main focus of teacher and parents needs to be the raising of the student's self-esteem. When this is established the student becomes motivated and open to learning. Very often the student will not reveal home problems and teachers can misinterpret their inattentiveness, non

co-operation or aggression as impertinence and laziness. We as teachers may then punish, ridicule, and withdraw favours from these students, thereby confirming the student's worst fears about being of no value and possessing no ability. In this way teachers add to the turmoil of home and, generally, because of a poor relationship with the student who is troubled, pile up more management problems for themselves in the classrooms.

I also began reading the literature of personal self-evaluation (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998; Walker, 1985; Winter, 1989). I came to see the need for critical self-reflection on personal professional practice, and I came to realise, as Walker notes, (1985) that what has changed most in any episode of personal research, is the researcher herself.

In the light of what I was reading, I thought it better to stop pointing the finger at the other teachers, who were handing out several conduct reports, and ask what this was saying to me. After all the investigations I had carried out, I know enough to realise that some students have major problems at home but was I adding to the punishment, ridicule and building up poor self-esteem?

In order for learning to take place, such conflict must stop otherwise the students will retreat into themselves and avoid further hurt, humiliation and rejection by not taking any further risks. From the literature on self-esteem and classroom management it is clear that the most positive action open to any teacher is the quality of their relationship with a class. Axelrod (1997) makes this point quite clearly; in order to modify students' behaviours, teachers will have to modify some of their own behaviours. Is my response style hostile, assertive or non-assertive? Am I consistent and fair? Is my approach towards the students more positive than negative? It is also known that teachers who establish a close, affirming relationship with students are the most effective (Best, 1996; Best et al.1995). They are the most effective because they raise low self-esteem of students. As Humphreys (1995:159) states:

The primary target of parents and teachers needs to be the elevation of the child's self-esteem.

I had what I thought was a reasonable relationship with the JCSP class, but whether it was valuing, affirming and caring I do not know. It is always easy to value, affirm and care for the 'good student' the one who always has their homework completed and their notes neatly written. The student who causes difficulties has to be valued, cared for and affirmed also. Herein lay my greatest challenge.

**Action step:**

My first step was to try and introduce activities that would build relationships between the students and myself. The first one was disastrous!! The first activity I introduced was for the last class period on a Monday evening. Students were coming from Materials Technology Wood I was not as well prepared as I would have liked, and it did not go very well.

I decided to make out a checklist to help me build a valuing, affirming, caring relationship with the JCSP students. I made out the following list to help me stop being negative to this group of students.

**Check list to help me build student self esteem:**

1. Listen. Do not shout or raise voice.
2. Aggression breeds aggression--- I get frustrated then I show aggression.
3. Hurt, anger and fear deafen students to the voice of reason.
4. Stay calm, relaxed and in control of self at all times.
5. Giving responsibility to students and believing in their ability to meet it are powerful boosts to their self-esteem.
6. Non verbal communication very important e.g. eye contact
7. Write down students' names with a tick after it (no action sometimes is often the best action).

I decided now instead of asking the students to stop talking I would just wait and look. In a number of classes it took time to establish the principle of quietness and order before we started the class. I found this effective and it helped me to speak less and listen more.

As part of a staff development day we had a lecture on the 'Canter Method of Discipline' (Canter 1992). The main focus of this method is to stay calm, relaxed and in control of self at all times. In order to avoid confrontation with the students and stay calm and relaxed, I adopted the 'Canter method'. When a student interfered in a negative way with the learning of others I put a 'tick' after their name. The students were made aware of this and if they got four 'ticks' in one class period they would have detention the following day. I saw the detention as an extra opportunity to talk to the students and it gave the students an opportunity to discuss why they interrupted the class in a negative manner. I found putting a 'tick' after the student's name worked extremely well. After about three weeks the majority of students co-operated once they were aware their names were being recorded.

The Canter method helped me to identify the students' strengths and to accept their weaknesses. I believe that developing their strengths in turn will help to develop their self-esteem. It became clear to me if a student who develops confidence in one discipline and appreciates their talents will transfer this confidence to other areas.

### **A change in my thinking:**

Up to starting the MA in Education I had focused on the examination; now I began to focus on the person. For me the examination was all-important; it was the way the school functioned. I was now coming to realise that by being student centred even within the examination centred structure the principle held true. Because at the end of the day school is all about relating to each other (Noddings, 1992). How we learn to relate to each other in school can influence the rest of our lives. As Humphreys (1993:152) states:

Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties respond positively to a school and classroom environment where they are constantly loved, valued, affirmed encouraged and praised.

These were values I felt I had, but never really practised. It was too risky, I might lose control. By using my check list (page 53) to constantly remind me that I needed to be positive and consistent, in the tutorial class and in the two or three minutes at the

beginning of each class to develop a bond or rapport, I felt I was going some way in developing a positive relationship.

### **Exercise to build self-esteem:**

Having focused on myself and having made myself aware of some of the negative actions and comments I was engaging in, I now tried to focus on some exercise that would help me build up student self-esteem. The first of these was on 'how to relate to each other within the classroom'. During the staff training with the pathways through education team we were told that the type of teacher student relationship largely determines students' self-esteem in the classroom.

### **How we relate to each other within the classroom:**

In meeting with the pathways team, I decided to choose a number of exercises that would build up the students' self-esteem. One of the first things I tried doing was looking at ourselves, and how we treat each other within the class. The first exercise was looking at the names we call each other at school, among friends and at school (Appendix 20). This is a list of positive and negative comments their teachers called the JCSP students. I recognised three of my own in the negative section and five in the positive section. On the days that I was very negative, the students were able to tell me what exactly I said, to whom, when and why I said it. I was very much taken aback by this. Most of the names are used within the class on a regular basis. We agreed as a class, after a lot of discussion, not to use negative comments. Our classroom was to become a 'negative free zone'. When a student broke the agreement, they had to make out a poster (Appendix 22) and put it up on the wall. If I made a negative comment I had to pay 50p and it would go towards the end of term party (I have contributed three times!!!). In the future I intend to do an exercise on a charter of students' rights for use within the classroom and the most important rights in order of priority.

These exercises did not go very well. The students told me they were doing too much of the same and wanted to get back to 'real lessons'. One student told me she was tired of the same old 'tripe' and wanted to do some 'real learning' (my reply cost me 50p!!). On reflection we were probably doing too much of the same in CSPE, SPHE and tutorial class. This particular student was right and helped me to see that building a

good relationship should happen on a daily basis over a period of time in every subject. It could only happen if it was continuous, affirming and valuing. I decided not to continue with any more specific exercises on building self-esteem but we kept the negative free zone area going and I tried to remember my positive checklists. Elliott (1998) states that the curriculum could be seen as an ongoing caring conversation.

### **Evidence of my learning:**

Evidence of my learning is contained right throughout my research. My learning could be divided into two categories.

1. What I learned about the school and the students.
2. What I learned about myself, my role and how I relate to the JCSP class.

Here is a short account of some of what I have learned:

Reflecting on my own learning in relation to the students, I have outlined some of my learning as the research progressed. I include below some of the main points in relation to the JCSP class.

- By giving time to students, I can get to know them, I can relate better to what happening in their lives. As Collins (1993:7) states:
  - A knowing which is prerequisite of caring.
- Listening is more important than telling or dictating.
- By praising students, I have learned that it enhances our relationship and it helps to build their confidence and self-esteem.
- A good relationship with a class can be greatly enhanced by giving a few minutes at the beginning of a lesson to establish a rapport.
- There is no point in making a student angry and then trying to talk reasonably to them. Students should not be humiliated or 'put down' in front of their classmates or other teachers. Discipline is negotiated rather than autocratic.
- Students like to discuss and work in groups. I have a very low tolerance level for discussions as I think the students talk about everything except the discussion topic. I have to revise my attitudes. While they are talking they may not be discussing substantive issues but they are rehearsing important personal and social skills.



- Individual teachers can have an enormous influence on a class, be it for better or worse.
- A teacher's relationship with a class, like any relationship, based on trust and respect is only established over a period of time through consistency and not in a lesson set aside to build relationships. Students expect and accept clearly defined roles.

**Conclusion:**

I believe that I have developed my own theory of education which I have generated from within my practice. After completing this research I realised that the processes of encouraging students to think, be polite, discuss and learn from each other was causing less tension in the classroom. Personal diary 13<sup>th</sup> March 2000:

Student 1      ...actually apologised for being late and then asked to speak to me privately (this was to tell me she had no homework done).

Student 7      student 5 was having problems working out anagrams and student 7 without any prompting saw she was having difficulties and helped her.

That day I felt there was a great sense of collaboration between the students and myself. I realised that when the students and I shared and 'created' the knowledge in the classroom that a great sense of achievement and satisfaction was felt. Freire talks of education being a humanising process (Mc Laren and Leonard 1993:45). Through changing my practice I realised that I could develop good student teacher relationships.

Habermas (1978) talks of a type of knowing that is emancipatory. This type of knowing revolves around self-understanding and the development of personal assumptions that evolve out of life experiences. From completing this research I developed a sense of what theorists have been talking about in the literature (Brookfield, 1986; Fontana, 1988; Perrott, 1982; Rogers, 1986); students need a forum to express their ideas, thoughts and hopes. I now welcome the students' contributions.

Here I have traced a shift in my practice and thinking and I feel because of that my relationship with the students has improved. I have become more understanding and facilitating by allowing and encouraging the students to think for themselves, instead of

trying to control them and make them follow my ideas and thinking (Brookfield, 1995). I feel I have moved from being a didactic teacher to a facilitative teacher where I encourage the students to look at alternative ways of interpreting their ideas and to examine them critically (Brookfield, 1986).

In doing so I have created an environment that is friendly and collaborative, by encouraging all students to participate and to voice their opinions without fear of ridicule.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Discussion of my findings:**

My claim is that carrying out the plan of action outlined above has positively influenced class and me personally. The social intent of my research was to improve my own particular situation and my own professional development. The main focus of my research centres on my role as form teacher/year head in trying to create a more effective learning environment. I now claim that I have an improved understanding of the problems experienced by the students and that they have begun to experience a deeper understanding of themselves. Furthermore, by approaching them, listening to them and engaging in discussion I have managed to see them from a different perspective while simultaneously effecting change.

I wish to claim that while the various interventions have positively influenced the class and myself, it is still an ongoing process. I say this because three students need to be helped in ways of respecting people. They are not co-operating completely. They have become more respectful than before and more co-operative, and while this is a clear improvement I still feel they are quite troublesome and need more help and assistance. Evidence of this is in Appendix 16. One student was suspended for misbehaviour before the end of term and another had their enrolment deferred.

As a 'competent practitioner' (Schon, 1983), I was able to recognise phenomena associated with my teaching which I did not like and through researching this question I have looked into my practice and developed it through the continuous process of acting, planning, observing and reflecting (Lewin, 1946). Through using an action research methodology my thinking has been stimulated and I have improved the understanding I have of my own practice.

I feel and claim that the techniques and processes adopted in my class were successful for the students and myself. What do I mean by success? I have learned how I must respond pro-actively if I am to react positively to students at risk. My practice within the classroom did improve in so far as I tried to improve my own relationship with each

student in the JCSP class and the effort and time I put into trying to identify and resolve students' underlying problems. I also examined my priorities for solutions as well as focusing on the school and students.

So while believing and claiming that the plan of action outlined had a positive influence, the class and myself feel that there is a lot of work still to be done (Appendix 16). I feel that in order for this to occur more effort is needed by myself, and the class will need to be continued into next year (I say this because of the students already mentioned who were suspended at the end of the year and had their enrolment deferred). I consider this to be a failure because I failed to respond adequately to these students and the students failed to respond adequately to the interventions.

From the students' viewpoint it was successful in that they have become more tolerant, respectful, co-operative and they enjoy class more as I do myself, but it is an ongoing process and I have made the start and my work with them needs to continue next year. For example in one students' case there was an improvement for a short while and then they began gradually to get worse. Here is an extract from an interview I had with the students on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2000:

Student: There was a big improvement after Christmas...

Teacher: After that did things begin to improve in general?

Student 1: Not really, I started going back to the way I had been because the teachers were annoying me. You can't please them.

Student 2: Yea but you had to be told twice to take out your books and then you were looking behind you and singing.

Student 3: Would you like the teacher to look away from you when she is speaking to you and bang her books on the table. Would you like any of us to do that to you?

This shows the students are beginning to critique their own behaviour and attitudes because of the various interventions that we as a class have implemented.

**Evidence from what I have observed in class of the students' behaviour and their attitude and what they said to me:**

The following shows evidence that there were changes and an improvement in what I was concerned about.

Before it was evident that there was a lack of pride, belief and self worth in themselves. Now they are happier and more content with themselves and in the way they behave, carry themselves and speak. This is obvious from how they scored on the 'Positive Communication' statement before and after Christmas 1999 (Appendix 16).

After working on a topic about self-esteem and bullying they believe more in themselves and are pleased that they are actually achieving results (Appendix 22 speaking to the students about bullying). The class seem calmer, more obedient, tolerant, co-operative and respectful of others and me. They are no longer as gruff with their language, are not as cheeky and rude and as rough with their school bags. They are more tolerant of each other e.g. less teasing towards members of the class. They are more considerate to one another. They seem to be more respectful of authority.

Example of incidents of them being more trustworthy and less wary of me, appears in my personal diary (1-2-2000 and 8-2-2000). Some of the students came to me for advice about a job. I advised them and they were very grateful. I do not think this would have occurred at the beginning of the year. As a group they are quite chatty towards me. Simply by being nicer to the students and treating them differently I got on better with them.

The students were not listening to one another at the beginning of the year. So as I have stated I started classes with them doing group work. I started doing more activity based learning; this helped them to listen to one another a lot more. I heard (occasionally) phrases like 'this is cool' or 'can we do this again to-morrow'.

**Evidence from other sources:**

I want to include evidence from outside the school context to provide another perspective on the development of the class. I received validation of my evidence about what was developing in my class and about my own professional development from some members of the MA study group (Appendix 23).

I claim that an attitudinal, affective and behavioural 'shift' has been made towards improvement and that a methodological and educational 'shift' has begun. My claim to some success is made within the significance of my own context. As McNiff (1988:142) states:

The criteria we set and the standards of judgement that we use are informed by the values we hold, as they relate to our circumstances.

**Attitudinal:**

By stepping back, looking at my research question and changing my methods of teaching from teacher based to student centred methods. I realised that I am not the only one with knowledge in the classroom. I now respect, share and discuss students' views. Knowledge comes from many different sources and the students' knowledge is just as important as mine. As I became more comfortable researching this study I realised that my thinking had shifted from that of a convergent to a divergent thinker (Guilford 1968). The learning experience for me was a vital part of my work this year. The action research method I used was very challenging in that it demanded a lot of personal involvement, reflection and subsequent change. I feel the experience gained has been invaluable and will be invaluable next year for co-ordinating the stay in school retention initiative (SSRI). I am now in a better position to make a contribution by sharing this experience with my colleagues.

**Affective:**

When I began to study the literature of building students' self-esteem (for example Best et al, 1995; Boldt, 1994; 1995; Humphreys, 1995; Perrott, 1982, to mention but a few), I realised how little time I had spent focusing on the students' needs in the classroom.

My practice within the classroom did improve in so far as I tried to improve my own relationship with each student in the JCSP group and the effort and time I put into trying to identify the students' underlying problems. I also examined my priorities for solutions as well as focusing on the school and students.

**Behavioural:**

I am showing through evidence how the class itself had changed their behaviour in the light of the interventions that have been made. This has been identified through positive behaviour to work, homework and an improvement in the actual class behaviour itself towards me and other class members and authority in general.

I uphold the values that I have spoken of in the introduction but realise that values are tinted by the reality of human behaviour and the dictates of economic and social circumstances. Given the evidence I feel I can claim that adopting a supportive, resourceful and adoptive role in my actions with the class has helped me to live out my educational values in a consistent way and I believe I can claim also, the class (the majority, as I have stated earlier with the exception of two students) are more confident in their role, their actions, more content and behave more positively towards me, towards other staff members and towards each other and they are more responsible in their actions.

**Evaluation of the research:**

In this section I want to gather the learning from the project as I reviewed it for the purpose of this dissertation.

**Reflecting on my own practice in relation to the class:**

I have learned many different things about my own practice with the class.

- I feel that I must build on the relationship in place with the class and to keep working with them to build their confidence, desire to learn, respect and self-esteem more (especially the two students spoken of earlier). My action research has not gone the full spiral described by Mc Niff et al (1996:10). With some students I am at the 'implement the solution' phase

whilst with other students' I am at 'modify practice' stage. I could best describe my work as developing in various ways: (i) the matters that I discuss in class, (ii) the amount of real communication, sharing of ideas and questioning that took place and (iii) the difference in attitudes when students are able to express themselves better and feel that they are being listened to.

- I will strive next year to facilitate the class to gain for and from themselves.
- I will continue to interact and teach the students the way I have been this year, on a more pastoral basis.

### **Reflecting on my own learning in the course of the research:**

I have personally gained from being involved in this research. Here are the many important elements in that learning:

- Making explicit my educational values focused me on applying these values to the particular context in which I was working. I developed from the 'unstructured psychology of proverbs' through the 'tacit knowledge' of Polanyi (1958) to a structured way of working thereby empowering both my students and myself.
- The value of action research as a means of personal awareness, leading to understanding, insight focused action and evaluation leading to reformulation. I also learned that being involved in action research enabled me to include others in reflecting on my practice.
- I learned to be flexible in the interpretation of my role and allowed myself to be open to change and develop that role.
- I learned more clearly the value of being able to stand back and facilitate and to resist the temptation for short-term satisfaction to get a job done quickly.
- I gained an invaluable insight into the importance of looking to my personal needs as I strove to be a more caring teacher.
- I have learned that keeping a journal helps me to reflect better and I have learned the value of honouring these insights by recording them.



- I have learned that success is not so much in the outcome as in the process, a process that involves, cherishes, respects, challenges and supports others is what is important.
- I feel and have learned that students are too ready to sit in class and absorb information. They are often happy to be passive receivers of knowledge and I was too often just instructing them in just one way and not ready to try new steps to see if they were learning adequately.
- I frequently did not give myself enough time at the end of class to evaluate what we had covered and feel that this could be improved on and give the students more opportunity to talk and evaluate.
- I learned a lot about myself within the classroom, about my techniques and I had to evaluate how I taught.
- I have learned that teaching is better if I am directly involved with the class, not just handing over information but working with them.
- I have learned that I should not judge students on past mistakes, attitudes or behaviour but that they are all inherently good (all different and if they behave badly-confused or there is some other underlying problem). They all crave attention, all in different ways and you must first respect them and be considerate to them to get any good out of them.
- I feel to do the above is the best solution. All too often I feel I had been carrying on with the classes regardless of their emotional welfare, not even bothering to find out what was their problem just to get the syllabus over. The students respond and learn better if they are shown respect, help and care. The students need to feel that you genuinely care. They are very perceptive.
- My modus operandi now is that I try to diffuse potential flashpoints, try to remove the person causing problems from the group if possible, observe eye contact with students but not appear aggressive, try to stay calm in all circumstances and keep my voice low. If there is a problem and they are very annoyed I try to engage them in conversation to seek a solution and then just listen.

## **Modifying my practice:**

How will these findings be of help in other contexts?

- My clarifying my educational aims and values will focus me as I continue to improve my practice.
- Involving others in the research was both supportive and challenging.
- The class when accompanied in a supportive and resourceful way, will respond positively to initiatives. I feel and believe that adopting an explicitly caring presence to the class will have very positive outcomes. This support and resourcing are at their most valuable when they enable those who receive them to become more confident in their own abilities and therefore less reliant on outside sources. This was demonstrated for me when the class in question took more responsibility for their learning, actions and behaviour in class and around the school (as described in chapter 4).
- Flexibility and openness, I feel are the key elements to developing my new type of role as teacher of the class and are also vital in the development and nurturing of the class. There is an important lesson here for the development of a caring or new role in a school context or I feel even in any context, that while a role definition is important, flexibility in regards to its development is very helpful in the exercise of what that role is about.

To summarise the main points in modifying my practice I conclude with the following points taken from a B.B.C. programme I once saw and whose name I do not know which deals with staying calm in the light of provocation:

- ✓ Learn to make your style work for you.
- ✓ Be able to take a certain amount of criticism but continue to focus on the problem.
- ✓ Have a clear view of what the desired outcome is and set out to be effective (not to win).

### **Conclusion:**

In this research paper I have outlined my research as it addressed the question:

**How can I raise the level of self-esteem of second year JCSP students and create a better learning environment?**

By choosing an action research model, which encouraged me to look at my own practice, I had to outline my values and see how I could improve my practice by reflecting on my values.

### **Aims of the research:**

- To make the class a more caring creative environment.
- To help the students develop positive self-awareness and independence.
- To challenge students in all areas of their development.
- To help the students develop effective communication skills.
- To develop and encourage a more holistic approach to education.
- To help the students develop understanding, tolerance and acceptance of other students.

I had previously many educational values, but I had always put them in the back of my mind, but this research made me become aware of these educational values and do something about them and not simply mull them over in my mind.

When I began the research I hoped I would be able to live out these educational values in a clear, consistent way so as to benefit the JCSP students and myself.

Having analysed the conduct reports, I came to the conclusion that they were a major factor in deciding whether students stayed in school or not. It was clear that there was a punitive form of discipline within the school, rather than a proactive, caring approach. My plan of action was first to respond to those students that I considered to be at high risk. I did this by giving them an opportunity to talk about and explain their behaviour. I focussed on building self-esteem, and it was here in particular that the action research methodology allowed me to focus on my own practices and how they contributed to building self-esteem with the JCSP students. The students and I engaged in a number of exercises, which I believe helped to build a more positive atmosphere within the class.

Action research has allowed me to bring my values into the classroom and put them into practice in how I relate to the students. I feel very fortunate to have read Humphreys' literature because his work, I felt, was a written description in many instances of what I was discovering from the JCSP class. I had previously a blanket description that covered all students e.g. 'misbehaving students' and 'weak passive' students. Humphreys (1993) identified such students as 'under control' and 'over control' students. Having looked for structures and the importance of roles within such structures to respond to students at risk I was very fortunate to have the expertise of the Pathways through Education team working with this group of students. Their focus was on the individual. They explained how important it is to give the student time. It was something which I was already trying to put into practice, but it was comforting to know that it played such a vital role with them.

I evaluated the research work. This was done from three main perspectives:

1. From my own personal learning.
2. From the perspective of the class and
3. From the usefulness of the research in other contexts.

I feel I have discovered the two legs on which a student's education succeeds:

- ✓ A caring school system that responds to the student's needs and

- ✓ A caring, valuing, affirming, relationship between each teacher and each student.

For years I focused on the subjects and the examinations without caring to address the needs of the individual. Furthermore, if no time or structure is given over to identifying students' needs, they will not be addressed. By putting a caring structure in place, the needs of the students will be responded to.

**The future:**

We have already started the groundwork for formulating a school development plan. We had a very successful prize-giving day in May and we have planned to have similar presentations at frequent intervals during the next academic year. We feel that events like this may help to give the students a more positive view of themselves and the school. The school is involved in the Stay in School Retention Initiative (SSRI). With the emphasis on retention this can only have a positive influence on the students I teach. To draw this research paper to a conclusion I quote from the aims of the JCSP programme:

The JCSP aim is for the student to:

- ✓ Have positive reports to bring home.
- ✓ Develop a sense of belonging in the school community.
- ✓ See possibilities of progression.
- ✓ Achieve a final positive record of achievements.

### **Appendix 3.**

#### **Junior Cycle (first year to third year):**

The courses in operation here are those, which lead to the junior certificate. Up to the present the main focus in this area has been concentrated upon finding a balanced range of subjects, which will best fit the requirements and abilities of each class. For those with learning difficulties remedial teaching is provided, and it is hoped with the stay in school initiative, that a fuller service than at present, will be provided in this vital area.

In 1998/99 the Junior Certificate Programme was introduced to benefit those with learning difficulties (Appendix 4).

**Subjects:** English, Irish, Mathematics, Religion, Art, History, Geography, Technical Graphics, Materials Technology Wood and Metal, Science, French, Business Studies, Environmental Social Studies, Civic, Social and Political Education, Social, Personal and Health Education and Home Economics.

**Senior Cycle (after 3<sup>rd</sup> year):**

The greater maturity of the students at this level and the complex demands of modern society have combined to make this sector of the school more adaptable and varied. Thus the senior cycle falls into two areas—vocational leaving certificate and repeat leaving certificate.

**Leaving certificate vocational programme:**

This is similar to the conventional leaving certificate with a link module and work experience built into the programme. It provides students with the opportunity to release their potential for self directed learning, for innovation and for enterprise. It strengthens the vocational dimension of the Leaving Certificate by linking subjects into vocational groupings. The three link modules sharpen the vocational focus of other subjects that the students study thus enhancing their employability capacity.

**Repeat leaving certificate:**

This is a one-year leaving certificate course (for students who have completed the leaving certificate), aimed particularly at those who wish to improve their grades for entry into degree, professional or technician courses at university, the institutes of technology or primary teacher training. Sixteen subjects are catered for at present and the timetable is arranged in such a way that each student can select his/her required subjects from the entire range. This has enabled many students to take up subjects, which they had not previously studied and in this way open new career and educational options for themselves.

**Night classes:**

In tandem with the day school, there is a significant night school for students wishing to take the leaving certificate and a wide range of other courses from computer aided design to keep fit and motor- car maintenance.

## **Appendix 2.**

### **Ethics statement:**

I will uphold the following ethical values while completing this research. I will ensure that the students get exposure to the syllabus and that my research will not conflict with the ultimate aim of the course, students obtaining their junior certificate. I am committed to the values of ethical practice in matters of access and confidentiality. I promise to maintain these aspects in my conduct of the research with strictest consideration and with specific regard to the following points:



**Confidentiality:**

I give an unconditional commitment to confidentiality in relation to data of a personal or institutional nature. The identity of students will be protected.

**Access:**

All participants will be informed of the objectives of the research. The permission of parents will be sought before involving their children in the research. The permission of the school principal will also be sought. I will seek permission from all sources to

- Gather the data
- Use and interpret the data and
- Present this data in an acceptable form in my dissertation (having first returned to my co-researchers for editing and approval before being allocated as data).

**Withdrawal from the investigation:**

All participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage and all appropriate data will be removed from the archive.

**Copyright:**

I will ensure that all aspects of the literature are adequately referenced.

**Appendix 3.****Copy of letter to school principal:****October 1999**

Dear Principal,

I am currently completing a Masters Degree in Education and I am at the dissertation stage.

I would like your permission to research the question 'How can I raise the level of self-esteem of second year JCSP students and create a better learning environment?'

I would like permission to:

- Complete this research
- Use information from the profiling meetings to back up my claims to knowledge.

Please find attached my ethics statement and I will at all times respect the confidentiality of the information and the students right to withdraw from the research.

I will at all times ensure that this research does not conflict with my teaching duties and the syllabus requirements.

Yours sincerely,

---

Marian Nugent.

#### **Appendix 4.**

##### **Copy of letter to parents seeking permission to use their children as co-researchers.**

October 1999.

Dear Parents,

I am involved in researching aspects of classroom behaviour and I am focusing on my role as a class tutor and year head to the class that your child is in. This involves examining ways in which a better learning environment can be created so that a better quality of teaching and learning can take place.

Monitoring student behaviour plays an important part in my work as class tutor and year head and it is necessary to keep accurate records of all students' progress so that you as parents can be kept fully informed of your child's progress in this regard. End of term reports, parent teacher meetings, notes to parents, notes in students journals and notes to me from other subject teachers all contain valuable information on how you child is progressing both academically and otherwise.

Some of this information will be used to back up some of the research that I am carrying out and I am asking your permission to use some of it if necessary. As this information is of a confidential nature, I will not be using the name of the school or the name of any students or teachers when writing up the research.

All names or information that might indicate the source of the research will be erased from any official documentation accompanying the research.

I must show that I have sought your permission to use any information as mentioned above and would therefore be grateful if you would sign the bottom of this letter and return it to me as soon as possible.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Marian Nugent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent's signature.

### **Bullying Questionnaire:**

- |    |  |                          |
|----|--|--------------------------|
| 1. | Do you consider that you ever have been bullied? | Yes<br>No                |
| 2. | At what age?                                     | 5-11<br>11-14<br>over 14 |
| 3. | When was the last time you were bullied?         | Today                    |

- within the last month  
within the last 6 months  
a year ago.
4. Were you bullied? Once  
several times  
almost every day  
several times a day
5. Where were you bullied? At home  
going to or from school  
at lunch  
in the toilets  
in the classroom  
other places.
6. Did/do you consider the bullying to have been: no problem  
worrying  
frightening  
so bad that you did not  
want to go out or go to  
school
7. Did the bullying have: no effects  
some bad effects  
terrible effects
8. What do you think of bullies? No feeling  
feel sorry for them  
hate them  
like them
9. Who is responsible when bullying continues to go on? The bully  
the bully's parents  
the teachers  
the victim  
students who are not  
being bullied but do  
not help the victim.
10. Was the bully (bullies): a boy  
a girl

11. If you have ever been bullied, was the bullying:

physical  
emotional  
verbal

12. What should be done about the problem of bullying:

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13. Have you ever bullied anyone?

Yes  
No.

Validation from MA in Education colleague:

Marian and I met at each stage in the research where we discussed her various ideas and learning outcomes as they arose. The research while complex was clearly outlined at each stage.

I was impressed by the volume of data she collected to support her learning outcomes. From my own experience as a year head in a secondary school for over twenty years I find her research accurate and relevant.

I think Marian's initiative will create an atmosphere of co-operation and help the students identify strongly with each other.

I was particularly interested in her efforts to redress certain issues and how her research impacted on the broader issues of school policy. For example the majority of reports were for behavioural problems rather than academic as this is an issue that I have become aware of through her research which is very relevant in my own position. Having read the transcripts of classroom practice, I support her claim that she has improved her practice.

Maureen Rohan.

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Dear Students,

I am doing research into my own practice to improve my teaching methodology and to make school a more enjoyable experience for you.

- I will accept your right to withdraw at anytime.
- I will respect the freedom of your ideas.
- Your names will not be disclosed.
- You do not have to participate (but I would greatly appreciate if you did).
- When I have written up the findings you are welcome to a copy.

Thank you,

M.Nugent.