

**University of the West of England, Bristol**

**How can I help the primary school children I teach to  
develop their self-esteem?**

**By**

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requirements for the award of the degree Master of Education.**

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# ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

This work was submitted for assessment under the criteria **ALM, BLM, CLM, DLM, ELM, FLM, and GLM.**

## **ALM Conceptual Domain**

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

## **BLM Literature Domain**

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

## **CLM Contextual Domain**

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

## **DLM Research Domain**

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

**ELM Ethical Domain**

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

**FLM Values Domain**

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

**GLM Action Domain**

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

## **Abstract**

This dissertation tells the story of a study I carried out in my primary classroom in answer to the research question, how do I help the primary school children I teach to develop their self-esteem? Through the process of doing this research. I learned that focussing on care in relationships and care in the learning process can impact positively on the children's self-esteem.

In undertaking this study I had two aims:

- To understand the ways that self-esteem develops and the impact of the classroom experience on that self-esteem and,
- To reflect on and improve my own practice with a view to creating an atmosphere where the children could be enabled to view themselves in a more positive light.

I used an action research methodology, because my intention was to improve my own practice and to involve and learn from the participants in order to enhance the learning experience for all. Through the process of doing the research I learned to reflect on my values, attitudes and relationships with the children as they impacted on my practice and on the children's view of themselves.

In doing the research I developed an enhanced awareness of the emotional needs of the children in my class and a greater understanding of their individuality. I came to understand the impact of self-esteem on learning and I developed a respect for the children's capacity to make decisions about their own learning and for the level of trust they place in me as their class teacher.

In the course of the research I developed an awareness of the need to create a caring practice centred on values of gentleness, respect, kindness and awareness of individual needs. This has implications for the ways I organise learning, attend to individual needs and help the children to manage their relationships with each other and most importantly for the way I as teacher show respect for each child.

*How can I help the primary school children  
I teach to develop their self-esteem?*

**Chapter 1:Introduction**

In this dissertation I outline my theory of education in relation to the development of self-esteem in the classroom context and I tell the story of an action research study that was based in my classroom. This study shows how that theory developed through the process of doing the research and the impact it had on my practice.

During the course of this study I set out to answer the following research question:

**How can I help the primary school children I teach to develop their self-esteem?**

In this chapter I will outline my rationale for undertaking a study in this area and I will outline my theory of self-esteem development and its origin. I will set out the aims of this study as elaborated from the original research question and I will describe my understanding of the teacher's role with regard to self-esteem enhancement and its limitations. Finally I will outline the structure and focus of the study.

***1:1:My Rationale for undertaking a study in the area of self-esteem.***

My reasons for choosing the development of self-esteem as my topic of research lie both in my professional view of education and in my educational and personal values. I have learned that self-esteem is one of the most important issues that determine whether an individual reaches his/her potential or falls short of that potential. The personal and social expectations and socio-economic circumstances into which we are born may limit us. Self-belief, achieved through high self-esteem, above all else, in my opinion, can enable each individual to come to terms with or surpass his/her circumstances. I have come to believe that the creation of a caring practice enables the development of self-esteem in the classroom.



In general terms at the outset of this study I had a concern that grew from observation of the following three issues:

1. Some of the children I taught scored very well on standardised tests, but their demeanour, work quality, self-confidence and behaviour choices were at odds with that perceived ability.
2. Some children whose standardised test results were very poor often displayed a defeatist attitude, a strong fear of failure, daydreaming, active disruption or sometimes a direct refusal to take part in class work.
3. Another group, whose standardised test results ranged between academically poor and capable, approached new or familiar tasks with an open willing attitude. They showed no fear of being wrong and a willingness to seek help or to help others when asked.

My understanding of the difference between the children described in 3 above and the two groups mentioned in 1 and 2 lies, I believe, in their level of self-esteem. I felt that the creation of a classroom atmosphere where the children could feel happy, secure and worthwhile might have an impact on the way the children thought and felt about themselves. I hoped that this might also impact on their behaviour choices and on their learning.

### ***1:1:1: Educational and personal values.***

Here I will briefly discuss my educational and personal values ( I will elaborate more in chapter 2). These values centre on my belief that the children I teach and the people I meet are all unique and valuable individuals. I believe that each child deserves the optimum conditions in which to develop into a strong and independent adult. Those conditions will vary for each individual in terms of their unique academic and social/personal profile.

Each child has the potential to flourish when the people they interact with daily cherish them. I believe that I as a teacher have a role to play in both caring for the children I teach and in striving to create a caring, learning, classroom community where values of gentleness, kindness, mutual respect and a sense of purpose are promoted. In this atmosphere children can, I believe, develop in a holistic rounded way academically, socially and personally.

## ***1:2: My theory of self-esteem development and its origin.***

My theory of self-esteem enhancement and of its importance began to develop when after 10 years of teaching I found my own self-esteem plummeting. Promotion prospects were very limited, involvement in decision making at school level was confined to the higher management and collaborative planning was relatively unknown among teaching staffs. Being a teacher became a very isolating and lonely profession.

I studied for a Diploma in the Management of Education in Trinity College, Dublin, and began to develop my theory of participative management in primary schools. I had learned that teachers are more willing to accept change and engage in their own learning when they become actively involved in the management of their own schools (Mc Ginley 1988a, 1988b, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1990).

This diploma led to involvement in a study group in Drumcondra Education Centre (Dublin) designing planning materials for teachers (Drumcondra Education Centre, 1996), and this was my first experience of a shared learning context. I saw the value of adults learning in a collaborative experiential way. I found that this way of learning helped me to develop my own self-esteem because I felt valued both as an individual and as a contributor to the professional discourse.

Although at this time I was developing a theory of participative educational management, I had yet to see the link between a shared respectful learning context and self-esteem enhancement in the classroom.

In 1996 I began work as a seconded teacher/trainer on the introduction of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Government of Ireland, 1996) (R.S.E.) programme. This new programme included a wide range of issues around human growth, pubertal change and the creation of new life. The sensitive nature of this work demanded an approach that respected the needs of the individual teacher and used the social context of the group as a focus for shared learning. In this context I began to adapt my experience, as a learner in a group situation that I had experienced in the group of facilitators, to the creation of contexts in which groups could learn together.

At this stage I feel I began to develop my theory of self-esteem enhancement in the learning context. I began to understand how teachers learned to adjust to the introduction

of a programme that covered many topics, which they had initially regarded as too sensitive to be broached in the classroom, through listening to and sharing fears and experiences in a mutually respectful context. I began to see that the respectful group-learning approach had impacted not only on the teacher's learning regarding the content of the programme, but had helped them to develop their own confidence regarding implementation of the programme. In other words, I learned that working in a caring learning environment had helped the teachers develop their own self-esteem.

On returning to the classroom I began to make sense of my learning from my experience in the area of educational management and as an R.S.E. Trainer, in terms of the development of a theory of education and self-esteem enhancement.

I began to see the importance of two issues, the relationship context and the learning context. I concluded that if adults can adjust to the acceptance of a difficult challenge through the provision of opportunities to learn together in a mutually respectful way, that this could work for children also. I learned that this experience had helped the adults to develop their own self-esteem and that a similar experience could work for children also. From this base I began to develop my theory of self-esteem development in the classroom context.

### ***1:2:1: My theory of self-esteem development in the classroom.***

First, I feel it is important to state that I do not believe that any individual can impose a change in the way another individual thinks about him/herself and therefore how that individual feels about him/herself. However it is possible, I believe, to treat an individual in a way that changes the individual's feelings about him/herself. If the individual is treated with a very high level of respect and care then the resulting changed feelings may be positive. The change occurs, freely, within the individual.

### **Living out a vision of care.**

I have learned that the central issue in self-esteem development in the classroom is care. My view of a caring vision for my classroom means focussing on the following:

- The quality of all classroom relationships and,
- The nature of the learning context.

These two interconnected issues are very important aspects of school life. My relationship with the children I teach is bound up with the learning experience, so it is difficult to reflect on either issue independently. The choices I make as a classroom teacher in regard to relationships and to the learning context can impact on the self-esteem of the children. Because of this I believe it is important to prioritise care as an issue in itself and as it relates to the learning process.

### **Care in relationships.**

In the classroom there are two sets of relationships that impact, I believe, on self-esteem.

They are:

- The teacher/child relationship and,
- The relationships among the children.

#### ***The teacher/child relationship.***

If I am to create a caring classroom community I need to focus on getting to know each child as a person as well as his/her learning strengths and areas of concern and to be 'present' in the classroom in a very real way through:

- Awareness of, and involvement in, constant interaction with all of the children,
- Engagement in genuine communication through consciously focussing on the children and their needs,
- Awareness of body language,
- Active listening,
- Genuine eye contact,
- Dealing with conflict while respecting the dignity of all,
- Focussing on how all interactions impact on self-esteem,
- Displaying warmth and concern and,
- Exemplifying appropriate behaviour.

I have learned that an awareness of care for all the children is a crucial issue as children learn to trust the adults around them both by being treated with care themselves and by witnessing care being shown to others.

### ***Relationships among the children.***

Relationships among the children are important because they can hold the potential enormously to enhance self-esteem or they can be fraught with conflict. I have learned that children are very sensitive to changes in their relationships with each other. There is enormous potential for me to enable self-esteem building in my classroom through building friendships and negotiation skills.

### **Care and learning.**

The learning context impacts on the teacher/child relationship. When I interact with the children in my care the focus is most often on some learning activity. The procedures and classroom management strategies that I adopt affect this interaction. It is important for me to reflect on those procedures and strategies, and to consider how they might impact on self-esteem in order that the learning environment may enable a living out of a vision of care.

### ***Choice in learning.***

It is difficult for me to separate freedom to choose from a vision of care. Care, in my experience, involves actively listening to the opinions and needs of another. I wanted to create opportunities for the children to make choices about their own learning and to reflect on whether choice in learning impacts on their self-esteem.

### ***Marking and discussing children's work.***

I have learned that marking procedures can have an impact on the way children experience success in learning. I have noticed that I communicate only through marking with some children each day. I wanted to reflect on this procedure in relation to self-esteem development and to make some changes that could impact positively on learning.

### ***1:3: Research question and aims.***

The research question I asked at the beginning of the study was:

#### **How can I help the primary school children I teach to develop their self-esteem?**

At the outset of this study I set out to achieve the following four aims which I used to elaborate on that question.

They were:

**1.** To reflect on the ways the following issues impact on self-esteem in the classroom:

- The relationships the children have with classmates and other children,
- The relationships children have with adults especially their class teacher,
- The creation of choice in learning and,
- The marking and discussion of children's work.

**2.** To reflect on and develop the practical application of my theory of self-esteem development in the classroom context through the process of doing the research.

**3.** To modify and refine my theory of self-esteem development through the research process so that I would be in a position to share my learning with my colleagues.

**4.** To add to the body of knowledge in the area of self-esteem, in the Irish context.

### ***1:4: The teacher's role in the development of self-esteem.***

In this study I consider how self-esteem develops in the classroom context. I have learned that, although self-esteem is first and foremost developed in the child's relationships with his/her primary carers (most often a parent or parent substitute), I as an individual teacher am a significant adult in the child's life, and as such can help enhance the child's self-esteem.

Furthermore, despite the primacy of the parental role, the child's sense of self continues to evolve over time. Children encounter difficulties in their personal or school lives that may damage their self-esteem. The way I as teacher handle these situations is significant in terms of whether I allow for difficult periods, by being flexible regarding behaviour and work expectations, and, by being supportive by giving extra attention. As a teacher I have the potential to impact on a child's self-esteem especially when s/he is vulnerable because of external difficulties.

#### ***1:4:1: Limitations of the teacher's role.***

A child in school brings with him/her a whole range of experiences that form the complete picture of the child's ability to engage in classroom work. I know that I am seldom aware of the issues that occupy the minds of the children.

Teachers are not psychiatrists or counsellors and are not qualified to address deep emotional distress or issues like neglect or abuse. However I have learned that I am in a

position to deal with straightforward issues of classroom relationships and to examine my own practice in terms of how that impacts on the self-esteem of the children in my care.

#### ***1:4:2: Self-esteem issues and the timetable.***

The teacher deals with self-esteem issues formally and informally throughout the school day. Many relationship issues emerge at unexpected times and are difficult to address on a systematic basis. A great deal of flexibility is called for if self-esteem issues are to be dealt with adequately.

#### ***1:4:3: Self-esteem building programmes.***

There are some programmes available to teachers that focus on self-esteem building issues. During the course of this study I used some programme material to assist me in the area of value clarification. The programme I used as the basis of my work was 'Building Self-Esteem in the Elementary School' by William Reasoner (1992). I also incorporated work from 'Self-Esteem: A Classroom Affair' by Borba (1982), 'Esteem Builders' (Borba, 1989) and from the 'Relationships and Sexuality Education' programme materials (Government of Ireland, 1999). I also used 'bits and pieces' from other programmes which I altered to suit the perceived needs of the children or used as a basis to design new materials.

#### ***1:5: Research design.***

This dissertation is the report of a study that took place in a primary classroom in a mainly middle class suburb of Dublin City. It was both a study of the behaviours exhibited by the children in my class in relation to their self-esteem and a study of the impact of changes I introduced throughout the study period that were designed to develop that self-esteem. As the study developed it also became a self-study as it became clear to me that the children learned from the example I set, in my role as teacher, and were affected by my behaviour choices. It was also a study of my practice and tells the story of how I tried, through the research process, to improve the process of education for the children I teach.

### ***1:5:1: Study phases.***

I implemented changes in classroom management, in methodologies and in programme content in two phases during the school year.

In the first phase (September-December 1999), I focussed on the issue of relationship building through the prioritisation of positive relationships and the exemplification of that value.

In the second phase (January/March 2000) I focussed on the care in the learning process.

### ***1:5:2: The outline of the structure of the study.***

This dissertation is in six sections. Each section contains a number of subsections that cover distinct but inter-related issues.

Chapter 1 covers the background to this study and an introduction covering such issues as my rationale for undertaking this particular topic, my theory of self-esteem enhancement, my research question and aims and a brief outline of how the dissertation is structured.

Chapter 2 contains the context of the study. It covers the autobiographical context, the locational context, the policy and historical context and the theoretical context, much of which is contained within the body of literature on this subject.

Chapter 3 outlines my chosen methodology. In this section I discuss my choice of paradigm and place this choice within my worldview and educational values. I also outline the structure of my study in terms of the three methods I used to gather data and ways in which I analysed and interpreted my findings. In this chapter I also outline how I dealt with issues of access, ethics and validity.

In Chapter 4 I outline both how I went about analysing my data and the issues and themes which arose therefrom. Here I present my findings and the evidence on which I base my understanding.

In Chapter 5 I relate my findings to the theoretical context in which I situated the study. I look again at some of the issues the literature has raised and reflect on how this has or has not been relevant to my practice.



In Chapter 6 I draw together the knowledge that I have gained from undertaking this study and reflect on how much I feel I have achieved in relation to my initial aims. I also consider the limitations of this study and suggest some ideas for future research.

The final part of the dissertation is made up of a bibliography and appendices.

## **Chapter 2: The Context of the study.**

I situated this study in my own primary classroom. My classroom is not isolated from the rest of my workplace. The actions and interactions within it are reflections of a wider context including the school, the community, and the children's families, and the past and current educational policy context.

Each person within that classroom has their own story that impacts to a greater or lesser extent on the lives of the others. I, as the teacher, can generally have a greater influence on the children in the class than individual children do. Because of this influence my educational and life values and their origin have significance.

The theoretical context that surrounded the research topic I undertook is also significant, as is my interpretation of that body of literature. It was important for me to review a wide range of literature in order to place the study in the context of past and current discussion of the issue.

### ***2:1: Autobiographical context.***

Here I discuss two aspects of my personal story that impact on my work in the classroom. I begin by looking at my personal and professional values and go on to discuss the development of teaching style.

#### ***2:1:1: Personal and professional values.***

I briefly discussed my educational and personal values in chapter 1. I will discuss this issue in more detail here.

The importance of naming a value position as a teacher centres, for me, on the nature of classroom roles. I feel it would be simplistic to suggest that both teacher and child are equals in the classroom in terms of role and responsibility although they are equal in terms of human rights. As both the adult and 'authority figure' I have the power to influence, guide and channel children in a chosen direction.

Despite working within policy and legal frameworks, I retain enormous autonomy and influence within my class. It is important therefore to state the personal and educational values that guide me. These educational and personal values inform my ethical and behavioural choices in the classroom (and in wider educational situations) and, I believe, impact on the self-esteem of the children.

The values that guide my choices were formed in a wide range of settings, interactions and challenges. Because of this I will briefly name my values and mention some of the influences that have helped me form these values. I will also look briefly at the gap that can form between stated and lived values.

My personal and professional values include:

- Mutual respect,
- Belief in democracy,
- Honesty,
- Care for the individual,
- Warmth in human interaction,
- The right to happiness,
- Acceptance of best effort from the individual,
- The exemplification of appropriate behaviour.

These are some of the most important values that underpin my interactions with those I meet both in professional and personal contexts. My personal and educational values are significant here particularly where they impact on my teaching. A number of significant people in my life influenced me. I was most influenced by my family and by my teachers some of whom had a strong Christian faith that they strove to live in their daily interactions and through involvement in charitable organisations. I strongly admire this living out of stated values.

Pollard (1997) suggests that the values we hold are evident in our behaviour and teaching in relation to our consistency, our attitude to change and the relationship between our stated and lived values.

Consistency, which reflects clearly held values can impact on security, which is an aspect of self-esteem (Reasoner, 1992). If the children we teach do not know in general how we might respond to a particular incident they can feel insecure and unsettled by change.

In this study I examined my own consistency and attitude to change through looking critically at my values and my vision for education mirrored against my classroom practice.

Whitehead (1989) who proposes the idea of experiencing oneself as a 'living contradiction' discusses the gap between stated belief and behaviour. Stating values is relatively easy but living by them is a challenge. Indeed, I personally, do not always see when lapses occur. An example of this is the issue of democracy. I have long held democracy to be an essential element in human interactions. However in preparing for this study I realised that I held this belief mainly in regard to adults. Where my work in the classroom was concerned I learned that I limited the freedom of choice given to the children by managing many aspects of their 'school lives'. Often we do not reflect on our behaviour in the light of our stated values, hence the possibility of experiencing myself as a 'living contradiction'.

### ***2:1:2:Teaching style.***

The second issue I wanted to look at was my teaching style. When I began to adopt a self-reflective approach in my work I considered the ways I related to the children in the context of the development of the children's self-esteem and critically examined my own teaching style for inconsistencies.

None of us are teachers one moment and people with lives and histories the next. All aspects of our lives intertwine. Goodson (1992) suggests that because teaching is intensely personal it is important that we understand the teacher as a person and the values they hold because those values impact on teaching style.

Clandinin (1986) suggests that teaching involves the translation of our values into daily actions in the classroom. It is important to look at what our practice 'says' about our stated values. In this study I considered what my practice 'said' about me as a teacher and as a person in relation to the self-esteem of the children I teach.

## ***2:2: Locational context.***

The locational context of a study is important because it clarifies both the unique nature of the study and its limitations. One of my aims in this study was to research an issue that I felt was pivotal to the children's success in school. I wanted to understand for myself all the issues related to the development of self-esteem in my classroom context. I felt that looking at the issue in this unique way would enable me to make research based decisions about improvement of my practice. My findings can have relevance for teachers working in similar circumstances.

The locational context of my study is the primary classroom in which I teach.

“In the final analysis what really matters is what happens in the classrooms”  
(Revised Primary School Curriculum Newsletter, Government of Ireland, 1999,p.1).

I believe that the real value of all curricula and policy decisions are evident in the impact they have in the individual classrooms and on individual children. If materials or policies relevant to classrooms are not tried, tested and adapted in the classroom context then, in my view, their value is questionable.

I believe that the individual teacher's educational theory creates a dynamic of interpretation where national policies or programmes are concerned. Regardless of national philosophy, individual teachers need to take opportunities to interpret that philosophy through professional dialogue and self-reflection in order for classroom practice to improve.

The research question I am asking is classroom specific. I needed to explore the issue of self-esteem in my own classroom in order to develop and improve my own practice. My aim in undertaking my research was to test my theory of self-esteem development in my classroom, through the process of doing the research, with a view to improving my practice.

### ***2:3:Policy/Historical Context.***

The policy and historical context of a study assists us in understanding the regulations governing an issue and helps clarify the historical reasons for the development of the current situation in relation to the issue under study.

The issue of self-esteem development in Irish education over the years has largely been ignored. In recent years some programmes have been introduced that contain a relationship building and/or a self-esteem-building component. Until the introduction of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (R.S.E.) programme (Government of Ireland, 1996) the adoption of all other such programmes was voluntary.

In the early 1990s a programme designed to educate children about the issue of child abuse, the Stay Safe Programme, (Government of Ireland, 1991) was both welcomed by some parents and teachers and decried by others. This programme was introduced on a voluntary basis and many schools chose not to adopt it because it was weighted in favour of educating children about child sexual abuse. It was followed by a variety of programmes, all of which could be adopted or ignored by schools and individual teachers within schools.

The Department of Education introduced a programme in Relationships and Sexuality Education that would later be incorporated into a Social, Personal and Health Education Programme being introduced with the Revised Primary Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999). The main changes were that:

- All schools were required to provide for, or provide, all aspects of this programme to the children in their care in consultation with parents and,
- Issues like anti-bullying codes, vision statements outlining the rights of the children, and elements like a “climate of care” were clearly delineated in the policy development literature (Government of Ireland, 1997).

To date all programmes that include elements of self-esteem-building have also included an element of sexuality education. However, because there were a lot of objections to the inclusion of sexuality education in schools the issue of the importance of relationships education including self-esteem components received very little attention.

Dealing with self-esteem building only in the context of any programme, I believe, is missing the point. Programmes are of little value if issues like classroom atmosphere and classroom relationships are not prioritised.

In general terms very little is written in terms of official guidelines or policies for how individual teachers and schools should address the issue of self-esteem building in the context of overall school or individual classroom management. The Education Act contains no direct mention of self-esteem although reference is made to the welfare of the children as follows:

“A recognised school shall...use its available resources to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students...”

(Government of Ireland, 1998, section 9d.).

This is a huge step forward in terms of the enshrinement of the personal development of students in law. The act after due process will come into law toward the end of the year 2000. The Revised Primary curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999) has been drawn up to reflect the Education Act.

## **2:4: Theoretical context.**

The purpose of this section is to place this study in the context of the body of literature on self-esteem and to relate that to the classroom situation. I begin by looking at the importance of defining self-esteem and go on to look at issues that impact on self-esteem and I discuss how behaviour can be seen as an expression of self-esteem. Finally I look at building self-esteem in the classroom through the creation of a caring practice which enables both adults and children to develop a sense of community.

### ***2:4:1: What is self-esteem?***

What is the value of a definition? For me, it creates an understanding of the essential elements of an issue. I found two basic approaches to defining self-esteem in the body of literature:

1. Global definitions of self-esteem and,
2. Analytical approaches to defining self-esteem.

Both of these types of definition had their role in developing my understanding of self-esteem. The global definitions helped me to develop an overview of the issue and I used

the definition of Humphreys (1993b), the feeling of being capable and the feeling of being loveable, to create the dual focus to this study which was on care in relationships and in the learning context. The more detailed analytical definitions helped to make me aware of the issues that can impact on an individual's self-esteem.

### ***Global self-esteem definitions.***

Global self-esteem is our overall feeling of self-worth. It is regarded as relatively stable over time and not easily changed (Lawrence, 1987) and is a feeling of being loveable and capable (Humphreys, 1993b). Most writers elaborate on their global definitions by defining them analytically.

### ***Analytical approaches to defining self-esteem.***

The behavioural outcomes of self-esteem are often described in analytical definitions. Analytical definitions of self-esteem break down self-esteem into aspects of individual's feelings or into behaviours. Rosenberg (1979), Harter (1988) and Reasoner (1992) have developed analytical approaches to defining aspects of self-esteem. Humphreys (1993b) has elaborated in great detail on his global definition of self-esteem and referred to its relevance to the school and classroom. Some writers developed their analytical definitions into instruments for measuring self-esteem levels (Harter, 1988).

Reasoner (1992) and Borba and Borba (1982) also break self-esteem into component parts that they used as a basis to design programmes. Each uses different terms to describe similar issues. I found these analytical definitions useful for my own purposes in examining areas that I felt I needed to prioritise both from a classroom management viewpoint and for programme design.

The approaches of Rosenberg, Harter, Borba, Reasoner and Humphreys in different ways helped me to focus my work on issues that might define the causes of children's negative feelings about themselves.

### ***2:4:2: How does self-esteem develop?***

There are two elements of our self-esteem that are evident in the literature. They are:

- How we think and feel about ourselves and
- How we imagine others think and feel about us.



Our thoughts and feelings form our opinion of ourselves. The literature suggests that these thoughts are initially formed as a result of our interactions with others. These thoughts and feelings impact on our actions therefore our sense of self has cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions (Lawrence, 1987, Reasoner, 1992, and Humphreys, 1993b). This is significant because behaviour can be viewed as an indication of self-esteem level and helping an individual to think differently about him/herself could lead to changed feelings and behaviours (Humphreys, 1993b).

#### ***A sense of self in early childhood.***

The work of Sigmund Freud (1900) and Erik Erikson (1963, 1968) is very significant. They show that the development of a sense of self in the individual is formed as a result of interactions with people who are important to that individual. Positive interactions can lead to a positive self-view and negative interactions can have the opposite effect.

#### ***Who impacts on the development of an individual's self-esteem?***

Although Freud and Erikson were the initial researchers in this field, many others, for example, Anna Freud (1958) and Harlow and Harlow (1962) developed theories that extended the early research. One of the common themes is that of the positive impact of warm and consistent relationships with significant adults in the child's life, on the formation of a positive self-view.

A significant other is an individual who has the capacity to influence another. The people who become 'significant others' in the life of a child vary as the child grows older. The first 'significant others' are the primary carers, most often a parent or a parent substitute, and later includes siblings and adults with whom the child has regular contact. As the child grows older the significance of the friendship group and peer group becomes more marked. The influence of the significant other can be positive or negative.

#### ***The teacher as 'significant other'.***

In the school setting the teachers with whom the child has contact can become significant others. In order for this to become positive, the teacher needs to develop a relationship with the children, which is conducive to a 'wish to emulate'. By this I mean that the children would, as a result of their feelings of respect for the teacher, view the behaviour exhibited by the teacher as a way they would wish to behave. The cornerstone of this relationship is, I believe, trust. The children can come to trust the teacher through direct experience of positive interaction and through witnessing positive interaction with others.

### ***Social influences on self-esteem***

The issues that impact on self-esteem can be culturally based and linked with social groups and their values. A quality or skill that is highly valued in one society, or group within that society, can become a standard by which individuals are judged and by which they judge themselves. If an individual prizes the opinion of another in their society then they will often seek to impress that other person.

“ The revealing thing about children is that success and failure in themselves have no effect on their drive to learn but the reactions of parents, teachers and other significant adults to success and failure can have a devastating effect on the child’s motivation to learn.” (Humphreys, 1993b, p--).

### ***2:4:3:How do individuals demonstrate their level of self-esteem?***

Because self-esteem has cognitive and affective aspects to it then it will probably impact on our behaviour. Humphreys (1993a) describes adaptive and maladaptive behaviours that are demonstrated by children. The behaviour choices children make are responses, in my view, to how they feel their needs are being met.

Glasser (1978, 1984) suggests that we have basic needs. He states that when our needs are not met that we set out to rectify the situation. Some of these needs are survival, belonging, power, freedom and fun. In the classroom, unmet needs in other areas of life, as well as unmet classroom needs, impact on behaviour choices.

Some researchers (Dweck, 1986; Tattum and Tattum, 1988) suggest that there is a direct correlation between teacher expectation and student performance. In other words, the child’s perception of the teacher’s view of his/her capability impacts on performance.

Children use a variety of strategies to help them remain in control of their lives. These strategies are learned throughout childhood in response to experiences (Glasser, 1984) and come to play in every aspect of life. In the classroom children will often avoid attempting a task that they fear failing (Humphreys, 1993b) because of their earlier experience of failure.

### ***2:4:4: Building self-esteem in the classroom.***

Here I will look at a number of issues that I have learned are important to reflect on in order to clarify the action steps that can be taken in prioritising care in the classroom.

### ***Care in relationships and in the learning process.***

There are a number of purposes of schooling. One is to enable children to develop a sense of their individual role as social beings and members of society. Another reason is to enable the children to be equipped with the skills of their society. In the case of western societies required skills include literacy, numeracy and a certain planned knowledge base.

As I understand it, the creation of a classroom context that will enable the fulfilment of these two purposes involves setting up a caring practice that enables learning. In order to fulfil this purpose I set out to focus on creating caring relationships and on care in the learning process.

### ***Issues that impact on care in the classroom.***

Here I list some issues that I believe impact on care in the classroom and go on to elaborate on each. Collins (1999) mentions the following issues:

- The students' sense of belonging,
- Viewing rules as supports for students,
- The balance between success and ability in learning,
- The celebration of difference and,
- The creation of challenge in learning.

Curwin and Mendler (1988) list the following:

- The prioritisation of individual dignity in all interactions and,
- The promotion of co-operation rather than competition.

I would add the following:

- Building teacher/child relationship,
- Building the relationships among the children,
- Creating opportunities for the children to clarify their values,
- Reflecting on all classroom procedures e.g. including marking of children's work and,
- The inclusion of social and personal education programmes.

### ***A sense of belonging in the group.***

I have learned that the creation of a sense of belonging is not an easy task. It is important to balance a variety of diverse forces and interests. Setting out to create a sense of

belonging requires an awareness of the already established culture of the group because some children may be accepted while others may be isolated. My own sense of balance and fairness is also an issue because I need to model inclusion for all children.

***Rules to support children and protect rights.***

The protection of individual rights through rules is a central tenet of all groups through building consensus, agreement and ownership of rules. It is important to agree rules to reflect and protect the rights of individuals and so that they could become student supports rather than teacher creations.

***Balancing ability and success.***

The success/ability relationship is one of the most difficult acts to balance in any classroom. Tattum and Tattum (1988) discuss a number of classroom issues that impact on the development of self-confidence and impact on the effort to succeed. They include:

- That labelling, grouping and seating arrangements can exacerbate negative self-concept,
- That teacher expectation can become a self-fulfilling prophecy,
- That non-verbal messages like tone of voice and body language can relay unconscious messages.

***Labelling and grouping.***

All children have different profiles of learning strengths. I have learned that it is necessary to match task requirements to capability in order for success in learning to be experienced. However, fixing grouping or seating according to ability may impact on self-esteem. Children can be grouped in ways that protect against a feeling of being labelled while fixing grouping according to ability may create a feeling of fixed teacher expectation (Dweck, 1986, Tattum and Tattum 1988).

***Individual dignity.***

In order to preserve individual dignity I have learned that it is important to reflect on and modify my own behaviour toward the children, to be aware of and manage the children's behaviour toward each other and to manage conflict compassionately with due regard to children's rights and opinions. Curwin and Mendler (1988,p3) suggest that we should focus on 'positively affecting the lives of children' rather than dealing with discipline issues. I have learned that the management of conflict and discipline can have profound effects on children's self-perception.

***Being different.***

The right to be different links with individual dignity, individual rights, ability levels and the sense of belonging in a group. I have often witnessed bullying in schools, for example, centred on difference and I have also seen the damage that this bullying can do to self-esteem.

***Competition and co-operation.***

Curwin and Mendler (1988) discuss the replacement of a competitive model with the encouragement of co-operation and mutual respect. For children to value others it is useful to view them as people who are working toward common goals. Competition creates a sense of individual goals and automatically creates 'losers'. Losing impacts on individual dignity and on a sense of belonging to the class group. It is important that I as the teacher model co-operation and avoid competition.

***The teacher/child relationship.***

There are two relationships in every classroom that become significant for every child. They are the relationships children have with their classmates and the relationship they have with their teacher. Borba and Borba (1982) state that the teacher's attitude and the classroom atmosphere are two essential areas of focus where self-esteem is being prioritised. The teacher as both the adult and authority figure has the duty to create a caring atmosphere where all the children can trust that their feelings will be respected. This means that the teacher will need to exemplify appropriate behaviour.

***The importance of children's relationships with each other.***

Positive classroom relationships have the potential to enhance every child's experience of school. Learning to socialise is a very important aspect of schooling, and friendships can be a tremendous source of joy and support. Children can benefit from being in a class where the teacher sees friendship building a part of his/her responsibility.

As teacher I have a role in helping children to develop positive ways of relating with each other. It is to be expected that children, because of their age and levels of maturity, will be in the process of clarifying their values. Like adults, they will also be in the process of learning to live by those values. This leads to the existence of conflict in children's relationships with others and can create a dependence on me, as teacher, to assist in the resolution of conflict, to respect and value difference, and to preserve dignity.

*The value of self-esteem building programmes.*

Self-esteem building programmes such as ‘Building Self-Esteem in the Elementary School’ (Reasoner, 1992) and ‘Self-Esteem a Classroom Affair’ (Borba and Borba, 1982), and the ‘Relationships and Sexuality Education’ (Government of Ireland, 1999), set out suggested activities or worksheets that can be used in the classroom. The role of these programmes, in my view is:

- To create opportunities for discussion.
- To demonstrate a prioritisation of relationship issues.

The creation of discussion opportunities can help children to clarify their values around general issues in a safe environment. The allocation of discrete time for programme inclusion can send a message about the value that I place on this issue.

**Where do I go from here?**

In the next chapter I go on to look at the theoretical background to the various methodologies commonly used by educational researchers. I discuss action research which was my chosen methodology for this study and I outline the way in which I set out both to collect data for this study and how I interpreted that data.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology.**

In this chapter I look at the three major paradigms used in educational research. I begin by focussing on the epistemological ground on which claims to knowledge in each paradigm are based. I examine the relationship between epistemological and methodological considerations and look at the reasoning behind my choice of action research as my preferred methodology. I then go on to discuss my understanding of action research. Finally I look at the 'operationalisation' of this study and deal in particular with the issues of access, ethics and validation.

### ***3:1: Views of knowledge.***

Knowledge can be seen from multiple viewpoints, including two that suggest that it exists regardless of and in separation from humans or, that it exists only because we as humans recognise ourselves as active knowers. Another way of looking at this is what Hirst (1993) refers to as, to 'know that' and to 'know how'. 'Know that' knowledge is to be found in books, on computer discs or is 'out there', available to those who search or research. Those who see knowledge as existing independently of humans hold this view of knowledge. 'Know how' knowledge exists in the context of the people who have knowledge or experience.

Both views of knowledge have their place in the world. Many fields of study focus on aspects of our world, which may be seen to exist independently of humans, for example, some fields of science. However, it is my view that all knowledge relates to people and should be viewed in relation to people.

### ***3:2: Views of Knowledge and Educational Research.***

The view of knowledge adopted by an educational researcher will impact on his/her choice of educational research paradigm. If a researcher sees knowledge as something that is 'out there' to be sought out and found, then an empirical approach is likely to be taken. If the researcher sees knowledge as existing in the context of human interaction, as the 'know how' view of knowledge, then an interpretive or critical theoretic approach may be taken.

The view of knowledge adopted by a researcher will also relate to research purpose, for example, the researcher may wish to answer a question, to test a hypothesis or may wish to solve a problem. Where any of these situations relates to people the researcher's view of

knowledge will impact on issues such as whether a qualitative or a quantitative approach is taken. It will also impact on the approach taken to ethical issues, and perhaps on the degree of involvement of participants, for example, are the participants passive or active in the research project?

### ***3:3: Views of knowledge and of the purpose of researchers.***

There are three major educational research paradigms. They are:

- Empirical,
- Interpretive and
- Critical theoretic which some researchers equate with action research.

Each research paradigm operates out of its own 'set of principles' (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995) or 'set of coherent ideas' about the world and how researchers operate (Bassey, 1990).

The empirical researcher views knowledge as existing separately from humans and the interpretive researcher views knowledge as existing in the human mind, interpreted by whomever examines it. The critical theoretic or action researcher, however, sees a world where justice and democracy and the individual's right to be heard (McNiff, 1995) are paramount.

If we look also at the approach taken by researchers in each paradigm we see a difference in knowledge view. Empiricists see their function as seeking out and examining knowledge that already exists but has not yet been found. Interpretive researchers view their purpose as the development of an individual understanding of reality, based on data gathered. The action researcher aims to improve practice and this view has implications for chosen methods of data gathering, for an approach to ethics and for the consultative and democratic approach adopted.

### ***3:4: Methodological and epistemological considerations.***

When I began to consider the educational research paradigm within which I would situate my own research, I returned to my initial intention to improve my own practice. In the past I have read many research studies in research journals, in books and on the Internet. Many of these studies were situated in the U.S.A., the U.K. or in Ireland. My difficulty with all of these readings was the same. They were not based in my own unique situation. Often a



comment or idea was of use, but the essence of the study, the approach to the study and the conclusions were always based on someone else's unique situation.

The studies were also, often, conducted in a way that is contrary to my educational values. I believe in democracy as the basic operator in human situations. This brings with it an array of issues related to consultation, involvement, respect, contribution, access, and privacy; and of course, the issue of who will benefit?

The problem, for me, was that there was a discrepancy between my view and the dominant view of knowledge. I needed to find a research method that could enable me to situate my research in my own unique situation and to live within my educational values. I held the view that I wanted this study to be of practical benefit to me as a class-based teacher. I hoped to resolve a long held concern regarding the self-esteem of the children I teach. I also hoped to be able to influence my colleagues regarding school wide policy development in the area of self-esteem building. Finally I felt that my deeply held view of the importance of democracy in human interactions needed to be preserved in the methods employed within the chosen paradigm.

To return to the purpose of my study, I chose to examine my own practice and how my choices as a class based teacher impacted on the self-esteem of the children I teach. I asked the research question: **How can I help the primary school children I teach to develop their self-esteem?** I wanted to bridge the gap between theory and practice in a way that would lead to both an improvement in my own practice and could be of benefit to the children. I wanted to put theory into practice, thereby enabling me to theorise my practice more adequately than before. I also wanted to objectify my own practice, to see, in some way, through the eyes of the children and parents, thus enabling me to re-clarify my educational values and check whether I was living them in my practice.

It became clear that I was looking at action research as my chosen paradigm. The issue of power is very important here. Empiricists and interpretive researchers or their employers (often, large companies or government bodies employ researchers to find, usually, statistical information that will support a view), hold power and decision making in their hands. The underlying principle in these two kinds of research might be democratic but the practice often is not. Where the study involves people they are not often viewed as active participants with an equal voice. The action researcher is often researching his/her own practice. Thus the power is potentially vested in the people involved in the research. I

wanted to retain autonomy in my research while allowing the children and parents involved in the research to also remain autonomous, by working in a democratic way.

Each of the three main paradigms used in educational research follows loosely the same pattern of data collection, analysis, deduction of evidence from data, validation of the evidence and making a claim to knowledge. However each of those steps is approached in a different way because at a basic level each paradigm comes out of a different ontological perspective and works toward a different outcome.

### ***3:5:Action Research.***

Action research is a participatory, democratic form of self-reflective enquiry that is used in social situations, like education, to improve practice. The aim is to work democratically. Respect for the individual is reflected in the approach to ethics because participants are consulted regarding data collection methods, privacy, access and the use to which all data will be put.

Action research is often used where teachers work as researchers into their own practice. Improving practice involves attempting to realise our educational values (Elliott, 1991). In a sense the reflective teacher, adopting action research methods, models the values s/he promotes.

#### ***3:5:1: Approaches to action research.***

Action research has developed in different ways since Kurt Lewin (1946), a social psychologist, first began his work. Although his work was not initiated in an educational setting it was later taken up by educationalists. The basic ideas of participation, democracy and collaboration together with the cyclical nature of its operation; planning, acting, observing and reflecting then returning to planning, were found to be of interest in educational settings (McNiff, 1988).

Stenhouse (1975, 1983) developed the idea of teacher as researcher in the U.K. He promoted the idea of practice based theory rather than theory based practice.

The dichotomy between practice based theory and theory based practice is still relevant today. It is particularly relevant in the context of issues like appraisal, accountability and

whole school evaluation where dominant theories are presented as the 'ideal' to which all schools should ascribe therefore creating many opportunities to fall short of that 'ideal'. Where theory is imposed on practice rather than developed from it, there will always be aspects of practice, which appear not to conform to that theory.

Carr and Kemmis (1986), Elliott (1991) and others took up the work of Lewin and Stenhouse and developed formalised systems or methodologies for carrying out action research based on a cyclical approach. A system or methodology is very useful for the teacher engaging for the first time with the idea of researching his/her own practice; however a 'method' is in danger of becoming prescriptive and therefore limiting. Seeing research as a step by step method to follow inhibits individual creativity and limits a researcher in following ideas from other paradigms that might usefully be employed to enhance the individual project.

Whitehead (1989) discusses the issue of the validity of research based in self-reflection. He developed the idea of living educational theory from enquiries of the kind, "How do I improve my practice?" He argues that living theory, or theory based in practice that includes contributions from established theory, is a valid method of developing educational theory. He sees the experience of perceiving oneself as a 'living contradiction' when holding educational values and of developing a practice that negates them, which is a danger of developing practice based on theory rather than the reverse. He also explores issues of validity and generalisability in testing a theory, which, Whitehead suggests, when examined with the same rigour as any other form of research, will be equally valid.

Having examined the three approaches to educational research, empirical research, interpretive and critical theoretic including action research, I finally chose the action research paradigm because it best suits my purpose. Within the action research family, approaches vary and can be varied to suit the circumstances of the research study. However I found that the approach I adopted, and the value base in which I situated my work, linked most closely with the thinking of theorists working in the living theory tradition.

### ***3:6: The design of the study.***

In this section I will begin by outlining the ways I dealt with access and ethics. I will then discuss my initial concern in undertaking this study and the question that I asked. I will describe the phases of the study and the issues that were dealt with during each phase. I will briefly outline the methods of data collection and analysis of data I used and, finally, I deal with validation.

#### ***3:6:1: Access and ethics.***

I began my research study by dealing with the issues of access and ethics in the following ways:

- I set out my ethical framework (Appendix B1) and gave that to the principal of my school together with a request for permission (Appendix B2) to carry out the research. I also gave the principal a copy of the letter I intended to send to the parents of the children in my class requesting permission to include their children in the research study. I requested permission from my principal to carry out the study and to send the letter to parents (Appendix B 3).
- Permission was granted in early September 1999.
- The second phase of gaining access was that of sending out the letter of request to parents mentioned above. This was sent out in September 1999 and over the next two weeks all of the parents gave me permission to include their children in the study. I made it clear in my letter to parents that all the children in the class would be included in all class work. Reluctance to have a child included in the study simply meant that I would not use any of their work as data (Appendix B 3).

I was then free to begin the study.

#### ***3:6:2: My intention: To improve the process of education for the children.***

When I began to consider researching the issue of developing self-esteem in the classroom I began with the action reflection cycle of Whitehead.

“How do I improve this process of education here?”

I experience problems when my educational values are negated in my practice.

I imagine ways of overcoming my problems.

I act on a chosen solution.

I evaluate the outcomes of my actions.

I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations...(and the cycle continues).”

(Whitehead, 1989)

My belief in the value and uniqueness of each individual was negated in my practice because I saw a need to impact on the children's self-esteem and prioritise it. My intention was to introduce strategies designed to develop self-esteem and try out those strategies while observing their impact. I introduced changes in my practice that I believed would create an atmosphere where the children could be enabled to feel valued as individuals and as members of the class group. I carefully monitored the changes I was introducing by recording them in my diary and in observation notes. I resolved to modify my future practice in terms of what I was learning about the effectiveness of my developing practice.

### ***3:6:3: The research question.***

I began with a question that I would set out to answer:

#### **How can I help the primary school children I teach to develop their self-esteem?**

I used this question as my base for designing my research study while focussing on two issues:

1. My own learning as a result of the examination of the impact of my behaviour and professional choices on the self-esteem of the children I teach and
2. An understanding of the issue of self-esteem as it impacts on my work as a class-based teacher.

These two issues impacted on the design of the study, as I had to build in examination of my practice in preparation for the study as well as the changes I planned to introduce.

### ***3:6:4: Phases of the study.***

The study period consisted of two phases.

The first phase took place in the first term of the school year 1999/2000. The focus of this phase of the study was on care in relationships.

The second phase took place from January to April 2000 and focussed on care in the learning process.

### ***3:6:5: Data collection.***

I collected data in three ways, through written reflection, observation and unstructured interviews. I chose these methods of data collection for the following reasons:

- It was important to have a written record from my viewpoint and from that of the children and parents. Understanding is a growing process that develops over time and the inclusion of a reflective aspect to both my field notes and those of the children added an extra dimension.
- It was important to observe and record the children's interactions. This process helped me to see patterns of change in the children's interactions.
- The unstructured interview process was helpful to ascertain answers to questions that had not incidentally arisen. I began to see the degree of sensitivity with which I needed to approach interviews with children as some children may attempt initially to answer in what they perceive is the expected way.

### ***Written reflection.***

One of the ways I gathered data is written reflection in a number of forms.

- I kept a reflective diary in which I recorded classroom and wider school incidents and my learning from the experience of those incidents. I also noted discussions with children, colleagues and parents.
- The children recorded their reactions to various experiences in their own diaries.
- I set up a validation group of three colleagues. One colleague observed a child from the class and recorded the changes she observed in that individual. The other two colleagues met me regularly to become familiar with and observe my learning throughout the study and recorded their impressions.

This range of written reflection gave me a broad range of data from which I could deduce my findings.

### ***Observation.***

I observed the class as a whole and in small working groups over several timeframes in the study. My aim was to gauge whether the changes I introduced in classroom management strategies, in programme input and in methodologies were having an impact on the behaviour choices of the children. I felt that I could gauge improvements in self-esteem throughout observation of behaviour changes.

I also observed one child (Child B) throughout the study period so that I could look upon the impact of the changes of this child as an indication of the impact of changes in the general class.

### ***Interviews.***

I used unstructured interviews with both parents and children. I interviewed some of the children so as to ascertain their reactions to the focus on care in relationships and in the learning process. This provided a balance to my own reflection and observation and to that of my colleagues. It also provided a deeper insight into the reflections in the children's diaries. The interviews with parents took place informally. I felt that the unstructured approach was more comfortable for both parents and children and more likely to elicit honest responses.

### ***3:6:6: Interpretation of data.***

The process of analysing qualitative data in order to isolate evidence that will support findings is outlined by Hitchcock and Hughes, (1995), as involving the following:

- Moving from a description of what happened to an understanding of why,
- An interpretation of issues arising from natural language,
- The discovery of patterns in data and,
- Looking for general orientations, themes and exceptions.

This is a complex process that involves ongoing reflection on the data and its meaning. The use of a reflective diary is a particularly useful tool as it helps build a habit of pattern seeking. It is necessary to classify the data under themes as the study progresses in order to assist in data management. The next stage in the process is formal identification of codes or categories that arise out of the patterns and themes. This process allows the researcher to move from describing the events to naming the issues that arose from the study.

### ***3:6:7: The validation process.***

The validation process I chose involved enlisting the help of three colleagues. The first colleague was a member of the school's learning support team. During the school year in which I undertook the study she worked with a group of children from my class. We agreed that she would observe one of these children (Child B) about whom we both expressed concern because of the child's demeanour, her reluctance to speak out and her poor 'performance'. My colleague observed this child throughout the study period and has reported her observations in writing at the end of the period (see Appendix H 1).

The second and third colleagues were members of the Masters study group whom I asked to validate my learning and act as critical friends. The first of these colleagues is a primary teacher and is working in the learning support area. The other colleague is working in the

secondary system. We met regularly and they became familiar with the focus and progress of my study and with the development of my learning. Both colleagues have an interest in the topic of my study and agreed to validate my learning. These colleagues provided written validations at the end of the study period (see Appendices H 2 and H 3).

***Where do I go from here?***

In this chapter I have outlined my view of knowledge and the way that impacted on my choice of paradigm for this study and have discussed action research in detail and the methods I used during the course of this study. In the next chapter I outline that study and go on to discuss my findings.



## **Chapter 4: Analysis, interpretation and validation of data.**

In chapter 3 I outlined the methodologies I used to gather data for this study and described the methods I used to analyse that data. In this chapter I name my findings and my learning outcomes as a result of those findings. I return to my initial purpose in engaging in this study by revisiting the question I asked at the outset and I set out an overview of this study. I then go on to describe the process of analysis that led me to my findings and I describe the study that I engaged in. Finally I discuss validation and outline the methods used.

### ***4:1: My aim in engaging in this study.***

At the outset of this study I had a concern about the potential of an individual's level of self-esteem to be of equal if not greater importance than issues like intellectual ability in relation to progress in learning, and social and personal development. The question I set out to address in this study was:

**How can I help the primary school children I teach to develop their self-esteem?**

It is important to state at the outset that it is my belief that self-esteem enhancement takes place within the individual and cannot be imposed from outside. The role that other people can take in enhancing an individual's self-esteem is, in my view, that of making explicit an appreciation of that individual's qualities and in treating the individual with a high level of respect and care.

I set out to do two things:

- To prioritise care in relationships and
- To prioritise care in the learning process.

My aim was to create a classroom atmosphere and context where every child could be enabled to look upon him/herself as valuable. I saw that this could have the potential to lead to a change in the way the children thought and felt about themselves.

### ***4:2: Research design.***

This study focussed on the development of self-esteem in the classroom context. It took place in a 5<sup>th</sup> class (10-11years old) in a large co-educational primary school in a middle

class suburb of Dublin City. There were 26 children in the class, 12 girls and 14 boys. Permission was gained from all of the parents to include their children in the study.

The study spanned most of the school year 1999-2000 and was broken into two phases. The focus of the first phase was care in relationships, the focus of the second phase was on care in the learning process.

### ***4:3: The process of analysis of data.***

I used a reflective diary as a means of both recording events and my interpretation of those events. This reflection helped me to ‘make sense’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995, p196) of the data collected. I looked for emerging issues and patterns or themes. In describing my findings I cite evidence from the data. In order to give a broader picture of the work that I engaged in with the children I have assembled a wider range of material in the appendices at the end.

#### ***4:3:1: The range of data collected.***

The data I collected included the following:

My reflective diary in which I recorded events and my reflection and learning on;

- Classroom and school incidents,
- Observations of children’s ‘behaviour’ during learning situations,
- Observations on children’s learning outcomes,
- Observations of interactions among the groups of children,
- Observations of one child (Child B),
- Notes of unstructured interviews with individual children and parents,
- My own ongoing learning and interpretation of data.

Children’s diaries that included;

- Reactions to prompt questions designed to elicit responses to the changes introduced,
- Reactions to discussions based on programme input,
- Reactions to discussion of group behaviour,
- Notes on feelings, thoughts and behaviours, influences, plans and activities.

The originals of all of this data are held in my research archive. I have included excerpts in the appendices.

#### ***4:4: The story of my research study.***

In this section I will outline the themes that emerged from this study and I will describe the study in detail using McNiff's (1988, 1995) action reflection steps.

##### ***4:4:1 Action-reflection.***

###### ***What was my concern?***

At the beginning of the school year I became concerned that the values I hold and the vision I stated for my class were negated in my practice. I found that the children I was working with were experiencing 'school life' in a way that was contrary to that vision and those values. (I have stated the values on which I based this vision in section 2:1:1).

###### ***My vision for the school year 2000-2001.***

I state my vision as follows:

'In my class I strive to create a caring context where each individual can be enabled to feel valued as a unique person and as a member of the class. I strive to balance the emotional and learning needs of individuals with those of the whole class.

I emphasise both social and personal development and learning and I aim to encourage respect, honesty, listening, and warmth, and to value effort'.

###### ***Why was I concerned?***

My concerns emerged from my early assessment and experience of working with the children and from the evidence gathering process of discussing each child's strengths and areas of concern with previous teachers, learning support colleagues, with the children and with their parents, in the first month of the school year.

The academic picture that emerged was of a wide range of strengths from exceptionally able children to those who attended learning support or fell into the special needs category. This created a teaching/learning challenge for me in itself but it was coupled with a range of behaviours that exacerbated my difficulties.

From my assessment of the children's emotional needs I learned that some of the children had experienced a personal loss in the previous year, that a number of the children were demonstrating behaviour problems and that some children were emotionally withdrawn. I

also found that the number of behaviour incidents that had to be dealt with daily made creating a sustainable positive learning environment very difficult.

I found the range of abilities and behaviours frustrating. There appeared to be little connection between standardised test results and children's participation in learning or motivation to learn. The children who demonstrated behaviour problems spanned the intellectual spectrum. The following behaviours were noted:

*In-class behaviours:*

- Inattention during teaching lessons,
- Lack of 'on task behaviour' and active disruption during group work,
- Attention seeking behaviour,
- Using diversionary tactics during discussions, e.g. shouting out irrelevant comments and laughing uproariously and,
- Carrying on open conversations across the classroom during class time.

*Out of class behaviours:*

- Bullying behaviour reported in the yard or from outside school.

*Behaviours of some individuals:*

- Avoidance of eye contact,
- Difficulty in coherently expressing a thought,
- Emotional withdrawal from interaction in informal situations or in group work and,
- Behaving very shyly.

There were also children in the class who sat quietly and waited for each incident to be sorted out so that they could get on with their work. These children were becoming frustrated and I was concerned that I was not taking care of their needs.

All these behaviours made it difficult for me to support learning and to live out my values in my practice. I reflected on the array of behaviours as I experienced them with this group of children and on similar behaviour that I had witnessed in previous classes.

I considered a number of possible solutions to this difficulty. Initially I thought that in the case of some of the children the problem might have been Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). I explored the literature around this topic ( Parker 1992, 1994, Green and Chee, 1995) and concluded that it was a difficulty that I could not solve in the

classroom as medical intervention is often an important part of the treatment and I did not see that referring the parents to a medical practitioner would help me improve my practice.

The second solution I considered was a focus on the broad range of learning strengths in the classroom, through exploring multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1983, Campbell, 1994) approaches to learning. I decided that the focus here was too narrow and did not value the whole child.

I concluded that the difficulty was centred on the broad area of self-esteem for the following reasons:

- I felt that many of the children had experienced failure and that they were avoiding engagement in tasks or relationships as a way of avoiding further failure,
- I felt that the exceptionally able children who were disrupting or avoiding engagement were experiencing a lack of challenge in the curriculum,
- I felt that some of the children had strong emotional needs that were not being met and that their disruption or shyness was a signal that they needed support.

There was quite a serious gap between the values I held and my daily experience in the classroom and I felt that prioritising self-esteem building through creating a caring classroom community could help me bridge that gap.

(Assembled from field notes September 1999).

### ***Proposed solutions: What could I do?***

I decided to take Humphreys' (1993b) definition of self-esteem as my overview for the study and to focus on 'the feeling of being loveable and the feeling of being capable'. I also decided to further break down each of these two aspects of the individuals self-view using Reasoner's (1992) five senses, three of which I linked with care in relationships and two of which I linked with care in the learning process (see below).

### **Prioritising care: Seeking to create a feeling of being loveable (Humphreys, 1993b).**

I decided to prioritise self-esteem building in the first phase of the study by focussing on the broad area of care. I decided that I would begin by focussing on care in relationships by looking at these areas:

- Caring for each other (A sense of belonging, Reasoner, 1992),
- Ground rules for behaviour and (A sense of security, Reasoner, 1992),
- Value clarification (A sense of identity, Reasoner, 1992).

Caring for each other involved looking closely at the relationships I had with the children and at the relationships among the children. Ground rules were needed to protect the rights of each individual. Value clarification involved working on externalising the values on which the overall vision of care was based.

**Prioritising care in the learning process: Seeking to create a feeling of being capable.**

I intended to prioritise care in the learning process during the second phase of the study through looking at the following two aspects of the learning relationship:

- Creating choice in learning (A sense of purpose, Reasoner, 1992) and,
- Marking children's work (A sense of competence, Reasoner, 1992).

Creating choice in learning involved looking at involving the children in planning for their own learning and looking at marking involved examining the impact of marking procedures on learning and self-esteem.

**How would I judge the impact of the changes I introduced?**

I felt that the children's patterns of change would have to be judged individually based on their initial profile. I felt that if I saw similar changes in a number of children that I could deem that a pattern had emerged. I would look for small improvements in the following areas of children's behaviour:

- Listening to each other,
- Turn taking,
- Taking responsibility,
- Respecting others,
- Showing kindness,
- Behaving gently,
- Concentrating on tasks,
- Expressing thoughts coherently,
- Attending to and focussing on current work,
- Engaging in interaction and,
- Making eye contact.

#### ***4:4:2: Action: What did I do?***

##### **A whole class focus.**

I kept a whole class focus throughout the study. I have learned that the behaviours that the children observe in the classroom context and those that they experience can have equal impact on the development of trust. Also, attending to the needs of individuals or a group within the class would be contrary to my values.

##### **Observing one child.**

I also observed one child throughout the study. The purpose of this was to track the progress of one child to demonstrate that what I was doing in a general sense could be understood by reading about the progress of that one individual.

##### ***Initial profile of Child B:***

I chose this child because she was one of a group of three who attended learning support with a colleague who agreed to act as validator for the study. In this way my colleague and I could both observe the same child. We agreed to look at her general demeanour in relation to the profile described below and to note any changes. This child had a number of qualities that I understood to indicate poor self-esteem:

- She was very quiet during class discussions and group work,
- When asked a question she often gave a monosyllabic reply and looked away discouraging further questions,
- If we discussed her work she tried to move away after each comment,
- She avoided offering comments or answers and spoke very quietly,
- She had recently grown tall and held herself somewhat hunched,
- She was experiencing some teenage acne and often kept her hand over her face,
- Her expression was very serious and she appeared unhappy.

On the positive side she had a nice little group of friends who played together during yard and held quiet discussions in the classroom during breaks. (Her mother, who I met several times during the year, came across as a very gentle quiet-natured lady who was very concerned about her daughter).

(Assembled from field notes - September 1999).

In Appendix G I will outline excerpts from a variety of sources to demonstrate the progress of this individual child.

***Phase 1: Care in relationships: creating a feeling of being loveable.***

This first phase of the study focussed on care in relationships by working to build trust and respect in all interactions. During this phase I learned that my focus should be on helping the children to manage their relationships, their work and their behaviour choices. I also saw that my exemplification of positive relationship, work and behavioural choices could impact on the children's choices. (Diary, September 1999).

***Caring for each other: Seeking to create a sense of belonging (Reasoner, 1992).***

I set out with a vision of care for my class (see section 4:4:1) but I was concerned that my vision might not impact on the children's self-esteem if it did not become the children's vision also. My intention was that the children and I would work together to show gentleness, respect and kindness to everyone we met and to build trust, and a sense of belonging, among everyone in the class. I set out by discussing this idea with the children and together we came up with three groups of people whose relationships were important:

- The teacher and the children,
- The relationships among the children in the class and
- Relationships with adults and children in the wider school.

We discussed the ways we needed to behave in order to make this work.

We need to:

- Try to talk to everyone in the class every day.
- Smile and make eye contact with people as we meet them.
- Offer to help others and use polite language.
- Remind each other nicely when we forget to be nice.
- To try to be a good winner and a good loser in games.

(Compiled from field notes-September 1999).

***Finding solutions to problems that arose.***

The children tried hard to adopt these strategies initially but difficulties soon arose, for example, some children had a habit of teasing others. This habit had become 'normal' to them and it did not cease after we agreed that it should. We built in a period in each day to talk about those difficulties. This worked well as it provided a daily ongoing structured time for children to actively engage in problem solving and relationship building and for gradual change in behaviour (see Appendix E). (Diary September 17<sup>th</sup> 1999).



***Action Step.***

For my own part I felt I had to maintain a very obvious presence in the classroom moving around and giving special assistance regarding work and relationship issues discreetly when required. I found it important to give extra assistance to the children who I identified as needing extra support, and to display genuine warmth toward all of the children.

***Ground rules for behaviour: Seeking to create a sense of security (Reasoner, 1992).***

Setting out a caring vision for the class was a very important start in aiming to live out my values and to build trust. The children needed to feel secure that their rights would be preserved. I learned that knowing our rights, our responsibilities and parameters, enables individuals to feel secure. Trust can be built where these rights are proven, by experience, to be upheld.

The children and I agreed a contract for work and behaviour (Appendix C 2). We explored the need for rules in various areas of society (Reasoner, 1992). The contract emerged from group discussion. We prioritised three areas:

- Respect for all,
- Honesty in interactions,
- Effort in work.

The contract was displayed in the classroom and the children discussed it with their parents. Displaying the contract created a reminder of the agreement. Discussion with parents created additional support.

I learned that being proactive in terms of rights and responsibilities for all in the classroom situation led to the following:

- It provided a framework for the resolution of issues that emerged as the year progressed,
- It named the central vision for the school year, i.e. respect for all,
- It distributed 'authority' in that it demonstrated that we all had the same rights and responsibilities,
- It created a base from which trust could be built.

(Diary September 1999).

When I first introduced the contract to the children it was well received especially by those who could readily see the benefits; however there was also suspicion. Some of the children's comments were:

- “ Does this mean that we can tell you if we don't like something you do?”
- “I think it's great 'cause we never get to say our rules, teachers always make 'em.”
- “If I don't agree with that, can I do what I like?”

(Comments made by a variety of children, assembled from field notes September 1999).

These comments taught me the following:

- In order to gain the children's trust I had to demonstrate that I could be equally taken to task on issues where I infringed rights or fell down on my responsibilities.
- Majority agreement does not mean total agreement,
- Children would infringe agreed ground rules despite the existence of a contract.
- I had to be careful in the operation of the contract that it did not become my rules rather than our agreement.

(Assembled from field notes September 1999)

***Value clarification: Seeking to create a sense of identity (Reasoner, 1992).***

The third area I dealt with was value clarification because I learned that positive choices emerge from a respect for self and others born out of understanding of, and belief in, our rights and responsibilities. Although the children and I had discussed a vision and agreed ground rules I learned that it would always be my vision and ground rules unless I enabled the internalisation of the values on which these two areas were based. Because of this I set out to create opportunities for the naming and discussion of rights and responsibilities which I felt would assist the children in developing their own sense of identity.

This was done in these two ways:

- Informally as issues arose,
- Formally through Social, Personal and Health Education.

**Value clarification in informal situations.**

When relationship issues arise in primary classrooms they frequently arise informally in a conflict resolution situations. These highly charged meetings can be accompanied by a strong feeling of anger or confusion causing a lack of clarity in the discussion. In my

experience, children find it difficult to separate the incident from the issue. I learned the following strategies were useful:

- Use 'time out' to cool emotions,
- Hear every side privately before commenting,
- Help the children to filter down the incident to the central issues by clarifying which rights were infringed or which responsibilities unfulfilled.

I have learned that the ensuing discussions can take a great deal of time at the beginning of a school year. As the children grow in understanding of their rights and responsibilities they frequently have clarified their position in their minds after a short cooling down period. (Assembled from field notes September 1999, December 1999 and March 2000).

### **Using programmes to enable value clarification.**

The role of programme inclusion in relationship building and self-esteem enhancement is twofold. It allows for the regular creation of time to deal with relationship issues and it allows the teacher to be proactive in the introduction of issues for discussion in a non-emotive atmosphere.

The children and I used a broad range of material to develop understanding of a wide range of issues. The following are some examples:

- The need for rules in all areas of society,
- The development of an understanding of feelings,
- The broad area of understanding the nature of friendship,
- The rights and responsibilities of individuals,
- The reasons for conflict and
- The broad area of social justice.

From these discussions the children were gradually enabled to name their own rights and responsibilities and to be challenged to live by them, to name and manage their feelings, and to express a respect for others.

I learned a number of things from these experiences. The children quickly understood their rights. Initially, although they could name their responsibilities they appeared to look upon them as both flexible and abstract, for example, some children told me that:

‘You need to be in the yard and small when a big guy threatens you to know that all that stuff is only O.K. if you’re a grown up.’

(Conversation with four children recorded in diary October 21<sup>st</sup> 1999).

Living by named values is a challenge to the average adult. It is no surprise that children find it equally difficult. (Diary, October 21<sup>st</sup> 1999).

One very interesting aspect was that the children didn’t seem to believe that their rights were equal to adults. I sensed that this feeling had grown from experience. After a difficult conflict resolution group discussion, one child said the following:

“It’s strange to be able to tell the teacher that she has been unfair and be asked how instead of getting a punishment.”

Adults have a lot to learn in terms of respecting children as equals and allowing them the rights we so dearly prize for ourselves.

(Assembled from field notes Sept 1999 to April 2000).

## **How can I show the impact of the phase 1 interventions?**

At the end of this phase I reflected on the interventions I had introduced and considered whether they had impacted on the criteria I had originally set out. I saw the following three changes and I cite the evidence of those changes through a description of the children’s learning outcomes from a project they were involved in during December 1999:

- Behaviour in groups became more focussed on the allocated tasks,
- Individual children began to show a greater sense of responsibility,
- In the case of some children there was improvement in eye contact and interpersonal skills.

### ***The hamper collection.***

In December 1999 the class were responsible for a school-wide project that involved organising the collection of foodstuffs for a charitable organisation. I felt that observation

of the children during this three-week period would give me a clear picture of any changes that might have occurred during the first phase of the study because involvement in this project challenged the children:

- To freely choose appropriate behaviour while unsupervised,
- To agree each day, in groups, the plan for class visits and to visit classes and to return after a specified period and,
- To explain to each teacher the purpose of their visit and to record contributions.

These activities demanded an ability to focus on organising the task in a group situation, to take responsibility for both the task and for their own behaviour and the use of interpersonal skills. During this period I observed some distinct changes (see Appendix 4) in some of the children and received comments from colleagues who observed changes also.

#### **Evidence of behavioural changes: Group work more focussed.**

“The children appear to have worked out a pattern for their visits. They have decided who will go where, and when, and to rotate responsibility for each class daily giving everyone a chance to visit every class. When a disagreement arises they appear to resolve it easily.” (Diary December 7<sup>th</sup> 1999).

#### **Showing responsibility.**

“ ‘I learned that the range of responsibilities and the compliments the children are receiving from other teachers are helping. They particularly enjoy visiting previous teachers and hearing about how much they have grown up’.

Child F: ‘Mrs X thought I was my big sister. She said she was the most sensible girl she ever taught and I was just like her. She got me to explain to her class who the hampers were for and I didn’t mind doing it. Its great to get a chance to show that you can be grown up.’

Child Q: ‘Mrs. Y said I was a very sensible fella now and she asked me to help her with a message. Can I go back and do it?’

‘Before this he would have gone ahead and would not have come back to let me know where he was’.” (Diary December 6<sup>th</sup> 1999).

### **Interpersonal skills.**

“I had a chat with Teachers A and B today about my class and the work I was doing. They both told me that they had noticed changes in some of the children on an interpersonal level. They talked in particular about Child U and Child O who they had both initially found to be evasive in terms of eye contact and engagement in conversation.

Teacher B: ‘Child U looked me in the eye today and asked me how I was, well, he said ‘Howya!’ but he waited for an answer. A while back he would have walked on with his head down.’

Teacher A: ‘Yes. I noticed a change in Child O as well. Do you remember how he used to push his way up the stairs? He stood back to let me pass. I was so surprised that I said - after you Sir!’

Self: ‘Did he look at you when he stood back?’

Teacher A: ‘Yes, and he sort of smiled, a big change for him’.”

(Conversation with two colleagues, recorded in Diary December 13<sup>th</sup> 1999).

### **Modification.**

At the end of phase one I reflected on the changes I had introduced to my class and the impact of those changes and began to consider ways in which I could move forward from here. I believed that the relationships among the children in the class were improving and that they were becoming more self-reflective. Furthermore I realised that difficulties were still arising but solutions were coming more readily and overall there was a greater recognition of individual rights by the children themselves.

I decided to maintain the emphasis I had introduced on care in relationships and to begin to look at care in the learning process. My relationships with the children are strongly connected with the learning process and the procedures I adopt in class. Many of the procedures that I adopt, like marking children’s work, can have an impact on the way children view themselves so I decided to reflect on the practices I use in the classroom and their impact on the children’s self-esteem.

### ***Phase 2: Care in the learning process: Seeking to create a feeling of being capable.***

During this second phase of the study I set out to examine two aspects of the learning process that I thought could impact on the ways children feel about themselves. I considered how the following issues might impact on self-esteem:

- Creating choice for children about what they learn and,
- Procedures for marking and discussing children's work.

***Choice in learning: Rationale.***

When I reflected on the idea of giving the children a right to choose what they learned I realised that this process would be difficult to manage. When I discussed the plan with some colleagues a comment was made that it 'would be a neat trick' to get the children to do my work. This comment upset my thinking because I realised that my inability to counter this with a clear explanation of my purpose stemmed from a lack of clarity on my own part. I had not set out a clear purpose for this strategy. (Diary January 10<sup>th</sup>).

I began to look at the value of choice in my own life and I realised that I valued my right to choose being respected because I felt more capable as a result and that it gave me a greater sense of purpose. For example, in section 1:2 I describe the origin of my theory of self-esteem development and I emphasise the important role of active involvement in my own learning in the development of my own self-esteem. I came to believe that the creation of opportunities for the children to make choices about their own learning could contribute to a feeling of being capable (Humphreys, 1993b) and could lead to a greater sense of purpose (Reasoner, 1992). I decided to involve the children both formally and informally in curriculum planning. My first steps were tentative and as a result led to some later changes.

***Choice in learning: Seeking to create a sense of purpose (Reasoner, 1992).***

Involving the children in curriculum planning was intended to have two consequences. I wanted the children to feel that they had a role in the choice of material we studied and I felt that this involvement could lead to an enhanced feeling of self-worth and a greater motivation to engage in learning or to a feeling of being capable.

**Action step: Planning Teams.**

I began by setting up planning teams and distributed responsibility for most curricular areas to these teams. Each week during phase 2 we planned the material that would be studied that week and we displayed our plan in the classroom. The children quickly began to take responsibility for classroom organisation and assembly of materials (Diary January 19<sup>th</sup> 2000).

The material that was planned was displayed in the classroom and we referred to this display daily. The children who had planned each piece of work took responsibility for arranging the classroom and assembly of materials. I retained overall responsibility for instruction.

***Resolving problems that arose.***

***Children choosing where their expertise lay.***

Quickly it emerged that although the children were researching possibilities for study that the bulk of responsibility for the learning environment was still mine. What was emerging was that the children were deciding on some of the content of learning while I in turn taught what we agreed. I realised that I was not operating a truly democratic structure. The children, having benefited from the focus on relationship building in phase 1, were quick to point this out.

“What’s the point in us telling you what to teach, wouldn’t it be better if did the things we were good at and you did the rest? Then we could make games and things to help us learn.” (Diary February 1<sup>st</sup> 2000).

Following this the children took responsibility for a small number of areas like Art, P.E. and creative writing and made contributions to planning.

(See Appendix D 1).

***Conflicting values.***

While the experience of planning for their own learning was positive for many of the children (See Appendix D 1) a dilemma arose for me in relation to competition. Although I had promoted the value of co-operation over competition in a general sense as part of relationship building, some children were very keen on planning competitive activities. It was very difficult for me to reconcile the tension between two of my values in this instance, i.e. democracy and co-operation. The children live in a culture that prizes dominance, and where competitiveness is valued. I wanted the children to freely make choices about their own learning and their choice of competitions was contrary to my promotion of co-operation (see Appendix F).



### ***My learning.***

I learned a great deal about myself as a teacher during this phase. I have always retained a tight control on learning choice in my class while comforting myself with the thought that when I had made all the 'important' decisions that I was flexible about the detail. I also learned that this was an area I needed to explore in more detail in order to understand it better.

(Assembled from field notes January 2000 to March 2000).

### ***Marking children's work: Rationale.***

I wanted to critically examine my approach to marking and discussing children's work. This is a procedure that I have learned can impact on the way children in classrooms feel about themselves. I have learned that marking can be time consuming and frustrating because the relationship between the act of marking and children's learning can be unclear. The problem seems to be something around the "separateness" of the act, by this I mean that I mark the children's written work and because of time constraints or organisation the child may respond to this by redrafting or through a re-teaching/learning exercise at a later stage.

I saw a need for greater responsibility for self-improvement on the child's part while I could act as a support. I also saw the need for an increase in 'face to face' marking. One difficulty that had emerged for me from self-reflection was that I communicated only through marking with some children. When I examined this issue in more detail I realised that many of these children were the really well behaved studious children. I felt that this was a terrible oversight on my part and almost an affirmation of the behaviours I had been trying to eradicate. In other words, as I felt the children might see it, poor work and behaviour standards gained much more of my attention and time.

### ***Marking and discussing children's work: Seeking to create a sense of competence (Reasoner, 1992).***

My purpose in focussing on marking and discussion of children's work was twofold.

- I wanted to re-clarify for myself the value of marking and,
- I wanted to reflect on the impact of my 'marking style' on self-esteem.

By marking style I mean the way I as a teacher mark a child's work and the use that I make of the learning from this experience. I include issues like respect for the child's effort and how the work is discussed and critiqued.

### *The children's view of marking.*

#### **Action step 1:**

I decided to get the children's view of marking using unstructured interviews. I felt that I did not fully understand the impact of the procedures I had learned to adopt. I had always considered myself to be both industrious and fair in relation to marking. I have long held the view that it is a mark of respect for the children's effort that I should spend time going through their work in detail.

Child F: "What I hate most is the red pen, and all the wrong spellings marked. It just makes a mess."

Child Q: "I can't stand writing out the right answer. If you do something once that should be enough."

Self: How can I correct your work so that you learn something and feel better.

Child F: "Just mark some of the really bad stuff. Some of the mistakes are just 'cause we're not paying attention. It just doesn't seem that important to be right all the time."

Child V: "Yeah. I mean you know that we can spell something if we do it most of the time. The odd mistake is not the end of the world." (Diary, January 21<sup>st</sup>).

As a result of these discussions I learned that marking need not be more than a few useful comments and that the focus should always be teacher and child learning. I realised that much of the learning takes place when the work is given back.

I learned that the purpose of marking is, in my view, to build a 'marking relationship' with each child or to become a critical friend. It is important to respect each child by regularly discussing his/her work face to face. In these discussions it is important to give the child's contribution to the discussion equal status. The marking relationship has traditionally has been an unequal one. I need to value the learner if self-esteem is to be built (Compiled from field notes, January to April 2000).

#### **Action step 2:**

Following these comments from the children I made a number of changes to the way I mark children's work.

- I read initially to look only for the positive comments I can make,
- I then look for the three most important errors which I base on the purpose of the exercise and I write these at the end,
- I note these errors for re-teaching and,
- I introduced a system of group editing to build self-editing skills.

## **How can I show the impact of these interventions?**

I believe that the impact of prioritising care in learning was seen in the following:

- The children showed an increased interest in the broad range of their weekly timetable,
- The children enjoyed planning for the lessons in which they felt they had expertise.
- The children appeared to show a greater understanding of the link between marking and learning and,

### *Awareness of the content and nature of subjects.*

Even though the first attempts to have the children involved in planning for all the subject was not entirely successful there were some positive outcomes. The children became more aware of the nature and content of the subjects.

One child commented, “ I didn’t like trying to work out what we should all learn in Geography but I think I learned more about it from trying to find something for you to teach”. (Diary, March 29<sup>th</sup>).

I observed that the children also developed a greater sense of team and a greater feeling of having a contribution to make to their own learning (see Appendix D 1).

### *Children showing initiative in favoured subject areas.*

I recorded the following in my diary:

“ Over the last few weeks I have been observing the planning group in charge of art. They have gone to so much trouble in assembling ideas and making samples that I feel inadequate. They have considered the three major school celebrations that we have in March, St. Patrick’s day, Mother’s day and Irish week. For each they looked up ideas, chose a selection and assembled the necessary materials. Often primary teachers complain that they cannot possibly have expertise in every subject. We forget to use the most valuable support we have, the children, and we also forget their capacity for joy in a subject that may not be our strength.” (Diary March 26<sup>th</sup> 2000)

### ***Marking and learning.***

Children seldom see the relationship between marking and learning. Many look upon marking as an indication of their failure. During this phase of the research I noticed the following:

- That the children gained a greater understanding of the role of marking in building their learning and consequently it changed their perception of it,
- That the children learned to improve the quality of their own work through the experience of helping others to edit.

“I don’t mind handing up my work any more because it doesn’t come back a mess. I like getting a second chance to correct it myself before you see it. Sometimes I hate doing a second draft but when you make it into a book I kinda like to see the rest of the kids reading it. If it was still a mess I’d be embarrassed.” (Excerpt from interview of four children, March 31<sup>st</sup> 2000) (See also Appendix D 2).

### ***4:5: Validation.***

I described the process of validation in chapter 3. Here I will discuss how I dealt with validation in this study. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) describe the validation process as being made up of the following elements:

- Descriptive validity,
- Explanatory validity,
- Instrument/technique validity,
- Criterion validity,
- Validity checks e.g. triangulation and respondent validation.

*Descriptive validity:* In this chapter (Chapter 4) I offered a description of the study I engaged in. This description forms a validation in itself in that it is open to interpretation by those who read it.

*Explanatory validity:* My explanation of why certain things occurred gives explanatory validity. This explanation coupled with the description of the study allows the reader to decide whether his/her interpretation would correspond with mine. My explanation is not only open to interpretation but it is also open to being challenged and checked as I have retained all my data in my research archive. This includes letters of permission, my

research diaries, the children's diaries and worksheets and written material the children produced. My archive also contains letters of validation from three colleagues.

*Instrument/technique validity:* I have described the research methodologies I used in chapter 3 and the reasoning behind my choice. This, I believe, lends instrument/technique validity. My choice and range of data collection techniques, in my view, suited the topic under study as I consider them to be fit for the purpose of this study.

*Criterion validity:* The idea of criterion validity was one that I had some difficulty with. In my trawl through the body of literature I did not come across any study that dealt with the issue of self-esteem enhancement in the way I did in this study. I engaged in an exploration of self-esteem enhancement in the classroom context through the introduction of changes in the areas of care in relationships and care in the learning process. I therefore was unable to check the broad range and emphasis of my work against that of other researchers

*Validity checks:* The final aspect of validation I wish to discuss is that of validity checks. Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) refer to these two aspects:

- Triangulation and
- Respondent validation.

I believe that I have incorporated both these forms of checks in my study in the following ways:

- The range of data collection methods (see section 3:6:4) and
- The use of informal/unstructured interview with both parents and children.

During the course of this study I met regularly with a number of parents and discussed a range of issues including their view of how their child was coping emotionally with school in general and with their lives outside of school. I recorded this information and my reflections in my diary. I also interviewed the children individually and in groups. I chose unstructured interviews, as I believed that I would get a more honest response in that way. Children are especially honest when they feel they are not under pressure. I believed that they would feel pressured by a perception that they had to give an 'expected answer' if I structured the interviews.

Another method of *validity check* is that of *colleague validation* (Mc Niff 1988). In this study I enlisted one colleague from the teaching staff of my school and two colleagues from the Masters study group to validate my findings and to act as critical friends. With my teaching colleague I worked as follows:

My teaching colleague was a member of the schools learning support team and was responsible for the provision of additional assistance in the broad area of English. She agreed to observe one of these children (Child B) in terms of B's demeanour, her openness to engaging in new tasks and her general ability to interact in the group.

My colleague and I met regularly throughout the school year and she was happy to write a report at the end of the study period confirming that she had not only seen an improvement in the agreed areas but that in conversation, the child's mother had confirmed it also (see Appendix H 1).

My critical friends in the Masters study group agreed to the following:

- To validate the progress of my learning.
- To act as reader validators to enable a deeper understanding of my findings and my learning.
- To meet regularly to discuss the progress of my research and of my learning.

Each of my two Masters colleagues agreed to write a validation report setting out areas where they agreed that they had seen my learning emerge (see Appendices H 2 and H 3).

The validation process was very important as a support during the study and in helping to name my learning. The day to day work of an experienced teacher can appear to become trivial in that we can forget the long periods of reflection that have led to the adoption of procedures or ways of interacting that work for us.

### ***Where do I go from here?***

This chapter contained a broad description of both the data I collected to support my findings and a discussion of those findings. Overall I feel I learned a great deal from engaging in this study and I will discuss that learning and relate it to the literature I read in preparation for this study in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of findings.**

At this point I intend to return to the literature that informed my study and use it to interpret my findings. I believe that a practical base is a very important aspect of teacher research.

One of the difficulties that emerged for me in the course of this study was that there appeared to be two approaches adopted in the body of literature I examined. One style discussed theories using research or ideas constructed from examination of other theories and studies. Another style was the ‘manual’ where, in the main, very little from the body of research literature was cited as a base for the theories set out, but a great deal of common sense was written. I found it necessary to examine both of these types of sources because in the process of doing this research I set out to generate my own theory in relation to the development of self-esteem and to explore the practical application of that theory.

In this chapter I will look at the theoretical context I explored in the course of this study and will link together some significant threads of my study and that theory. I intend to discuss the following issues:

- The impact of significant others on the development of self-esteem as it relates to the role of the teacher.
- Definitions of self-esteem as they can be used to interpret the role of the teacher.
- The ways in which an individual demonstrates his/her levels of self-esteem.
- Autonomy and the enhancement of self-esteem.
- The role of programmes in self-esteem enhancement.
- The importance of the learning context in self-esteem enhancement and
- The importance of a lived caring vision both in individual classrooms and in the wider school.

### ***5.1: The teacher as significant other.***

The literature on the development of a sense of self (for example S. Freud, 1900; Erikson, 1963, 1968; A. Freud, 1958) suggests that an individual’s concept of his/her worth develops as a result of his/her interactions with the people who become significant in that individual’s life.

The people who can become significant in the life of a child begin with the close nuclear family and broaden out to include the wider family, the teacher, peers and community members. In primary schools children tend to spend most or all of their day in the care of one teacher. There is a potential for the teacher to have a good deal of influence over the children.

During the course of this study I explored the teacher's potential to have a positive influence on the children in his/her care in the role of significant other.

I am convinced, as a result of engaging in this study, that a class teacher can become a significant other in each child's life and has the potential to have a very positive impact on the self-esteem of the children in his/her care.

The body of literature I examined helped me to understand the teacher's role as a significant other in the lives of the children but gave me no practical clues as to how I might set about making that a positive influence.

### ***5:2: Defining self-esteem and the role of the teacher.***

The purpose of a definition is generally to explain a phenomenon succinctly. I found some definitions very useful beyond that simple purpose. Humphreys' (1993a, and b) definition that self-esteem is a feeling of being loveable and capable supports my vision of self-esteem development. I focussed on care in relationships in an effort to help the children see themselves as loveable. The focus on care in the learning process was intended to build a feeling of being capable.

Reasoners' (1992) analytical definition of self-esteem lent further depth to those two broad strands and helped me to break a feeling of being loveable into three subsections (senses of belonging, security and identity) and being capable into two subsections (senses of purpose and competence).

The analytical definitions of self-esteem were of practical use to me in the course of this study as they name the feelings and behaviours that are central to self-esteem. For example, Humphreys (1993b) names over- and under-control behaviours that indicate low self-esteem. Other writers (Rosenberg, 1979; Harter, 1988; and Reasoner, 1992) name feelings or aspects of the person that impact on self-esteem, for example, character or



appearance. These definitions helped heighten my awareness of comments made by the children as clues to their feelings.

### ***5:3: Levels of self-esteem and behaviour.***

Self-esteem is based in our thoughts and in our feelings about ourselves and as such is not generally accessible to others unless we choose to make it so. When another person wishes to establish whether our self-esteem is high or low then they may use clues to assist them. The clues are often gathered from discussion with the individual or observation of behaviours exhibited.

Glasser (1984) suggests that our behaviour is the means by which we communicate our needs and control our lives. During this study I studied the behaviour of the children in order to help me understand them. I found that their discomfort in a situation often showed in a physical way before it was expressed verbally because many children have difficulties in expressing their thoughts and feelings verbally. (Assembled from field notes September 1999 to June 2000).

I found it possible to link my observation of the behaviour of individuals with the analytical definitions of self-esteem thus providing a practical base from which to work.

### ***5:4: Autonomy and the enhancement of self-esteem.***

The issue of autonomy is, I believe, central to self-esteem enhancement. It relates to power and powerlessness. Children often do not see the range of choices that they make on a daily basis especially when the choice has been impulsive. Children will often suggest that they carry out actions that reflect anger without thought. It is important to learn to recognise what drives our impulses in order to develop a greater self-understanding (Assembled from field notes Sept 1999 to April 2000).

Freedom to make choices about learning or about conflict is important as it places control in the hands of each individual. Erikson (cited in Biehler and Snowman, 1990) suggests that such issues as trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity and intimacy develop as a result of positive interactions with others. A significant other can impact positively or negatively on self-esteem and a teacher can become a significant other.

The role of the teacher in creating a context where self-esteem can be enhanced is described in Biehler and Snowman (1990) as one where the teacher shows trust in the pupils ability to make choices about their own learning and is sensitive about their social and emotional needs. These two areas were the underpinning values in my study (see chapter 4). The creation of opportunities to make choices can create a feeling of being valued as a contributor to the dialogue of the group to which the individual belongs. This feeling can lead to an enhanced feeling of worthiness or capability.

The practical application of a belief in democracy was difficult to introduce in the classroom. There are so many variables to be considered including the links with observation and recording of learning and management of behaviour issues that arise in groups. The literature that I came across where the value of operating democratically is discussed deals very little with the practical application of that value.

### ***5:5: The role of programmes in self-esteem enhancement.***

Self-esteem building programmes support the work a teacher engages in where self-esteem building is prioritised. Programmes provide variety and can also present novel angles to an issue. Reasoner (1993) for example has laid out a variety of worksheets that deal with issues like security and identity. One of the important aspects of programme inclusion is that they are designed to be of practical use in the classroom. I now believe that this is one of the reasons that programmes are often included as perhaps the sole approach to self-esteem building.

I do not believe that programmes on their own can enhance self-esteem. The prioritisation of care in relationships and in the learning process together with the inclusion of programme elements can, in my opinion, impact positively on self-esteem in the classroom.

### ***5:6: The learning context and self-esteem enhancement.***

The learning context is very significant when self-esteem building is prioritised. Social constructivist approaches to education for example Vygotsky (1978) have the potential to create an enhanced feeling of loveability and capability (Humphreys, 1993b). Children can learn a great deal from working together and can feel cherished by another's support.

The teacher needs to reflect on all the interactions the children experience that could impact on the ways in which they perceive themselves including the learning process.

### ***5:7: A lived caring vision.***

The individual classroom can become an oasis of calm in a child's life where an individual teacher sets out to make it so. However I feel it is preferable that the whole school community, including educational partners, set out to create a lived caring vision.

The school community needs to reflect on whether their expressed vision reflects the experience of every individual in the school. The question that needs to be asked is, is there a mismatch between our stated and lived values? Whitehead (1989) introduces this concept when he discusses the concept of experiencing oneself as a living contradiction. Do we state one thing and do another? I found this to be a core issue when I reflected on my plans for this study and as the study progressed. I learned that I had internalised the concept of relationship building as a value. I still had a long way to go in living out another of my stated values, that of belief in democracy or individual autonomy. I believe that children's rights are equal to adults. I also understand that children differ in experience and learning (Assembled from field notes September 1999 to December 1999). The balancing of these two issues is a great challenge to me as a classroom teacher.

I found this to be a profound learning about my self as both a teacher and a human being. The practical application of this value is a very worthy challenge that I did not wholly resolve during the course of this study.

### ***Where do I go from here?***

In this chapter I discussed the body of literature about self-esteem and the ways in which my reading helped deepen my understanding of the subject under research. In the next and final chapter I will return to my initial intention at the outset of the study and will examine the extent to which I believe I fulfilled my aims.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion.**

In this chapter I intend to return to the main argument of this study and examine the extent to which I fulfilled my original intentions. I intend to begin by briefly restating the question and aims I set out at the beginning of this study and will discuss the extent to which I fulfilled those aims and answered that question. Finally I will review the limitations of the study and indicate some future research possibilities.

### ***6:1: Research question and aims.***

The research question I asked at the beginning of the study was:

**How can I help the primary school children I teach to develop their self-esteem?**

At the outset of this study I set out to achieve the following four aims which I used to elaborate on that question. They were:

- 1.** To reflect on the ways the following issues impact on self-esteem in the classroom:
  - The relationships the children have with classmates and other children,
  - The relationships children have with adults especially their class teacher,
  - The creation of choice in learning and,
  - The marking and discussion of children's work.
  
- 3.** To reflect on and develop the practical application of my theory of self-esteem development in the classroom context through the process of doing the research.
- 4.** To modify and refine my theory of self-esteem development through the research process so that I would be in a position to share my learning with my colleagues.
- 5.** To add to the body of knowledge in the area of self-esteem, in the Irish context.

During the course of this study I feel I achieved all of my aims and answered the question I set out to address. The focus of the first aim was also the focus of the study and therefore this aim had primary importance for me. The other aims relate more broadly to the overall learning that emerged from the first aim. I will therefore discuss my learning from the first aim in more detail than the others.

### ***6:2: My broad areas of learning.***

I feel that I achieved most in the area of care in relationships as it was an area that I had been prioritising and refining over some years and this study created an opportunity for me to develop a deeper understanding through the process of doing the research. My work in

the area of exploring care in the learning process was new and it is an area I would like to return to in future research in order to understand its practical application more deeply.

In relation to self-esteem building I learned about the importance of the following:

- My teaching style and my relationships with the children,
- Conflict management,
- Value clarification,
- Agreed ground rules
- Relationships among the children,
- Success in learning and,
- Choice in learning.

I now intend to discuss the relationship between my learning and the aims I originally set out. The above issues will emerge in the context of the discussion of aims achieved.

### ***6:3: How my learning relates to the aims I set out.***

My first aim helped me set out the dual focus of the study, which was to examine the impact of relationship building, and choice in learning, on self-esteem.

#### ***What I learned regarding relationships building and self-esteem.***

I learned that relationships are of prime importance to children and that the quality of these relationships impacts on the children's self-esteem. Children, in my view, experience a lot of difficulties in relationships particularly with regard to care and conflict. I found this to be true in the course of this study.

The two main relationships that I examined were children's relationships with other children, especially classmates, and the relationships they have with adults, especially the teacher. In the course of doing this research I learned the following:

- That children need a lot of assistance to manage their relationships with others, especially with other children but that the creation of a caring classroom community assists this process.
- That children may have difficulties recognising their own rights and responsibilities as human beings due to their emerging maturity or character, and unclear, or perhaps un-stated, values.

- That giving children opportunities to clarify and state their values creates the challenge to live by them.
- That some children respond more quickly than others to day to day kindness and that some show suspicion or discomfort, especially at the beginning perhaps due to past experience.
- That the agreement of ground rules for behaviour was a very important support to the caring classroom community and that it has an impact on the development of security and trust and on the protection of rights.
- That children feel more secure when they know the parameters within which to operate. Being involved in drawing up those parameters allows for a greater degree of 'ownership' than when the parameters are presented as complete.
- That the internalisation of the basis of the ground rules in the form of their rights and responsibilities as humans is assisted by value clarification.
- That the combination of the three approaches to relationship building, focussing on care, ground rules and value clarification, had a positive impact on the ways in which the children viewed themselves and consequently on their self-esteem.
- That group learning and group behaviour need to be addressed simultaneously. Children need to be taught how to work in groups and to discuss both their learning and the behaviour difficulties that arise in groups, in order to build successful group work.
- That in the school context, learning and relationship building is closely connected to self-esteem building.

***What I learned regarding choice in learning and self-esteem.***

The introduction of democratic planning structures designed to create choice in learning was an area I had not explored before. Consequently I feel that my work in this area was less successful than my work in relationship building. I am aware that I have a great deal left to learn. I believe that linking choice in learning to relationship building in the context of self-esteem enhancement was successful. However I believe that it is an area that demands further research.

During the course of this study, having introduced and prioritised changes in the area of relationship building I then went on to build structures that were designed to create choice for the children in the content of their learning. During this phase I learned:

- A great deal about myself as a teacher as I realised I maintained control over learning choice despite intending to give the children responsibility for naming the curricular areas that we would explore.
- That the children were happy to take responsibility for a limited range of curricular areas while I looked after the rest. Indeed it soon became obvious that they had a very clear picture of my strengths and areas of weakness as a teacher. Physical Education was one area I was told clearly not to “worry about”. “ You can make sure we’re nice to each other and we’ll do the rest” (Diary, March 2000).
- That having responsibility for planning their own learning led to an increased interest in and enjoyment of a wide range of curricular areas. I believe that a deeper exploration of this area might help me to understand the whole area of self-esteem and motivation to learn as I believe they are closely linked.
- That attempting to live out one value e.g. belief in democracy can create a challenge to other values when individuals freely choose a course I did not believe in.

***6:3:3: What I learned about my teaching style.***

I believe that a teacher’s style is developed as a result of their own experience of being taught and of their later learning around the skills of teaching. I experienced teaching as a very didactic activity and have had to work hard at not repeating that experience. I believe that I have made some considerable progress but find that I need to further explore the broad area of trust in the students to make positive choices about their own learning. Regarding my teaching style I learned:

- That while I believe the theory I find that the practice is so bound up with my perception of my responsibility to monitor, and take responsibility for, the whole learning environment.
- That I believe in the principles of democracy but that its practice is both difficult and challenging.

***Putting my theory into practice.***

One of the most important aspects of this study in my view was that it afforded an opportunity for me to explore both the theory and practice of self-esteem building. I feel that as a result of this experience I now have a clearer understanding of the body of literature on self-esteem and of the practical application of that body of knowledge.

When I researched the literature in preparation for this study I found that research-based writing and practice-based writing were largely separated. I learned:

- That if the area of teacher research is to develop in such a way that it will lead to improvements in practice then theory based research needs to be linked with practice based research.
- That I could have fully explored my practice without first examining the theory and that my understanding of the theory would have been very limited without exploring the practical application of that theory.

This experience has now led to my belief that I can share my experience with my colleagues citing both theory and practice. This can in turn create opportunities for colleagues to create their own theories and to research the practical application of those theories.

### ***Adding to the body of knowledge on self-esteem in the Irish context.***

One of the aims I set out to achieve was to add to the body of knowledge in relation to self-esteem in the Irish context. I feel I have done this in a number of ways.

I have explored the practical application of my theory of self-esteem building in the classroom context with a dual focus on the importance of the relationship and learning contexts. I have concluded that a combination of factors is important if self-esteem enhancement can take place in the classroom.

These factors are:

- A prioritisation of the creation of a caring atmosphere,
- An agreement of behavioural ground rules that respect individual rights and emphasise individual responsibilities,
- The creation of opportunities to name, clarify and internalise the value base of both the caring classroom and the ground rules,
- The creation of negotiated opportunities for choice regarding learning content and context,
- An exploration of behaviours exhibited both in the learning context and in the wider school that assist in the living out of a shared caring /learning vision or that detract from it,
- An exploration of the strengths and limits of the teacher's role in self-esteem enhancement.



I have also examined my theory of self-esteem building as it relates to the Irish educational context with particular reference to the Education Act (1998), the New Curriculum (1971) and the Revised Primary Curriculum (1999) which is currently being introduced to schools through in-service education. I concluded that the focus on group learning recommended in both these curricula requires a practical understanding of the practicalities of managing relationship issues on the part of the teacher.

Finally I have looked at programmes that refer to relationships that have been introduced to Irish schools in recent years and conclude that their role is as a support to the caring/learning vision that a teacher sets out to create with a view to self-esteem enhancement.

I feel that I have gained a lot from the experience of doing this research and have explored an approach that I have not come across in my reading. In this way I feel I have contributed to the body of research on self-esteem.

### ***6:3: The limitations of this study.***

The focus of this study was on my own experience in my classroom. I had developed a theory of self-esteem building in the classroom context that I set out to test through this study. My intention was to understand the psychological theory in the body of literature about the development of self-esteem and to explore the ways in which that theory could link with my own theory that was based in my practice.

My main intention was to link my understanding of self-esteem enhancement to practical classroom issues such as the creation of a positive atmosphere where children could feel secure and cherished as individuals. This involved the exploration of the management of behaviour and conflict issues, choice in learning, and most importantly an exploration of the value base on which I believe a caring/learning vision is based.

I did not set out to explore teaching methodologies per se but only as they related to self-esteem issues. Although I have mentioned the role of programmes as a support to the work I set out to do I did not explore their content in detail in this dissertation.

### ***6:5: Future research possibilities.***

My experience during the course of this study of linking choice in learning to relationship building, in the context of self-esteem enhancement, was I believe, successful. However I believe that it is an area that demands further research.

The children's choice to limit their responsibility regarding choice and planning for their own learning needs further exploration. A deeper exploration of this area might help me to understand the whole area of self-esteem and motivation to learn, as I believe they are closely linked.

Future possible research questions include:

- Can giving children choice in what they learn be harmonised with national curriculum requirements?
- Are motivation to learn and self-esteem interdependent?
- How can human rights be protected where individuals negate responsibilities?

Although I feel I have reached some answers in the course of this dissertation I can see that it has also created an ongoing research agenda.

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## **Appendix A:**

### **Contents of my research archive.**

- Item 1: My ethical statement.
- Item 2: Letter to Principal requesting permission to carry out research study; Signed original.
- Item 3: Letters to parent requesting permission to include their children's work in the research study; Signed originals x 26.
- Item 4: Notes from discussion with children explaining purpose of study, parental permission letter and asking for their willingness to have their work included.
- Item 5: My reflective diaries.
- Item 6: Observation notes: Whole class.
- Item 7: Observation notes: Child B.
- Item 8: Interview notes: Various children.
- Item 9: Interview notes: Child B.
- Item 10: Interview notes: Various parents.
- Item 11: Interview notes: Parent Child B.
- Item 12: Initial profiles: Whole class.
- Item 13: Initial profile: Child B.
- Item 14: Children's class diaries.
- Item 15: Notes from discussions with colleagues.
- Item 16: Children curricular plans.
- Item 17: Programme materials used with the children and samples of children's written work.
- Item 18: Notes from validation group meetings.
- Item 19: Validation letters: Signed originals x 3.
- Item 20: List of names of children in class and letters used to refer to them in dissertation, e.g. Child B: Name. Parents were referred to as e.g. Parent of Child B.

Item 21: List of colleagues cited or quoted and letters used to refer to them.

# Appendix B: Access, Ethics, and Permission.

## Appendix B: 1

### *Ethical statement.*

Statement of ethics regarding research project to be carried out in School X in 1999/2000.

Researcher: Sally Mc Ginley.

The following is a statement of ethics that I am setting out to guide me through the process of research. In it I outline the topic of research and some basic guidelines which I intend to follow in order that I may treat all the participants of my project with respect and their contributions with confidentiality. The following issues will guide my behaviour:

1.The subject I intend to research is the relationship between self-esteem, self-discipline and motivation to learn. I believe that there is a link between these three issues and that self-esteem is the basis for the others therefore I have framed the research question as follows:

How do I develop the self-esteem of the children I teach?

2.In order to carry out the research I will undertake to carry out a wide range of reading in the areas of self-esteem, self-discipline, motivation to learn and learning theory together with a variety of relevant materials which becomes important as the project progresses. I believe that this is important so that I can plan and carry out my research in the context of recognised and relevant educational psychological theory and practice.

3.Before commencing my research I will seek and gain permission in writing to carry out the research from the principal of my school.

4.Before beginning to gather evidence in the form of children's written or oral work I will seek and gain permission in writing from the parents and will only use material where that permission has been granted. In order to solicit this permission from parents I will write to them outlining issues of anonymity, access, storage and length of time the material will be stored together with a brief outline of the nature and purpose of the research.

5. I will gather evidence in forms other than children's work, for example, my reflective diary, observations from a validation group and comments from parents and teachers regarding the children that I teach. All conclusions that I make will be based on genuine evidence.

6. Finally I will give my principal a copy of my statement of ethics and the letter I intend to send to the parents and gain his permission to send out this letter before doing so.

*Signed:-----*

Sally Mc Ginley.

## *Appendix B:2*

Letter of permission: Principal.

Dear (Principal),

I request your permission to carry out a research project in my class. The subject I am researching is the relationship between self-esteem, self-discipline and motivation to learn. I believe that self-esteem is the basis of both self-discipline and motivation so I am framing the research question “How can I develop the self-esteem of the children I teach?”

In order to carry out this project I have drawn up a set of ethical guidelines that I intend to follow in the course of this study. I have included a copy with this letter for your information.

In my ethical guidelines you will note that point 4 covers the gathering of evidence from the children in my class. In order to do this I will require the permission of the parents. I have drawn up a letter that I intend to send to the parents in my class with your permission. I enclose a copy of the letter for parents for your information.

I would be grateful if you could indicate below whether I have your permission to carry out the research and whether I have your permission to issue the enclosed letter to parents.

Yours truly,

-----  
Sally Mc Ginley.

I do/do not consent to this research project as outlined above and in the enclosed ethical statement.

-----Principal.

I do/do not consent to the enclosed letter being issued to parents.

-----Principal.

*(The signed original is held in my research archive).*

### *Appendix B: 3.*

#### *Letter of permission: Parents.*

Dear Parent,

I am writing to you for two reasons.

1. I want to inform you that with Mr. Healy's permission I intend to carry out a research project in my class for my M. Ed. thesis. The topic I intend to explore is the relationship between self-esteem, self-discipline and motivation to learn.
2. In order to write up this project I will need to gather evidence in the form of children's work. For this I would need your permission.

In order to be clear I will outline the ethical guidelines that I intend to apply to my work as well as a brief description of some of the issues I intend to explore in the class. The work I will be carrying out will come under the category of Social, Personal and Health Education.

The following guidelines will apply to my work:

1. In order to explore the issues of self-esteem and self-discipline we will look at issues like friendship, decision making, peer pressure, listening skills and a variety of other related matters.
2. All children in the class will benefit from this work whether their parents give permission for their work to be quoted or not.
3. Only children whose parents have given permission will have their work quoted in the final project.
4. Where parents have given permission samples of children's work may be used to illustrate issues or demonstrate trends.
5. Where sample work is quoted names will not be used and children will be referred to in a general way, for example Child A.
6. You are entirely free to choose whether your child's work will be included or not. Your choice will not alter my relationship with your child.
7. If you wish to access material your child has produced in relation to this project I will gladly show it to you.
8. Material will be held for the duration of the project and for 12 months after completion. All material will be destroyed at the end of this time.
9. All material will be held securely and access will be limited to my tutor, the school principal and staff members who already work with your children.

Please contact me if you have any questions in relation to this project.

I would be grateful if you would sign this letter whether you wish your child's material to be used or not.

Yours truly,

-----  
Sally Mc Ginley.

I do /do not wish to have samples of my child's work included in the above research project.

Signed:-----Parent.

(The signed originals x 26 are held in my research archive).



## **Appendix: C.**

### **Phase 1: My approach to care in relationships**

*My underpinning purpose in focussing on care in relationships was to create an atmosphere where all the children in my care could feel valued. It was my intention to build a better learning community where self-esteem enhancement could take place in an atmosphere of gentleness, kindness and respect.*

#### ***Appendix C: 1***

##### ***Focus on care: Seeking to create a sense of belonging.***

*The purpose of focussing on creating a sense of belonging was to enable all the children to feel that they were equal in the classroom and in my eyes. I felt that this was very important because I believe that children build up damaging self-views as a result of their experiences that can inhibit their personal and social development and their academic learning.*

In seeking to build a sense of belonging I focussed building my relationship with the children on the following:

- I assessed the learning needs of each individual in the class through building profiles of each child's academic, social and personal development from discussions with, the children, their previous teachers, and their parents, and from assessing all the records available in the school.
- I worked to get to know each individual child through moving around the classroom and sitting down with each group and through talking to each child about a piece of work as regularly as possible. I also engaged in 'getting to know you' exercises e.g. tell me about your family, friends, hobbies etc.
- I tried to be 'present' in the classroom in a real and meaningful way. I tried very hard to engage with as many of the children as I could every day through greeting, casual conversations, eye contact and moving around to assist with or discuss tasks.
- I set out to show warmth and humour as a mark of openness and by displaying patience and calm where needed.
- I worked very hard to actively listen to the needs of the children so that I could understand them better. I had to slow down the pace of my work in order to allow for this and,

- I was aware that the children's body language could be seen as a way of reading feelings they might have been dubious about expressing. Some of the children were very tense and 'fiddled' a lot during tasks so I found it necessary to maintain awareness of physical signals at all times.

In setting out to build the children's relationships with each other I worked on the following:

- I discussed the friendship groups that existed in the classroom and worked on building a sense of inclusion through working on games and teams that placed everyone within a team-group before yard every day (One new child had started in September).
- I always helped the children to manage the teams that were set up for P.E. or group work in the class as I have learned that there is a danger of the same children being constantly isolated.
- I focussed on the themes of 'New beginnings' and 'Friendship' throughout September in Social Personal and Health Education and,
- I modelled 'inclusive behaviour' for the children through the creation of a displayed rota for the distribution of responsibilities and favoured tasks.

## Appendix C2

The agreement of ground rules: Seeking to create a sense of security.

**My purpose in setting out to focus on setting up ground rules as a support to building a sense of security was to enable the expression and protection of individual rights. I believe that feeling secure emerges from knowledge of rights and from trusting that those rights will be protected. Security is also enabled by a knowledge that supports or procedures exist to deal with infringements of rights.**

Agreement of ground rules:

*The procedure I used to build agreement of ground rules involved the following steps:*

- *I discussed some areas of society where rules are set out clearly (Sport and Rules of the Road) and asked the children to name the reason why this is so.*
- *The children and I spent some time filtering down this reasoning into a clear statement of the rights that were being protected by the rules they were familiar with.*
- *We then moved on to look at rules in the home and in the wider school using the same process.*
- *Gradually the children were enabled to see the purpose behind the rules they were familiar with and were able to name individual rights.*
- *We then moved on to discuss the nature of classroom work and the issues the rights of individuals there.*
- *We spent a long time filtering down the classroom rules and finding a way to frame them positively, this led to our classroom code.*

This code was displayed in the classroom and the children wrote it in their homework journals. A group meeting was held for parents in late September 1999 and the code was discussed there also.

**Our classroom code.**

- *We will treat everyone and everything with gentleness and respect,*
- *We will be honest in what we say and do,*

- *We will try our best in all our work.*

*Operation of the code:*

*The code was used as a way of helping us name our behaviours in terms of issues rather than incidents. The focus was on both positive incidents where the code was valued and on negative incidents where it was infringed. For example, if a child showed kindness to another we would ask him/her to name the code that was kept, for negative behaviours we asked the child to name the code that was broken. In this way there was constant learning and a developing understanding of behaviour choices.*

### Appendix C: 3

Clarifying values: Seeking to develop a sense of identity.

**My purpose in focussing on the area of value clarification was to do two things:**

- **I wanted the children to be able to name and understand the basis behind their own values. I felt that this would enable them to reach a deeper sense of self-awareness or identity.**
- **I wanted the children to clarify for themselves the values that the class group had expressed through naming our classroom code. I felt that this would help the children to ‘own’ the code and that this process would help the children view the code as a contract to which they agreed rather than as a set of rules.**

*The process of value clarification took place in two ways:*

- *Informally as situations arose and,*
- *Formally through the Social Personal and Health Education programme.*

*Informal value clarification situations:*

*Informal value clarification took place through out the day as both positive and negative choices were made. Choices were noted and discussed where possible and the relationship between individual rights or the classroom code was discussed. In this way an ongoing learning was built into each day.*

*Formal value clarification through programme:*

*Throughout the school year I used a variety of materials from programmes and a variety of methodologies.*

*Programmes:*

*I used Reasoner’s (1992) ‘Building self-esteem in the elementary school’ as the basis of my work because I found the five ‘senses’ of self-esteem that he names suited the dual approach I chose, a focus on being loveable and a focus on being capable (Humphreys, 1993b):*

Reasoner (1992).

- A sense of belonging,
- A sense of security and,
- A sense of identity.

Humphreys (1993b).

*The feeling of being loveable.*

- A sense of purpose and,
- A sense of competence.

*The feeling of being capable.*

*Using this overview as the basis of my programme planning I then chose material from a wide variety of sources to suit my purpose including 'Building self-esteem in the classroom' Borba and Borba (1982), 'Self-esteem Builders', Borba (1988), and the Relationships and Sexuality education programme materials, Government of Ireland (1999).*

*Methodologies:*

*Most of the work I undertook began with an oral component either in the form of class discussion, group discussion, role-play or a game based on prompt questions. Many activities contained no written component and some ended with a written or art activity. I weighted the activities in favour of oral work for the following reasons:*

- *Often oral activities are more spontaneous and show a greater honesty,*
- *Oral activities are more inclusive of children who find written work difficult and,*
- *A great deal can be achieved in a short space of time and when all the ideas have been clarified a written exercise can be built in as re-enforcement at the end if necessary.*

*Throughout the year the children and I covered a wide range of issues and it would not be possible to discuss them all in detail here. However I will outline five issues and the subsections into which they were broken.*

*I have already shown how I dealt with rules in society in Appendix C:2.*

*Below I have outlined the issues I dealt with under each of the broad headings. The questions or statements I have shown are the central intention of each lesson.*

**Understanding feelings:**

*The purpose of looking at this area was to build greater self-awareness and greater awareness of others.*

- *What are feelings?*
- *What is the purpose of feelings?*
- *Can feelings be good or bad?*
- *Naming feelings,*
- *Expressing feelings, I statements (I feel sad...),*
- *Reading feelings: Body language,*
- *Managing anger and,*
- *Managing fear.*

**Understanding friendship:**

*The purpose of looking at this area was that I have learned that many children have a lot of difficulties around the broad area of friendship.*

- *What is a friend?*
- *What is the role of a friend?*
- *Honesty and tact in friendships,*
- *Negative experiences in 'friendships',*
- *Change in friendships,*
- *Treating people with respect even though they are not my close friends,*

#### **Rights and responsibilities:**

*I have learned that many children have difficulties either with naming their own rights or respecting the rights of others.*

- *The two side coin; when I have a right to something for myself others have a right to the same from me,*
- *Naming rights:*
  - *In the family,*
  - *In the school,*
  - *In society.*
- *Naming responsibilities.*

#### **Conflict:**

*Children's relationships are often fraught with conflict because of their emerging maturity or character. I felt it was important to both examine the reasons behind this and to help the children to adopt some skills that would help them negotiate their way out of difficulties.*

- *What is conflict?*
- *Where do I experience conflict and with whom?*
- *Is any of the conflict I experience caused by my behaviour choices?*
- *What do I fight about?*
- *Dealing with conflict:*
  - *Three steps: Support each other, Step back, Cool down.*
  - *Body awareness: Check your body language, Lower your voice, Try to look calm.*
  - *Name the issue not the incident (Refer to classroom code).*
  - *How important is this? Place the issue in perspective.*
  - *Explain calmly where your difficulties lie, use 'I' statements ( I feel angry because...).*

#### **Social Justice:**

*An awareness of the needs and circumstances of others can help place our own lives in perspective. Because of this I feel it is important to involve the children in practical projects designed to help real people as well as understanding the broader issues through discussion, reading, video etc.*

*During the school year 1999/2000 the class and I were involved in a number of charity projects which were chosen to help children to understand the needs of less fortunate individuals at home and abroad, including the following:*

- *The class took responsibility for the school wide collection of non-perishable foodstuffs for the local conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.*
- *The class became involved in a full day of silence in aid of Concern (an Irish charity working in the third world).*

*Through the religion programme we also looked at the broad area of understanding the causes of poverty:*

- *At home,*
- *World-wide.*

*A lot of other work was covered throughout the year. I include a sample only here to demonstrate the approach I took.*

## **Appendix : D.**

### **Phase 2: My approach to care in the learning process.**

*My purpose in focussing on care in the learning process was to critically reflect on the learning procedures I adopt and to consider whether I needed to make changes in order to impact positively on self-esteem.*

For the purpose of this study I confined my observations to two areas:

- The introduction of choice in the learning process and,
- The introduction of change in my marking procedures.

<b>Appendix D: 1</b>
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#### ***Choice in learning: Seeking to create a sense of purpose.***

*I reflected on my own sense of purpose in my work, its origin and on the times when it was lacking. I realised that, although having a sense of purpose is a very complicated issue that can emerge from a wide range of feelings and experiences, the central issue of freedom to choose was important to me. In my own experience I experienced positive feelings when:*

- My opinion was asked for,
- My opinion was respected,
- My ideas were considered and,
- Some of my contribution was included in the final ‘product’ or, if through the process, I came to understand why it was not necessary to include my ideas.

I realised that for me making a contribution to the process I was engaged in was the crucial issue when I was involved a learning situation. I thought that if the children had more choice in what they learned they might find it a positive experience.

#### ***What did I do?***

*I began by setting up planning teams in the class that I tried to arrange a mix of strengths in the following areas:*

- *Creativity,*
- *Ability,*
- *Attention to task.*

*I distributed responsibility to the children for all curriculum planning. I explained to the children that there were curricular constraints on us. I did not give them complete freedom. I demonstrated the constraints of the national curriculum and showed the children the broad ‘skeleton’ of what I had set out for each week. I also distributed all of my support materials to each group and allotted 30-40 minutes to planning each week with daily updates of about 10 minutes.*



What did the children do?

*The children set out plans to deal with a number of topics each week and we displayed the plan. I discussed the details of the plan, in terms of the materials required and the methodology planned, with each group. The children took responsibility for arranging the classroom and for photocopying of materials.*

Positive outcomes.

*The children showed great enthusiasm especially at the beginning (see appendix F) and wanted to arrange a great variety of interesting and worthwhile tasks. For example the group in charge of Science collected lots of ideas about the topic of electricity, the Art group came up with lots of ideas for the various 'celebrations' and the English and Irish groups found ideas for drama and debate. The children appeared to develop a greater understanding of the content of some of the subjects especially as they took responsibility for different subjects after a few weeks.*

### ***Problems that arose.***

A number of problems began to emerge as time went on, some for the children and some for me.

*The children's problems.*

*Gradually the children began to see a difficulty arising for them when they were planning in subject areas where they felt they had less expertise; especially Irish, Maths, History and Geography. They felt that they were really choosing something for me to teach and that other than doing some photocopying for me or arranging the room that they weren't really 'doing it ourselves' (see appendix F).*

*My problems.*

*A number of difficulties arose for me. I began to feel as I imagine some children in secondary school feel; that every group that was responsible for a subject was demanding my complete attention and a larger section of the timetable to cater for their plans. In other words, each group saw their subject as the top priority. I found myself pulled in many directions and had to balance a wide range of demands including my responsibility for:*

- *The balance of the curriculum,*
- *The emotional 'payback' for the children who had invested time and energy into planning,*
- *The overview of the curriculum.*

Changes that were agreed.

*The children and I agreed to make a number of changes. The 'planning groups' were reorganised and responsibility was reduced to the following areas:*

- *Physical Education,*
- *Creative writing,*
- *Art and craft,*
- *Music,*
- *Science.*

*This was much more successful and led to a reduction of pressure on me as teacher.*

What did I learn?

*When I came to the end of the process I learned that the difficulty lay with my original approach. I gave the children responsibility for each subject as a separate entity. I have always found it difficult to balance the broad requirements of the curriculum with a thematic approach to teaching. I have found that gaps occur in each the subject areas and because I generally teach senior classes I feel that I must cover core areas in preparation for secondary school. I have learned to 'scatter' a number of projects throughout the school year that I operate thematically. I realise now that if I had introduced the concept of 'planning teams' under the umbrella of a project theme that there would have been much more coherence and reduced pressure as we would have been working toward a common goal.*

## Appendix D:2

A focus on marking: Seeking to create a sense of competence.

*My purpose in focussing on marking emerged from my concern that I communicate with some children each day only through marking. I began to see the importance of getting this area 'right' in terms of the impact it could have on a child's self-esteem. I felt that they became more willing to tell me what they felt.*

What did I do?

*I began by looking at marking from these two viewpoints:*

- *The teachers viewpoint and,*
- *The children's viewpoint.*

*I discussed the purpose and role of marking with colleagues and their views ranged from the perceived pressure from parents and inspectors 'to be seen to be marking' to an awareness of the positive links between marking and learning.*

*I followed my discussion with my colleagues with discussions with some of the children and found that they held a number of views including:*

- *Marking is an act of respect for the effort expended in producing a piece of work,*
- *Over-marking leads to a feeling of wasted effort,*
- *The marking process is most often a search for errors,*
- *Positive comments about the quality of work go unnoticed when a lot of errors are marked.*
- *Re-drafting is a waste of time unless there is some clear purpose to it like displaying the work.*

What changes did I make?

*Following these discussions I made some changes to the procedures I adopt for marking including:*

- *I discussed all work with the child in question either during the marking process or when returning the work,*
- *I scanned the piece of work first for good quality and second for errors,*
- *Patterns of error were noted for re-teaching and only marked once in the child's work,*
- *I kept the number of marked errors down to three in each piece of work,*
- *When setting tasks I considered how they might contribute to learning as opposed to 'filling time',*
- *Alternative ways of demonstrating learning were introduced, for example drama and,*
- *Self-and peer-group marking was introduced for first drafts of work.*

What did I learn?

*The marking procedure adopted can contribute to or detract from a sense of competence. The marking relationship needs to be respectful of the child's effort and the amount of quality work done rather than focussing on errors.*

## *Appendix : E*

### *Evidence of change: Phase 1: Care in relationships.*

*In this appendix I will include excerpts from the data I collected during the course of this study such as, live data from conversations and interviews with children, parents and colleagues. I will also use data collected in my reflective diary and from observations carried out in the classroom.*

*This data will show how the children behaved before and after the study. Below are the five areas of behaviour difficulties I noted at the outset of the study:*

- Behaviour during group work,
- Behaviour during whole class work,
- Behaviour during out of classroom incidents and,
- Behaviour in relation to self-expression,
- Other behaviours including withdrawal/shyness.

#### *At the beginning of phase 1: Why was I concerned?*

At the beginning of the school year 1999/2000 I began work with my class and I quickly found that I was having great difficulties each day with teaching/learning and classroom management. In this section I will include evidence of the behaviour I cited in chapter 4 as a description of the behaviours I witnessed at that time.

#### *Group behaviour:*

“ During today’s English lesson I set a group task during which the children were working on a group poem. We had done all the usual language development work beforehand together with some exploration of poetry. The theme was ‘new friends’ and I balanced the groups according to ability as best I could. I observed each of the groups in terms of their behaviour and moved around the room to hear what they were saying. One group remained on task during the whole 20 minutes. Two or more children actively disrupted the work of the rest of the groups. They pushed, pinched, held their own conversations, tried to dominate the group while not giving the others their turn and in one case two children jumped up several time and did a Mexican Wave.

I learned that I need to help these children to learn how to behave in groups or no other learning will occur” (Diary September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999).

#### *Behaviour in whole class situations:*

“ Today I was teaching a Geography lesson and Child W made a comment about the climate in Ireland and how he prefers the weather in Spain where he was on holidays. Child V immediately interjected that Spain was for ‘Lager Louts’ and they continued their banter across the room, shouting and laughing, as if the other children or I were not there. By the time they had settled down the Geography time was almost finished and I had lost the attention of the rest of the class who had started their own conversations.

I learned that I need to find a way of keeping these children focussed on the task in hand but how???” (Diary, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1999).

#### *Behaviour in relation to out of classroom incidents:*

On several occasions when I came out to collect my class after yard Child U was standing out of the yard in the punishment area. On each occasion I spoke to the teacher on yard supervision and he had often infringed yard rules or put another child in danger. On one occasion I spoke to the supervising teacher and we had the following conversation.

“Teacher D: Child U was sent to the punishment area today because he was kicking during a ‘game’. He knows that ‘play-fighting’ is not allowed.

Self: Did he behave when he was out?

Teacher D: That is the problem, I hate going on about this kid every time I’m on the yard but he stood up there throwing stones down at the others.”

I had asked to see the parents of Child U because he was getting into a lot of trouble with other teachers in the yard. His mother came up to see me and is very concerned about his behaviour but feels that it is the same every year at this time.

“Every September I have this problem with Child U, He is in constant trouble until Halloween and then things settle down a bit. He doesn’t seem to be able to settle down after the summer.” (Excerpt from conversation with Parent of Child U recorded in Diary September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1999).

#### *Bullying:*

“Today Child Q and Child S reported that Child V and Y had been bullying them. They said that it had been happening ‘for years’. They said that it had been reported to the principal before and that it had stopped but that it began again every September. The behaviour they reported was quite difficult for a yard supervisor to see because it involved ‘shouldering’ or ‘elbowing’ as they passed by followed by a ‘profuse apology’. I asked all the yard supervisors to observe and had a ‘warning word’ with Child V and Y. Maybe it will settle down.” (Diary October 4<sup>th</sup> 1999).

#### ***Behaviour in relation to self-expression:***

One of the unusual aspects I noticed in some of the more ‘vocal’ children was that despite their regular interjections during class the following pattern emerged:

- Their interjections were of a ‘staccato’ style, i.e., they shouted up one word or a short phrase,
- They almost always avoided eye contact while they did this,
- When encouraged to explain or support their comment further they avoided further engagement either by turning away or starting a conversation with another child.

“ I took my class to a play in town yesterday called ‘Into the West’ in The Ark in Temple Bar. It was a really exciting trip and the play was excellent. Today we discussed the play in class and two things struck me, the level of attention some children paid to every detail and the difficulty some others had in expressing their thoughts. There were a lot of one-word comments being shouted up while other children were answering questions or describing incidents. When these children were given space to comment freely they appeared to have nothing to say in the whole class setting. I am concerned about this as it both causes disruption to the class and appears to be an indication of some expression difficulty.” (Diary, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999).

#### ***Withdrawal and shyness:***

I noticed that a number of children were either behaving very shyly or withdrawing from engagement with the other children or with me. I was concerned about this behaviour because I feel it is these quiet children who ‘suffer in silence’ and who keep their difficulties hidden so well that no-one sees a need to help.

During an observation of the class I noted the following:

“I watched the children today during an in-class break and I noted that several of the children were not engaging a lot with the others. Child D, for example, stood at the periphery of a group at break but for 15 minutes did not appear to either listen to the others or interject in any way. It was almost as if she had learned that this was a way of appearing to be part of the group.

I also observed Child S and he appeared to try to enter a group several times and lost heart. Was this a result of previous experience?”

(Observation carried out in classroom during break, September 24<sup>th</sup>).

Behaviour changes noted as phase 1 progressed and afterward:

*Beginning in September 1999 I introduced the changes in focussing on care, agreeing ground rules for behaviour and working on value clarification I described in chapter 4. Gradually changes began to emerge in the children’s behaviour and I will cite evidence in the form of excerpts from conversation, interviews, interviews and observations.*

*The behaviour changes I noted fell into the following groups:*

- *Group work became more focussed on the allotted task,*
- *Whole class work also became more focussed,*
- *Out of class behaviour began to improve and,*
- *Individual children began to show a greater sense of responsibility,*

*In the case of individual children I noted:*

- *An improvement in eye contact and interpersonal skills,*
- *Changes in relation to withdrawal and shyness and,*
- *Changes in relation to self-expression.*

More focussed group and class work:

*I saw a gradual change in the children’s approach to group and class work. This began slowly and took longer for some individual children to adapt to then it did for others.*

*The following signs emerged gradually:*

- *An improvement in the amount of time the children were able to concentrate on a given task,*
- *An improvement in the number of children concentrating on the tasks in each group and,*
- *An increase in the amount of eye contact and interpersonal skills.*

**Group work:**

*After a short period I began to take feedback on the behaviour in the groups before taking feedback on the task. This changed the nature of group work quite dramatically.*

*“ Today I decided for the first time to take feedback on group behaviour before hearing about the task. I was surprised by the impact of this simple change. I began by teaching the children how to explain the behaviours they witnessed while respecting the anonymity of the individuals involved. I then took the feedback.*

*‘In our group one boy kept butting in and not allowing anyone to take their turn. I think this is unfair because we are all supposed to have a chance.’*

*'One of our group kept messing every time I spoke, it was really annoying because I was interested in what we were doing'. (Individual children's comments recorded in Diary, November 25<sup>th</sup> 1999).*

*The reaction of the children in question was quite surprising. They simply sat back and listened. It is often said that children pay more attention to each other than they do to their teachers."*

*Following this, gradual changes emerged and the children who had continually disrupted group work showed a greater interest and engagement. It was almost as if they had learned to behave as they did because they thought it was expected by the other children. (Assembled from field notes October 1999, to March 2000).*

#### **Class work:**

*I noted similar changes in the children's approach to class work. Incidents continued to occur but the broad range of the approach appeared to be slowly having an impact. The most obvious change was that the children as a group began to take a greater role in noting behaviours that were unacceptable. It was interesting that this did not happen in a self-protective way but in a way that showed care for their classmates.*

*" During a group discussion today a few of the children began to 'mess' and laugh at a comment made by Child O. The reaction of several of the children was rapid and strong.*

*Child N: 'You don't have a right to treat Child O like that.'*

*Child P: 'Yeah, he's got the same rights as you.'*

*Child V: 'We were only messing. It didn't do him any harm.'*

*Child O: 'I'm used to child V being like that.'*

*Child P: 'You shouldn't have to take that from anyone. You have your rights, stand up for yourself.'*

*Child N: 'Hey, Teacher, what were we talking about before that started?'*

*(Conversation in classroom, recorded in diary, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2000).*

*Out of class behaviour improvements:*

*The type of improvements I noted out of class showed in yard behaviour and in general movements around the school.*

*In the early stages of phase 1 when classroom behaviour was beginning to become a focus I saw no improvement in the yard or as we moved around the school. Gradually I began to see two changes:*

- As we moved from place to place, e.g. going to Library or Computers, there was less pushing and shouting and seemed to be a greater sense of gentleness toward each other.*
- Colleagues who were supervising the yard began to notice that they were noting very few behaviour problems from my class.*

*(Assembled from Field notes, February to March 2000).*

*Showing a sense of responsibility:*

*I noted evidence of an increase in a sense of responsibility in all of the children to varying degrees and in different circumstances. In this regard I collected evidence from parents, colleagues and from my own observations.*

*Some examples are:*

*During a discussion with the parents of Child D and Child K the following was said:*

*“Parent D: I’m delighted with Child D recently, She seems to be paying more attention to me when I ask her to help with something.*

*Parent K: Yes Child K has grown up a lot this year. Last year I tried to teach her to take more responsibility for her own bag and books and lunch box. I still had to bring up her lunch on days that she forgot it. I used to think that she did it deliberately to get my attention. Now I haven’t to bother at all.”*

*(Conversation with two parents, recorded in Diary, January 22nd, 2000).*

*Colleague G commented in the following way:*

*“Child P helped me organise a load of books today at lunchtime. He saw me carrying them and asked if I needed help. It was great to have somebody to check off the lists.”*

*(Conversation with colleague G recorded in Diary February 16<sup>th</sup> 2000).*

*In my diary I recorded the following:*

*“ I seem to have noticed a greater sense of responsibility overall in the class. It may be partly due to the fact that I really focus on giving responsibility to every child rather than on those who are good at it because they have had opportunities to learn it. I have learned over the years that some children cannot simply lack practice.”*

*(Diary, February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000).*

Individuals improvements:

**Eye contact and interpersonal skills.**

*The final area where changes in the children were noted was in the area of eye contact and interpersonal skills. Some of the children had difficulty with these areas. In the case of eye contact discussions with parents at parent teacher meeting demonstrated that this trait was either present mainly in school and the parents had not seen it or that they had witnessed it when their children appeared nervous.*

*I found that it occurred mainly in relation to other adults and myself and did not appear to be present in child to child conversations. I observed the children who seemed to have difficulty with eye contact and noted that it appeared to be a learned tactic to avoid conversation particularly of the challenging type.*

*In my diary I recorded:*

*“I have been observing a number of children who I have found had difficulty making or maintaining eye contact with me and with other adults. I have noted some changes. Several of the children are more able to make eye contact but still have difficulty sustaining it for very long. However, Child D and Child P appear to be much more relaxed and are using eye contact in a way that feels very natural.”*

*(Observation recorded in Diary December 14<sup>th</sup> 1999).*

**Withdrawal/Shyness:**

*“Today I met Parent D. She is very happy with the progress being made by Child D. She feels that it is a result of all the work we have been doing and the support she is getting from the special needs teacher.*

*Parent D: ‘I find she is coming out of herself more and more. I wasn’t great at school and I worried about her. Now I can see her getting a nice job and being happy’*

*(Conversation with Parent D, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2000).*



**Self-Expression:**

*In some individual children there was a gap between their ability to express their thoughts coherently and my experience of their general ability. I felt that this was caused by poor self-esteem and that with greater confidence they would make improvements.*

*This difficulty showed mainly when the children were involved in class discussions. I noted a gradual change for some of the children and I feel that it was caused by the change in the behaviour of the listeners. There was quite a degree of 'jeering' from some of the children in reaction to remarks made by others in the earlier part of the year school.*

*As the children experienced more successful group work I feel a change occurred in the way some children were perceived, this led to a greater respect for their contributions and consequently to greater confidence in making those contributions.  
(Assembled from field notes September to April 2000).*

## Appendix F:

### *Evidence of Change: Phase 2: Care in the learning process.*

*In this appendix I will cite evidence to show the before and after situations I encountered in my class in relation to the learning context.*

Freedom to choose: Why was I concerned?

*When I had completed the first phase of my study I concluded that one of the issues that I had not examined in relation to self-esteem development was the broad area of freedom to choose. I began to consider the importance of choice in my own life and of the importance of my freedom to choose and I concluded that for me having choice is closely connected with my sense of self-worth.*

The marking process: Why was I concerned?

*I also began to look at the kind of conversations I have with the children each day. Within the school day there is very little time for conversation around issues that do not connect with the work we are engaged in. The conversations I have with children are most often centred on resolution of relationship problems or work issues. I noted that in the case of some children who do not come to my attention in the discussion of relationship issues the only interaction I have with them some days is through marking of their work.*

*I therefore decided to look at the two areas of choice in learning and the marking process.*

The situation that existed at the beginning of phase 2 in relation to choice in learning.

*Before I began phase 2 of the study I made all the curriculum choices myself and in consultation with the other 4 teachers working at fifth class level. The fifth class teachers met once a week and consulted on and planned our work. I occasionally consulted the children on issues like creative writing, Art and P.E. ideas but in general I made all the important decisions because it was 'my job' to do so.*

*I felt that in relation to learning some of the children were highly motivated, some worked because 'it's what you do in school' and a group of children tried everything they could imagine, diverting attention from work. This usually began in the late morning and became worse as the day progressed.*

*I thought that if the children had a greater say in what they learned that they might develop a greater incentive to become and remain engaged in tasks. I decided to allow the children to make choices about the content of their learning by giving them a curricular framework each week that they could use to 'flesh out' and build a plan for each week. I assisted them in this process.*

*(Assembled from diary January 2000).*

Behaviour changes noted:

*After the first few week of the children being involved in planning I noticed that the children in general were showing an increased interest in the nature and content of the*

*subjects they studied. They also began to see interesting possibilities in terms of activities they could engage in.*

*Some of the children became very excited by the possibility of the class working on something that they had suggested. Unfortunately it was difficult for me to incorporate all the ideas that emerged and this led to a feeling of disappointment. We began a negotiation process to deal with this but gradually, although the children were unsure about what was wrong they knew that something was missing. However, the children were showing an interest in what we would study and how we would study it.*

*One of the main things that emerged was a greater sense of team. The children appeared to enjoy sharing out tasks and leaving work prepared. There was a noticeable increase in attention to task for example, there was a quieter sense about the way the children worked.*

*(Assembled from field notes, January to March 2000).*

Difficulties that emerged:

*The area of competition became a difficulty for me. I had promoted co-operation over competition as I felt that competition damaged self-esteem. In most cases there is only one winner or winning group.*

*A particular group among the children wanted to arrange competitions for a lot of the topics that they were planning for. Their behaviour and attitude became difficult as they were using phrases like 'we're going to beat everyone, we'll win it all'. This did not encourage me to have it go ahead but I wanted to encourage their interest. In the end I allowed some competitions but we discussed caring behaviour in these situations beforehand to help ease difficulties.*

*(Assembled from field notes February and March 2000).*

The situation that existed in relation to marking at the beginning of Phase 2:

*At the beginning of phase 2 I had a procedure for marking that I had been using since September and probably with some alterations for many years.*

*My rationale was that:*

- *Each piece of work should be marked thoroughly with a view to producing a 'perfect' copy after further drafts,*
- *I should fulfil my duty as a teacher by both marking and being seen to be marking, (hence the red pen) and,*
- *To make positive, encouraging remarks to the children about their work at the end of each piece that would show how I valued the quality aspects of the work.*

*I felt that this situation assisted the children in making improvements to their work and that doing anything less would be a non-fulfilment of my duty.*

Changes that I introduced and their impact:

*Following discussions with children and colleagues I changed my approach to a more consultative way of marking. I stopped correcting every mistake and started to focus on the learning that could emerge as a result of correcting a few things. I also introduced a system of self-editing followed by peer-editing.*

**Impact of these changes:**

*Overall I found that these changes were positive. The first thing that I noticed was that for me there was a sense that I was not quite doing my duty until I began to really see*

*the benefits. This feeling was mixed with a sense of relief that I no longer had to spend so many hours on correction.*

*For the children there appeared to a great sense of relief that I was no longer going to 'search and destroy' their work. It was they who pointed out to me that every mistake does not mean that something wasn't known. 'Sometimes a mistake is just a mistake'.*

*Working with their peer to improve their work was also interesting. Some children who often handed up work that contained a large number of errors could scan another child's work and quickly and point out errors. I felt that they learned more from this than from all the hours I spent at home pouring over copies.  
(Assembled from field notes February and March 2000).*

## Appendix G:

### Evidence of change: Child B.

*In this appendix I will include evidence related to the child I called Child B. I observed all the children in the class throughout the study period but I paid particular attention to observing this child. My purpose was to demonstrate that what I was doing in a general sense could be seen though tracking the progress of one child.*

Child B: Before:

*At the beginning of the school year I assembled a profile of this child in relation to her academic, social and personal qualities using material from her file and discussions with the child herself, her mother, her previous teacher and the learning support teacher she had attended for some years.*

*Academically she had a number of difficulties particularly with composition of written work and with handwriting and spelling. She had attended support since 2<sup>nd</sup> class and her tests at the end of fourth class indicated that she would continue to need learning support.*

*On a social level I had observed that that shad a stable group of friends that her previous teacher and mother assured me had been together for some time. This was a great support for her.*

*(Assembled from field notes September 1999).*

*On a personal level she had a number of difficulties.*

*‘Child B was always nervous last year. She seemed to have difficulties speaking out for herself and appeared to need a lot of support. I think it’s mainly connected to her lack of success in school because she has a nice personality and has kept a nice group of friends’ (Meeting with Colleague J recorded in diary September 8th 1999).*

*‘Child B has always been a nervous girl. I worry about her all the time. I’m afraid that when she goes to secondary school she won’t manage. Everything is here for her with Colleague F giving her learning help and the teachers all so kind. Up there you’re just a number’.*

*(Conversation with Parent B after parent-group meeting September 27th 1999).*

*In my own observations I noted that in class she spoke little and avoid coming to notice by keeping her head down a lot. She also tried to cut off every conversation very quickly by moving away. She also appeared to be maturing physically as an adolescent and seemed to feel uncomfortable with the changes that she was experiencing. Overall she appeared to be unhappy.*

*(Assembled from field notes September 1999).*

Child B: During the research study and as it progressed.

*The changes I noted in Child B took some time to become obvious but as time went on she appeared to grow in confidence more quickly. The changes I noted in her fell into the following groups:*

- *Changes in general demeanour e.g. standing up straighter, keeping her hands off her face and mouth,*
- *Greater willingness to contribute to class discussions,*

- *A more relaxed approach to making mistakes,*
- *Much more willing to engage in conversation and,*
- *A stronger voice when she spoke.*

*'I am very happy with Child B already this year. She loves coming to school and gets on with her homework with any trouble. She was always a good girl but she had bother with her written work and she used to get in a state, now she seems to be much calmer. It's a great relief to me because I can relax a bit about her.'*  
(Meeting with Parent B, November 19<sup>th</sup> 1999).

*'I discussed Child B with Colleague F today and she has noticed some of the same changes I have seen. Overall she finds her more confident and willing to speak out.'*  
(Diary March 9<sup>th</sup> 2000).

*In my diary I recorded the following:*

*'I watched child B today for fifteen minutes as she worked with the group on her project. I began to wonder why I chose to observe her at all until I remembered how she had been. I know she has great support in her friends and in her family and that must have contributed as well. I am happy to see that she has grown more confident. She appeared to be the one with the ideas today. She still has bother with her written work but it's mainly in the handwriting now.'*  
(Observation notes: Child B: March 9<sup>th</sup> 2000)

Appendix H: 1

**AppendixG: 1 contains a letter of validation from one of my teaching colleagues who works in the learning support department in my school. In this letter she validates the changes I state occurred in Child B during the course of the research study.**

June 2000.

To whom it may concern:

I am a learning support teacher and colleague of Sally Mc Ginley and have agreed to act as validator for her. We work in the same school and I withdraw children from time to time from classes to work on specific areas of English. During the school year 2000/2001 I worked with a group of three children and agreed with Sally that I would observe these children with a view to their general self-confidence, demeanour, and approach to their work. I paid particular attention to the child known as Child B.

I have worked with Child B over a number of years and have come to know both her and her family well. The focus of my work has always been assessment of her learning needs in the area of English and then afterwards designing and teaching a suitable programme based on those needs. Over the years I have found her to be a very pleasant well-mannered child who unfortunately lacks self-confidence perhaps due to a history of learning difficulties. At the beginning of fifth class, September 2000, I assessed her using a range of standardised tests for reading, comprehension, spelling and general written work. Based on the results of these tests and on the agreement of both her parents and class teacher I agreed to work with Child B and two other children from the same class for three periods each week.

Over the school year 2000/2001 I observed Child B as she worked in the small group and sometimes as I saw her around the school and noticed a gradual change in her demeanour. She appeared to grow slowly in confidence and this showed in her general demeanour and in her willingness to accept both her successes and her mistakes equally. I met regularly with her mother throughout the school year and again at the end of that year. She agreed that she had seen a change in Child B throughout fifth class and that she was now more confident at home and more willing to 'speak out for herself'.

I am happy to write this letter of validation and to have it included in the research study.

-----  
(Name).

(Signed original held in archive).  
Learning Support Colleague.

## **Appendix H: 2.**

*Appendix G: 2: Validation from one of my Masters Study Group colleagues who agreed to act as a critical friend during the course of my research study.*

June 2000.

Dear Sally,

Over the year during which you undertook your research study I was happy to act as your critical friend and to observe the progress of your learning in that period. I am now pleased to be in a position to validate that learning.

As we discussed your research study I was interested to see how you developed your theory of self-esteem enhancement out of your own personal experience. You then took that theory and combined it with an exploration of the body of literature on self-esteem leading to a more refined theory which you then tried out in practice in your classroom. From this standpoint you then further developed your theory through the process of doing the research.

Throughout the period of the research study I observed your learning related to self-esteem development and to other educational issues. I was particularly interested in how you learned to focus on the needs of the whole child in the following ways:

- You moved from a position of looking at the inclusion of self-esteem building programmes in classes as being the main way of enhancing self-esteem to a position where you saw programmes as only one element of self-esteem development in the classroom and,
- The child's whole experience of school both in terms of relationships and learning emerged as crucial because you came to believe that the child's self-view is built in day to day experience and not in one time-tabled slot.

I was also struck by the way you developed your understanding of the importance of care in the learning process as you learned:

- To understand the impact of the learning process on self-esteem,
- To introduce changes in the marking procedures you adopted,
- To create opportunities for the children to make choices about what they learned and how they learned it.
- To build a positive marking relationship with the children and,
- To trust the children to make positive choices about their own learning.

I congratulate you on what you have achieved and on what you have learned. I enjoyed observing the gradual change in your understanding.

Yours sincerely,

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(Name)  
(Signed original held in archive).  
(Masters study group colleague).



*Appendix G: 3: Validation from a Masters Study Group colleagues who agreed to act as a critical friend during the course of my research study.*

June 2000.

Dear Sally,

I am happy to record my validation of your learning as a result of engaging in your research study. At our regular meetings I was impressed by the progress of your research and by the parallel progress of your learning.

**I observed your learning in two ways, your learning in relation to the topic under study and your learning in relation to the value of an action research model as a way of improving your practice.**

In relation to the topic you researched I saw how you came to understand the importance of self-esteem in each child's life and the impact of self-esteem on success in learning. Through the process of doing the research you critically reflected on your own teaching style and how that impacted on the self-esteem of the children you teach. You also observed the children's experience of relationships in the classroom setting and realised how important it was for you to help them manage those relationships. In this way you refined and developed your theory of education in relation to self-esteem building in the classroom context.

I also saw a broader learning emerge for you as a result of engaging in this study. You learned to see the importance of practice based theory through the use of an action research model. Although your initial focus was on the topic of this research study you gradually learned to see how the action reflection process could be used to explore other areas of concern in your practice. You also saw how it could help you to refine your theory of education by exploring other topics in this way and you expressed an intention to adopt this model as a way of building in continuous improvement to your practice.

I enjoyed acting as your critical friend throughout this study and I would be happy to continue this role in the future.

Yours sincerely,

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(Name).

(Signed original held in archive).

(Masters study group colleague).

