

**How do I sustain my spiritual values of loving and hope-filled service and communion with other in my life and its work as an educator at the end of my teaching career?**

**Overview and Background**

*'As have no slight or trivial influence  
On the best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered acts  
Of kindness and of love.'*

(William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', July 13<sup>th</sup> 1798)

Since starting my doctorate, the necessary, but feared, end of my teaching practice with students with autism has arrived. When it came, sitting in a small, cluttered consulting room in Dublin, I could not realise nor bear it. It hit me like an implosion of breathless panic. I immediately felt cold, alone and adrift. This rapidly transferred to physical shaking that affected both voice and body. I left the consulting room and phoned a dear, close friend. I stood on a busy, gradually darkening, city street, my back pressed tightly against a grey wall with my teeth chattering, frozen by the internal coldness left in the aftermath of the implosion while soft, warm tears rolled down my cheeks. As passer bys hurried home, invisible to them, I struggled with the words that I was trying to repeat without owning.

I squeezed my back tighter and tighter against the wall behind me as I tried to focus on my friend's comforting words. This was beyond choice. This was a path I had to walk. This was where the values of love and hope that had been the cable connecting and conducting my academic, professional and personal knowledge into my relationships with my students, now, must energise life itself.

Struggling with increasing health issues and the effects of years of working with emotionally and physically challenging behaviours, I had hoped, for a long time that, when the time came a living legacy would transform grief into achievement. Watching so many of my contemporaries without significant senior position or academic regard, leaving the profession, head-low, heart-broken, spirit-depleted, I had feared their 'loss of grace'. They had grown tired and old, burdened with professional frustrations and disappointments. They had grown small and isolated, disconnected from an academy that, during my doctorate apprenticeship, I have come to believe could have salvaged community and inspired achievement. Bereft of professional regard and academic community, their personal, embodied knowledge had neither outlet nor expression. What was their unique light turned inwards and burnt the very source that had kindled and nurtured it. When they left the profession they sought alternative interests. They sympathised with those still teaching; still trapped. They met with other retirees and shared 'horror' stories of how badly they had been treated. It took an age before some could reminisce with a fondness that did not stir more than thirty years deep, ocean of tears:

*'She died a famous woman denying  
her wounds  
denying  
her wounds came from the same source as her power.'*

(Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974 – 1977*)

I was determined that when stripped of the practice that had given my life purpose and direction, for the greatest part of my adulthood, the grace of my spiritual values would remain intact, enduring and energising the next step, enabling me to keep my head-up, my heart loving and my spirit hopeful. In the midst of a struggle to accomplish this, the idea of a 'living legacy' was born. For me a living legacy provides a positive bridge between a past and a future in which 'I' is the present.

Therefore, as I see it, within me is realised the sum of my past academic, professional and personal knowledge. The present is the 'sum'. If each sum represented a candle what light of knowledge the totality of these candles could emit, right now, from the past to shine for future generations of educators. Yet, at present, each 'I' shines separately, alone in the dark of its own extinguishing. So, with the hope of my own living legacy, came the dream that, in creating it, I would contribute something of significance for others:

*'Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world.'* (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 738)

In the two years, since starting the doctorate, the legacy has taken shape and grown. At the start, it was simply a dream of passing on a torch to those coming after me. Repetitively, I have said that, I wished I was just starting out my practice with the academic, professional and embodied knowledge, I now have. However, there was no pinprick direction for such a task; there was no intuitive 'hunch' needing investigation because, in the practice itself, again and again, I had tried and tested theory, refined and re-hypothesised it. There was just the totality of years of enquiry and study; reflective practice and knowledge chiselled into every aspect of my being. However, from walking through the door, on the first doctorate residential weekend, to walking out of the consulting room in Dublin, much had happened to lay the foundations and scaffolding for my dissertation.

At the start I did not know what my dissertation would be, except that, as my legacy, it would have to be anchored in the field of autism; the field I had spent more than the last decade of my practice passionately immersed in. This lack of specific direction appeared at odds with the majority of those with whom I started down the doctorate road. In the face of their inner direction and their higher status, institutional positions, my absence of direction was anxiety ridden. However, now, I am grateful for this lack of clarity and certainty because it afforded me the freedom, to engage both in breadth and depth, with the process of simply walking the road. As a result of this, unfettered walk, this proposal has evolved from a unique engagement with the academy, on a level, I had never before experienced. For that, I am sincerely grateful, to Dr Joan Walton and Professor Jack Whitehead. They did not lead me. What they offered me was essentially themselves. They met me, in a way no academic had

ever met, or even tried to meet, with me before. In their own search to nurture ‘the flourishing of humanity’ they walked the path less traversed. It is the path we do not readily share because it is internal, introspective and personal. It is the path that appears to me to be the forbidden fruit of academia and the profession. Yet, I contend that it is an essential part of the life and force of the goals of both. More than that, in my living, reflective practice, I know that it is the source of much profound, now missing knowledge, to both.

This proposal attempts to account for this because it relates a journey to honour the union between the academy, the profession and the personal that has been conducted through a cable of my spiritual values of love and hope in all my relationships with children and, now, ultimately with self and other. Furthermore, these values inspire a new dream; the dream that this dissertation will be seminal in opening the door for my contemporaries to proudly name and celebrate their own living legacies and, thereby, enrich and influence the academy and the profession that without the personal, in my opinion, remains unearthed and unsafe. Like two of the three elements of electricity, I see the academy as the neutral, steady force and the profession as the live, pulsating one. Although electricity will flow with just these two forces, it is unsafe without the third, earthed element, of the personal. This ‘earth-ing’ of these neutral and live forces occurs in the embodiment of knowledge within the reflective practitioner or as Davis et al (2000) acknowledge ‘knowing is doing is being’.

Ultimately, through the authenticity of my own reflective inquiry, I dream of a new form of valued connection between these three strands; of communion between me and other; and, a deepening of the spirit of love and hope.

## **The Abstract**

MacLure (1996, p. 283) emphasizes the importance of resisting telling an inauthentic ‘smooth story of self’ in the narrative of an action researcher. Walton (2011) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing knowledge and understanding with values emerging from love and hope. Whitehead and McNiff (2006, p. 45) point out that:

*‘We know what happens when people are prevented from exercising their capacity to question, the gradual loss of excitement, and the quietude of acceptance.’*

(Whitehead & McNiff 2006, p. 45)

This proposal focuses on a narrative of my learning to sustain an expression of loving, hope-filled insight, in my life and work as an educator, as I come to the end of my teaching career. It includes a struggle with macro-cosmic issues that focus on an effort to sustain a sense of meaning in existence and, living a loving and productive life, as my values seek to find expression beyond the one-to-one interactions with my students.

The narrative is imbued with meaning by my resilient dream of a society, in which, we all have something to contribute, are all of equal value and where we all belong. The values that underpin this dream are the values of service and loving, hope-filled, empathetic communion with other. Also, from the authenticity of personal reflection, I will explain how ‘owning’ what my value system is and, what my values are, consciously and powerfully accessed grace that, started me on a journey to understand why I did what I did and who I am. Re-awakened this connection illuminates my sense of self and guides me deeper and further on the journey that is my thesis. It is the ‘virtue’ that inspires me to be the best I can be in this life, seeking loving, hope-filled service and communion even when the practice has ended.

Energised by this connection, I will relate how during the last two years, I came to the knowledge and understanding that, the psychosocial stages of development (Erikson, 1968) may not only provide different tasks, but, also, may require alternative approaches with adapted methods of research. This insight significantly shifted my proposed thesis from the path I initially discerned. It brought me to a new quest of service and communion and, the idea that a 'living legacy' may offer an alternative, unexplored approach, enriched with a lifetime's passion and the promise of the hope of valued, dignified resolution.

### **Introduction: Russian Dolls**

The proposed nucleus of my research is a personal narrative of enquiry and learning. The focus of this will be upon the challenge to sustain an expression of loving, hope-filled insight in my life and its work as an educator at the end of my teaching career. This will include my personal struggle with social, cultural and institutional issues and, the exploration of their impact upon my sense of meaning and social role, alongside an unwavering search to live a life of service and communion, even when, the practice ended but the practitioner lived on. The narrative will be imbued with meaning and hope through the changing nature of my irrepressible dream of a society in which we are all normal, different and unique; of equal value and due mutual respect, regardless of ability, age, status, etc. From this, meaning and hope, emerges the most powerful sense of connection with other experienced, mature practitioners that illuminates the validity and potential human scope of the study. Equally sad as joyful, I am neither alone nor outsider on the journey I am about to authentically research, interpret and share, as a literature review shows.

Every year dedicated, experienced, mature classroom teachers are lost to early retirement. This is an international problem. Mantei (2010) describes the significant impact the loss of 'late career teachers' has had upon Australian schools, particularly in the responsibility placed on early and mid career teachers to reshape present day pedagogies. Hansez et al (2005) argue that the increasing numbers of teachers in Belgium, retiring early, has lead to

significant shortages within the profession. In two consecutive reports 'Learning Teams: Creating What's Next' (2008) & 'Who Will Teach? Experience Matters' (2010), The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future warned of a 'retirement tsunami' (2010, p.4) that would deprive American schools of 'an unacceptably large number of our best educators' (2008, p.2). In the United Kingdom the 'Independent' newspaper on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2012 reported that almost ninety thousand teachers took early retirement in the previous school year.

Predominately, international studies identify stress related issues as the main cause of early retirement in the teaching profession. Weber (2002) found that more than fifty percent of Bavarian teachers taking early retirement did so because of 'psychic or psychosomatic illnesses'. Hansez et al (2005) concerned that stress was a major factor in the increasing numbers of Flemish teachers taking premature retirement, found that this was often located in a perceived sense of job depreciation and lack of recognition. Lehr et al (2009) found that 'affective disorders' frequently accounted for early retirement in schoolteachers in Germany identifying an imbalance between effort and the reward of esteem by supervisors or colleagues as a more significant risk factor for depression than low monetary reward or job security. Cau-Bareille (2011) looking at the early retirement of female kindergarten teachers in France, found that the acquired experience of these teachers did not protect them from the mounting human costs of their jobs. Teachers interviewed were affected by work-related constraints and cumulative fatigue, with feelings of personal effectiveness declining with age, adding to increased anxiety in the last few years of their working lives. Dunham (2002) writing about stress in teaching in Britain cited Travers and Cooper's (1990) study that found that out of the sixty-six percent of participants who had actively considered leaving teaching, thirteen percent were considering taking early retirement. Dunham (2002), also, identified that the 'older teachers' felt that they had once had greater freedom of choice in their work but, had had to come to the acceptance that, they were merely employees who just had to do as they are told. He cited Blase (1982) and how cumulative stress leads to the erosion of coping strategies and burnout.

The silent but high loss of the cumulated academic, professional and embodied knowledge of these mature, experienced teachers to education, research and practice seems incongruous to me. In addition, that many of those who are such a rich, untapped source of educational experience and knowledge should walk away from their mastered art and craft feeling drained and valueless is, in my opinion, beyond defence. Yet, at present, the response to this premature loss appears, simply to be, a proliferation of studies that acknowledge the impact upon the profession and names the nature of causes and possible preventions of this exodus:

*‘researchers need to ask how to keep teachers in the profession (Perrachione, Rosser, & Petersen, 2008) by identifying why they leave and thus providing schools with the information necessary to address those problems’ (Vanderslice, 2010, p.300)*

Inevitably, these studies take a third person viewpoint and share a common construction that insightful understanding will somehow banish attrition. They are, primarily, qualitative in nature but are told by those for whom retirement may seem a distant country. Also, in focusing on describing, understanding and stopping the seepage, it appears to me, that there is ‘an emperor’s new clothes’ denial of the inevitability of retirement. As Aaron and Callan (2011, p.7) note, ‘Quite unsurprisingly, as workers age, they tend to stop working.’

Many areas of work, in the care professions, appear to run increased occupational risk of ‘burn-out’ (Maslach, 2003; McGrath et al, 2003; Pension et al, 2000; Felton, 1998; Maslach & Jackson, 1982) and, thereby, recourse to early retirement. Front-line, hands-on class teaching is no exception:

*‘Those who work in human services seem to be at the highest risk of burnout (e.g., social workers, nurses, teachers, lawyers, medical doctors, and police officers). Each of these professions involves dealing with emotional situations that draw on the affective domain. For teachers, working with many students over an extended period of time creates a platform for emotional stress. In addition, adverse effects from social and political changes, combined with what Farber (1991) calls the erosion of public respect for teachers, have left many*



*teachers disenchanted with the profession and at high risk for burnout. Farber (1991) notes that many reforms of the 1980s, which were centered on top-down changes, have left even more teachers dissatisfied, stressed, worn out, and overcommitted.* (Vanderslice, 2010, p.298)

Here is multi-tasking at its best. Class teachers must teach and manage groups of young people with divergent personalities, abilities, interests, backgrounds, etc. They must (often simultaneously!) communicate with parents, colleagues, auxiliary and senior staff, other professionals, etc. In these interactions and communications, in the face of timetable and curriculum demands, they must make snap judgements as to what to act upon immediately, what to shelve for future attention, what to pass on, what to instantaneously forget, etc. Also, in the day-to-day business of a school, the class teacher must relinquish some degree of personal control and judgement to management demands and school policy. They must do all of this under the scrutiny of accountability, inspection and a press that often finds them wanting. To ignore or deny that, this is a job with many psychological stressors that may lead to chronic ill-health and the necessity of early retirement is either naive or unjust.

However, from a review of the available literature, it appears possible, that the inevitability of retirement, either early or timely, is being overlooked because age-related attrition is being subsumed within a general concern for teacher attrition as, for example, may be seen in the papers of Choinye et al (2011) Manuel (2003) and McGaw (2002). This concern may, also, explain the focus on the effect upon those left behind and means of retention. Unfortunately, if it is so, the lens being used to interpret and understand the experience provides a focus that may, not only, be inappropriate to the phenomenon but, omits to situate the experience within the relevant psychological, social and cultural contexts. Moreover, personal issues and/or costs tend to be viewed as intrapersonal or institutionally interpersonal, with resolutions being presented as potentially fixable on these levels. Broader, macro-cosmic influences are kept outside the scope of the research. However, mature teachers, at present, teaching in our schools and experiencing the accumulation of pressures and contradictions may, like me, intuit that some chronic issues/costs are rooted in broader social/cultural constructions and, therefore, beyond the redemptive scope of their individual working life.

Therefore, an outsider, descriptive narrative focused on the institutional and professional consequences and impacts, whilst naming the issues, appears to maintain control over the subjective depth. 'Messy', intrapersonal angst can be contained and its 'situatedness' within broader social and culture stereotypes of age and aging can be overlooked. This absence confers an erroneous appearance of relational neutrality on the issue of early retirement. By this, I mean, that early retirement appears to be placed outside 'the influence of changes in the relationships between' elder practitioners and 'economics, politics, ecology and sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts that' (Whitehead, 2008, p.1) they inhabit. My concern, here is that, this is not simply an imbalanced picture but one that may, by neglect, be reinforcing social and culture prejudices and barriers.

Certainly, for me, the intrinsic relationship between the social and cultural aspects of gerontology and the intrapersonal, psychological issues that an aging teacher may face seem to be overlooked. For example, one of the more frequent issues of early retirement studies is the resulting impact for younger, less-experienced teachers as seen in Chionye et al's (2011, p. 109) observation that the loss of experienced teachers does not 'augur well for the profession because such teachers could become mentors to beginning teachers and teach them the rudiments of the job.' Socially and culturally this may be seen to reflect an aspect of the phenomenon of 'youth centredness'. 'Youth-centredness' is the expression, I use, to describe a social/cultural trend towards conferring uniqueness and value more onto the young, than the elders of a society. It, may be, part of the wider diminishing of respect for the elder members of Western societies' that Aboderin (2004) and Cowgill (1986) locate in industrial and economic factors. Indeed, Cole's (1997) cultural history of aging in the America, parallels improved medical and economic conditions with an accompaniment of cultural disenfranchisement, in terms, of a loss of meaning and social role for older citizens. In this way, the findings of Dunham (2002), Hensez et al (2005), Lehr et al (2009) and Cau-Bareille (2011) may all be located in the social and cultural diminishing of the value and respect for elders across Western societies. For example, Hensez et al's (2005) finding that a sense of job depreciation and a lack of recognition contribute to premature retirement in teachers in Belgium may fit into the context that as practitioners age their value and respect within an institution may, at best, peak but at worse, diminish, reflecting broader social and cultural trends. Certainly, Dunham (2002) found an association between aging and loss of

professional freedom of choice whilst Cau-Bareille (2011) found that teachers expressed a reduction in personal effectiveness that they directly related to aging.

Also, the focus away from the personal, subjective, insider account of the process of early retirement onto professional and institutional consequences and impacts draws attention away from vast areas of concurrent research in other fields. For example, there has been no research that draws together aspects from the fields of gerontology, developmental and/or transpersonal psychology. It appears, to me, to be the norm and the practice across all spheres of human endeavour, to sharpen insight and knowledge in one field/discipline at the expense of a breadth of knowing. There is even the old, familiar adage of 'jack of all trades, master of none' that epitomises the danger associated with non-specialisation that has been culturally imbibed. Everywhere I look I can see how the modern age has refined departmentalism into a common craft. The young are swiftly moved from a broad, general education increasingly into a limited, specifically tailored one. Even the view of matter as an organism that can be broken down into sub-atomic particles invisible to the eye, reinforces the belief in what, may be described as, an objective and purposeful reductionism. Indeed, if I created a living legacy it would relate the story of my teaching practice in the field of autism, situated within the field of special education, situated within primary education, situated within education. These 'Russian dolls' fit neatly, one-into-the-other, representing a sharpening of my skill and a refining of my capabilities and, I can, even selectively, know one without necessarily having a depth of experience with another. However, for me to be familiar with but one, without ever having awareness of its relationship within a network provides a blinkered, partial glimpse of their 'raison d'être'. To understand Russian dolls I must understand both the singularity of each doll and the nature of the sum of all the dolls. For me, this is as true for a living legacy of my practice in the field of autism, as it is for a full, comprehensive exploration of the research question:

*'How do I sustain my spiritual values of loving and hope-filled service and communion in my work and life as an educator at the end of my teaching career?'*

The only difference is in the dolls themselves. The doll of a living legacy, addressing my practice in the field of autism, fits readily into the macrocosm of education. All the dolls of this system exist outside and without me. The subject-knower 'I' who will create the legacy will reflect upon a plurality of dynamic relationships with academia, the profession, students, parents, other professionals, etc. 'I' will find my legacy situated within these interactions. However, the 'doll' of this research question is not a subject-knower-I' but, 'I' a 'knowing-subject'. This 'knowing-subject-I' is situated at the microcosmic level of many systems. The system of this research is but one and, this one, is complex and many layered. In its totality the system represents much human enquiry across several disciplines, such as, psychology, sociology and education. What is most interesting in the nature of this system, is that all the enquiries into early retirement are concerned with understanding and/or interpreting the experiences of the 'knowing-subject-I' and, yet, there has been no research reporting the first-hand reflections of this 'I'.

Therefore, it is with the 'knowing-subject-I' that this research proposes to begin and continually look to maintain connection to personal sincerity, authenticity and trustworthiness. In doing so, I mirror Walton's (2011, p.7) view of living theory as the product of a 'living contradiction' existing 'when there is a dissonance between the values' a practitioner holds, and how they actually behave, in the creation of a new, disharmonious struggle between an individual's youthful aspirations, on one hand, and, on the other, the actuality of achievement. I want to explore whether or not Walton's (2011) proposal that, as living theory enables a person to reflect on their own dissonance and seek to resolve it, the creation of a living legacy can likewise enable me, a mature teacher, to come to the end of my practice with the resolution necessary to sustain my spiritual values of loving, hope-filled service and communion for other beyond the arena of my thirty year practice.

The spiritual values I refer to are not anchored in a specific religion but are intrinsic and existential in nature. Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) noting increasing interest in workplace related spirituality proposed three categories of definition. These are, intrinsic, religious and existential. The second category is specific to a religion and, therefore, does not relate to the research question. However, the first category, intrinsic, defines spirituality originating inside

a person i.e. 'inner consciousness' and the latter, existential, defines a reflective 'search for a meaning'. The spirituality of the research question is an amalgamation of both these.

In, many ways, this will be a unique research journey. MacLure (1996) emphasizes the importance of resisting telling an inauthentic 'smooth story of self' in the narrative of an action researcher but, the nature of my narrative denies me even that choice. MacLure (1996) looks at the narratives of people who have transitioned from teacher, via action researcher to academic, dwelling within the boundaries of these, before arriving at their final destination. One thing is very clear to me, even in my darkest moments in my practice, I knew I had arrived at my destination i.e. the place I wanted most to be. The boundaries I dwelt in, as I embarked on my doctorate, were significantly different in nature to those of MacLure's participants. There was nothing greater or bigger beyond the classroom for me. I entered the boundary lands free of will and aspiration. With the unrelenting march of time, it simply was a process I, as others before, beside and behind me, must go through. Therefore, perhaps, my emotional need to find resolution and embrace the 'inbetweeness' of my transition towards leaving the work that has given my life structure and purpose, may refute MacLure's description of boundary work as a 'transgression'. I own that I am hoping to create 'a new space' in which the dissonance between my values, as expressed through my youthful aspirations and the actuality of my ultimate achievement can be resolved or dissolved (MacLure, 1996; Winter, 1991). So, in telling my story, it will be authentic and, it will not be smooth.

Moreover, in its 'methodological inventiveness' it will go beyond the smallest Russian doll, 'I', seeking loving, hope-filled service and communion with other. Whilst the 'knowing-subject-I' is the vessel of authenticity, sincerity and trustworthiness, 'shared understandings' are my source of social validity and coherence. These located in the social and cultural discourses of age and aging, in the available literature offer, I believe, a comprehensive nest of reliability. Ultimately, the intent of this 'nesting' is not mere illumination but, as advocated by Habermas (1987), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Russel (1993 reprinted 1992) the interruption of what have become silent, entrenched, normative, social orders that they may be transformed anew for the betterment of many:

*'unquestioning acceptance' of normative rules and practices 'by practitioners often contributes {albeit unwittingly} to reproducing the existing social order and so perpetuates them' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p. 101).*

### **Purpose and Significance of the Research**

The purpose of this research is to understand the intrinsic and existential spiritual values (Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002) that inspired my practice; how they were expressed within the practice; and, how they can be sustained as the practice drew to a close. Therefore, the guiding research question is:

*'How do I sustain my spiritual values of loving, hope-filled service and communion in my work and life as an educator at the end of my teaching career?'*

The purpose is neither to tell a story locked in a fading past nor to describe the end point in my practice. Working within Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) 'living philosophy' the purpose is to positively engage with an external change of circumstances, so that the spiritual values that guided my educational practice can grow, flourish and inspire whatever comes next. With this is the personal hope of resolution, between the dissonance of my youthful aspirations, as a novice teacher and, my end accomplishments. Alongside this, is a greater hope that, through understanding the psychological, social and cultural 'situatedness' of my values and their changing role in my personal experience of early retirement, a shared understanding of existential meanings and, the possible, academic and professional contribution of dedicated, experienced practitioners can be achieved. The ultimate dream of this research is the illumination of how values can be positively rechanneled to improve the experience and sense of social contribution of those approaching retirement:

*'living philosophy, a form of artistry, which requires us to change ourselves if we want to help others to become participants in processes of change'* (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.137).

The significance of this will lie in bringing together aspects that have been kept apart. To date, research into early retirement has had a reductionist focus upon the causes and prevention of teacher attrition. Focus on causes acknowledges 'burn-out' and other psychological and emotional conditions (Cau-Bareille, 2011; Lehr et al, 2009; Hansez et al, 2005; Weber, 2002). Focus on prevention predominantly addresses interpersonal, institutional issues such as, the regard of senior management, loss of self-agency and constraining workplace structures (Cau-Bareille, 2011 & Dunham 2002). Also, frequently, the expressed concern of these studies has been on the professional and institutional impact for those left behind i.e. the students and the less experienced teachers (Mantei, 2010; & Hansez et al, 2005). Both these focal points and concerns are worthy of study. However, it is the contention of this proposal that they may have blinkered out the essential human being who is at the heart of the subject matter and without whom the intrapersonal dimension, shared understandings and the cultural/social discourses these are lodged in, are glossed over and/or lost.

Moreover, this coming together will include not only fields of research but, also, the fields of academic, professional and personal knowledge. I am, particularly, interested in what, if any, part, the abstraction of knowledge from its seat within the individual experience of a practitioner to external academic and professional ownership has to play in the attrition of the experienced, mature teacher. I am equally interested in what, if any, part, this veneration of external knowledge has played in my disassociation from what I value and my values in favour of embracing pragmatic dissonant, contradictions in my career. Therefore, subsequent enquiry questions are:

*Has this displacement of personal knowledge devalued and impacted negatively upon my perception of my ability to contribute to the academy and the profession knowledge?*

*Has imbalance in how different forms of knowledge are valued promoted stoicism in the face of dissonance between my values and my actions?*

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this research are to bring into the discourse of teacher early-retirement two issues that I consider essential but missing in this area of significant human interest. The first relates to conceptualisations of age and retirement. It is my proposal that, retirement, whether early or late, for most practitioners, is an inevitable part of life's journey. Therefore, rather than, struggling to maintain an unsupportable status-quo, it may be more productive and humane to identify alternative means of harnessing the loss of expertise. The second is interwoven into the giving of a personal account of one making the journey. Sadly, as the research focus of teacher early retirement is predominantly on loss and a battle for retention (Hansez et al, 2005 & Weber, 2002), rather than, an acknowledgement of another stage in life's journey, what is, also, missing, from research to date, is how the transition can be transformed into more than a brief handshake of thanks and become a celebration of a unique and reflective life.

Amongst the educational aims encapsulated in the mission statements of most places of learning is the intent to enable students to live rich and fulfilled lives. Personally as a practitioner I would feel a sense of failure if I did not strive to such an endeavour. Personally, at present, as a colleague, a friend and a human-being, I feel a deep sense of failure because I know others who have left the practice they had passionately loved feeling a poverty of indifference and the absence of regard. Therefore, the ultimate research objective of this thesis is that, the spiritual values that drive good practice in the care of students will transpose into a person-centred valuing of all.



### **Research Limitations & Risks**

The potential risks of this research lie in the breadth and the depth of the aspects that will be brought together. There is pragmatism in refining down onto a specific area of research rather than expanding outwards from a personal microcosm to an ever-expanding universe of knowledge and interpretation. However, the approach of a 'knowing-subject-I' is intended to act as an anchor of authenticity, sincerity and trustworthiness, keeping the study afloat and steady even in potentially overwhelming seas of divergent theories and concepts. In this way, the 'knowing-subject-I', acts as a force of limitation and check upon the scope of the study, whilst the triangulation between 'I', the 'shared understandings' of other and the cultural and social discourses of the literature review, act as staples of social validity and coherence.

### **The Methodology: The Path**

*'Researchers also need to understand the assumptions underlying various techniques and they need to know the criteria by which they can decide that certain techniques and procedures will be applicable to certain problems and others will not.'* Kothari (2004, p.7)

During the initial two years of the doctorate programme there were many discussions on choice of methodologies. However, as I came closer to knowing what my enquiry would be, I felt increasingly estranged from choice because the nature of the inquiry and the research path appeared inseparable i.e. methodology rather than being an academic choice was directed by the enquiry. In other words, the path of discovery that I was upon was establishing not only my proposal but, also, the direction I would inevitably take. Therefore, along, with a growing number of others, such as, Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009; Creswell et al, 2007; Savage, 2006; Patton, 2002; Creswell, 1998 and Guba & Lincoln, 1994, I believe that my choice of methodology cannot be separated from my personal ontological, epistemological and axiological perspective and assumptions.

My personal ontology is internal and relational. That is, not to say, that I deny the independent existence of an objective world. I situate it on the upper, right quadrant or corner of Wilber's (1996) cosmos, where it represents all that is observable within and without ever increasing organisms and systems and, I accept its central, dominant place in the research of others. However, the predominant world of my research proposal co-exists with this world. For me, it is represented by Wilber's (1996, p.76) upper, left quadrant of 'the interior depth that is consciousness itself'. It is the internal world of sentient, conscious beings. I am a sentient, conscious being and, together with other human-beings, I do not simply see, hear and touch the objective world but I, also, interpret, respond emotional, seek to understand and invest with meaning all that lies without me. This process incorporates perception, emotion and cognition and meets, sometimes struggles, with relational support or challenge from other. Moreover, all this is done within the structures of a broader relational discourse between my subjective knowing/meanings and the culture/society I live in. Therefore, I acknowledge that the ontological lens, through which I am looking, as I start on this journey, is internal and relational.

My personal epistemology is submerged and, yet, arising from this ontological perspective. I do not deny the existence of knowledge that is hard and concrete. I have transmitted much of the simpler tenets of such knowledge, from across disciplines, to students, for the best part of thirty years. However, the knowledge that interests me, that forms the essence of this proposal is 'softer, more subjective, spiritual or even transcendental kind, based on experience and insight of a unique and essentially personal nature' (Cohen et al, 2000, p.6). As my ontology is internal and relational, my epistemology is the knowledge of the 'inner experience' and, of the 'shared meanings' that construct and are re-structured by these, as they are continually negotiated and influenced by broader social and cultural structures.

During the last two years, I have come to believe that, my axiological perspective and assumptions, or my internal value system, is the gate keeper to understanding why I was the practitioner I was, and why, I have chosen this as my next journey. However, before this time, I was ignorant of its power and, therefore, its influence over my ontology and epistemology was silent and subconscious:

*'We need to recognize and understand our educational values and beliefs before reflection and therefore development can take place.'* (Kennedy, 1996, p. 21)

To this, I add that, I needed to recognize and understand what I valued, before I could know a methodological path that authentically would reflect the unique unity of personal, professional and academic knowledge that my practice embodied.

I know, now, that I had always placed value in the internal, relational world. I reflect upon my life and see this value revealed in the choices I made. For example, as a teacher, the staple of my practice was the establishment and quality of relationships with my individual students. Equally, in valuing the internal, relational world, the knowledge, I have consistently placed the highest value upon, has been that of the intrapersonal 'inner experience' and, the interpersonal 'shared understandings' between me and other. I knew these to be personal, authentic, subjective 'truths' and lived with them, allowing them to penetrate and influence my daily practice. For example, I would spend weeks playing, observing, simply getting to know the student with the aim of establishing an empathetic communion. The less conventional the means of communication the student could access, the greater the challenge to establish a relationship that allowed me to glimpse the core constructs that would shed insight onto behaviour, wants, needs, likes, dislikes, strengths, etc. In understanding the core constructs of my students, I reflected on my own and, created space for them to evolve or devolve. These were valued, symbiotic, dialogical relationships.

However, in the past, when I undertook research, steeped in the traditional society and culture of academia, I knew to disassociate from these personal, authentic, subjective 'truths'. In other words, experience had given me awareness, rightly or wrongly, that I was in a world with a different value structure to my own and that held hegemonic sway over mine (Apple, 1996). Whether I consciously or subconsciously 'owned' this in the past, I do not know. I do know that, my past study was overshadowed by a pragmatic resort to the conformity of disassociation between what I internally valued and the external values I borrowed for research purposes. This disassociation became the established contradiction of a lifetime, always readily accepted and dismissed with the expression, 'Give unto Caesar' (Mark, 12:

17). I lived with it, resigned to the contradiction and, only occasionally, acknowledging dissonance in the professional arena when my principles were brought into conflict. However, the doctorate journey of the last two years has encouraged me to explore both what I value and my values. This exploration brings the promise of resolution but, only if, the methodology of my research authentically reflects my personal ontological, epistemological and axiological perspective and assumptions i.e. only if what I value and my values authentically and trustworthily inspire and influence how this research is approached and reported. I value this task. For me it is a significant enterprise: a celebration of what I value and the educational values I hold expressed through a life of service and communion:

*‘Perhaps the most important new insight for both of us has been awareness that, for some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their chosen research focus. We had understood for many years that substantive choice was fundamental to the motivation and effectiveness of practitioner research (Dadds, 1995); that what practitioners chose to research was important to their sense of engagement and purpose. But we had understood far less well that how practitioners chose to research, and their sense of control over this, could be equally important to their motivation, their sense of identity within the research and their research outcomes.’ (Dadds & Hart, 2001, p. 166)*

Furthermore, nestled within a relational ontology, I construct it as part of a worthy movement towards ‘living enquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing’ (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p.1). Therefore, whilst others face ‘a variety of options in terms of methodology’ (O’Connor, 2011, p. 7), I am option free. For the first time in my life, the methodology of my research is an authentic looking glass onto the ‘knowing-subject-I’ researcher, me!

Whether option free or not, believing in relational, shared constructions, I own that, the methodology of this research accords with certain contemporary worldviews or paradigms:

*‘This is a way of seeing the world or as Kuhn puts it a ‘definition of the field’ where ‘shared paradigms result in commitment to the same rules and standards for scientific practice (p.94)’*

(O’Connor, 2011, p.7)

In other words, the research methodology, though reflecting an internal, subjective ontology, does not arise from a personal ground zero but, is situated within certain relational, interpersonal constructions and discourses of present day culture and society. However, it is essential that the selected worldview offers the social validity of coherence with my personal ontology, epistemology and axiology; I must situate the research within a paradigm that compliments what I value and my values or these will be lost again in another dissonant, external value system.

Intrinsic to the research question is the overarching desire to find an alternative, creative expression for the embodied fusion of my personal, professional and academic knowledge. This desire arises from a lifetime of hands-on, reflective practice that depended upon the amalgamation and constant renewal of all three. My internal value system privately values them equally but, publically knows, only two are traditionally venerated. Sadly, the one least respected is the one that guided my reflection and practice in the other two areas: the personal, embodied knowledge essential to praxis. Therefore, it is in the paradigm of praxis that I initially sought to situate my research methodology.

Praxis is defined by Reason and Bradbury (2008, p.1):

*‘not so much a methodology as an orientation to inquiry that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues’*

As such it finds expression in action research:

*'Action research can be best summed up as plan, do, review, which is repeated in a circular fashion. The second plan must take into account the former review data and the evaluation of it so that new ideas can be tried and built upon. This ensures that the project develops and moves forward.'* (Little, 1995, p.31)

However, as the enquiry took form in my mind, it was the 'circular fashion' of action research that niggled at me most. I was coming to the end of my practice and, ending, by nature, precluded return and revision. Before I knew my research question, the school-based action research I had undertaken in the past, made me highly anxious that, what I was about to do would take me down a new, uncharted route, beyond the spirals of thirty years of practice, reflection and revised implementation. I valued these 'learning spirals' and wanting to honour and celebrate them had provoked the doctorate journey, but now, I was moving into new territory where there seemed to be a lack of 'goodness of fit' between this approach and the research I was interested in.

Concurrently, as I reflected on this dilemma, I became aware of the 'living theory' (Whitehead, 1989) approach. Within the action research approach, 'living theory' proposes that practitioners *'are capable of generating their own personal theories by systematically studying their practice'* (O'Connor, 2011, p.8) without limiting the study to a forward movement. For example, the 'living theory' doctorates of Van Tuyl (2009), Spiro (2008), Walton (2008), Sullivan (2006) and Naidoo (2005) all include a retrospective gaze. Here, therefore, was my initial glimpse of how I could construct research appropriate to my life situation.

Also, as the focus of the research question began to formulate, I realised that Walton's (2011, p.7) view of living theory as the product of a 'living contradiction' existing 'when there is a dissonance between the values' a practitioner holds, and

how they actually behave, could be reframed to explore the existential angst created between my youthful aspirations and the actuality of their mature, possibly final, achievement. As Walton (2011) suggests that, living theory can provide an opportunity for a person to reflect on their own dissonance and seek to resolve it, the idea that a 'living legacy' could enable a mature teacher to come to the end of her practice with the comfort of resolution, took seed. As it did so, the methodological concepts and tools were decided.

Central to these are 'I' and authenticity. Whitehead (2005) holds 'I' as central to the creation of 'living theories' whilst MacLure (1996) emphasizes the importance of resisting telling an inauthentic 'smooth story of self' in the narrative of an action research. However, MacLure (1996) is discussing the narratives of people who have transitioned from teacher, via action researcher to an academic, dwelling within the boundaries of these, before arriving at their final destination. As I started on the doctorate road I felt as one who has arrived at that destination. The classroom was where I wanted most to be. The boundaries I was dwelling in were different in nature to those of MacLure's (1996) participants. Moreover, my entrance to them was inevitable, given the human conditions of aging and mortality. Therefore, there was a need to find resolution and embrace the 'inbetweenness' of my approach towards leaving the work that gave my life structure and purpose and my spiritual values expression, that refutes MacLure's (1996) description of boundary work as a 'transgression'. In telling the authentic, 'unsmooth story of self', I am hoping to resolve, life-long contradictions, in order to unleash values tethered to expression in classroom practice and allow them to flow through the wholeness of my humanity. Even as I am required to leave my profession, I do not have to abandon the values that inspired it. The hope is of re-direction and, in this, new service and communion with other.

Therefore, beyond the centrality and authenticity of 'I', I am brought, once again, to the relational i.e. to the other. Condensed down from the abstract and general world-view of the traditional scientific model of enquiry; missing the filter of the reporting researcher of the established hermeneutic model; into the pure singularity of the first

person relationship between knower and known of an autoethnographic approach; the belief that guides my process of knowing is that, from the authenticity of personal, 'tacit knowing' (Polyani, 1958), a communion of shared understanding and insight can be achieved between the 'I' and 'other' through which the social validity and reliability of the research can be assessed. In other words, in undertaking my research into the issues around early retirement, I offer, a first-hand, autoethnographic account of my own experiences. In this, I am hoping to understand this experience that, I can, through reflection as advocated by Schön (1987, 1991), Freire (1972, 2004) and Habermas (1987), transpose into a new direction, the grace of the spiritual values that inspired my practice. If I can do this, I believe, I can enrich what is ahead and, thereby, improve the experience. However, as my values have been rooted in service and communion with other, the ultimate aim of my enquiry is to enrich and improve the experience for more than self. So, the second step of this enquiry is situating the personal within the narratives of contemporaries and, by so doing, not only broadening the enquiry but deepening the spirit of communion. Ultimately, with many jigsaw-piece, key-hole views of a shared reality, the underlying social/cultural and psychological themes of this common, human experience may shed light on how those at the end of their career can feel the strengthening of the grace of inspiration rather than the gradual diminishing of the light and create a legacy that enriches the academy, the profession and them, personally.

### **Research Methods**

The choice of methods not only differs from those of the traditional, scientific approach, and hermeneutic research in which the researcher interprets the stories of others but, also, from the now established, action research method of improving one's practice through 'circular reflection' that is at the heart of self-study and living theory (Whitehead, 1989). As a mature, experienced practitioner facing the end of my career, I experienced a sense of psychological 'outsiderness', even from colleagues researching within the action research, 'living theory' perspective because my focus had shifted from improving practice to leaving a legacy. This testimony, as I initially came to imagine it, would be a synopsis of what I had learned academically, professionally and personally for teachers, students, parents, etc, following me



down a path I believed I was coming to the end of. Certainly, in the years of practice, there had been constant, ‘circular reflection’ as academic and professional theory was tried and evaluated against experience and, eventually, transformed into ‘knowing in action’ (Schön, 1991). Furthermore, in the daily tasks of teaching, I still sought to improve my practice but, given the inevitability of a clock ticking that only I, it seemed, could hear, my focus was pulled increasingly towards the accumulated ‘tacit knowledge’ (Polyani, 1958) of the past and its future plight:

*‘. . . we live within the tensions constituted by our memories of the past and anticipation of the future.’* (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p.746)

I perceived myself as a bridge that was about to collapse or vanish. Either way, there was fear and concern that the embodied knowledge, uniting the past with the future, would be permanently lost without even an attempt to record it. In this space, I began to understand the need for ‘methodological inventiveness’ (Dadds and Hart, 2000) and creative methods grounded in my ontology, epistemology, axiology and, also, appropriate to my ‘psychosocial stage of development’ (Erikson, 1968).

Erikson (1968) describes eight stages of psychosocial development that occur throughout the lifespan. He proposed that each stage ‘is characterised by its own particular developmental task’ (Barnes, 1995, p.304). The penultimate stage spans middle adulthood to maturity and is characterised by the need to create or nurture things that will outlast one’s life. Successful ‘generativity’ results in feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, whilst failure results in ‘stagnation’ and shallow involvement in the world. Meanwhile, the final stage, spans maturity to death and is characterised by reminiscence. Erikson (1968) proposed that the older adult needs to look back and feel a sense of fulfilment. Successful ‘ego integrity’ results in feelings of wisdom and satisfaction, whilst failure results in regret, bitterness and despair. In the last two years, I have come to believe that, the edges and ages of these stages are not as clear and stable as Erikson (1968) prescribed. He suggested that the stage of ‘generativity versus stagnation’ is between forty to sixty-five years of age and that the stage of ‘ego-integrity versus despair’ stretches from sixty-five to death. Alternatively, I experienced the

developmental tasks of these stages not as separate but, as I approached the end of my practice, they seemed transplanted, one-on-top-the-other. In other words, the need for ‘generativity’ looked towards ‘reminiscent’ reflection for expression.

Therefore, whilst traditionally, in action research there appears to be a perpetual cycle of reflection, the starting point of this thesis is clearly at the end of a process. Guided by the tasks of ‘generativity’ and ‘reminiscence’ appropriate adaptations of this method are needed. Schön (1987, 1991) categorised reflection into two main ways. These were reflection in-action and on-action. Clearly, reflection post-retirement is confined to on-action. Therefore, for the purposes of the thesis the conceptualisations of Fitzgerald (1994) and Boyd and Fales (1983) regarding on-action reflection have been adopted in order to provide clarity of approach and direction. Fitzgerald (1994, p.67) proposes that reflection on-action can provide ‘the knowledge used in practical situations, by analysing and interpreting the information recalled.’ Reflection, therefore, may enable access to embodied, perhaps, automatic knowledge applied in-situ by the practitioner. Given the accumulation of years of experience and practice, systematically accessing this knowledge may be extremely valuable, not only to the practitioner, but, also, to the academy and the profession. Alternatively, Boyd and Fales (1983), focus on the value of on-action reflection to self:

*“The process of creating and clarifying the meanings of experiences in terms of self in relation to both self and world. The outcome of this process is changed conceptual perspectives”* (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 101)

On-action reflection does not simply add to personal, academic and professional knowledge but can act as a catalyst, transforming conceptual constructs and assumptions i.e. not simply increased breadth of knowing but increased depth of understanding enabling the evolution of personal knowing. If I was concerned that the tasks of ‘generativity’ and ‘reminiscent reflection’ could be biased and closed, denying open investigation and discovery, these perspectives challenged that. The process of reminiscent reflection, in making the embodied knowledge known, may transform the knower’s conceptual perspectives of the road taken and the road ahead. Therefore, I propose to adopt as my initial, creative method of enquiry

an autoethnographic reflection using the techniques of life history reflection and review (Butler, 1974), journal/diary extracts and other intensive personal writings.

Historically, ethnography concerned itself with studying the lives and behaviours of people from non-western/European societies. However, with accusations of colonialism, ethnography fell into disfavour (Ashcroft et al, 1998) and began to move from studying 'them' to studying 'us'. Eventually, steered by developments in postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminism this movement arrived at the authenticity of 'I' in the form of personal, autobiographical narratives, examining the ways in which the self and social structures are culturally constructed (Reed-Danahay, 1997) or as Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe:

*'Each is a first-person account, written as a story that expresses vivid details about the author's own experience. The "research text" is the story, complete (but open) in itself, largely free of academic jargon and abstracted theory. The authors privilege stories over analysis, allowing and encouraging alternative readings and multiple interpretations. They ask their readers to feel the truth of their stories and to become co-participants, engaging the story line morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually (Richardson, 1994b)'* (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 745)

Here, therefore, within this tradition, I found a method appropriate to reminiscent reflection and my life situation.

My second method of choice is relational. Whereas the chain of continuity in the 'cycle of reflection' was the practitioner and his/her continued reflective practice; the chain of continuity aspired to in the tasks of 'generativity' and 'reminiscent reflection' link the researcher to the other i.e. those walking behind. In this scenario, the spirit of communion with other that had driven my practice, stirred. Simultaneously as I felt an isolation from those pursuing action research/living theory to improve their practice, I was aware of a multiplicity of thousands of 'I-bridges', like myself, slowly disappearing and immediately

being forgotten. The literature review, I undertook, supported this with evidence that, annually, across the globe, we were losing experienced practitioners from our schools, the profession and the academy. As with the Buddhist story of Kisa Gotami who goes in search of a mustard seed from a home that has not been visited by death, to revive her dead child, only to find that her suffering unites her with the whole of humanity; what began as my own 'generative' quest being transformed into a connection with other. Also, I realised that, in the narratives of others, I could look for social validity, reliability and coherence.

Nevertheless, at first, I was challenged by this method. I did not want to lose the centrality of 'I' in my research because it was my expression and guarantee of authenticity, sincerity and trustworthiness i.e. my 'sense of identity within the research' (Dadds & Hart, 2001, p. 166). Also, possibly in reaction to my own previous adherence to more traditionally methodologies and methods, I was experiencing a growing, personal distaste towards any research that hinted at polarisation, such as, between researcher and researched and/or self and other (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008). However, I did want to confirm my assumption that I was but one amongst the many of experienced, passionate practitioners who left teaching feeling that something vital, alive and informative was being left unsaid; silently dissolving from existence without ever taking form or finding expression. Therefore, given the unique nature of this research, I believe that deviating from a purely autoethnographic account to combine with the 'generative' and 'reminiscent' personal interview narratives of others is a necessary part of the overall 'methodological inventiveness' (Dadds and Hart, 2000).

Also, overarching, both the autoethnographic account and the narratives of others, is the third method: a literature review. This involves cross-referencing and interpreting available literature from cross-disciplinary sources. However, the purpose of this goes beyond the 'common conventions and expectations' (Holbrook et al., 2007, p.338) of the literature review as summarised by Ely et al. (1997):

*'a theoretical framework is proposed at the beginning and a theoretical discussion synthesizes findings and their significance at the end.'* (Ely et al., 1997, p.225)

Instead, it is an integral part of the research aimed at:

1. Supporting the autoethnographic method by locating personal experience in appropriate cross-disciplinary theory.
2. Situating the 'shared understandings' of narratives in contemporary social structures and cultural discourses.
3. Act as a purposeful method of triangulation between the personal, the relational and the socially/culturally 'lived experience' being examined i.e. it is intended to 'contribute to understanding the phenomenon' (Thurmond, 2001, p. 253).

### **Ethical Considerations**

An ethical consideration declaration and clearance form (See 'Appendix 1') was submitted to and approved by the university in September 2011 ensuring that all necessary ethical safeguards were in place prior to commencing the research.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this proposal outlines the rationale, context and approach for conducting research into how I can sustain my spiritual values of loving, hope-filled service and communion in my work and life as an educator at the end of my career. The desired outcomes have personal, professional and academic relevance as they connect subjective experience with shared meanings situated within social structures and cultural discourses. The integrity of this triangulation promises to provide the rigorous authenticity, trustworthiness and social validity of the research. However, the ultimate standard of judgement has been situated in the honouring of my personal ontological, epistemological and axiological perspective and assumptions. It is only through this that the true nature of this 'living legacy' research was realised. The dream of a 'living legacy' sustains my spiritual values connection to service for and communion with other as it promises to illuminate the way in which the embodied

knowledge and experiences of ordinary practitioners can be acknowledged and conveyed to present and future generations. The hope that it will be the means for many to realise a sense of achievement and fulfilment that could sustain interest and enthusiasm in practice and self-esteem, value and connection beyond, is at the core of the proposed research:

*'We would do well to regard ourselves as characters with an experience of life and a unique knowledge of the world which, far from hiding it in a shamed silence, we should be ready to impart to those less expert than we. Only you have been where you have been and only you know what it felt like: you are indeed the expert in your own existence and it may well be the case that there are things others could usefully know which only you could tell them.'*

(Smail 1996, p. 118)

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