

Chapter 7

Creating Living Educational Theory About Assessment in the Infant Years

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Introduction

Journey end ... and another journey beginning

In this thesis I journeyed widely across the complex and ever-changing educational assessment landscape to search for a fairer assessment of children's learning, development and attainment. I journeyed through vast and varied literature about educational assessment and the debates about raising standards in order to examine local and national perspectives and alternative viewpoints (see Chapter 1 in this thesis).

Whereas many research paradigms related to educational assessment have been created because of philosophical and epistemological commitments to particular bodies of knowledge and working practices (Davis, 1999; Mortimer, 1998; Gipps, 1994), my approach has been a more problem centred and a creative one that evaluates the tacit knowledge of infant school practice related to the assessment of young children's learning, development and attainment (Moyles et al, 2003; Atkinson & Claxton, 2000).

Methodology and epistemology

As a branch of philosophy that studies knowledge, epistemology addresses knowledge questions that surround the process of knowing. In pursuing this research I attempted to understand the epistemological dimensions of how professionals in teaching, like myself, authorise and certify the knowledge they produce. I explored the social epistemological construction of my own consciousness. I traced the effects of

my cultural value systems upon my frames of reference and the perception of the world around me (Kincheloe, 2003).

The project is unique in using its own interactive research process (collaborative reflection and analysis of past practice to inform future practice and in using its own form of visual representation (multi-layered jigsaw puzzle). In Chapter 2 I explained how I adapt a research method from Lomax and Whitehead's approach to critical action research (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003 & 1996) in which the researcher's educational values are the yardsticks by which action (practice) is evaluated. I chose to use Oak Tree Infant School, where I was head teacher, as a case study to explore the existence and significance of tacit knowledge as a basis for effective assessment practices that will not disadvantage young children. I adapted a method of professional story writing (a personally meaningful approach to me) to probe deep levels of my tacit knowledge and raise it to explicit levels of awareness to inform future practice – a fairer assessment of children's learning, development and attainment (see Chapters 3, 4 & 6).

Throughout my research journey I learnt to be creative as unexpected happenings occurred in my professional life both as head teacher of Oak Tree and as a teacher-researcher. I realised that we all have creative abilities and we all have them differently (Cape, 2005). In Chapter 3 I showed how I worked with members of a research group at Kingston University to pursue our research projects, each in our own creative way, by using individual professional story writing and visual metaphors. Storytelling was our main investigative tool. Often, on hearing a story, members of the research group remembered a forgotten experience. Stories provided inspiration, and offered fresh ideas or confirmed old ones. We also gained an understanding of

another person's experience through their story, as it involved us in events from the frame of reference of the teller. Atkinson suggests that:

In telling a story we increase our understanding and knowledge of ourselves, deepening the meaning in our lives through reflection and putting our experiences in a form that can be understood by others. Stories are part of our natural dialogue and interaction (Atkinson, 1998:12).

Our conversations also allowed the real world into our research and this was crucial for us all, as teacher-researchers. Storytelling helped us to give meaning to our lives and experiences, and for us, this worked in a variety of ways (Atkinson 1998). We attempted to find a powerful means of relaying imagery of school experience for in-depth analysis. I discovered that creativity is not a single aspect of intelligence that only emerges in particular activities, in the arts for example, but that it is a systematic function of intelligence (essential in the educational action research process) that can emerge wherever intelligence is engaged. Also I discovered that creativity is a dynamic process that draws on many different areas of school experience and intelligence. Members of the research group found a way to harness, for improvement of practice, not just release their creativity. We discovered that creativity was not just purely an individual performance but that it arose out of our interactions with the ideas and achievements of each other (Cape UK, 2001). We also found that creative expression facilitated communication. It became an agent of personal reflection and change to improve the overall educational experience.

Also in Chapter 2 I described how I used colour, shape and tone in the multi-layered jigsaw puzzle, which was my visual metaphor that represented the overall research process to manifest personal meaning (Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004). I now realise that my research process appears akin to the four stages of art therapy, outlined by Silverstone (1993). As well as the language of the professional stories I needed to

use images, the felt-sense of a phenomenon that the research group could identify and work with as a way of uncovering meaning (multi-layered practitioner knowledge). Throughout my journey I interrogated my own educational values as I uncovered successive, significant layers of professional knowledge in the infant school related to a conceptual model of a fairer assessment (see Chapters 3, 4, 5 & 6). I used self-study and adapted a narrative approach (see Chapters 3, 4 & 6) to construct a language that I could use to show underlying ideas, and to open them up for collaborative reflection and examination of the educational assessment landscape I journeyed through with research colleagues. I also drew on assessment and pupil data from a school self-evaluation study at the case study school (Oak Tree) and work with a group of local head teachers to collectively examine the effects of school context and intake on achievement (see Chapter 5). Throughout the thesis I endeavoured to make sense of what I considered to be less than adequate standards of holistic educational assessment and find ways to improve them so that assessment practices enable all children to have a fair opportunity to learn (Wragg, 2001:39).

Although the journey was very risky it was a huge collaborative practical learning experience for all those involved, particularly me. Like Black et al (2003:118) I soon realised that practical learning and risk often go together. One risk in our journey was that we (all teacher-researchers) found the tasks that the journey set us often to be unacceptable or impossible (see Chapter 3 & 6). Although we did not decide to refuse or to ignore the challenges, there was still the uneasy feeling that the changes we proposed might have been found feasible but unacceptable. We were keen to improve our practice (effective assessment) by making changes, but we were required as head teachers and teachers to implement national and local policies in our schools. Yet these potential disasters did not happen!

Why did we persevere and why are the outcomes of the thesis so positive and rewarding to me?

One answer to this question lies in the relevance and potential of educational assessment as a research topic. Throughout the project, assessment remained one of the most talked about national issues in education. In Chapter 1, when I reviewed the literature about the debate on educational assessment I showed that assessment has taken on such importance in schools since the introduction of the National Curriculum that the very word is saturated with associations of formality, anxiety, ritual and impending doom (Wragg, 2001).

Yet while the positive outcomes may have been due in part to this potential, the commitment of the research group formed a second essential component. Soon after the beginning of the journey, I became aware that the interaction of the two - that is the power of the ideas to bring out the professionalism and talents of teachers (research colleagues) - was clearly the catalyst to success that has enabled me to get to this point in my journey to be able to complete the writing of the thesis (see Chapter 4).

Theoretical framework **Educational assessment**

The purpose of my research was to examine assessment policy and practice more deeply and collaboratively reflect on some of the issues raised by my experiences as an infant head teacher/teacher. I examined the relationship of subject matter – summative and formative assessment, assessment by Ofsted with the learning needs of young children. I also examined how the work, attitudes and beliefs of teachers impact on young children and I linked this with research into children's learning.

Discovering the best way to assess pupil and school performance remains one of the most hotly debated issues in education. I weighed up the arguments in Chapter 1 and the recent research by the General Teaching Council (GTC) (2005) has provided valuable information. I discuss the work of the GTC later in this chapter. In an attempt to examine the inter-related elements of educational assessment I collected a variety of data about formative assessment (see Chapter 3 Learning from Children's Work: exploring the evidence), standardised assessment (see Chapter 4 Learning from the Infant Curriculum: exploring the evidence), summative assessment (see Chapter 5 Learning from assessment and pupil data: exploring the evidence), and the assessment role of Ofsted (see Chapter 6 Learning from Ofsted: exploring the evidence).

Summative assessment

At the start of my research project I tried to encourage research colleagues to steer clear of summative assessment. I consciously tried to show them how teachers at the case study school (Oak Tree) developed their formative work (see Chapter 3), when I examined examples of annotated children's work. I now realise that I felt the negative influences of summative pressures (National Key Stage Sats) on formative practice (Follows, 1991) and a strong feeling of the harmful influence that narrow high-stakes summative tests had on teaching and learning at Oak Tree.

Research colleagues could not accept this emphasis because the reality in school was that formative assessment had to work alongside summative assessment. In fact we tried to work out effective strategies for using formative approaches to summative tests, as Black et al later wrote about (2003). We looked at the distinctions drawn

between formative and summative assessment, with the definitions of the two usually revolving around the difference in function and timing (see Chapter 1).

Summative assessment is generally undertaken at the end of a course or programme of study (half-term or term's topic) or at the end of year or Key Stage to measure and communicate pupil performance for accountability (Torrance & Pryor, 2002). The implementation of the National Curriculum and National Assessment was central to our debate about the role and purpose of formative assessment, and indeed the balance to be struck, or the tensions to be resolved, between formative and summative assessment. In Chapter 1 I discussed the claim by the National Curriculum Task group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) that a properly designed system of national assessment could produce both formative and summative assessment data – at the level of the individual child and at the level of the school and national system for accountability purposes (TGAT 1988). Subsequently, Harlen et al (1992) have argued that formative procedures and data must be kept separate from summative, precisely because they address quite different purposes: to use the former to supplement that latter would inevitably involve distorting the process of formative assessment. Others like (Wragg, 2001) have argued the reverse – that two separate sets of procedures would produce an intolerable burden on teachers and that, in any case, in such circumstances the summative would always overshadow the formative because of the demands of accountability.

Certainly this tension and feeling of intolerable burden on our work in schools was the central factor in our discussions, (see Chapters 3 & 4). In writing the thesis, and continuing to work with a primary school community, I realise that for formative assessment to survive at all it must be developed in tandem with, and linked to, summative assessment (Black et al, 2003). Certainly teachers now have greater

control over the setting, timing and marking of Key Stage 1 Sats. Although teachers have no control over the construct of the tests they have greater opportunity to use them positively as part of the learning process, rather than solely as proof of the learning outcome.

At the beginning of my research, the most significant issue that I discussed with the co-researchers was the impact of National Curriculum assessment on the learner [child or teacher] (Weedon et al, 2002:14). Reineke (1998) points out that:

Instruction touches the mind; assessment touches the heart (p7).

Certainly one of the main reasons for me starting my research was the emotional impact of assessment on young children, teachers and the school community at Oak Tree (see Introduction).

I felt that the emotional impact of assessment was one of the most overlooked but profoundly important truths of education that learning includes both intellectual and emotional components. Reineke states:

Assessment, formal or informal, considered or casual, intentional or not, powerfully affect people, particularly students. The assessment climate that students experience is a critical component of instruction and learning. Students' assessment experiences remain with them for a lifetime and substantially affect their capacity for future learning... emotional charge is part of the character of assessment information (Reineke, 1998:7).

In each of the Data Based Chapters I considered the factor that assessment can lead to elation, dejection, fear or excitement, but is rarely neutral. In Chapter 1 I used Satterly's writings to discuss the origins of educational assessment and explained that if any adult reflects on their best and worst moments at school they will usually recount an assessment period. In many cases these experiences are painful many years later. I examined my very negative Ofsted experience in Chapter 6 and children's negative experiences in the classroom in Chapter 4. Psychologists have long

recognised the role of emotion in learning, in terms of self-esteem, motivation, attribution theory, but this recognition has only recently spilled over into the world of educational policy and practice (DfES, 2005).

Government Control and interference

External tests and targets have been the dominant culture for the best part of two decades (Moorhouse, 2006), as shown by the introductory paragraphs to earlier chapters. In the past years, prior to and during my research project the government and its educational advisers became progressively more involved in telling teachers not only *what* to teach within the curriculum but *how* to teach it, using a range of methods perceived to be appropriate (Alexander et al, 1992). Also the government introduced strict procedures of *what* to assess and *how* to assess teaching and learning in schools.

Depending on the age, experience and partialities of teachers, some have welcomed these incursions into their professional practice while others have been more sceptical. I know that I fell and still fall into the latter group. The National Literacy (NLS) and Numeracy Strategies [NNS] (DfEE, 1998b; 1999a) were arguably the most prescriptive of these incursions and they received mixed responses from teachers. I know that I became increasingly frustrated, as head teacher, on behalf of the teachers and young children at Oak Tree when lack of time precluded the exploration and spontaneous development of ideas in a class, or the struggle to perceive the relevance of some of the learning that was to be tested.

Fundamental review of purpose and process of assessment

Even as I complete my thesis assessment remains one of most talked-about issues in education. The General Teaching Council (GTC) initiated extensive research in 2005, to study evidence from all sides in order to better advise the Secretary of State for Education. Despite some welcome developments, they wanted to see a fundamental review of the whole purpose and process of assessment across National Curriculum Key Stages 1-3 (Moorhouse, 2006).

As a head teacher I recognised that everyone had a stake in the assessment debate - from children, teachers, parents and schools. But I strongly felt that the balance had swung too far in the direction of external tests and targets. I began my research by trying to find a right or fair way to assess children's learning, development and attainment and the performance of a school. Soon after the beginning of my journey I realised that there was no easy or single answer (see Chapter 5). Throughout my research I weighed up the arguments (see Chapter 1, 3, 4, 5 & 6).

I find it interesting if not reassuring that the General Teaching Council (GTC) Chief Executive, Carol Adams (2006), recommends that we need a fundamental review of the whole purpose of assessment. She states:

We need to go back to basic questions, such as: what do pupils need to help them best with their learning? What information is most helpful to parents who want to be involved in their child's education? Such a review needs to encompass Key Stage 1 - 3. (Prestage, 2006:6).

The GTC sees three major components for a future system of assessment:

- Teachers use a bank of nationally devised tests when pupils are ready
- Formative and summative assessment are used side-by-side to better support learning, enrich public information and increase accountability of schools
- National standards are monitored through sampling cohorts of pupils.

In his article Prestage emphasises the need for immediate change in the assessment system. Just as I have written in my thesis he explains that external tests and targets have been the dominant culture in education for approximately seventeen years.

Children and assessment

Prestage reiterates the competitive nature of summative assessment and writes that tests and targets may benefit the brightest children but increasing evidence shows that rather than raise standards overall, the gap has widened between high and low attaining pupils particularly those in socially-deprived areas (DfES, 2005; Weedon et al, 2002). Many young people appear to regard testing not as a help to their learning, but as a confirmation of their failure (Buck, 2006) [see Chapter 4]. Although this is feedback from secondary school students I continue to experience similar anxiety and concern both from the young children that I teach and their parents. This echoes the negative feelings since National Curriculum and the assessment procedures were introduced (Weedon, Winter & Broadfoot, 2002; Gipps, 1994).

Perhaps most fundamentally, Government is modifying its one size fits all approach to assessment with a commitment to personalised learning drawn from work started in the 1990s on assessment for learning (AfL). Black is widely recognised as a pioneering leader in AfL's development. He defines it as the way a teacher might assess a pupil in order to determine what the pupil or group needs to take learning further and considers the vital element involves motivating pupils to become independent learners, able to reflect on how they learn best. Although Black's work appears to be concerned with AfL in secondary education, much of his work can be applied to both primary and early years education, and therefore is very pertinent to my research.

The GTC strongly supports AfL as a vehicle for developing teacher assessment and recommends that the Government integrate it even more into its national strategies for education. Black & William's famous review of the literature (1998) about formative assessment (AfL) established that:

Engaging in formative assessment raises test results and equips children to be lifelong learners (Clarke, 2005: 5).

Since Black & William's conceptual framework was developed, formative assessment (AfL) has gained higher and higher profile with policy makers (QCA) and practitioners (teachers). It became widely linked to the current thinking of other educationalists (Clarke, 2005, 2003 & 2001; Hall & Burke, 2003) and has dramatically impacted on teaching and learning in infant and primary schools. I shall discuss formative assessment in more detail later in the chapter.

Parents and assessment

Assessment for learning provides new opportunities for parents too, as much of the current feedback on their children's progress comes from test results. Ongoing assessment and more regular feedback between teachers and parents (key-stake holders) could, the GTC believes, encourage more parents to be more actively involved in helping their children to learn. Cottee (2006) writes about the dazzling array of information, from performance tables to Ofsted reports, available to help parents make informed choices about their child's education. She discovers that despite many parents not knowing the difference between formative and summative assessment, or be able to define assessment for learning, they certainly know when they are receiving regular, clear feedback about their child's progress and performance from teachers who know their child well. Therefore the issues surrounding the information received by parents from teachers and schools, when

they receive it, and how they use it – to make informed judgements and choices about individual children' learning and about schools are central to the debate on the current assessment and accountability.

GTC liaised with a number of organisations including the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations (NCPTA), the National Governors' Council and the Parent Education Support Forum and the GTC also commissioned quantitative and qualitative research throughout 2005. Margaret Morrissey of the NCPTA commented on the results:

We have found scant support for league tables and SATs from parents... Our survey with the London Evening Standard found the majority of parents wanted to abolish Key Stage 1 SATs, and they are definite that SATs data should be used by individual schools, not for league tables...Performance table information is 'too narrow' and the over emphasis on testing in the system risks children being taught to the test, not taught to learn. Parents don't want assessment data used for performance tables to inform their choices, they need broader information about children and schools.

Finally she reflected on another research group's findings (GfK NOP, 2005):

Parents can use the information teachers give them, to help teachers raise standards and progress learning at home and at school, but the assessment is the teacher's role. Of course parents need to understand it, but ultimately parents respect teachers' professionalism and trust them to assess their child, using the information gained to progress learning.

And she concluded that:

Parents want ongoing discussion with teachers, with good, regular information, preferably termly, so that issues can be dealt with early. By the end of the year it's often too late (Cottee, 2006:9).

My work with a group of local head teachers confirmed the involvement of parents as an important contributory factor to young children's learning, development and attainment (see Chapter 5).

School governors and assessment

My research examined the interest, and power taken on by school governors at Oak Tree, the apparent difficulties in their understanding of the effect the context of the school on the children's attainment and perhaps their own value or political position (see Chapter 6).

In the autumn of 2005, a GTC stakeholder seminar on assessment brought together a variety of bodies including those representing parents and governors. Issues raised included the imperative of finding appropriate ways to disseminate data to different audiences – from teachers and pupils to LEAs, parents and governors. Neil Davies, chair of National Governors' Council explained that Governors approach assessment data differently from parents. Governors take a strategic position, attempting to establish from the assessment data whether a school is moving in the right direction, with regard to its school development plan and Key Stage targets. But Davies recognised that governors need training to make a valuable contribution when interpreting such data.

Government accountability assessment

It is a central feature of public accountability that a school's informal assessment procedures and the results of the formal assessment of children's learning are shown on its Performance and Assessment Data Report (Panda) on which statutory Baseline and end of Key Stage tests and optional annual Key Stage 2 tests are recorded and included on the School Self-Evaluation Form (SEF), together with Contextual Value Added (CVA) that was introduced in 2005. They are part of the evidence base on which Ofsted inspectors may draw when making judgements about the school and the teaching and learning that takes place within it (Ofsted, 2005).

Ofsted focuses on the school's policy and practice, and the extent to which formal and informal assessment is used effectively.

However, the greatest emphasis is still placed, by government, on the results of the national tests and whilst I feel that it is not unreasonable that such information should be scrutinised, I remain concerned that the data is still often used crudely and inappropriately. For example norm-referenced statements such as the results in mathematics are well below/well above the national average on their own say very little about the quality of teaching and learning in a school, as they do not take into account the many different starting points. Some schools with children of high ability may have too low expectations, but still show above-average performance in tests because of the efforts of parents or private tuition. Conversely, some schools with large numbers of children with significant learning difficulties may struggle to obtain a set of grades close to the national average (Wragg, 2001).

My research highlighted this unavoidable factor related to Oak Tree and the apparent difficulty of Ofsted and Park LEA to appreciate this point (see Chapter 6 & 7). My earlier work on exploring the value-added possibilities at Oak Tree included additional information about many important factors that impact on children's progress. These included earlier attainment in tests as well as information about their special educational needs and socio-economical backgrounds (see Chapter 5). I can only question whether the outcome of the Oak Tree Ofsted inspection (1997) might be different under the new Ofsted inspection system (2005).

Ofsted (2005) describes a new relationship with schools as the self-evaluation form (SEF) is now used as the focus of the inspection. Inspectors use SEF to inform their judgements about how well the head teacher and senior management know their

school and how well the school is meeting the needs of the children. Ofsted (2005) say feedback about the new inspection system has been overwhelmingly positive:

Head teachers and senior managers say that they find the process challenging but professionally rewarding (Ofsted 2005:1).

But, the Times Educational Supplement (Hastings, 2006) reports differently:

The new inspections might be shorter, but pressure is driving some heads to resign and hundreds to complain (Hastings, 2006:9).

Furthermore, Wallace (2005) reports on documents, obtained by the TES under the Freedom of Information Act, that between 2002-2004, five schools had their special measures judgements overturned by the Chief Inspector, David Bell. The figures give an interesting insight into the scale of apparent misjudgements of Ofsted inspection teams and raise the question of how many more schools might not be in special measures, had they had sufficient self-belief to challenge Ofsted's findings.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) remains deeply concerned about the variable quality and continuing aggressive nature of Ofsted inspections and their use of contextual value-added data and they have requested changes to Ofsted so that statistical analysis of pupil performance should be placed in the context of deeper and wider knowledge about prior attainment and individual pupil circumstances that affect progress. The NAHT recognise that what is useful as an internal quality assurance measure is not necessary helpful as external extrapolated data (NAHT, 2006). Also De Waal (2006) has written a critical expose of the Ofsted inspection process and concludes:

Teachers are not treated as professionals. They are told what to teach and how to teach it. Not only is Ofsted traumatic, it can have long-term damage. Every box must be ticked, and anything that doesn't confirm is ignored. Ofsted only guarantees conformity to a bureaucratic template not quality in education (Smethurst, 2006:13).

Nevertheless, the Government continues to advocate the need for national tests to provide the basic data on which to evaluate and judge evidence of teachers' effectiveness, pupils' learning, national or local improvements from one year to the next, comparative performance between one school or local authority and another, predictions of future potential and performance all part of the government's aim to raise standards in education (Headington, 2003).

The Government White Paper *High Standards, Better Schools for All* (2005) is seen as the most contentious for years by the GTC and teachers' unions despite its bold and welcome aim:

To raise standards for all especially amongst the least advantaged (DfES, 2005:3).

The white paper highlighted that the correlation between under-achievement and social class, gender, ethnicity and deprivation is more severe in England than in many other countries. On first glance I was optimistic that at last many of the issues that I had grappled with as Head teacher of Oak Tree were being recognised by government (see Chapter 5). But on reading the article that summarises the GTC response, I too am seriously concerned that the proposals do not currently contain the right balance of measures to make real progress on the most intractable of education issues - the attainment gap. It seems that unless variations of attainment within and between schools are tackled, educational underachievement may merely be moved around the system. Furthermore, pockets of deprivation in relatively affluent urban (the context of Oak Tree)[see Chapter 5] and rural areas need to be targeted.

There is clear evidence that it is not the school structures that have the foremost influence on outcomes for pupils. It is the quality of teaching and learning, institutional and professional leadership, the curriculum offered (see Chapter 4 & 5), parent/carer

involvement and the resourcing that make a difference. My research findings have been subsequently echoed by the GTC, who believe that the white paper proposals do not, in combination, place sufficient weight on these factors, and so will not deliver an entitlement for all pupils to excellence and equity in either provision or outcomes. The opportunity to make a difference for those children who are least well served by the system is only half grasped. The GTC fear that the proposals on school structures undermine the government's stated objective. The criterion for change of school status or school expansion should be whether change will improve the attainment and well being of all groups of children in an area. This should be placed alongside sustained additional provision to tackle the attainment gap (an important factor not considered by Ofsted when Oak Tree was inspected (see Chapter 6)

Finally the GTC proposes nine measures that would deliver flexibility and authority to the local community and schools:

- Greater incentives for schools to work together across a whole local area
- Admission policies demonstrating how they will enhance provision for all children and have a positive impact on disadvantaged children
- Further resources, including better staffing ratios, targeted at pupils at highest risk of under-achievement
- Universal access to continuing professional development for teachers and staff
- A commitment to extending expertise in special educational needs throughout the system and to all staff
- Support for families in poverty and with low literacy and numeracy to engage with their child's school

- A realignment of accountability of schools from the centre to release local influence
- Greater clarity in local and national accountability and monitoring combined with a central focus on pupil outcomes (GTC, 2006:11).

The GTC focuses on the goal of entitlement for all pupils to high quality provision tailored to their needs. This goal of entitlement was a fundamental principle highlighted in my research (see Chapter 5).

Formative assessment

Clark (2005, 2003 & 2001) continues to work in infant and primary schools, at the Institute of Education INSET courses and in research projects related to practical strategies for implementing the principles of Assessment for learning (AfL) or formative assessment that now has a high profile in UK schools. She emphasises the importance of the successful implementation of formative assessment in schools and says:

In order for formative assessment to be embedded in practice, it is vital that teachers have children's learning as their priority, not their teaching or the opinions of outside parties (Clarke, 2003:1).

Like Clarke, I believe that the continuing and developing interest in the subject is a consequence of its unique characteristic in the UK. Rather than being just another government initiative, teachers (like those at Oak Tree in Chapter 3) are continually (re)defining formative assessment, as they trial various strategies, come up with their own ideas and delve deeper into certain aspects as they gain more insights. Clarke suggests that the development of formative assessment, therefore, is:

The result of action research undertaken by thousands of teachers in their own classrooms (Clarke, 2005:1).

This model of professional development is now respected as probably the most powerful way of affecting change, and Learning Networks have been set up all over the country to encourage this way of thinking. This current way of working appears to be very similar to the network that I was part of at Kingston University in the 1990's, when it was considered to be at the cutting edge of practitioner research (see Chapter 2).

Clarke's involvement in action research includes various large-scale national or local projects, and now in the co-ordination of LEA-based *Learning Teams*. These are spread around the country and consist of 30 teachers drawn, in pairs, from 15 schools in each project. The LEA selects the keenest teachers and schools and the participants make a commitment to attending all three days with her (once a term for a year) and carrying out action research in between the days. I too was actively encouraged by Park LEA to pursue this action research as a continuation of previous projects (see Chapter 2 & 5). Like Clarke I describe the feedback days as being, rich exciting and inspirational, as teachers discuss then summarise their key findings under three headings:

*What did you trial?
What was the impact on children's learning?
How did you know?*

The last question ensures a level of rigour. It means that teachers cannot simply say that a particular strategy made the children for instance *more focused*. They have to say how they know they were more focused: what behaviours were manifested, what the children said to make the teacher believe they were more focused? How their work changed? The feedback is organised in phases and then published almost word-for-word on Clarke's website (www.shirleyclarke-education.org). This means that teachers can find out what other teachers from different parts of the country have

discovered about the same elements of formative assessment in the same year groups. All the teams' findings are archived, so the resources continue to grow. Like teachers in Clarke's Learning Teams I have certainly delved deeper to gain more insight into formative assessment, specifically the aspect of fairness as I consider it to be a vital part of the bigger picture of the education assessment landscape (see Chapters 3, 4, 5 & 6).

Also it is interesting that Clarke (2005) writes about weaving the elements of formative assessment together to become very knowledgeable about the component parts of a formative assessment, but still be unclear about how to weave these together through a typical lesson (very similar to my justification for creating the multi-layered jigsaw puzzle to weave the elements of a fairer assessment to become more knowledgeable about its components parts [see Chapter 2]). Trying to fit the elements into a traditional model of teacher input followed by children's recording just won't work. Clark's book attempts to show how the pieces interlink and overlap and often take the place of traditional input and recording. To bring this idea to life, she sought the help of excellent practitioners, like I sought the help of excellent practitioners at Oak Tree and the research group at Kingston University. Clarke asked them to write up a typical lesson or series of lessons in which formative assessment is central. Similarly, I created a series of professional stories of my practice in which the notion of a fairer assessment was central. The practitioner's pieces punctuate Clarke's book, and she referred to them within the main body of the text. She believes these accounts will help people to see the main question is not:

How can I fit it all in?

But rather:

How can I reformat the lesson to capitalise on maximum learning? (Clarke, 2005:3).

Again I see parallels with my work as the main question is not:

How can I fit different types of assessment to develop a fair assessment?

But rather:

How can I reformat the assessment system to capitalise on maximum fairness to all children?

Clarke concludes that all the elements of formative assessment (sharing learning goals, effective questioning, self and peer evaluation and effective feedback), are as usual, detailed and include direct references to the findings of the learning teams, Also she included for the first time, accounts by head teachers of how they organised the development of formative assessment in their schools, plus two accounts by LEA advisors who very successfully enabled formative assessment to take off in the Dorset and Gateshead areas. She finishes by saying:

Great things can be achieved by individual teachers, but we need risk-taking, enthusiastic leaders to really push formative assessment through so that it has a more global impact (Clarke, 2005:3).

Much of Clarke's observations of the research process echo those of Black (2003) and certainly as my own research project evolved I became increasingly knowledgeable about the component parts of a fairer assessment, but I was still unclear about how to weave these together to articulate my findings to others. I began the straightforward adult approach to completing a jigsaw puzzle (see Chapter 2). But trying to fit the elements together into a traditional model of jigsaw puzzle didn't work. I realised how the pieces interlinked and overlapped and discovered hidden layers of meanings too. Similarly I attempted to bring the idea of a *fairer* assessment to life, by writing professional stories of my infant school practice, then I sought out excellent

experienced practitioners (Kingston University Action Research Group (KHARG), co-researchers from Oak Tree and critical friends to provide feedback on my past practice which in turn will inform future practice - creating effective assessment that will help rather than disadvantage and potentially damage young children at the beginning of their formal education (see Chapter 3, 4, 5 & 6).

Another journey beginning...

Educational values and the creation of original practical knowledge

I begin this next journey with some trepidation. I am very aware that many further professional stories can grow from this continuing investigation. I am uneasy and tentative, rather than conclusive, about expressing/articulating my understanding of the concept of a fairer assessment of children's learning, development and attainment. Also I am very self-conscious, as I am at the point of submitting my work for public scrutiny and accreditation for a higher academic degree requiring educational theorising.

I still question the weight or authenticity of teacher transformative knowledge as opposed to the dominant propositional forms of theory. This is despite being involved with critical educational action research for twenty years, deciding that it was my best professional learning pathway and the current realisation that such work is a valuable contribution to and influential in policy debates rather than radical. Whitehead is a prominent theorist in this field and suggests that:

Personal practical theories should carry as much weight as conventional social science approaches...Practitioners should be encouraged to offer accounts of their work, in terms of descriptions and explanation of their practice, and these accounts should be seen as living educational theories of practitioners as they endeavour to live more fully in the direction of their educational values (Whitehead, 2000:74).

McNiff supports this view and realises the positive effect on teachers' teaching and children's learning:

The practical nature of teaching, how teachers could come together to share their work and their visions for the future, how partnerships could be developed between schools and higher education and what might be the different contributions that all parties might take to support children's learning in classrooms (McNiff, 2003:3).

From writing the thesis I now recognise my own biases from the enquiries of others who work with different perspective from my own and I am open to the possibilities that others may interpret the data in my research differently (Kincheloe, 2003).

Educational values

This research journey is as much about the life of an infant head teacher as it is about the life of an infant class teacher. I care deeply about education and hopefully the thesis brings alive a real infant school and classroom practice. Throughout my journey I examined what I enjoy and find difficult about infant school practice and policy specifically about the issues to do with educational assessment. My discoveries have been interspersed with an analysis of the vision offered by a variety of past and contemporary writers and researchers as to how things might change as the 21st century gathers momentum.

Throughout the thesis I offer my own ideas from unearthing tacit knowledge of assessment practice and my beliefs as to what is important for a *fairer* assessment of children's learning development and attainment. In considering changes and how differently things could be constructed in the future, the centre-piece of the thesis has been the exploration of my values - the rights and wrongs of different courses of action, the kinds of choices and how my own actions have been determined by a particular set of beliefs (see Chapter 3). In revealing the very human self behind the

role of infant head teacher and teacher I offer very personal insights into some of the issues that lie at the very heart of any debate about educational assessment.

Finally by drawing comparisons with others' practice and the views of educationalists and policy makers around the UK, this thesis offers its own vision for creating a fairer assessment of children's learning development and attainment in the years ahead. I hope it promises an exciting and thought provoking read (Crombie-White, 2000).

Social justice and equity

The core values of social justice and equality underpin my research and affect its outcomes. They include an understanding that all people are of equal worth and deserve to be valued and respected and treated accordingly. The values led me to begin my research and question fairness and equity in the educational assessment practices that I was required to implement at Oak Tree and challenge a system that appeared to me to privilege those born into a situation of relative advantage, while at the same time subject those not so fortunate to less preferential treatment [See Chapter 3].

Also the core values of social justice and equity of practice led me to use Carr & Kemmis and Lomax's definition of action research, then to take methodological risks, to break with convention and find my own creative and innovative pathway through the research (see Chapter 2). I became aware, too, that I needed to visualise my own unique way through the research (multi-layered jigsaw puzzle) and that this was as important as my self-chosen research focus (educational assessment) and my method (critical education action research) (see Chapter 2).

Centrality of children

Children's practitioners place the interests of children at the heart of their work. Children and young people value practitioners who enjoy working with them, who treat them with respect and who are good at communicating with them (GTC, 2006:7). In the data based chapters I showed that I, too, feel a strong responsibility for a range of outcomes for children. I am committed to ensuring all children have the chance to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and experience economic well being. I recognise children's fundamental right to be safe, in order to reach other goals (DfES, 2004).

The core value of keeping children central to my work underpins the approach to my research and gave me the stimuli to spark off ideas for creative writing. I presented the research data in the form of professional stories (see Chapter 5). I adapted a children's story (see Chapter 6) and I included examples of young children's work (see Chapter 3) to examine tacit knowledge of infant school practice – assessment of children's learning, development and attainment. The presentation of the data showed that my work with children starts from their experiences and interests. I strive to embed creativity into school practice, review practice and make changes where required, create a curriculum that is broad and balanced and relevant to the children that I teach as it maximises their learning and so their achievement (Hopkins, 2006); www.creativelearningjourney.org.uk; QCA, 2004; National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999).

Whole-child approach to assessment

Practitioners, including teachers, concern themselves with the whole child, whatever their specialism. Although their own involvement with specific children may be short-

term, children's practitioners work to develop the potential and capacities of children for a longer term (GTC, 2006).

Despite pressures to formalise classroom assessment practices and the need to produce *evidence*, I use whole-child approaches for contextualising children's progress and informing the next stage of teaching and learning (Torrance & Prior, 1998; James, 1998; Pollard et al, 1994). This illustrates the confidence that most early years teachers like myself continue to hold in their all-round knowledge of children as they pass through their school. The following teacher's view emphasises this point:

Because I think, you see, if you've already got a good team you don't need all this formalising and paper work, because we've always talked to each other and every member of staff knows every child in the school, not just by name but we know their talents and we recognise them (Key Stage 1 teacher, Broadfoot, 1996:72).

Whole-child approaches to assessment not only involve direct knowledge of a child's attainments and efforts across a range of settings, but can also embody, explicitly or implicitly a number of social, emotional and physical characteristics of children. In this, a vast assortment of behavioural, attitudinal, socio-economical, cultural and family characteristics often constitutes a social diagnosis (Filer, 2000) in accounting for children's progress, fulfilment of potential or application to tasks. Torrance & Pryor (1998) describe just such a diagnosis in relation to the emotional state of a child:

I've got a child at the moment who's got a lot of problems at home and so I will plan an activity for that child and if that child can't see themselves at the end of the activity I record what they have achieved but I suppose I'm giving them the benefit of the doubt and thinking they could have achieved more if they hadn't been going through all these emotional turmoils at home. (Year 1 teacher, Torrance & Pryor, 2002:36).

As Torrance & Prior suggest, taking account of previous effort and achievement, reflecting and making allowances, seems a legitimate, even laudable use of a teacher's previous knowledge of a child. However Filer & Pollard's (2000) findings

through the *Identity and Learning Programme* led them to question what it means for an early years teacher to know the child they are assessing. What assumptions are embedded in the notions of a whole-child approach to learning and assessment, with its suggestion of a child as a knowable entity, accessible for teacher interpretation? Certainly this question arose in Chapter 3 when research colleagues and I examined examples of assessed children's work and we discussed the different ways in which teachers knew the same children. Nevertheless, I maintain that it is essential for the teacher to value and respect children's individual identities and their distinct approaches to learning. Also my belief in whole-child assessment led me to adapt and modify the original title of the research from - *Looking for a fair assessment of children's attainment* to - *Looking for a fairer assessment of children's learning, development and attainment*.

Furthermore, the Early Years Curriculum Guidance (QCA: 2000) outlines the curriculum for nursery and reception classes and details Stepping Stones and Early Learning Goals in the six areas of learning recommended for young children, which are – Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Communication, Language and Literacy, Mathematical Development, Knowledge and Understanding of the World and Physical Development. In the Principles of Early Years Education section, the Guidance outlines the national expectations for good in relation to assessment procedures for young children:

- Assessment should be based on skilful and well-planned observations of children, observing play or logging their responses to a variety of activities. These may be sometimes recorded in writing or photographs, and sometimes an insight can be gained through talking with a child or assessing samples such as drawing or writing.

- Parents are vital partners in the assessment and planning process.
- Assessment gives an insight into children's interests, achievements and possible difficulties in their learning from which next steps in learning and teaching can be planned
- Where staff are clear about what children know, the skills they have, they can plan how best to take learning and teaching forward. (QCA, 2000: 24).

Similarly the Ofsted Framework for Nursery Education (Ofsted, 2000) asks inspectors to:

Determine whether staff make regular assessment...identify achievements and any learning difficulties...Check if assessments are based on observations of children's behaviour and activity, listening to children in different contexts and evaluation of their work. Determine if the assessments are systematic, informative, objective and clearly linked to the early learning goals (Ofsted, 2000:75).

In September 2002 QCA introduced the Foundation Stage Profile as the statutory assessment for children at the end of reception year. This replaced Baseline Assessment. The London Borough of Merton Assessment and Record Keeping folder for the Foundation Stage (2003) was developed to incorporate the Foundation Stage Profile into a holistic assessment approach across the Foundation Stage from the beginning of the child's experience in nursery to the end of reception. This movement appears to support the professional judgement of early years teachers like myself to adopt whole-child assessment.

Collaborative learning and assessment

I see learning in the classroom as the teachers and children learning about learning together (Watkins et al, 2000). Furthermore, I see learning as a collaborative interactive process for both children and adults as a means to empowerment, trust and respect for other's judgments (Torrance & Pryor, 2002). I believe a dialogue of equals fosters both personal and professional development in either a school or

research setting (Introduction). Throughout the research and the writing of thesis I supported a collaborative approach to teaching and learning and assessment in the early years classroom (see Chapter 3 & 4). Also throughout my own research journey across the educational assessment landscape I showed that it was very much a collaborative interactive learning and assessment process both with staff at Oak Tree, local head teachers, co-researchers and the research group at Kingston University (see Chapter 5 & 6).

Like Kreisberg (1992) as a teacher-researcher I seek to construct and integrate assessment and learning that can be seen as empowering of others. On reflection, my contribution to practitioner knowledge could be seen as empowering of other practitioners if it could be said that I articulated the thoughts of others in the research group and in return they articulated my own thoughts – rendering explicit what others were struggling towards (metacognitive reflection). Therefore, this collaborative methodology could be crystalised for exploring the processes and outcomes of other innovative practitioner's work (Dadds & Hart, 2001) [see Chapter 2]. As Kreisberg notes while quoting the words of one of the teachers in his study:

... The power of more powerful individuals frequently gives other people in the group a feeling of being empowered as well, because somebody is speaking articulately things they were thinking. This is synergistic power. Its exercise expands the effectiveness of the individuals in the group and of the group as a whole (Kreisberg, 1992: 138).

In earlier chapters I showed with respect to the relationship of classroom assessment to the promotion of learning, rich examples of the possibilities of peer collaboration, facilitated by the teacher setting up a structured small-group formative assessment task and adopting an observer role. Therefore, I showed the advantages of metacognitive reflection in young children (Clarke, 2005; Drummond, 2003). I showed collaborative classroom environments in which children were encouraged to develop

the capacity to monitor the quality of their own work and to develop a set of tactics, which could be drawn upon to modify their work. There appears to be clear paralleled evidence that collaborative peer interaction (adults/children) is capable of enhancing the intellectual performance because it forces individuals to recognize and coordinate conflicting perspectives on a problem (early mathematics concept or educational assessment) and that learning consists of the internalization of social interactive processes (Forman & Cazden, 1985). In the contexts of the arguments in this thesis the role that teachers take in considering the relationships, which exist between teaching, learning and assessment is critical. Although the concepts and practical implications are very much related to classroom contexts, their foundations must also relate to professional practice.

By following a collaborative learning process I have been able to reconceptualise my professional practice, based on the priority for developing both my own and young children's learning. In so doing, I realize that there is the potential to recognize the ways in which assessment is not merely an adjunct to teaching and learning but offers a process through which children's involvement in assessment can feature as part of learning – that is, assessment as learning (Dann, 2002).

Relevant curriculum

This principle requires practitioners to understand how young children develop and learn during the early years and recognise that they develop rapidly – physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially (QCA, 2000; Isaacs, 1930). Like Blenkin, Hurst, Whitehead and Yue (1995) I consider knowledge of child development to be the single most influential factor in the professional development of practitioners who work with the under-8s. Furthermore, an early years curriculum should be based on

certain bodies of knowledge that is planned for that is relevant and complimentary to the experiences of the community in which the setting is based (Moriarty & Blatchford, 1998). It should be seen as the widening of every child's horizons of appreciation and understanding. Furthermore this principle implies an active involvement of learning by the participants. This view of children unequivocally excludes the possibility that because of their age and biological maturity they are in any sense weak, needy ignorant or lacking in ability. This construction of childhood in turn, shapes my approach to pedagogy, which is based on the child as the one who, in relationships with others, constructs knowledge and understanding. Children are spontaneous and autonomous meaning makers in their own right. Like the New Zealand approach to learning the early years curriculum should be founded on four principles:

- Empowerment

The early childhood curriculum empowers child to learn and grow

- Holistic development

The early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow

- Family and community

The wider world of family and community is an integral part of early childhood curriculum

- Relationships

Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things (Ministry of Education, 1996)

I examined the curriculum at Oak Tree in Chapters 3 & 4 and showed that like the Reggio educators I honour learning over teaching and see the task of teaching as being to provide the conditions for learning, that is a planning a relevant curriculum (Drummond, 2003).

Creation of original knowledge

Below I use the five subheadings to explain each area of original knowledge that I created in my research.

a). An unconventional perspective from a practitioner researcher using genuine infant head teacher/teacher experiences

I stress that some typologies or approaches are only useful to some readers and only for some of the time and no single system is able to capture our unique individuality (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). This thesis reveals a journey of one infant head teacher/teacher who, for the past six years, has explored the way narrative inquiry deepens her understanding of educational experience and it is always multi-layered and many stranded.

That is why I chose to break with convention and find my own creative and unique path through my research (Dadds & Hart, 2001) and perhaps other readers might find my pathway quirky or baffling (Herrington, 2001; Bassey, 1999). This thesis could make an original contribution to our understanding of motivation and quality in practitioner research. It suggests that we may need to resist any form of methodological dogma if practitioner research is to be effective (see Chapter 2).

Just as helping children to develop as confident, enthusiastic and effective learners is a central purpose of Primary Education (DfES, 2004) we may need to empower individuals like me to make methodological choices that harmonise with their own purposes and predispositions - to free them to do practitioner research their way. The findings in this thesis provide opportunities for professional discussions about teacher's work which will support both individual and school development needs, which are essential for school improvement and effective assessment of children's learning.

Although I touched on it earlier in the conclusion it seems useful to analyse more thoroughly the question of the reasons of successful learning throughout the project, partly as a way of seeing the work described here from different perspectives, but mainly because such an analysis should help those who might draw lessons from their own action from my work. Just as I have anticipated and reflected on my work as an infant head teacher/teacher, other teachers could anticipate or reflect on their own experiences as practitioners (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000).

b). Additional case study information about the effects of educational assessment on teaching and learning in the infant school context

This thesis explores information about educational assessment in the infant school context through critical reflective examination in order to understand the events and processes of the assessment practices at one infant school (Oak Tree). As a teacher-researcher I need to pursue an inquiry that I care about and am perplexed about. The enquiry has to be concrete and practical in a real life context of an infant school with important practical results (a fairer assessment of young children's learning, development and attainment). In order to do this I needed to look at the contemporary issue of educational assessment, although I had to consider both historical and political influences. My research appears to coincide with the features of case study that are summarised by Yin (1989) who states that case study is an empirical enquiry that:

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (see chapter 1); when
- The boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (see Chapter 2); and in which
- Multiple sources of evidence are used [see Chapter 3, 4, 5 & 6] (Yin, 1989:23).

Case study suggests an academic approach to practical problems and is crucial for practising a community for learning. Case study enables the practical problem (assessment of children's learning) to be investigated in ways that might allow teachers to reconceptualise the problem, understand more fully its wider significance and act more intelligently in resolving it (Golby & Parrott, 1999:71). I see case study as the pursuit of professional excellence through academic means and therefore invaluable for other teachers to consider when wishing to improve their practice.

c). An original action research methodology that facilitates a critical collaborative reflective look at professional practice through using self-study and memory work

Although the thesis examines the notion of a fairer assessment of children's learning, development and attainment in the early years, from studying the practices at Oak Tree, it also presents a distinctive multiple approach to self-assessment (a critical collaborative reflective look at professional practice) for teachers using a wide range of techniques related to narrative and data analysis. It offers a transformative insight into the life and learning in one infant school (Oak Tree) that can be approached in a number of ways and through different layers. Most of us tend to assume that everyone responds to the world in much the same way as we do, and we are often taken aback when they do not (my assumptions were highlighted in Chapter 6). The in-depth analysis of widely contrasting physical, emotional and intellectual types of infant school practice (various assessment procedures) found in this thesis reveal how dramatically dissimilar people prove to be in education. By reading and engaging with this thesis this colourful spectrum of types hopefully enables you to understand yourself more clearly, and to anticipate how you - or someone with different traits or values/beliefs - might act, and why (Godwin, 2001).

d). A thoughtful critique of educational policy that is potentially disadvantaging and harmful to young children

A coherent theory of a fairer assessment has not yet been formulated; indeed I am hopeful that the findings of my research project will provide new ideas about such a formulation. In the vast, varied and complex field of educational research, the task of practical implementation of ideas cannot simply be as the application of previous knowledge: putting ideas into practice usually leads to those ideas being transformed - new knowledge being created (Black et al, 2003) and the growth of educational knowledge, creating my own educational theories (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000; Whitehead, 1993).

I argue, that any theory of a fairer assessment that draws on the findings of such knowledge will be grounded in the realities of (infant) classroom practice and will, therefore be more useful to teachers than one that is not so grounded. Such arguments can be found in writings about the nature of new knowledge that I examined earlier in the thesis (see chapter 2) and created by technology - it is not merely *the appliance of science* (Layton 1991) – and for educational research, in a paper by Hargreaves (1999) entitled *The Knowledge Creating School*. Also McNiff & Whitehead (2000) confirm Schon's (1995) approach to educational knowledge and they say that:

It is time to develop a new scholarship which demonstrates a new epistemology, a new way of knowing, that meets the everyday needs of people working in real-life situations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000:1).

So what I attempted in this thesis is an in-depth analysis of the lessons I learnt about the concept of a fairer assessment as it unfolded throughout the research. By doing this I hope that I have created some new knowledge of my own that could be offered and transferred to other practitioners, giving them the opportunity to learn from me and make a difference - so impacting on wider practice and influence policy. However

I realize that this new knowledge can only be acceptable to others if they can take ownership of it and that it is consistent with their own beliefs and values as teachers.

e). A presentation of educational assessment both as an integral part of the infant school curriculum and as a result of the politics of education

The notion of a fairer assessment

As the professional body for teaching, the General Teaching Council for England (GTC) is concerned with all the issues related to teachers and their role in the enterprise of teaching and learning. It is concerned with improving children's education by supporting the professionalism of teaching (GTC, 2006). The GTC recognises that pupil assessment is an integral component of the teaching process and is critical to effective learning.

As commented earlier the GTC is committed to the principle of teacher professional judgement being used to better effect in the assessment system than is the case in the current arrangements. At the GTC Conference *New Relationships: Teaching and Learning and Accountability* (2004) a comprehensive paper highlighted the continuing tension between the DfES view of teachers using performance data as the basis of dialogue and target-setting with children, and the more bottom-up approach developed in the research of responding to individual needs with qualitative feedback. This again seems to highlight the issue of how to reconcile the purpose of assessment for learning (AfL) with assessment related to wider public accountability.

Of the eight contributors to the conference Gipps & Stobart 's paper focuses on fairness in assessment and clearly characterises the strength of assessment for learning as the basis of future assessment arrangements in their framework of good assessment practice, combining a focus on learning with transparency in approach and the need to provide a sense of equity for all learners. Although Gipps & Stobart

use a different approach from my research, their work is very useful to articulate what I consider to be some aspects of a fairer assessment.

Gipps and Stobart's paper addresses some of the key issues in fair assessment: equal opportunities, bias and discrimination and validity. Although they focused particularly on tests they feel, as I do, that they could apply their argument to teacher assessment (see Chapter 3). They suggest that equal opportunities in assessment relate to two issues; what we commonly call bias in the test itself, and fairness in the comparison: have the groups of pupils being tested had the same opportunities to learn? Fairness and equity are used as interchangeable terms, with equal opportunities as one component of what constitutes equity. As I established earlier in the thesis Gipps & Stonard's (2004) key question is: Can we create an assessment system that is fair to all learners? The answer is: no - but we can make it fairer. We do this by being clear about what we are assessing, by identifying and dealing with possible forms of bias and unfairness (see Chapter 3).

As I discovered, whilst examining the literature search in Chapter 1, Gipps and Stobart confirm that most research on equity issues in assessment has focused on tests and examinations; there has been little work done on equity issues in teacher assessment in the early years. For example we know that teacher expectation can affect the curriculum and learning experiences offered to children. There is clear evidence that teachers offer a different curriculum for whom they low and high expectations (Harlen, 2004; Tizard et al, 1988; Troman, 1988) [see Chapter 4 in this thesis]. While high teacher expectation is good and can enhance children's performance, the opposite also holds true. So one question is - Can teacher expectation have an effect on teacher assessment?

Equity, bias and testing

External testing has historically been seen as an instrument of equity.

Examinations were the obvious method of attacking patronage, the hitherto dominant mode of recruitment to all forms of government (Sutherland, 1996:16).

The notion of the standardised test as a way of offering impartial assessment is a powerful one, though if equality of opportunity does not precede the test, then the fairness of this approach is called into question. So these fair 19th century selection examinations invariably excluded women from taking them and similarly fair 21st century selection examinations appear to exclude disadvantaged children from succeeding in them (see Chapter 5 & 6).

I have shown earlier in the thesis that bias is a term widely used in relation to assessment and is generally taken to mean that assessment is unfair to one particular group or another (James, 1998). This rather simple definition, however, belies the complexity of the underlying situation. Differential performance on a test, i.e. where different groups get different score levels, may not be the result of bias of the test; it may be due to real differences in performance among groups which may in turn be due to differing access to learning, or it may be due to real differences in the group's attainment in the topic under consideration. It is also possible to have unequal group outcomes that may be seen as fair. An example would be where the group differences in application to learning and preparation, where each had similar resources and preparation. The philosopher John Wilson argued:

Education is not (only) something that can be simply be given to people and distributed equally or unequally, like cake. To be educated is not just to have received something but also to have done something... there is always what we may call the question of uptake: whether the individual makes use of whatever opportunities or resources he may be given (Wilson, 1991:2).

I feel these complex issues of difference in children's performance were highlighted in Chapter 3 when I explained how some teachers assess children's work and Chapter 4 when I analysed children's learning from National Curriculum and the Foundation Stage Curriculum. The question of whether a test or assessment is biased or whether the group of children in question has a different level of attainment is clearly extremely difficult to answer. Wood (1987) describes these different factors as the opportunity to acquire talent (access issues) and the opportunity to show talent to good effect (fairness in assessment).

In the USA tests have been seen to be denying opportunities for advancement, particularly for black students. In the post-1965 Civil Rights legislation era, critics of *advancement through testing* were pointing out that opportunities to acquire talent or to be able to show it to sufficient effect in tests and examinations, were not equally distributed (Orfield and Kornhaber, 2001; Wood, 1987) In other words these tests were biased in favour of the dominant social group.

Wood (1991) recognises that the threat of bias is an important danger in formative or summative assessment by teachers. Research in this area (Black, 1998; Gipps & Murphy, 1994) shows conflicting results on whether teachers confuse or conflate industry and effort with achievement. Gipps & Murphy (1994) show that there is evidence of teachers behaving differently towards boys and girls, towards pupils from different social classes, and towards children with differing season of birth (see Chapter 4 & 5). It would appear possible that where teachers know their pupils well, they might be able to detect and act upon individual or group differences, by adapting the tasks, by making allowances in interpreting results or by seeking moderation from colleagues. Nevertheless, by focusing too much on bias in tests or assessment it

might distract attention from wider equity issues such as actual equality of access to learning, biased curriculum, and inhibiting classroom practices (see Chapter 5).

Fairness

Most tests and examinations including National Curriculum Key Stage SATs, are amenable to coaching. My thesis shows that schools are strongly encouraged to prepare their children for SATs. Children who have very different school experiences are not equally prepared to compete in the same test situation. Furthermore, children do not come to school with identical experiences and they do not have identical experiences at school. Gipps & Stobart (2004) therefore suggest that we cannot expect assessment to have the same meaning for all children. However the stakes and purpose of the assessment are relevant here as Linn et al (1991) argue:

On a non-threatening assessment ... it is reasonable to include calculator-active problems even though student access to calculators may be quite inequitable. On the other hand, equitable access would be an important consideration in a calculator-active assessment used to hold students or teachers accountable (Linn et al, 1991: 17)

Throughout the thesis I have shown that what is important is to have a fair approach where concerns, contexts and approaches of one group do not dominate. This, however, is by no means a simple task, e.g. national test developers may be told that they should avoid any context, which may be more familiar to males than females or to the dominant culture. There are problems inherent in trying to remove context effects by excluding passages that advantage males or females, because it reduces the amount of assessment material available. De-contextualised assessment is anyway not possible, and complex higher order skills require drawing on complex domain knowledge.

For design of tests in a multicultural society Shohamy (2000) has proposed three models of how the contributions of different groups are treated:

- *The assimilative model.* In this there is no appreciation of an immigrant's (sic) previous knowledge; the task is to master the new knowledge associated with the dominant group. There may be recognition that this takes time to acquire and allowances may be made to ease the process (pain killers);
- *The recognition model.* In this there is recognition and appreciation of the different knowledge and viewing of it as valuable – situation in which groups are credited for this knowledge and encouraged to maintain it;
- *The interactive model.* In this knowledge of the *different* groups affects and influences the dominant group and thus existing knowledge.

While we might aspire to the interactive model, Shohamy (representing the highly diverse Israeli culture) is not so optimistic:

Even in societies multiculturalism as part of society there is rarely recognition of the specific and unique knowledge of different groups in schools ... educational leaders continue to strive for homogenous knowledge to be owned by all. This is even more apparent in educational assessment. In a number of situations there is a gap between curricula and assessment as curricula may, at times, contain statements and intentions for the recognition of diverse knowledge, yet the tests are based on homogenous knowledge (Shohamy, 2000:3).

Gipps and Stobart consider that one litmus test of where an assessment system is in relation to these models is in the attitude to language; how much linguistic diversity does the assessment system reflect?

For example:

- Assess in only the main language of the culture (e.g. England)
- Offer the same tests/qualification in two or more languages (e.g. Wales).

Both options bring options and costs. In the monolingual approaches an issue is the accessibility of tests for those who are not using their first language, particularly if this

is combined with cultural assumptions in their content. Politt et al (2000) provide a case study example of how the monolingual assumptions of mathematics test writers interfered with understanding of an Urdu-speaking student taking a mathematics test in English. In Urdu the number of hours *in a day* (din) is 12 (with day-night, *dinraath*, being 24 hours) and there are two words for *height* (from the ground; of the object) – with both ambiguities capable of generating *wrong* answers to everyday *how long will it take...? And how high is...?*

I found little reference to research into linguistic issues in Baseline Assessment or NC KS1 tests except for Moriarty & Blandford (1998) who suggest that there may be discrepancies in the way results for individual children are interpreted. Different teachers may also interpret children's understanding differently. There may also be a danger that some children will be labelled as a result of tests being administered in this way. In all kinds of assessment, there must be vigilance to ensure that assumptions about children who have different cultural backgrounds, or who have English as a second language. They state:

Our knowledge is not value-free, therefore assessments need to be monitored. The best way to achieve this is to talk to other staff and consciously to evaluate the statements that we make regarding each child's progress (Moriarty & Blandford, 1998:38).

We are now much more aware that the form of assessment can differentially affect results for different groups. In England there has been far more analysis of this in relation to gender than ethnicity. In Chapter 5 I considered the results of both gender and season of birth and it is now normal practice in schools to consider all contributing factors as crucial evidence of pupil performance from entry into school to end of Key Stages 1 & 2.

So to return to Gipps & Stonard's definition of equity, how do we ensure that assessment practice and interpretation of results (by teachers, schools, parents and

all interested parties) is as fair as possible for all groups? As Willingham and Cole (1997) and Gipps and Murphy (1994) argue, consideration of the way in which a construct is tested is crucial. I feel this is essential for any age of children but particularly necessary for children who are being tested at the beginning of formal education when recognition of children's successful achievement is vital (see Chapter 3).

All four researchers emphasise the need to encourage clear articulation of the test developers' constructs on which the assessment is based, so that the construct validity may be examined by test-takers and test-users. The requirement is to select assessment content that accurately reflects the construct, even if it produces gender/ethnic group differences, and to avoid content that is not relevant to the construct and could affect such differences. The ethics of assessment demand that the constructs and assessment criteria are made available to children and teachers and, in any case, this is consonant with enhancing construct-validity. We also need to define the context of an assessment task as well as the underlying constructs to make sure they reflect that is taught. The involvement with a minority background is crucial. It raises the issue as to how much the ethics of assessment can be applied to Baseline Assessment and National Curriculum assessment?

An important approach to offering fairness is to use, within any assessment programme, a range of assessment tasks involving a variety of contexts; a range of modes within the assessment; and a range of format and style. This broadening of approach, though it may not be always possible, is most likely to offer young children alternative opportunities to demonstrate achievement (learning, development or progress as well as attainment) if they are disadvantaged by any one particular assessment in the system (Black, 2003); Linn, 1992)

This broadening of approach is included in the Criteria for Evaluation of Student Assessment Systems by the USA National Forum on Assessment (NFA), a coalition of education and civil rights organisation:

- To ensure fairness, students should have multiple opportunities to meet standards and should be able to meet them in different ways;
- Assessment information should be accompanied by information about access to the curriculum and about opportunities to meet the Standards;
- Assessment results should be one part of a system of multiple indicators of the quality of education (NFA, 1992:32).

If we wish children to do well in tests we need to think about assessment that elicits an individual's best performance (after Nuttall, 1987). This involves tasks that are concrete and within the experience of the child (an equal access issue) presented clearly (the child must understand what is required of her if she is to perform well) relevant to the current concerns of the child (to engender motivation and engagement) and in conditions that are not threatening (to reduce stress and enhance performance) (Gipps, 1994). This is where teacher assessment *can* be more equitable since it is under the teacher's control (Gipps, 1994).

As good assessment practice we should:

- *Using assessment that supports learning and reflection, including formative assessment with feedback;*
- *Designing assessment that is linked to clear criteria (rather than relying upon competition with others);*
- *Including a range of assessment strategies so that all learners have a chance to perform well (Gipps & Stobart, 2004:32).*

Using a range of assessment processes, together with clarity and openness about what is being assessed and how, is not only more equitable, but also supports learning. My research shows that this is true for teacher assessment as it is for tests.

Earlier in the thesis (see Chapter 1) I discussed the work of a Canadian working group, convened by the Joint Advisory Committee of the University of Alberta's Centre for research on Applied Measurement and Evaluation that produced a document called Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada (1993). The principles and their related guidelines address both classroom assessment and large-scale standardised assessment, developed outside the classroom (by commercial test publishers, ministries of education and school boards), and represents a broad consensus of the educational community. Intended for both developers and users of assessment, the former being those:

Who construct assessment methods and people who set policies for particular assessment programs; the latter are those who select and administer assessment methods, commission assessment development services, or make decisions on the basis of assessment results and findings (p3).

The principles include the following:

- Assessment methods should reflect the purpose and context of the assessment
- Students should be given sufficient opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, attitudes, or behaviours being assessed.
- Procedures for judging or scoring student performance should be appropriate for the assessment method used, and should be consistently applied and monitored.
- Procedures for summarising and interpreting assessment results should yield accurate and informative representation of a student performance in relation to goals and objectives of instruction for the reporting period.
- Assessment reports should be clear, accurate, and of practical value to the intended audience (Froese-Germain, 1999:56).

All three sets of principles for fair and good assessment practice stated by the NFA, the University of Alberta and Gipps & Stonard appear to be applicable to any form or stage of assessment of children's learning, development and attainment from entry into school to the end of formal education. Similarly, I feel these principles are at the heart of both my research and the General Teaching Council's current request for a fundamental review of the whole purpose of assessment in UK schools.

A pause for thought on the learning journey...

As a head teacher/teacher I am both a producer and consumer of knowledge. Through the professional development opportunities at Kingston University I was encouraged to engage in the debate both about educational research and undertake meaningful research myself (Kincheloe, 2003). I was encouraged to carry out research to improve the effectiveness of the leadership and management of an infant school and practice (assessment) in an infant classroom (see Chapter 2).

By writing the thesis I now realise that I have reflected on and challenged the reductionist and technicist methods that promote a top-down system of education that I experienced since the introduction of the National Curriculum (1988), National Assessment Programme (1991) and Ofsted (1993). I argue that only by engaging in complex, critical research will teachers, like myself, rediscover their professional status, empower their practice in the classroom and improve the education for their children.

Since beginning my research the choices for educational assessment have been enriched by the work of the Assessment Reform Group, whose important and influential publications have made a substantial contribution to our current understanding of understanding the power and purposes of assessment. The first of

these *Inside the Black Box* (Black & Wiliam, 1998), presented overwhelming evidence, firstly that improving the practice of formative assessment raises standards, secondly that there is room for improvement, and thirdly that we already know a great deal about the ways in which assessment can be made more effective. Black & Wiliam went on to argue that if teachers are to implement these ideas in their practice they will need considerable support in the form of *living examples of implementation* (Drummond, 2003:181). As I wrote earlier in the chapter they sketched out an ambitious programme for development, which would enable teachers to reconstruct their current approaches to assessment in the interests of learning: assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning has been the driving principle of this development work. In the later publication (Black et al, 2002) the authors describe the innovative practices in assessment that have developed in selected secondary and primary schools and the evidence that this work has raised standards. This classroom work is described under four headings: questioning, feedback through marking, peer and self-assessment and the formative use of summative tests. In all four areas Black and colleagues claim, teachers become more effective as they redefined their role in learning, relinquishing the delivery-recipient relationship of expert teacher/passive learner (a term that I always struggled with), and repositioning themselves with their children as partners in pursuit of a shared goal (my preferred role). Gradually assessment *for* learning has become a dominant responsibility, a key principle that extends to the whole of their teaching. Further development work continued, under the auspices of the ESRC Teaching and Learning Project, which extended the earlier work on formative assessment into a model of learning how to learn for both teachers and children. This in time may offer teachers a powerful framework for examining and understanding both their practice and their children's learning.

One striking aspect of the work of my research is that it is taking place on an educational assessment landscape where the trends still seem to be set in a very different direction. My own experience and observations, over the last ten years of children in the early years of school, suggest that the process described by Willes (1983), by which active, enquiring and explorative children quickly become submissive and obedient pupils, is still a lived reality for most children.

As funding arrangements for four-year olds changed, many more children now enter primary school at the beginning of the year in which they turn five. But these children of below statutory age are, on the whole conceptualised as pupils, and subject to stringent classroom control. This is despite the introduction of the Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance (2000) and the standardised Foundation Stage Profile (2002) and the work of Clarke (2001, 2003 & 2005). I remain concerned that the principle of young children as:

Active learners who take responsibility for and manage their own learning
(Black et al, 2002:21)

has limited currency in the wider world, outside the *Assessment for Learning* project schools and Clarke's project schools. Like Drummond (2003) I feel that there is still too little opportunity for an active learner, and no framework for understanding young children's spontaneous acts of meaning making and enquiry (see Chapter 3 & 4). There is still the danger of young children being impoverished as learners, discouraged from exploring the world, from loving and quarrelling and peace-making, from engaging with enthusiasm, from telling astonishing stories, or imagining new and impossible worlds. The model of assessment that accompanies this mindset towards learners is I have come to realise, equally inappropriate (see Chapter 6).

Where to next? Another learning journey...

Throughout the thesis I have attempted to establish some enduring principles in fairly assessing young children's learning, development and attainment that are not subject to contingencies of short-lived national and local pressures and policies. I have explicably shown my extreme anxiety about inappropriate mechanical and numerical approaches to assessment, and shown my cautious continuing optimism that teachers like me can do better, in ways of our own invention. This thesis accounts for many fresh efforts by teachers to alter the assessment landscape from unsituated tests that have been dominant in the last two decades to moving towards assessment at its best.

It is important to note, however, that some of the emerging discourse about educational assessment is similar to that which surfaced alongside the progressive education reform period earlier in the last century. Teachers then, as now, were engaged in discussions about documenting children's learning, making real work the focus of attention in assessment, getting closer to children's understandings, their meanings, helping children make learning their own. And yet such directions did not come to dominate the educational landscape (Perrone, 1997). We need to pay attention to that history so that assessment remains not only *assessment for learning*, but also *assessment as learning* in order to improve the learning process (Dann, 2002:142).

While writing the thesis, the work of Drummond (2003 & 1993), related to assessment of young children's learning, has been an inspiration to me (see Chapter 3) and since that time I have considered her short, simple, clear, but nevertheless very profound message:

Children's interests are paramount. Assessment is a process that must enrich their lives, learning and development. Assessment must work for children (Drummond 2003:13).

My research journey so far has given me the opportunity for careful reflection on past practice to try to understand the place of assessment in education and it has made great moral and philosophical demands on my thinking. Because the thesis examines my work in school since the implementation of the Education Reform Act (1988) I examined both the objective, mechanical process of measurement that suggests checklists, precision, explicit criteria and incontrovertible facts and figures (see Chapter 1, 4, 5 & 6) and how I worked in the classroom with young children (see Chapter 3 & 4). I particularly looked critically at my acts of assessment of children's learning. I collaboratively explored (with research colleagues) what I saw. I tried to understand it and put my understanding to good use. I embarked on a process that in this thesis I referred to as - looking for a fairer assessment of children's learning, development and attainment.

I am ready to take up my next responsibility or challenge as I am optimistically committed to a future that will enable me to use my improved acts of a fairer assessment of children's learning, development and attainment, to open doors to their future as confident life-long learners. The opportunities for continuing practitioner research on the education assessment landscape appear varied and extremely interesting. My wish is to continue to work with a school community, to gain their involvement with an action research project that explores formative assessment (AfL) of creative learning and includes gaining young children's perception of assessment. I would like to design an early years curriculum of exploration, themes and creativity for the whole primary age range – perhaps this could be my next creative learning journey. Maybe the Primary Review, chaired by Robin Alexander (TES, 2006), over

the next couple of years will provide one such an opportunity for me to continue my learning journey across the educational assessment landscape.

This thesis, then, tells the story of an infant head teacher/teacher researcher's exploratory journey into the heart of a living educational assessment landscape at a time of extensive and forever changing national reforms. The account identifies her personal and professional values and seeks to:

1. Evaluate the tacit knowledge of infant school practice related to the concept of a fairer assessment of young children's learning development and attainment
2. Demonstrate how teachers, schools and Ofsted make judgements about young children's learning, development and attainment
3. Create a research methodology that is adapted from critical educational action research case study and reflective practice research paradigms
4. Use professional stories of past practice (self-study) to represent implicit theories
5. Use collaborative reflection of experience (memory work) as a means to deconstruct practice and extrapolate values to foster personal and professional development
6. Create the environment for an improvement of assessment practices and children's learning, development and attainment (living education theory)
7. Show a unique representation of the overall research process in the form of the visual metaphor of a multi-layered jigsaw puzzle that enables the researcher to uncover successive, significant layers of professional knowledge in the infant school that relate to the concept of a fairer assessment of children's learning development and attainment

8. Provide an original contribution to educational knowledge in the debates about the rationality and justice of educational assessment

The characteristics of this thesis are located in each of the themes noted above:

1. Fairer assessment relies on both tacit and explicit practitioner knowledge
2. Young children's learning, development and attainment are not adequately represented through formally derived test scores but by means of a collaborative assessment community within a school
3. Use of a narrative approach, critical incident, self-disclosure and professional dialogue provide a powerful, situated, holistic, principled and eclectic combination in educational action/case study research
4. Implicit theory can be constructed by drawing from personal and professional practice and plays a vital role in the development of professional judgement and expertise
5. Collaborative critical reflection on experience powerfully enables both the production of educational knowledge and emancipation from the restraints of educational assessment
6. Formal and informal assessment procedures involve a social process, bias, distortion and equity issues and also affect each young child's motivation, self-esteem and sense of self as a learner
7. Professional knowledge is multi-dimensional and relies on a combination of creative action and evolving dialogue by collaborating participants

The research offers an original contribution to educational knowledge in that it clarifies meanings of my ontological value of a fairer assessment of children's learning, development and attainment and forms that value into a living epistemological standard of critical judgement.

This is achieved through:

- Adopting an unconventional perspective from a practitioner researcher using genuine infant head teacher/teacher experiences
- Additional case study information about the effects of educational assessment on teaching and learning in the infant school context
- An original action research methodology that facilitates a critical collaborative reflective look at professional practice through self-study and memory work
- A thoughtful critique of an educational policy and practice that is potentially disadvantaging and harmful to young children
- A presentation of educational assessment, both as an integral part of the infant school curriculum and as a result of the politics of education.

In this thesis I demonstrated how a passion for a fairer assessment of young children's learning, development and attainment and the involvement of a collaborative community of teacher researchers (critical friends) from an education background has sustained my work and caused me to interrogate my own practice and values. My research not only reinforced a belief that educational assessment should support all young children to be enthusiastic and effective life-long learners but also, crucially, generated professional knowledge to share with other practitioners about the implications of a fairer assessment.

I invite the reader to live, experience and learn in a reciprocal relationship with the findings of my thesis and thus understand better the creative, emotional, social, moral and sensual feelings attached to their own assessment practices. In short, to travel their own educational journeys to professional enlightenment.