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'HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY PRACTICE AS A

LEARNING SUPPORT TEACHER?'

TOWARDS A THEORY OF LEARNING DIFFERENCE.

BY

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

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The pupils, parents, colleagues, and management of my school, who helped me to improve my practice.

I dedicate my dissertation to

DEREK,

my husband, friend and soul mate,
whose practical and emotional support made my journey possible.

Assessment Criteria.

I wish the work of this dissertation to be assessed under the following criteria.

A: Conceptual Domain (Core).

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

B: Literature Domain.

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

C: Contextual Domain.

LM The assignment demonstrates that the student has an awareness of the significance of relevant contextual factors influencing the area of study and is able to critically engage with the contextual significance.

D: Research Domain.

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

E: Ethical Domain.

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

F. Values Domain.

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

G: Action Domain.

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

Abstract.

The following dissertation is a description of my professional practice.
It outlines my educational values as a learning support teacher and the context in which I tried to honour those values

My research recounts the steps I took to address my professional concerns that my belief in the values of education as emancipatory and the uniqueness of the individual were denied. It shows how I attempted to develop a theory of learning difference through action and reflection, as I researched the question,

'How can I improve my practice as a learning support teacher?'

My choice of an action research methodology was a deliberate attempt to conduct my study within a framework that was compatible with my own professional integrity and values system. It was important to me that my pupils and colleagues be collaborative participants in my research and that I would be at its centre.

In my dissertation I intend to show how I moved from a deficit model of learning remediation to a theory of learning difference. I investigated new methods of learning support, which I believe resulted in the development of a more collaborative consultative model of practice.

Finally, I hope my dissertation demonstrates that I have taken my first tentative steps towards the development of an emancipatory theory of learning difference.

Introduction.

My dissertation is the culmination of a two year journey which has taken me down many roads, some of which were wide, and comfortable, filled with encouraging characters and pleasant encounters. Others were narrow, bumpy and lonely; sometimes forcing me to retrace my steps back to the start. The journey began with an exploration of my professional learning for my portfolio of six units of A. P.(E).L. I followed this with three research units, 'Forms of Inquiry', 'Research Issues' and 'Preparation for Dissertation'. I have now reached the last stage, my dissertation.

My purpose in making this journey was the desire to gain accreditation at masters degree level. Participation in the process has greatly expanded my expectations beyond that simple brief. I believe it has resulted in significant shifts in my thinking, and in my practice, adding a new dimension of self actualization to my life. Along the way I learned to contextualise the many facets of my experience as a professional teacher. I developed an ability to critically reflect on my practice and as a result my understanding of how I come to know reality changed. My own sense of myself as a person also unfolded, and I became aware of how that shaped my educational values. At first the beliefs of educationalists such as McNiff (1988) and Whitehead (1993) regarding professional development made sound sense, but in time I came to appreciate them more fully as I became immersed in critical reflective practice. Today their words speak to my own living educational experience.

'Professional development is grounded in personal development; and personal development is not an 'add on' procedure so much as a lifelong transformation of understanding' (McNiff et al,1992 p 25).

In conducting my research, I was anxious to develop a theory of learning difference, a theory which was formed through an organic, dynamic and developmental research process. My overall aim in undertaking my

dissertation was to improve my practice as a learning support teacher. I wanted to provide a learning environment that would offer appropriate support for students with learning difficulties. All of my work over the last two years has helped me to provide a framework for that theory.

While writing my dissertation I tried to bring together a number of ideas which represent the changing nature of my work, the evolution of my teaching role and my own personal growth experiences. It speaks of how I was before, who I am now, and where I hope to be tomorrow. It does not try to suggest that I have in any permanent sense 'arrived'. My dissertation represents 'my present best thinking' (McNiff, 1993 p1) about my educational practice; it constitutes my own personal theory of learning and teaching. It is a partial account of my professional learning to date. The setting is my school work place, the characters in the story include my students, work colleagues, my M.Ed colleagues, my tutor, numerous educational minds known only through their writings and myself. Through each chapter I try to unfold the plot of 'my story', and show the process my critical thinking has undergone to reach its present stage of understanding.

In chapter one I explain the background to my research. I attempt to outline my own historical situatedness, through which my educational values emerged. I describe these values, because they underpin my work in education. I show how I am concerned that my educational values are being denied.

Chapter two considers the context of my practice and the reality of children with learning difficulties within that context. In it I try to identify some of the dilemmas I face in my work situation regarding learning support. I establish the aims of my research study in response to those concerns.

Chapter three entitled 'Methodology', discusses the current debate regarding issues around educational research. I indicate the research methodology I

intend to use and justify my choice. As a responsible researcher I also identify the ethical issues involved in this particular research paradigm and show how I might protect the validity of my research.

Chapter four describes my research project. It tells the story of how I tried to improve my practice as a learning support teacher. It shows how I began by examining learning and teaching styles through experimentation with theories of multiple intelligence; how I went on to differentiate between the terms 'learning difference' and 'learning difficulties'. Finally it chronicles three reflective action cycles. The first cycle tells about my support of one student with specific learning difficulties. The second involves improving the quality of support for a class group. The third details my support of a colleague. The account of these three action reflection cycles is also the story of how my role as a learning support teacher changed. Chapter four highlights the importance of the critical reflective practice that was central to my action research. It shows that while I investigated how to improve my practice, my own thinking had also moved through a process of change.

My dissertation ends with chapter five. Here I outline the significance of my research project. I examine how my inquiry influenced my own learning and that of others. I describe the educational theory I have developed through this research and the underlying professional values I ascribe to. I attempt to test my educational theory, which to me has the existential quality of being a living theory (Whitehead, 1993), against current educational theories in the literature. Lastly I endeavour to pinpoint my current position as I continue my journey as a practitioner researcher on the road to professional development.

CHAPTER ONE BACKGROUND.

My Starting Point.

In 1974, at the age of twenty, I started out on my journey into the world of teaching, as a teacher of Religious Education. Unlike most post primary teachers in Ireland who were university graduates I had come through a three year teacher training college system of specialist training. I knew that I had been well grounded in the pedagogy of religious education and took up my new responsibilities with confidence and conviction. Perhaps it was my exposure to the liberation theology of the time, or my own sense of justice, that I felt an unease grow within when I found myself teaching the Religious Education curriculum to youngsters who were unable to cope with the written words on the page. I was unable to articulate my experience of unease at the time. I just knew that I wanted to do something about it but I wasn't sure how.

I had grown up in a family where education was considered a great prize, a privilege that was not just a gateway to security but a liberation of the soul. That is what Gadotti (1996) refers to as 'autonomy' and the 'possibility of self determination'. Twenty years later I was expressing the same concern in an action research project on spelling I had undertaken. I wrote,

> 'Illiteracy is a gag that silences and disempowers at the
> most basic level of humanity' (Burke, 1996 p 1).

In 1976 the Department of Education circularised second level schools inviting applications for places on their one year remedial teacher training course. I approached my principal, applied, passed the Department's interview board and became the first specialist religious educator to be accepted for training. I successfully completed the course in 1977.

By the early eighties, teacher training colleges in Ireland were offering four year degree courses to their undergraduates. These colleges also began to offer their graduates in Physical Education, Home Economics, Construction Studies, and Religious Education the opportunity for further study to bring their qualifications up to degree level. So in 1986 I obtained a B. A. in Religious Science and I was delighted to take my elective in English Literature. During the next ten years, I gradually moved more and more into the teaching of English. Parallel to these developments I also became interested in the area of pastoral care, life skills, and social, personal and health education. I saw these as central elements in the curriculum for the development of the whole person.

Today I am involved full time in the area of learning support .

My Values.

Through that time, what has grown important to me as a teacher is that children experience school as an uplifting force that empowers them to learn.
In his Inaugural Address Nelson Mandella expressed what to me is an essential truth. He said,

'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? 'Actually, who are you not to be?....It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone' (cited in Handy, 1997 p 210).

In 1996 I wrote in my action research report that I believed that I was

'a part of that system that disadvantages young people'
(Burke, 1996 p1).

Unfortunately, it is still my experience that it is debilitating many of them just as I had discovered it did twenty years before. I want to be part of a system that values all learners equally, where each child is helped to find her 'special way

to learn' (Geheret, 1996 p11). In short to develop a climate of care where the cycle of underachievement and disaffection can be broken.

In recent times there has been a trend towards fitting development in education into the new enterprise culture that is associated with the 'Celtic Tiger'. The Green Paper on Education (1992, p 35) appears to have a strong bias towards the needs of the economy; it states,

'the education system must seek to interact with the world of work to promote the employability of its students and in playing its part in the country's development.'

I would challenge this approach which to me does not in fact aim to celebrate or develop the whole person. It also bolsters an inequitable social system. Sweeney (1998, pp 206-207) in his recent critique of the current Irish economic boom, describes its darker side:

'Ireland has serious problems which its leaders have to face up to directly. There is extensive poverty, and while the poor are somewhat better off at the end of the successful decade to 1996, the boom has accentuated the difference between the top and bottom of society....there appears to be a high level of indifference or even a hardening in some quarters to not share the new wealth with those who have not benefited from the success.'

I believe this situation has serious repercussions for education in Ireland today. I feel compelled to take up the invitation of educationalists, such as Aronowitz and Giroux (1991, p 189) who write of the need to explore

'the emancipatory possibilities of teaching and learning as a part of a wider struggle for democratic public life and critical citizenship,'

in order to develop an educational system that is appropriate for a post industrial society. They argue that teachers should perceive their role in a new way

'as public intellectuals who combine conception and implementation, thinking and practice, with a political project grounded in a struggle for a culture of liberation and justice.'

Recognizing a Problem

Meeting the educational needs of children with learning difficulties today is a complex challenge. My role as a remedial teacher has changed and expanded since my training days in the mid seventies. It involves much more than just offering remediation to children categorized as slow learners. Twenty years ago Irish educationalists were struggling to understand and accept the term 'dyslexia'. Now our understanding of learning difficulties has broadened. We are more aware of other specific difficulties such as dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactive disorder, asperger syndrome, dyscalculia and so on.

Despite a greater knowledge and understanding of the whole learning process, the school system, in my view does not generally deal well with young people with learning difficulties. Children who are not thriving in school are sometimes labeled in a negative way. Often class room subject teachers feel they are not trained to deal with the children in their classes who have learning difficulties. It is my experience that more often they look to the remedial department to remedy and solve the problem.

In turn my experience of remedial teaching is increasingly that of being pulled in many different directions, often frustrated by limitations such as lack of time, resources, expertise, and support. A negative cycle of unmet expectations develops where all involved seem to be disappointed. However the long term effects for students are dismaying. Wilcockson (1996, p 187) found in his research into underachievement ,

'that a long period of academic failure undermined the development of a positive attitude to motivation towards learning, leading to progressive alienation from school.'

This more and more was becoming my experience of children I was meeting on a daily basis in my work.

Developments in Remedial Education.

Remedial education in Ireland according to the literature officially began in the early 1960's, when the first ex-quota remedial teacher was appointed to a primary school in 1963 (I.N.T.O. 1994 p4). The development of the service was slow; in fact by 1968 only seventeen remedial teachers were appointed. In 1975 this had increased to three hundred, after the new primary school curriculum was introduced in 1971.One of the central aims of the 'New Curriculum' which proclaimed a child centered approach, was to respond to the individual needs of all children (I.N.T.O. 1994 p 4). Today there are over 1,500 remedial teachers working in primary and second-level schools in the state.

A New Vision of Remedial Education

I believe that the model of education implied by the term 'remedial' no longer adequately meets the needs of my practice. The Association of Remedial Teachers of Ireland rejected this model and changed its name to 'The Irish Learning Support Association' (Casey, 1997 P 7).The Department of Education guidelines on remedial education in 1988 in line with growing trends in Europe, acknowledged that the term 'remedial' was not an appropriate term to describe the work of remedial teachers (Lynch, 1995). It is a model that suggests there is something wrong with the child which the teacher can somehow cure. Indeed much of my training as a remedial teacher focused on a myriad of procedures, namely tests and observations, which were to help me diagnose learning problems and provide the appropriate action which would remedy the condition.

The Origins of the Remedial Model of Education.

This understanding of remedial education is a throw back to the nineteenth century, when the area of medicine was considered to be the correct discipline to deal with educational anomalies. Learning failure in the early nineteenth century and up to the first half of the twentieth century was blamed on poor teaching, poor organisation and dullness on the part of the child (I.N.T.O 1994 p 4). In 1956, in the Rules for National Schools, special classes were for the first time to be provided, for among others, 'backward children'. A decade later the function of the remedial teacher was to teach children who were 'backward' or behind' at reading, to remediate their problems and bring them up to the standard of their peers (I.N.T.O.1984 p 5).

A New Paradigm of Understanding.

Since then there has been a shift in both understanding and direction within remedial education. This has emerged through more general developments in education, such as the expectations associated with a belief in equality of opportunity, the emphasis on individual needs, and the provision of an optimum learning environment for all (S.E.R.C.R. 1993). The National Association for Remedial Education (1977) broadly defined remedial education in its guidelines as

'a part of education which is concerned with the prevention, investigation and treatment of learning difficulties from whatever source they emanate and which hinder the normal development of the student' (N.A.R.E. 1977 p 2).

As we near the end of the 1990's the word 'remedial' has been dropped by educationalists across Europe (Lynch, 1995) and the term 'learning support teacher' is widely used. Indeed there has been a change in the way teachers refer to learning problems. Terminology has moved from 'backwardness' to 'learning difficulty' and now to 'learning differences'. Specialised terms such as 'dyslexia' and 'dyspraxia' are also becoming accepted. This trend turns the emphasis away from difficulties to strengths, from the child's problem to the teaching method of the teacher (Vitale, 1982).

The Special Education Review Committee Report (S.E.R.C.R. 1993) recommends a new perspective on the role of the remedial teacher. It states that the role has expanded to include among other aspects consultative and coordinating functions, with other staff members and parents, team teaching, advising and supporting subject teachers. The need for this style of learning support in my practice has become more and more obvious to me in recent times.

Emergent Trends in my Practice.

My experience is that new demands for learning support are emerging all the time which greatly challenge not only my expertise but also the time and resources available to me to respond. In 1996 I undertook an action research project into the teaching of spelling partly as a response to the needs of students with high academic ability presenting with spelling difficulties (Burke, 1996). In the last year I have initiated a paired reading programme in my school, training adults to read with our students with reading difficulties. These types of activity were not part of the traditional remediation approach of the remedial teacher.

Critical Self Reflection.

In 1996 I began to look for ways to meet the increasing demands of my practice. I embarked on a self reflective journey and began to examine and question my professional practice as a teacher in the nineties. I first encountered the concept of reflective practice through action research. This empowering experience showed me that for the first time in many years I could influence my practice and in turn, I hoped, my students' learning. I continued my exploratory quest by enrolling in the Modular Programme. Reflecting back on my A. P.(E).L. portfolio (Burke, 1997) I recognize now that a strong pattern was emerging. In almost all of the units I was describing my response to a

problem, a need, or a tension in my practice. What had started out as the narrative of my professional learning had in an unconscious way uncovered and developed the theory of my own practice. At the time, I was contented to describe different aspects of my professional learning in each unit. In retrospect, now I can see that I was also struggling to make sense of my practice and my role as a teacher which had become more complex over twenty years. My further participation in the Modular Programme has increased my learning curve. I believe it has developed my ability to reflect critically on my professional work and helped me to engage in a meaningful way with the epistemological issues around that work. Through this process I have moved towards a more holistic approach to my practice.

Describing my Practice.

Perhaps it is the nature of second level teaching which is specialised that each teacher works in her own area of expertise in almost splendid isolation. In the past I tended to practise as a teacher in a fragmented fashion. I was the Religion teacher to this class and the Social Personal and Health Education teacher to another class and the remedial English teacher to some other group. But in many senses I didn't make a connection between them. I was concerned with the product end of my practice rather than the overall process of learning and teaching. This fragmentation also spilled over into my attitudes to children and colleagues. I was the remedial teacher. Yes! I discussed problems, assessments and diagnosis with my colleagues. However it was I who accepted responsibility for the learning difficulties of children referred to me by other subject teachers. If I was the class tutor, it was I who was responsible for monitoring progress, encouraging positive behavior and trouble shooting when conflict arose between students and other subject teachers (Burke, 1997 A.P.E.L. unit 2).

In theory I was part of a team, the teaching staff, but in practice I often found myself in situations of sole responsibility. As a result I became tired and disillusioned and frequently over stretched. My previous research activities allowed me to look at aspects of my work, but as I approached my preparation for dissertation I wanted to bring that focus together in an integrated way. Over the years as I have already stated I found myself wearing many different teaching hats. Now I considered that all of my work could realistically be said to come under the umbrella term of learning support. Yet I had come to recognise a dichotomy between my original training in 1976 as a remedial teacher and my current experience and practice in the 1990's. In view of this tension, created partly by my changing perspective, I felt it was imperative that I explore and research the area of learning support. I needed to build up a theoretical framework to help me understand my developing role as a learning support teacher and develop a rationale that would help me follow through on my educational beliefs.

CHAPTER TWO CONTEXT.

My School

I have been teaching for seventeen years in my present school, which is located in a growing suburb of Dublin. The school opened in 1979. It is coeducational with just under nine hundred students, and over sixty permanent teaching staff. It was to serve the second level needs of an area of over two thousand houses; sixty percent were local authority accommodation and the remainder private purchase houses. It was intended that the school would have a social mix among its pupils. However while almost all students from local authority housing apply for places in the school, those from a private housing background do not, preferring to travel to other secondary schools (Black, 1995). According to the County of Dublin Area Needs Survey published in 1987 by Dublin County Council the schools catchment area is one of economic and social disadvantage (C.O.D.A.N.S. 1987).

The Banding System .

While our student intake has a full range of ability, pre first year assessment tests indicate approximately thirty percent of students who have significant literacy and numeracy problems (Black, 1995).
Students are banded into ability groups on the results of these assessments and in consultation with primary school teachers on the ability of their students. Four bands of ability are formed.
1. above average. 2. average. 3. below average. 4. remedial. (Moroney, 1995).

Students with Learning Difficulties.

Each year we are aware that there are students in higher bands who could benefit from learning support. They are classified as having specific learning

difficulties. These are students who in the traditional understanding of intelligence (Gardner, 1983) have an IQ score within the average or above average range in an intelligence test, but are underachieving in relation to their ability. Tests in perceptual organization skills may highlight the specific areas that are causing the difficulty.

Discovering Learning Difficulties.

Their learning difficulties may have been brought to light by an experienced primary class teacher or through the persistence of a parent who refused to accept the labels of lazy or disruptive and believed there was an underlying reason for her child's troublesomeness or underachievement. Often these parents have to pay for expensive private educational assessments which they arrange through the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Difficulties. In some cases pre first year assessment tests might uncover anomalies in a child's performance and the school would try to investigate where the difficulty lies. However the situation is compounded by the inadequate service provided by a very over stretched Schools Psychological Service. It has been my experience that students have had to wait up to two years for educational assessment at which stage they may have dropped out of the system or learning support is of minimal value. Many children with learning difficulties fall through the net, and their real learning needs are never addressed.

I believe that there is a need for putting in place a supportive system in the school where teaching methodologies that optimize the learning of children with these hidden difficulties are promoted. The prevalent approach has been to concentrate on the problem area exclusively. One of the aims of my research was to address this aspect of my learning support. I agree with Vitale (1982) when she suggests we need to change our question from 'why isn't the child grasping the material' to 'why isn't the material reaching the children?'

Distribution of Learning Support Resources.

It is the policy of the school that the needs of the weakest students are prioritised where limited learning support teaching hours are allocated. In my school this learning support allocation of teaching hours is mainly used to form small classes for weaker students at the bottom end of the Junior cycle band. Students are offered an increased number of English and Maths classes with a small core of teachers on a reduced subject timetable.

However apart from the English teacher, none of the other subject teachers would have any specialist training in remedial education. Each teacher would then work in an independent way as he/she would with other classes, under the constraints of the examination system. Behavioural and motivational problems arise when these students are brought through the Junior Certificate curriculum.

The subject teacher often has no option but to use the same textbooks and materials as students in other bands, because there is nothing else available. Adaptation of the materials can be very successful and rewarding for both teacher and students, but there is a very high cost in terms of teacher free time. One worksheet may take hours to create, and a number of these may be required for a lesson. Despite this it is my experience that teachers do this all the time. However even the most dedicated, caring and gifted teachers often express their own sense of inadequacy and a fear and dread of the terminal exam at the end of the Junior cycle.

Description of Students in the Lower Bands.

The students in the bottom band would be considered to have general learning difficulties. Their IQ scores would be in the below average range. Some would have come from special schools, or from special classes within their local

primary school. Others would have been withdrawn from class into a small group for special help from the remedial teacher. It is my experience that by the tender age of twelve they have already experienced a great deal of learning failure in school. Many are disaffected by their underachievement and perceive themselves to be stupid and bitterly resent this.

The Effects of Underachievement.

In their review of remedial education in primary schools the I.N.T.O. (1994) cited the research of Deci and Chandler (1986), Byrne (1984) and Rosenholt and Simpson (1984) to highlight the significant link between self esteem and learning achievement. Lawrence (1971, cited in I.N.T.O. report 1994, p 16) stated

'Failure to read is a personal failure. The retarded reader sees himself not only as an inferior reader but also as an inferior person. The result is a child who has come to accept failure as inevitable for him and whose natural curiosity and enthusiasm remains inhibited.'

Hargreaves (1967,cited in Wilcockson 1997, p 189) adds to this picture. He states

'When dignity is damaged one's deepest experience is of being inferior, unable and powerless.'

My experience of working as a learning support teacher would lead me to agree with these writers' findings.

At the beginning of the school term in September 1997, I engaged my new first year remedial class in an informal discussion about school. I asked them what was it like to be in school, what did school mean to them? Their replies were to me sad and disheartening.

Journal entry 24/9/1997.
The responses were generally negative,

' school is boring, no good, a jail, prison.'

Later on in the term I wrote again in my journal, reflecting on how I was experiencing my remedial students.

Journal entry 5/10/1997.

"I looked back over my notes from the I.L.S.A .conference and I looked at the sentence, 'children that are not thriving are labeled in a negative way', I think of my classes. When I go into these rooms - there is bustle, noise, activity, life, energy These kids may not be achieving academically - but they are full of energy and intelligence, bucking the system. How do I channel all that positive force? What am I doing that is not empowering, that is not a freeing experience?"

So I ask the question, How can I improve my practice as a learning support teacher to these disaffected students?

In the light of this Freire's (1994, p 9) statement in 'Pedagogy of Hope', is particularly poignant.

'One of the tasks of the progressive educator....is to unveil opportunities for hope.'

In my research a second aim has to be the establishment of a positive learning support environment, where support strategies that offer opportunities for learning success as opposed to the usual prescriptive methods are fostered. The changing needs and expectations of my students have forced me to reexamine my role as it has developed today. It seems to me that schools work best for the 'typical' or 'average student'. Most teachers have little or no training in recognizing or helping the child with learning difficulties. This difficulty is compounded by the lack of time and resources available in most schools to give these children the individual attention they need. As a consequence they are sometimes labeled lazy or slow. I question myself as to how I can more effectively use my time and expertise to the benefit of these students. How can I support their learning and empower those who are so often disadvantaged by

their experience of school? How will this expand even further my understanding of my role?

Current Theory of Learning Remediation.

I needed at this stage to reconceptualise my understanding of remedial education. I had to acknowledge that great strides had taken place in the education of children with special needs, over the last fifty years. Lynch (1995, p 65) charts the development of the special education services from a separate parallel system to a more inclusive one where the majority of

'pupils with learning difficulties are involved in mainstream education and are supported by a rapidly expanding support service.'

This has really grown out of a deficit model where originally according to the I.N.T.O. (1994, p 1)

'little attempt was made to identify underlying causes of learning difficulties'.

In practice, the first principle of remedial education was in a sense to identify those who did not match up to what was considered normal. Remedial education was about bringing someone up to standard (see chapter one). This approach labels the child as in some way 'deviant', not matching up in reading or writing to the normative criteria in these areas. I believe this theory of learning remediation is a deficit model which separates and categorizes pupils according to their weaknesses. It is based on a static understanding of intelligence and ability, which is held by those according to Goleman (1995, p 34),

'who argue that I.Q. cannot be changed much by experience or education.'

There is a current debate regarding the efficacy of matching 'mental age' and 'reading age' to identify those who are underachieving. While the S.E.R.C.

report (1993, p 87) recommends it as good practice, Shane et al (1988) challenge this discrepancy definition stating,

'It may be timely to formulate a concept of reading disability which is independent of any consideration of I.Q.,.... considerations of I.Q. should be discarded in discussions of reading difficulties' (Shane, McGee, Silva 1988, cited in I.N.T.O. report 1994, p 16).

These views are part of a whole new movement which views intelligence in a different way. Gardner (1983) suggests there are at least eight different kinds of intelligence. Current I.Q tests used in education in Ireland only measure logical and linguistic ability but do not take the wider ranges of intelligence into account. Gardner suggests that we should,

'spend less time ranking children and more time helping them to identify their natural competencies and gifts, and cultivate those. There are hundreds and hundreds of ways to succeed, and many, many different abilities to help you get there' (Gardner 1996, cited in Goleman 1997, p 37).

It is from this understanding of education, which aims to bring about learning by building on the individual's strengths, that I hoped to develop a more 'emancipatory' theory of learning difference.

Chapter Three Methodology

The Nature of Research.

According to Ernest (1994) educational research is a systematic inquiry with the aim of producing knowledge. Bassey (1990) adds that the inquiry needs to be critical and self critical. In my study of Unit B2, 'Forms of Educational Inquiry', I became aware that there were three major paradigms of research in the current literature of educational research. Bassey (1990), Carr and Kemmis (1986), Ernest (1994), McNiff (1988), refer to;

* The Scientific / Positivist Research Paradigm.
* The Interpretative Research Paradigm.
* The Critical Theoretic / Action Research Paradigm.

The Scientific / Positivist Research Paradigm.

In the scientific paradigm which demonstrates a positivist approach, the researcher is concerned with objective reality and absolute truths. The world to her is a rational reality existing out there irrespective of people which can be known through observation and the senses (Bassey, 1990). In positivist research, knowledge is expressed as factual statements. The researcher is concerned with the gathering of objective facts and studying the relationship between them. She uses scientific techniques to produce quantifiable evidence, such as numeric and statistical analysis. She sees herself as outside the research and not as a variable within it. Her impersonal reports refer to herself as 'the researcher' rather than I. She aims to describe and understand phenomena, to explain how events occur and predict outcomes

(Bassey, 1990). Through scientific analysis she examines cause and effect and draws conclusions from which she produces generalizations. She expects to report to other researchers who in turn will replicate her methods and produce identical results.

In the past teachers would have been conditioned to equate all research with this paradigm and to think of research as

'a process that uses an instrument, involves a large number of people, and is analyzed by reducing the data to numbers' (Glesne and Peshkin 1994, p 5).

Many educational institutions quite usefully employ empiricist methods of data gathering, to collate statistical records; for example, student test results, attendance patterns, and so on. The impersonal nature of this research allows researchers to distance themselves from decisions about how their findings affect the educational process and educational values in general. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986).

'Science is not concerned with how hypotheses originate, or the motives of those who propose them. It...is concerned with how they are validated.' Empiricists would point to the validity of their approach, because it is not infected by subjective preferences and personal bias' (Carr and Kemmis1986, p 64).

The Interpretative Paradigm

This paradigm developed from methods used in social science research and is often categorised as insider research (Ernest, 1994). The Interpretive researcher observes and describes reality which is viewed as a construction of the human mind, rather than existing irrespective of it as is assumed in the scientific paradigm.

'Interpretation is a search for deep perspectives on particular events and for theoretical insights' (Bassey, 1990 p 15).

The interpretivist like the positivist researcher does not explain this reality. Instead, the interpretive paradigm is concerned with

'human understanding, intersubjectivity, interpretation and lived
 truth' (Ernest, 1994 p 24).

It refers to possible not certain outcomes. It seeks insights not statistical analysis (Bell, 1987). It uses qualitative forms of inquiry and data gathering methods such as case studies, field notes and observations (Bassey, 1990). The interpretative researcher explores the uniqueness of a particular case and is then able to illustrate something more general (Ernest, 1994). Through its descriptions others can empathize and identify with 'the lived reality of the case' (Ernest, 1994). The researcher offers no certainties or precision, but suggests an example of complex truth. By studying one case in detail she uses the particular to suggest the general case. For Ernest (1994) this is the 'bottom up' perspective. The observer is part of the reality she is observing and may change what she is trying to observe (Bassey, 1990). This is why it is referred to as insider research. To balance the subjectivity of researcher perspectives, the researcher may use the qualitative method of triangulation, describing and interpreting observations to reach a consensus and provide a means of validation. The researcher uses tacit knowledge to describe her perceived reality. She interprets her understanding of knowledge as she sees it. For her, knowledge has to be contextualised and interpreted.

Critical Theoretic/ Action Research Paradigm.

Critical theorists concern themselves with understanding as the interpretive researchers do, but also with social change. In education this approach is particularly identified with action research. Action research encourages a teacher to

'be reflective of his own practice in order to enhance the quality of education for himself
and his pupils' (McNiff, 1988 p 1).

Teachers research what is happening in their own classroom, Bassey says (1990, p 17),

'to improve the phenomena of their surroundings'.

Bell (1987) and McNiff (1988) suggest that action research is not a method or technique. Formal or informal action research is an open ended approach which resists closure. This research is designed to improve action (Bassey, 1990). The purpose of action research is to take action (action) and to find out what is not known (research) in order to effect improvement.

According to Carr and Kemmis (1986)

'action research is a form of self reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices' (Carr and Kemmis 1996, cited in McNiff 1988, p 2).

The practitioner is at the center of her inquiry and unlike positivist and interpretive researchers sees herself as an agent of influence. The researcher looking at the influences in her own practice is a participant inside the research; others are involved as participants and as validators of the research.

One recurring central idea in the literature is that of values. Elliott (1995, p 5) writes

'Good action research is formed by the values practitioners want to realize in their practice. In education it is defined by the educational values teachers want to realise.'

McNiff (1988), and Whitehead (1989) believe that in education we work out of a value system. While putting these values into action they are sometimes denied.

'We can experience ourselves as living contradictions'
(Whitehead, 1989 p 45).

Action research is about reflecting on such a situation and asking 'How do I improve what I am doing? (Whitehead, 1993). Its problem solving nature is

cyclical; there is a sense that the task is not finished when the project ends (Bell 1987). For Bassey (1990) and McNiff (1993) it is continuous, involving professional commitment.

Choosing my Research Methodology.

All of these research paradigms are valuable and authentic in their own right. They point to the fact that there are different ways of conducting a systematic research inquiry:

'Different approaches allow us to know and understand different things about the world' (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992 p 9).

Carr and Kemmis (1986, p 72) define paradigms from the thesis of Thomas Kuhn (1962) as embodying

'the particular conceptual framework through which the community of researchers operates and in terms of which a particular interpretation of reality is generated. It also incorporates models of research, standards, rules of inquiry and a set of techniques and methods all of which ensure that any theoretical knowledge that is produced will be consistent with the view of reality that the paradigm supports.'

Antipathy between the research paradigms is apparent in much of the literature. Bassey (1990) reiterates Carr and Kemmis when he states that inquiry into a singularity by researchers in the interpretive and critical theoretic traditions would be rejected by positivist researchers as non useful. Qualitative researchers argue for inclusive forms of inquiry (Ernest, 1994) and doubt

'whether social facts exist and question whether a 'scientific' approach can be used when dealing with human beings' (Bell, 1987 p 6).

Bassey (1990) remarks that not only is the term 'positivist' not always recognized by those who work in this paradigm, it is also used pejoratively by those of alternative paradigms, perhaps due to the claim that this paradigm has a monopoly on truth, which Ernest (1994) rejects as 'unsustained' and

'arrogant'. McNiff (1988) sees it as a flawed assumption, as such researchers are 'fallible people' like everyone else. In the end the value of this debate must lie in learning to respect all traditions and for the individual researcher to be aware that

'each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and each is particularly suited for a particular context. The approach adopted and the methods of data collection selected will depend on the nature of the inquiry and the type of information required' (Bell, 1987 p 6).

In Unit B2, 'Forms of Inquiry' I had described my growing commitment to action research in 1996. I experienced my action research

'as a source of empowerment and personal development' (Burke,1997).

It is said that the zeal of the reformed can be blinding! So as a responsible researcher, I realised that it was necessary to justify my choice of methodology for my present research project. When choosing a methodology suitable for my research purposes, I found it necessary to revisit the themes and the epistemological issues I explored in my earlier study of Unit B2, 'Forms of Inquiry'. As Schwandt (1989) suggests it was important to look again at the compatibility of each research paradigm with my own ontological views, and find a research paradigm that was supportive of them.

'We conduct inquiry via a particular paradigm because it embodies assumptions about the world that we believe and values that we hold, and because we hold those assumptions and values we conduct inquiry according to the precepts of that paradigm' (Schwandt, 1989 p 399).

As I have already stated there are a number of different valid ways of doing research. Indeed, it could be said that qualitative and quantitative researchers use similar elements in their work. They state a purpose, pose a problem or raise a question, define a research population, develop a time frame, collect and analyse data and present outcomes. They also rely on a theoretical framework and are concerned with rigor (Glesne and Peshkin, 1994).

However there are a number of important differences between the various research paradigms as to how they put these elements together which effect the process and the final product of the research. The purpose of the researcher's study will influence her choice of methodology. If she wants to describe and explain, then positivist approaches are sufficient. If on the other hand the researcher wants to change a situation and explain the process of change, she has to choose a methodology that is powerful enough to explain these transformative processes.

Influences on my Thinking.

In my research Units B2 and B6 I had testified to viewing research in very narrow parameters, perceiving it exclusively in terms of objective empirical knowledge which used quantitative statistical methods of data analysis. I held the positivist view that research and practice were distinct and separate. I was so conditioned in this kind of thinking that I firmly believed that propositional knowledge equated with valid knowledge.

All of my professional life I had been trying to fit my practice into a stated theory. My professional training was rooted in what Ernest (1994) describes as 'process-product research' which examined classroom and learner variables and sought to correlate them with learning outcomes. I studied one theory after another to develop my practice. However the separation between research and practice that is a feature of the traditional empirical model of research was unhelpful. Yet incredibly such was the strength and depth of the belief systems in which all my professional training and formation was embedded, that I was unable to formulate questions that might challenge the total autonomy of propositional objective empirical knowledge as the only valid form of knowing, although the theory was manifestly irrelevant and inappropriate to my practice.

When one holds entrenched views it is not easy to admit to prejudice or alter one's mind set.

It was through the combination of different elements acting together that a change occurred. A radical process was initiated which had a profound influence on my thinking. While engaging with the literature in analyzing research traditions and the research issues in education, a number of fundamental epistemological and methodological issues became apparent to me. Questions arose concerning What is knowledge? Who can know? How is knowledge validated? What constitutes research and then educational research? As a practising teacher, I had to question where research connected with my practice; where did the role of teacher and researcher meet?

However before I reached this stage in my professional development, two seminal events occurred (which I have already referred to in chapter one) which challenged my thinking and radically influenced my practice as a professional teacher. Firstly I participated in a formal course in action research with Jean McNiff in The Marino institute of Education, Dublin. Secondly, as a direct result of that experience I enrolled in the M.Ed. Modular Programme also in Marino, and began the preparation of my APEL portfolio. What was special about these two events was that while I expected the broad didactic approach to learning that I was used to, what in fact happened was that instead of being given ready made answers I was engaged in a process that allowed me to ask a different kind of question. At the core of this new approach was the concept of the critically reflective practitioner.

This, as I have already alluded to, more than anything else was responsible for changing my thinking at a fundamental level. For me critical reflection was the key to unlocking a whole new understanding of knowledge and learning (Burke, 1997 APEL unit 6).

My Research Style

In my Unit B5, 'Preparation for Dissertation', I was quite clear that I wanted to develop a theory of learning difference. I explained that through my research I hoped 'to change' the situation of children with learning difficulties, and 'to help their learning' and 'to take action' and so on. In expressing my proposal in these terms I was placing myself 'I' at the center of my inquiry and projecting my self as an agent of influence within my research. It was a deliberate decision on my part not to be an objective observer outside my research. I did this because I largely agree with the views of those like Nielson (1990) who believe that empirical forms of research aim to predict and control.

'They point up the many ways this dominant positivist research paradigm, supported by processes of social reproduction and often the domain of white western men, was used in the social sciences and education as a method of control and power' (Burke, 1997 Unit B6 p 1).

I had good reason to avoid this approach for my research. Firstly, I didn't just want to explain or describe phenomena. I wanted my intervention to count. I agree with Lomax (1994, p 17) that 'there is no requirement for educational development' with outsider research. I wanted my research to change me as practitioner and I wanted it to make a difference to the children I teach. Secondly I needed to find an approach that was a relational, collaborative form of inquiry involving others in a democratic process. This was important to me because I wasn't dealing with impersonal data, or statistical evidence. I knew my research would involve me in a personal way in the problems of children and their families who already knew the pain of failure associated with learning difficulties.

As an objective observer I appreciate the importance of the scientific approach and the usefulness of quantitative methods of research. It offers clarity, precision, rigor, standardisation and generalisability (Ernest, 1994). But for my

purposes I was swayed to the more personal quality of the qualitative methods of research.

Deciding on an Appropriate Methodology.

In studying research traditions I was impressed by the post empirical methodologies used in life history, feminist and action research, which recognised inclusive forms of research, qualitative methods of data collection and subjective experience as valid, which suggested a constructive acceptance of 'difference' (Lomax, 1994 p 5). It was important to me not to be distant from how my findings affect the educational process. I needed to use a methodology that would allow me to observe and to understand like the empiricists, but would also allow me to take action and influence the situation. I required research strategies where data could be collected in a non hierarchical way (Sparkes, 1991) and that was suitable for research with those experiencing powerlessness and marginalisation (Oakley, 1981).

As a result, I was drawn to the methods of the new critical theoretic paradigm which included a spectrum of strategies appropriate to my research purposes. I chose the methodological approach of action research, because it 'is research with rather than on' others (McNiff, 1988 p 4) and because it views research in a moral context, what McNiff et al (1996, p 8) refer to as 'informed committed action' or 'praxis'. Finally, as a practitioner researcher I wanted to be part of a form of educational research that researched problems that are always educational and practical and involves a resolve 'to improve practice' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986 p 109).

Ethical Issues.

Inherent in all research methodologies is the need to establish procedural guidelines. The researcher should consult the published ethical guidelines of

reputable organizations such as those of the British Sociological Association or Psychological Society to become familiar with the ethical principles and issues involved in research. All researchers must maintain strict ethical standards regarding the conduct of their research. While I would challenge the assumption that any research is value free, it does appear that because of the impersonal nature of data in positivist research, less access and negotiation is involved. Therefore there would appear to be fewer ethical issues in scientific research than in insider research.

I was aware that in the increased personal involvement of insider research there is a danger of a power relationship developing in the research. I was particularly careful about this because my research involved participants who had serious difficulties with literacy and learning and in my opinion were therefore more vulnerable. In democratic research the rights of all involved have to be protected. Therefore a greater level of negotiation regarding access was required. I produced an ethics statement before I began my research (Appendix I). In it I outlined my procedural guidelines; I guaranteed the anonymity, privacy and the right to withdraw consent of all participants. I was careful to explain orally as well as in writing a number of times, and on different occasions what I required, so as to avoid any misunderstanding.

At the time, I just wanted to be true to the ethical standards of good research practice. However on reflection I realised that the act of asking permission of my students was a symbolically significant moment. It was a public recognition of the equality of relationship that I had always theoretically valued in my work as a teacher. It was a moment of praxis. It was the beginning of a dialogue of equality which I hoped would be a continuing feature of my research. I believe it was also a moment of empowerment for my students, whose opinions are often not taken into account.

Facing Dilemmas in Action Research.

Outsider researchers would challenge the validity and researcher bias of insider research and would view including 'others' in the research as a dilution of the researcher's role. To avoid these criticisms I followed Bell's (1987, p 7) correct assertion that

'it is vital that action research is planned in the same systematic way as other types of research.'

Having stated that, it is however important to remember that action researchers also challenge the traditional way research outcomes are validated. They are involved in a process of movement that when repeated may not have the same outcomes. So they reject categories such as replicability as valid criteria; they are not features of action research. Questions of generalisability are treated differently in action research than in other research traditions. Reality and the nature of knowledge is uncertain and unstructured, therefore knowledge has to be contextualised. It is through the process of developing understanding that the structure of knowledge is transformed (McNiff, 1993; Whitehead, 1993).

Safeguarding my Research Process.

I was critically aware that issues such as self delusion, collusion, and self indulgence had to be addressed and monitored with a high level of honesty and awareness during my research. It was here that the self reflective practice at the centre of the action research process was particularly helpful. The importance of this reflective process is reiterated by Somekh (1994, p 14) who states John Elliott's (1991) argument that it's

'through reflection that practitioners have access to their tacit understandings and are capable of strategic action to transform their institutional setting.'

I also believe that intersubjective collaboration between participants, discussions with critical friends and validators, provided other valuable checks

against self delusion and distortion. It is in relation to this point also that Bassey's (1990) recommendations on keeping systematic and careful records in a project archive were very useful.

The data gathering methods I used included interviews, audio recording, photographs, student work, student and teacher evaluations, field notes and a critical reflective diary. I had intended to use video recording, but in view of the sensitive nature of my subject area, I felt it was inappropriate to identify students in this very explicit way. In particular, I found the diary and the field notes helped me to focus on the specificity of the research and to record new questions regarding my practice.

Finally I discovered that through using an action research methodology I had become involved in constructing knowledge. By investigating my own practice I have had to develop my own personal and professional theory of education which I must follow. In that sense I am theorising my own practice. This methodology has challenged my own assumptions and helped me to keep myself open to my own learning.

Chapter Four. My Research Project.

My Concern.

I stated in my Unit B5. that my area of interest was supporting the child with learning difficulties. I wanted to develop a theory of learning difference. There is a current debate among educationalists around the meaning and language of remedial education. A number of different terms are used in the literature including 'slow learner', 'learning difficulty' 'learning disability' and 'learning difference'. In an early discussion with my M.Ed colleagues about my area of concern 'Dan'(a colleague) stated

> *'Everyone needs learning support- we all have special needs'*
> *(from my field notes).*

During a later conversation with an educational psychologist, I noticed she also differentiated between two terms, indicating her view that we all have learning differences but not everyone has a learning difficulty (Appendix II).

At the 'Spectrum' educational conference in November 1997, the focus was on hidden learning difficulties. There was a suggestion that the term 'difficulty' could be replaced by 'difference' and that many learning difficulties were masked by behaviour problems and never named. On the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Difficulties dyslexia course, January to May 1998, the point was made that labeling has two aspects to it. It can bring relief by diagnosing that there is something definite that has to be addressed. It can also be used as an excuse for the child not to make an effort. My thinking was certainly in flux.

To reach a clearer understanding of the issues I looked to the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), to see how that might speak to the needs of the students I was focusing on. At the Irish Learning Support Association

conference in September 1997, one speaker stated that through multiple intelligence, we can see children differently. In 1995, she had written of her concerns regarding students who appeared not to thrive in the educational system:

'significant numbers of our students coming into the secondary system, are not thriving there. Their difficulties with reading and writing block their progress and their interest in many subjects and diminish their confidence in their own ability to learn. As a result they are viewed as 'weak'....and as the months go by many of them show decreased effort and increased misbehaviour.' (Fleischman, 1995 p 28).

The article then described her work using Howard Gardner's (1983) framework of multiple intelligence to address this situation. It spoke to my concerns, and I followed her suggestion that teachers should focus on one intelligence to introduce some small new initiative into their own teaching.

In October I applied the theory to my third year foundation English class. I began by introducing an interpersonal multiple intelligence strategy into the group. Negative and disruptive interaction between students made it difficult to engage them with the work for long periods. This situation denied my educational values (Whitehead, 1989, 1993) that learning should be enjoyable, productive and the responsibility of the individual.

Changing the Strategy.

I devised and implemented a number of strategies in an attempt to improve the situation.

Worksheets.
I devised character worksheets, entitled 'find out sheets' on the short story 'Janey Mary' by James Plunkett. The students had found it difficult to identify with that story.

It was my usual practice to spend five minutes of each lesson separating friends and generally rearranging the students seating choices.

Sometimes I used class time to encourage silent individual work. As homework was haphazard, class time was a good opportunity for obtaining quality personal work. This time as I handed out work sheet one I told the class of eighteen students they were permitted to work alone or with another person, in pairs.

The students were required to work through three worksheets at their own pace. Only three groups of pairs formed. The rest chose to work alone. As the work proceeded larger groupings began to emerge and discussions developed between groups and myself regarding the characters.

I observed the students' interpersonal intelligence at work but not in the way I expected. -- Not by working in pairs, but those who were on the same worksheet no matter where they were placed in the room, engaged with that part of the work through discussion. The students worked solidly for over an hour to complete the worksheets. I felt the majority of the class engaged in a meaningful way with the work.

Visual stimuli

One week later, I experimented with visual intelligence, with equally unexpected results. I believed that some of my 'difficult' students were visual learners. Instead of giving titles for essay writing as I always did with this class, I provided two photocopied photographs and instructed each student to look at them, then plan and write a story from any idea the pictures brought to mind. I didn't encourage any discussion. Their mixed response was interesting. Some started planning and working immediately. Two made no effort. I was surprised by other students, who consistently work conscientiously, but seemed restricted by the pictures and couldn't get past the images on the page. It was my belief that they needed very concrete stimuli and the pictures were too unconnected from their reality. By the end of the class all but one had started

and some had finished. The strength of their response may have had nothing to do with their learning styles, but it certainly was an indication to me that I needed to continually adapt my teaching style to take account of their learning needs.

Developing Practice.

I continued to introduce a 'small new initiative' into my various class groups. While it did indicate some students preferred learning styles and different learning strengths - an important and extremely relevant factor that every teacher needs to be cognizant of - I felt it did not meet the wider needs of my learning support role.

To develop a theory of learning difference I had to untangle a number of elements that had become confused. I found myself experiencing 'contradictions' in my professional work. I believe each of us has potential, with talents and strengths which if given the chance to develop will allow us to become fully as human beings. I also believe that the role of school as a system in the pupil's life - as expressed through her relationships with teachers, students and the curriculum - should be emancipatory (Freire 1994, Gadotti 1996, Giroux 1997).

I was aware that terms such as 'slow learner', 'learning difficulty', and 'learning disability' conflict with my belief in the potentiality of the individual. The terms were reductionist, seeming to reduce the complexity of the person to a problem or an inability to perform in a certain way.

Another aspect that I was having difficulty separating was the use of the term 'learning difference'. In one sense it denotes a broad concept that refers to the individuality of our learning styles. We all learn differently. In that broad context my M.Ed colleague was expressing a truism, in the sense that we all have

special learning needs and require learning support. Within that learning cohort there are individuals who certainly have individual learning styles but who also have needs, that when unmet form barriers that block and prevent them from using their particular learning style, through which they can develop their skills and come to know.

I believe that historically many of the terms that were used to describe these learning difficulties were done so to help people. In a sense when something is named action can be taken and assistance given. However over time these terms became pejorative, acquiring a stigma and a negative cultural meaning that perhaps was never intended. With time they also seemed to acquire particular technical meaning and for convenience they were retained.

If one looks back to the census forms of the early twentieth century, one can't but be struck by the bluntness of questions such as' if imbecile or idiot or lunatic' (Census Of Ireland, 1901 Form A). Today these words convey to us a historical context, a whole system of discrimination and inequality. To us these terms are offensive; their usage conveys an historical contextual mindset which evokes a whole system of discrimination inequality and suffering that disgusts us. However at the time these terms were used to differentiate particular meanings.

Lynch (1996, p 63), explains the continued use of the term 'remedial' in official documents, reports, and so on: while inappropriate ,

'perhaps is being retained so as to distinguish the target population of the remedial teacher from that of resource and visiting teachers.'

I accept that we all learn differently, but in the case of a barrier to learning I also believe it is vital to name the difficulty. Otherwise a different kind of very negative labeling happens, where the student is called 'lazy' or 'uncooperative' and so on. Not to identify the child's learning difficulty can lead to an even greater

denial of his potential. It can allow useful support to be given that can free up the child from being controlled by his inability to learn, remaining blocked, and filled with frustration.

The Beginning of a Theoretical Framework.

At this stage I tried to reconceptualise my ideas about remedial education. I had begun to move from a learning deficit model to an integrated theory of learning difference. I was already aware of the importance of education as a democratic activity which valued the individual for who she was, not just what she could or could not do. Instinctively I searched for a system that gave recognition to the pupil's own experiences, and honoured her strengths. As I considered my practice as a remedial educator I realised that this concept of learning remediation denied my values of justice. I rejected the deficit model, which appeared to discriminate between those whom the system indicated were worthy and unworthy.

Action Research.

It was out of this changed understanding that I decided to investigate the situation of one student. I saw this student as a representative case of a much wider systems dilemma. My first piece of research focused on,

'How can a student with specific learning difficulties be accommodated within a schools system? '

During this action research cycle which I recount below I interviewed the student himself and his paired reading tutor. His English teacher gave me written comments throughout the process and two other subject teachers wrote of their perception of movement in his attitude to work after four months. I also gathered pieces of his work, field notes, and kept my own reflective diary. I

offer this data as validation of the systematic nature of my research and as evidence to support my claims to knowledge.

In my action research, Whitehead's (1989) living theory approach to action research and McNiff's (1988, 1993) concept of the generative transformational nature of action research appealed to my own understanding and experience as an educational practitioner researcher. I anticipated that my research would include

'many spontaneous creative episodes' (McNiff, 1988 p 43).

I decided that the action cycle of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning approach of Kemmis and others would not be appropriate. In dealing with one problem at a time it did not as McNiff (1988, p 43) suggests

'reflect the reality of my professional life and its random hurly burly nature.'

It might have captured one episode, such as dealing with my concern with student 1. However when I added that into the overall picture of my evolving practice, rather than isolating it, I was able to explore a number of concerns, which were interconnected and develop a richer understanding of my practice.

Three Action Reflection Cycles.

Introduction

I organised my research project as three action reflection cycles.

In the first action cycle, 'Intervention with student number one', I supported one student with specific learning difficulties, from October 1997 to March 1998.

Learning support was offered to help him cope with his classwork. This was initiated by collaborating with three of the pupils' class subject teachers.

Action cycle two 'Intervention with a class group' developed out of the first cycle. It was conducted from January to March 1998. Here I continued the collaborative support, by working with three subject teachers to support a whole class group.

Finally, in the third action cycle, 'Intervention with a class teacher', I continued to support an individual class group in one particular subject area; through collaborative support of one of the class teachers. This learning support intervention took place between late January and March 1998.

The action reflection cycles allowed me to monitor and record movement taking place within my practice. In each cycle it was important to track the progress of the learning support given, in order to expand and develop the support offered in the previous action cycle. I noticed that one action episode suggested possibilities that led to another.

While I could point to a 'continual process' (McNiff, 1988 p 21) within and between each action cycle intervention; I was also aware that the process was not in that sense 'linear or cumulative' (Kuhn, 1962 p 139). It was only when I was involved in action, and reflection on the action that my perceptions became clearer. This process pointed up new ideas and understanding and my thinking was transformed. My understanding of education itself and my own professional practice within it changed, sometimes through 'flashes of insight' (Kuhn, 1962) or 'spontaneous creative episodes' (McNiff, 1988), but mostly through a process of ebb and flow like that of sea waters forever washing away and replacing loose shingle from the shore. Kuhn (1962, p 140) describes this process as being

'at the heart of the most significant episodes
 of development.'

This 'generative capacity' (McNiff, 1988 p 43) of my research project helped me to create tentative new theories regarding the substantive issues underlying my research, concerning what constitutes a theory of learning support. It transformed my own learning, so that I moved towards 'a theory of horizon', what Gadamer (1975) refers to as a 'fusion of horizons' where my new understanding emerged out of a fusion of past and present perspectives.

Action Research Cycle One

'Intervention with student number 1.'

Referral

In October 1997 Student Number 1, a boy who was just turning thirteen, was referred to me by his English teacher who was puzzled by his erratic performance in class work and homework. He was in the top band of first year. Checking his pre first year assessment tests indicated that he was of good average ability. While his reading age which was below his chronological age was queried, his maths ability was very good. The student profile sheet filled in by his primary school sixth class teacher did not indicate any problems.

Step 1. Discerning a Problem.

On meeting the student he explained the problems he was having in class and I began to learn of the strategies he had developed to survive school (Appendix III). Additional specialist assessment indicated that this child was dyslexic with specific learning difficulties. He had perceptual problems, leading to a severe reading difficulty. However his auditory perceptual ability was strong. I was faced with a dilemma, and I asked myself how could I support this child, while

he remained in this class? In terms of ability he was correctly placed, but he did not have the necessary reading skills to cope with the text books he was expected to use. Neither he nor his parents wanted him to change to a lower class band. Yet I knew the school could not offer him the intensive leaning support he needed (Appendix IV).

Knowing the limited resources available, the practical solution (and some would say the correct one) would be to insist that the child change class to a lower band where the curriculum demands would be easier. I believe to do so would have denied him the chance to develop to his full potential, or to contribute to the learning environment in a meaningful way. Yet at the same time, his present experience of school was hardly emancipatory. He appeared to be drowning in the system and his struggle to survive barely allowed him to keep his head above water. To act in either way, would be to deny my values as an educator. I had to find another way.

Step 2.Initial Response

From my experience I knew that students who have problems reading avoid it and tend to get information in other ways. The first immediate requirement was to include him in the paired reading programme. My viewpoint was verified by his comment to his reading tutor

'No I don't like reading and what's the point of reading, if you can tell me what's in that book, I'll know it then' (Appendix v).

I also arranged to see him once weekly for one class period. During that time I tried to gain his confidence and trust and develop his self esteem through support and encouragement. I taught him cued spelling techniques for dealing with key subject words (Burke, 1996). I encouraged him to use a multi sensory approach to learning spellings (Culligan, 1997 p 36), voicing, reading and writing the words to be learned. I noticed that he remembered the spelling

clues very well, once they had been decided on, but he was slow to identify them initially. I deliberately avoided reading exercises, in order not to conflict with the paired reading approach.

I felt he was comfortable with what I was doing, but I knew it was not enough. It was necessary to impact in a more direct way on his class work and homework. I looked to see how I could start another small support intervention involving subject teachers, keeping in mind his reading difficulty, and using his auditory strengths in the process.

Step 3. Exploring Alternate Support Methodologies.

In November I approached his Geography and English teachers. I first asked the Geography teacher to indicate the chapters of the Geography book he had set for revision for the end of term, in school test. His response was positive. I was surprised at the generous level of interest in the request by the teacher, not because it was out of character, but because of the work load on teachers. I was anxious not to add to their burden of work.

I proceeded to read four chapters of the text book onto tape. This exercise was very instructional for me; I found the concepts of the book sophisticated and the technical language quite difficult. I could immediately identify the kinds of problems student 1 would have understanding the language and vocabulary in the text. I was also struck by the layout of the book, which did not follow a straightforward sequence. Each page was filled with a mixture of diagrams and photographs and informational paragraphs, which were often positioned randomly.

For the first time I viewed a text not in a theoretical way but through the eyes of a specific child. I thought of the truism in Vitale's (1983) approach to learning difficulties. I did not include any instructions, except to indicate the page

number as I worked through the text. When I gave it to the student, he seemed genuinely pleased.

Expanding my Practice.

At the same time I had a series of discussions with Student 1's English teacher (Appendix v1). She was concerned that he was unable to read the novel and would be unable to revise for his English test. The novel was complicated because it involved a story within a story, two separate sets of characters, two different historical settings - linked by diary extracts. The student's reading problems made it extremely difficult for him to untangle the plot. We discussed at length what exactly his needs were and structured the intervention very specifically to those needs. We decided to use the tape intervention again but with major differences this time.

Firstly the subject teacher decided what material should be included and how it should be presented. Secondly the teacher took control of making the tape and gave it to the student herself. Her instruction was that he was to listen to the tape without the book. We were hoping to tap into his auditory strengths here to help his comprehension of the story without the complication of the written word, distracting him from the task. His teacher also made out a chart of the characters and explained it to him in a one to one session during his weekly time slot with me. Again he appeared pleased with this intervention. This was later corroborated by his paired reading tutor, who recounted the following incident.

'When his teacher had given him the tape, he showed me the actual cassette and he said, "I'm going to listen to it again and again and I can keep listening to it, until I know what it is and I can do my exams" ' (Appendix VII).

This intervention proved so successful that the Class teacher recognising the worth of this work, played the tape to the whole class as a revision aid and gave each child a copy of the character chart as well. The net result was very

positive for all concerned. Later I checked with the student as to whether the tapes helped. He believed the tapes helped him to know the material in the text books (Appendix VIII).

Learning Outcomes.

Overall this was a good learning experience for me. My experience of supporting the work of the class teachers was very positive, due mainly to their openness. It gave control over learning to the student and this was vital to improve self esteem. I discovered that more work on some of the names of key characters, particularly when they were similar, would have added to his success. I also became aware that responsibility for learning was still in our hands. Student number 1 was still reticent about asking questions, a throwback to the strategies he used to remain anonymous in class and not draw attention to himself. It reinforced for me the importance of training children to trust their instincts and asking for answers. It was clear that this had to be done in a practical way, not only giving him the permission but the words, allowing him his own voice. It echoed my belief that illiteracy silences and failure robs us of our self belief.I learned that good practice that is successful with a single student can be equally useful for others. I realised also that the primary responsibility for student's learning in the class group is rightfully that of the subject teacher. My responsibility as learning support teacher is to support and facilitate that subject teacher in whatever way I am able.

The Geography tape was less successful, perhaps because the information was less structured. The student echoed my perception of the book and described his frustration at trying to follow the text with its complex design and listen to the tape at the same time. Because of his sequencing problems I learned that if he is listening and reading he needs to work on a much smaller section of work at a time. I learned that if tapes of texts were to be successful they needed specific guidelines. This was an exploratory experience until I could perceive some improvement.

Step 4.Modifying the System.

The end of term exams were approaching. I decided to try another experiment, to encourage student 1's self esteem and to show that with some modifications to the system he could improve his attainment levels. I arranged to read the questions on the English exam paper to him and allowed him to record his answers to section one of the exam on the novel. I worried that he might not be happy with this, but his response was positive.

'*It's alright 'cause I know how to pronounce all the words, but I don't know how to write them down' (* from taped conversation 15/12/'97).

I found the experience of supervising his test very informative. He completed section one of the test very well by himself. But in the other sections he was very slow to write; in one instance he spent over ten minutes deciding how to spell one word. Despite this while his answers were short, they were accurate. The contrast between the oral and written answers were startling (Appendix IX).The accuracy of the answers demonstrated that the original intervention of taping the material, breaking it into sections and using a character chart helped greatly. The biggest help to him was not having to deal with the printed text alone.

Step 5. Problematising my Practice.

In January, I made a second Geography tape. I incorporated what I thought I had learned from my student's comments on tape number one. I included only one chapter, and gave specific instructions at the end of each page to rewind the tape and listen again with the book. However the feedback from the student was still negative. He found the instructions irritating (Appendix X). Even though he found reading and listening unhelpful, he learned a lot from just listening. A dilemma was emerging. I asked myself what was the purpose of the tapes?

At the same time his English teacher made two more tapes for him, one of the play she was working through with the class. It was not as successful as the first she had done on the novel. When we analysed it we realised it contained too much content, and it lacked purpose. The success of the novel tape lay in specificity. The third tape was again successful for the same reason. His teacher had given him a two page handout with an extract from Anne Frank's diary which the class were working on for homework. This was follow up work to the novel of term one. The language in the piece was very difficult for him to read, so I read it for him. But through questioning I knew he understood, and was able to interpret it very well.

On further discussion with his teacher, we agreed that it would be an ideal text to put on tape. Immediately the teacher volunteered to do this. His follow up homework was extremely good and again showed his comprehension was much better than his reading accuracy skills. The answer to providing successful tapes seemed to lie in being selective with the material and being very specific in the purpose of the tape.

By February I was gaining confidence in working with class teachers so I approached student 1's History teacher and asked if I could support her work with this student in any way. She agreed. After discussion with her, we decided that I would make two History tapes. This time the tapes were very specific. They were directly related to homework tasks.

I included the questions that were to be answered for homework before and after each section, thus breaking the text into manageable sections. I also spelt out the key technical words in each section as I read along. I found that the History text was much more accessible and straightforward than the Geography book; the language was more pupil friendly, although it included technical terms and pictures and diagrams. The narrative was closer to the style and language of a story.

When the History teacher showed me his end of term History test I was surprised by the length of the answers. The student didn't seem to be as put off by his inability to spell or read. I wondered if the narrative style of the History curriculum appealed to his auditory perceptual strengths. Perhaps the layout of the text did not tax his sequencing skills, when he was retrieving information.

I was beginning to understand the process involved in making a tape that was a good useful learning tool for this student. Success lay in being sure as to its purpose. I recorded this process in my journal (Appendix XI).

Outcomes and Reflections.

His History teacher remarked that student 1's homework with the tapes was very good. She also reported an overall improvement in his work and more importantly a growth in confidence of late.

'He is more confident to participate as part of class. Obviously more content that he is not so 'different' to his peers. He has more understanding of his work and eager to show off' his knowledge of the subject. Homework is now being completed. It is more organised. There is a sense of pride in his work.'

This was also echoed by other teachers and by his mother at the parent teacher meeting (appendix XII). Although the support intervention for student number 1's learning has been on a small scale, collaboration with his three teachers has had a positive effect on his work. I think he copes better, because his problem is out in the open and some of the control over his learning has been put back into his own hands. The fact that this intervention has not caused him to miss classwork as in the old withdrawal system, but instead reinforced classroom learning is a key element in its success.

Another important element is that the participating teachers have not taken away his autonomy, but guided him to learn for himself. The fact that he has listened to the tapes voluntarily and with enthusiasm shows that he is anxious

to learn and succeed. I believe a large part of the success of this learning intervention has been in the area of personal support through the weekly class session where I encouraged him to develop coping strategies, but more importantly in his participation in the paired reading programme.

I am pleased to point to his success in reading attainment, not just by pointing to an improved reading score, but by showing a huge change in his attitude to reading. At first, in November, he stated he would prefer the tutor just to tell him what was in the books. By February he had moved up to the next level in the reading scheme, and by March, he had asked to borrow a book and bring it home. More importantly, I think the paired reading programme is successful, because it helps a child who is struggling to survive in what to him must be an unfriendly threatening learning environment; to relax and be comfortable with a friendly accepting adult, to work at his own pace, and hopefully experience the joy of reading.

Finally When I asked the student in February why did he think his teachers were doing this work for him, he replied

'so I can have the same chance as everyone else'
                (from taped conversation 23/2/'98).

Changing my Perspective.

Through working with student number 1, I had tried to accommodate his learning within the school system. It was not the first time that students with learning difficulties had been supported within the school. Yet it was a new departure that I was able to work in collaboration with his class teachers to support his class work. I was also able to depend on the continued support of his reading tutor and not just develop a programme independent of the normal curriculum. Supporting student 1 in this way seemed a much more effective method of learning support than the withdrawal method normally used.

Interventions I had made in the past for such students were often very frustrating because the amount of individual time and support I could give was very small. For children who experience failure in learning, school work becomes something they can't do and so is avoided. Learning and school is something that's done to them, that they have little control over.

Developing my Understanding.

My understanding of my role was changing. Its focus was beginning to move from an exclusive model dealing exclusively with students in my class or in withdrawal groups to an inclusive model which also involved supporting teachers in the ordinary classroom both formally and informally, who encountered children with learning difficulties. I was gradually becoming a resource for the wider school.

Through engaging with the literature, personal reflection, and interaction with parents, students, teachers, educational psychologist and lecturers on various courses, I began to believe that I was moving in the right direction. I needed to deploy myself in a more efficient way in order to reach more students. If I could engage with a number of teachers in order to help one student surely it was possible to work in a similar way to help a class group. I came to understand also that it was important for me to respect the autonomy of the class teacher and not usurp her role in the class.

My supportive action needed to be empowering for the student. Removing him from his classroom which was his natural learning environment, in order to help his learning defeated the purpose. It didn't help him to belong or be accepted by his classmates. He had an additional problem to cope with along with his learning difficulties. Part of my role as a support teacher had to be to help the subject teacher to develop skills to cope with a student with learning differences.

I was moving from a deficit model of learning support to a more positive view of my role. Now I had successfully engaged with other teachers to develop a collaborative inclusive methodology of intervention for learning support, a methodology that recognises good self esteem as a key factor in learning support. It values learning as a positive empowering experience for the student, and promotes personal autonomy. I was expanding my role as a learning support teacher and I wanted to see if I could transfer my practice into another area of my work. This new experience of working with students in collaboration with colleagues was reinforced by my reading. The literature echoed this belief that my new methodology was a far more effective use of myself as a resource.

Trends in the literature.

In 1972 Sean McGleannain discusses the role of the class teacher in dealing with children with learning difficulties in an article entitled 'The Slow Learner in Irish Schools'. He firmly establishes the central position of the class teacher when he states,

'Final responsibility for the teaching of reading must rest with the class teacher, and the remedial teacher, however well qualified or efficient, should be regarded as an auxiliary rather than a replacement of the class teacher' (McGleannain, 1972 p 18).

The National Association for Remedial Education guidelines in 1979 suggested that withdrawal techniques should be given much less emphasis. This idea was supported by the Irish National Teachers Organisation report (1984) on the changing role of the remedial teacher.

The authors cited the international literature of the time which suggested

'that children requiring additional help for learning difficulties, should receive this aid in their own classroom and preferably from their own teacher' (I.N.T.O. 1984 p 9).

They pointed to Cashen and Pumfrey's (1969) conclusion that remedial teaching on a withdrawal basis failed to improve children's attainments in the

long term. The Department of Education guidelines on remedial education for primary schools (1988) would be in agreement that the widely practised withdrawal method is not necessarily the most effective way of working. The guidelines also urge that the focus on skills development should be shifting to a wider focus encompassing the total needs of the child. Five years later the Special Education Review Committee report (1993) recommended that remedial teachers should be encouraged not to restrict themselves to a withdrawal method of work organisation.

In a review of remedial education the I.N.T.O. (1994) noted that there had been a trend away from the traditional withdrawal approach towards in-class intervention. This shift was associated with

'the evolving role of the specialist teacher towards a more collaborative, consultative model' (I.N.T.O. 1994 p 100).

Lynch (1995) in her report on the integration of children with special needs in main stream education in Ireland, claimed that despite a changed perspective on children with learning difficulties,

'classroom teachers do not seem to know how to provide adequately for individual learning differences nor how to provide a flexible classroom structure and organization that would accommodate all pupils with varying degrees of abilities and needs' (Lynch, 1995 p 70).

Jones et al (1996) are adamant that class subject teachers should be encouraged to develop teaching activities which will take advantage of children's strengths. Lynch (1995) moves further and challenges those in the system to actively promote a whole school approach to pupils with learning difference.

A New Research Focus.

Through continued critical reflection I became aware of the broader significance of my role during action cycle one. As a consequence my research focus changed. I then had to look beyond supporting one child with specific learning difficulties to addressing a new concern,

'How can I improve my practice as a learning support teacher?'

My new question informed action research cycles two and three, in which I was concerned to support the practice of class subject teachers working with a larger group of children. During these action research cycles, the data gathering techniques I used were similar to those of action cycle one. They consisted of student and teacher evaluations, student work, field notes, audio tape discussion of the class group, student record sheets, photographs, lesson materials and my self reflective journal. The data archive includes my evidence through which I hope to demonstrate that my practice has developed. I also hope to show through these action research cycles in particular, that my claims to have advanced a more inclusive paradigm of learning difference are valid.

Action Cycle Two 'Intervention with Class Group'.

My Tutor class.

Another aspect of my work involved teaching English to small class groups of students, at the bottom end of the Junior cycle bands in first, second and third year. These students were generally in the below average academic range. They had general learning difficulties and sometimes exhibited behavioural problems and emotional difficulties. Years of failure usually left them with little confidence in their ability to learn. Some were even in danger of dropping out

before their Junior Certificate examination. Motivation to do homework and / or take an active interest in their learning was difficult to sustain.

They exhibited many of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties, poor concentration, short term memory, and organisational skills, together with general literacy problems. I wondered if I could expand the collaborative cooperative methodology I had developed through my support of student 1 and apply it to my own second year tutor class.

My tutor group consisted of nine students -- five girls and four boys, ranging in age from thirteen to fifteen years.

Step One.

In January 1998, I approached three class teachers, whose subjects were Science, History and Geography, and Home Economics. I asked them if I could support their work with my tutor group (Appendix XIII). All three agreed. Home Economics is a subject option, so the Home Economics teacher only taught some of my students. Within a few days the Home Economics teacher gave me the plan of work she would be following around the topic 'fruits and vegetables', and a photocopy of the relevant chapters in the text book. The Science teacher also gave me a list of key Science words on the topic of 'plants'. As a result of their responses I was able to try two approaches and compare the results.

As the class English teacher, I integrated the content of the Home Economics topic 'vegetables' into my English class content. I did this in simple ways using different activities (Appendix IV). The students enjoyed these exercises and interest was sustained, even amongst those who did not study the subject.

I then introduced the Science vocabulary around the topic 'plants' to augment our work on vegetables. I did not integrate it as content material for English

class work. We did cued spelling work on the words and because all the students studied Science I noticed they were eager to show off their knowledge. Each day we would revise a few of the key words from both topics. I included an integrated revision exercise, built around the key words in the two topics. In the beginning I had explained the purpose of these exercises; now I encouraged the children to discuss our new class work with their teachers. At this stage we started to create a key word wall. Key vocabulary charts from these subject areas were put on a classroom wall especially designated for the purpose.

The emphasis on almost 'over learning' the vocabulary had developed a momentum all of its own. This happened for a number of reasons. Firstly there was a lack of content resources from subjects other than Home Economics from which to develop good quality exercises suitable for developing skills in English. Secondly as a result of the lack of resources or professional expertise on my part in the topic areas I became weary of delving too deeply into an unknown discipline. Thirdly, I was comfortable dealing with the language needs of my students in each subject area; that was where I felt I could give useful support, to the students in their English class. Lastly, I realised this in fact was what the class really needed. Their general learning difficulties made constant revision, to reinforce even the simplest of concepts a necessity. I did fear that boredom would set in, because of the repetitiveness of the process. Instead, I found that the students were more than eager to display their knowledge. The second method only took up about five to ten minutes of class time at each lesson. It became an effective revision method.

Unfortunately the Geography teacher became ill and remained absent for all of January. Even though the students tried to pick out key words from what they had been doing they were unsure and I could give no guidance. It brought home to me the importance of collaborative planning to ensure success. This was reinforced by an incident later on when the Science teacher and I were

planning to allow the class to dissect flowers to examine, name, draw and label the plant parts. We decided that a double class period would allow more time to introduce and complete the task. That day the Science teacher became ill. However on this occasion I was able to tell the substitute teacher the plan, provide the necessary resources and the students, knowing what to do, worked away at the planned task. This was a critical moment when I believed the intervention was worth while. We continued working in this manner reinforcing and revising the different key concepts and building up our lists of key words.

At the end of four weeks I asked the students and the two participating teachers for feedback on the merits of the intervention from their point of view. There responses were very positive and encouraging (Appendix XV).
They included the following,

'It does help me when I have my class I know the words.'
'Then you know your Science or your spellings for tomorrow.'
'It helps us learn how to do them for homework or classwork.'
'Because of the things on the wall (key word wall charts)
and to learn at home'
'It helps me spell better in Science.'

Step Two.

In parallel with this intervention, I had deliberately introduced a study skills module in Social, Personal and Health Education class, raising the pupils' consciousness around the use of memory and its importance for learning. The students were linking this idea with our daily word checks. I was delighted one day when I casually asked why we were doing this extra work and one lad replied spontaneously

'to exercise our memories'   (from my field notes).

By the end of January I was ready to initiate the second part of my plan. I was very aware of teachers' constant concerns that students did not do homework. Often it was not written into their homework journals and my students were

generally unenthusiastic about it. The problem as I saw it was, that because of the nature of second level school, there was often a gap of a day or two between classes in certain subjects. Students' poor memory and organizational skills prevented them from linking up with what had happened in the previous lesson. Low literacy levels made it difficult for them to access their text books and so homework was avoided.

I was anxious to build on the success of intervention one. At this point I had the good will of both the class and their teachers. Towards the end of January, I gradually introduced the idea of a weekly study plan. Just before I proceeded I asked my students about their views on using a study plan. There were mixed reactions to my proposal (Appendix XVI).

'You will know the questions.'
'It could be good.'
'It will help you get your homework right.'
'I don't think it will help me.'
'It doesn't help.'

The Study Plan.

It was proposed that the students would study one or two of their seven academic subjects for ten minutes extra each night, for four nights each week. Through democratic class discussion, we arranged the choice of subjects so that the extra study time would be done where possible the night before they had that subject (Appendix XVII). I circularised the teachers involved, hoping that they would reinforce the idea through their positive approval of the scheme and by suggesting appropriate work (Appendix XVIII). I designed a study plan record sheet for the student's use (Appendix XIX).

Each day the students spent a few minutes discussing exactly what would be studied that night. My role was to chair the discussion and to act as scribe, writing up the suggestions on the board. The key word wall became an important resource. I noticed that quite quickly the students would automatically

consult it for ideas or for correct spelling. Each student would then be given time to fill in their record sheet. Then most importantly they wrote it a second time into their homework journals. The following day they would simply note on the record sheet if the study had been attempted.

The exercise was not compulsory, and I made a point of emphasising this again and again. Some students made regular negative remarks about the idea of study. I made sure never to comment positively or negatively on who had or had not studied, or to engage in arguing the merits of the study plan. Now and again I would be asked 'why are we doing this?' usually by someone who had been absent for a few days. I always tried to explain in as factual a manner as possible. I also reinforced the idea that this was extra to homework, and not a substitute.

Despite this, I was concerned that the students might feel compelled to say they had studied just to please me. However in many instances, they were able to write that they hadn't studied. I took this as an indication that they felt free to be honest. Another development which evolved quite naturally was that individual students began to pick study work to suit their own particular needs. This happened as students experienced success and associated it with their increased efforts, with the result that they engaged with the process and began to make it their own.

If I forgot or delayed in giving out the record sheets I was summarily reminded. I also noticed that those who had committed themselves to the study plan soon began to defend it, and would brook little criticism from dissenters disregarding them in a dismissive way without bothering to argue. It was one of the few times I witnessed peer pressure of its kind.

I realised that these students were hungry for success. I believe this success came because they themselves chose what to learn out of an understanding of their own needs. The plan worked by and large because it was built around a

simple routine. The task required was clearly defined within set limits. The students were not overwhelmed by work they could not do. It was practical and very 'doable' and usually there was instant affirmation. There was a good chance that the topic would come up in classwork or homework or in our daily revision sessions within a day or so if not the following day.

At the end of week one I asked the class to answer the question

'*Did the study plan help you?*'

All nine students replied *yes.*
When asked to say '*How it helped'.* The following replies are representative of those given.

'*I learned words that I wasn't in school (for).*'
'*It helped me because I knew what I was doing the next day.*'
'*I can spell the words I was given.*'

When asked '*How the study plan helped*?'

Six said with homework .
Three with classwork.

Their replies explaining how specifically it helped in these two area showed the very practical link they were themselves making between the study work and learning success. The following are some of the replies.

'*We learn the spelling and they came up in the homework.*'
'*When I went to do it (homework) I knew it.*'
'*Because I learned it the last day before I did my homework.*'

I believe that the students' behaviour changed and they appeared more 'tuned in' during those study planning sessions each day. One of the more interesting experiences that occurred during those often quite noisy sessions, were the

heated discussions that took place between students as they decided what were the key elements of the last History or Science lessons.

I really enjoyed it when my students would stop me on the corridor after a class to tell me they had a new key word for the wall or a new topic to be studied. The study plan intervention was by no means all positive. It did not eliminate the no homework problem. In some cases, students even did the study but forgot home work. There were some who rarely did any study work. I smiled at the student who declared that her one night's foray into study had actually helped her. She wrote

'*It helped me because I knew what we were doing the next day'.*

But when asked *Is it a good idea to use a study plan?* answered
'*no , it just is not.'*

Learning Outcomes.

I felt that the study intervention focused the students on their work. It emphasised the link between classwork and homework. Most of all it encouraged personal responsibility for learning. In the end I realised that it wasn't important how many nights they actually studied. What became much more important was that in a small but significant way the whole issue of the ownership of learning was addressed by my students in the very centre of learning -- our classroom.

Students unconsciously were asking the most essential epistemological questions, such as 'Why am I doing this?', 'What do I need to know?'. In their own ways they were sharing knowledge and differentiating between levels of knowledge. Those who did participate, engaged with their own learning in a meaningful way. The experience was positive because any personal affirmation or learning success that resulted was due to their own efforts alone.

That is my explanation as to why negative peer pressure did not destroy the process. They were in control of their own learning and they were empowered by that.

There were a number of small incidences which highlighted this point. During the last week of the study plan, one of the students was absent through illness and he had missed the last study plan night. To my surprise, when he returned to school he stated his intention to do the study that night instead. When I asked him why, he said it had helped him and he wanted to keep it up. Another student who had been vociferous in his condemnation of the plan remarked to me out of earshot of the class that he had used the study plan when he was absent to try and catch up on what he had missed.

The intervention lasted one month, at which time I announced that we would take a break from our extra study work. At the end of the fifth week I asked four students at random to write down their views of the study plan. Their comments included the following.

'When we did the study plan, it really help(ed) us with our class work and home work. We knew our work when we were asked.'
'It helped me a bit with my homework, it helped me to remember the words I did not do yet.'
'It helped me with my homework, it helped me to spell better and do my sums better.'
'It made a difference every time I study, I can remember all the words.'

Action Cycle Three. 'Intervention with a Class Teacher'.
Teacher Support - A New Departure.

Networking is common practice amongst teachers, especially at informal moments in the staffroom, or coming or going to class. During the class intervention action reflection cycle I noticed that I engaged in conversation much more with my participating colleagues. At first it was simply at an information exchange level. Gradually, they became accustomed to giving me work plans, answering my questions, and seeing the key word charts go up on

the wall. Through discussing and sharing ideas I became more closely involved with their work. In small practical ways I was a useful resource, supplying flowers to be dissected, or collecting empty cartons for growing plants, and providing magazines and other materials for projects .

I believe the teachers' increased interest in the class and the consequent cooperation between teachers, had a positive effect on the students, and I could see a greater connectedness between them. One quip from the Science teacher pointed this up. She was remarking on how the children were complaining to her about my lack of knowledge. They said 'Miss would you ever tell her (me) what the words mean?' They were referring to my understanding of photosynthesis.

Later I recorded in my journal 22/1/98,

'When I went over a new word , they told me what it meant. One side effect of that is 1) I'm constantly talking to their teachers.2) They know we care about them 'cause we are interested in them. This has to boost their self esteem.'

Step One. Expanding the Collaborative Consultative Model.

As a result of these collaborative class group interventions, another development occurred, which I had not expected. When discussing my class one day with the Home Economics teacher, she casually remarked, 'Is there any way you can help the rest of the students in the class?' I didn't teach any of the other students and I had no direct access to them at all. The teacher explained that she was experiencing great difficulty motivating this class. There were twenty-one students in the group, who came from three different classes in the bottom band of second year. They had two double classes per week of Home Economics. One was a practical cookery class. The other was a sewing class. However at this the second term of the year, they had yet to start sewing.

I agreed to support the teacher during this double class in whatever way I could.

The overall aim was to introduce sewing into the class. Up to this the teacher had not felt able to do so and used the class to teach theory. We had a number of planning meetings to decide on the appropriate action to be taken with the class. Initially we agreed that we would need to develop short term aims for these students. This was because of a number of factors. There was poor behaviour, mostly due to the fact that the students came from a mixture of classes and didn't integrate well. The students were considered to be below average academically. However there was a perceptible range of abilities within the group. Many students had a short attention span, poor motor skills, and seemed to lack the personal skills needed for the task. The teacher herself described the situation as follows:

> '*There are a number of students who will not take responsibility for*
> *cleaning up their work unit and who are noisy and disruptive'*
> *(class teacher evaluation 29/1/'98).*

As this was a totally new departure for all concerned, it was necessary to move slowly and build success experiences for students into the class work. It was important not only that the students accepted my presence in the class room but also that the two of us would build up a good working relationship together with them. We thought that to introduce sewing straight away was too much too soon. We devised four team teaching sessions around the vegetable and fruit theme the teacher had already been working on.

We recognised the need to change the teaching methodology. It was decided to improve classroom management by breaking the double class into manageable sessions. In this way we hoped to improve learning. We therefore divided the class into sections.

1. Input or demonstration by the class teacher.
2. Group work using an action / multi sensory approach.

3. Short whole class activity.

Step Two. Four Team Teaching Sessions.

Session One

Initially the teacher conducted a twenty minute review of the topic. This involved an interactive discussion to establish the categories of vegetables and lists of examples. These were written up on the board. During that section I moved around the room encouraging students to answer up, directing them to the correct section of their textbook and encouraging others to engage with the work (Appendix XX). The next activity asked the students to apply their knowledge of vegetables to a cooked dish by filling out a worksheet (appendix XXI). The students were then divided into groups to design a vegetable category chart.

There were only thirteen students present, so we created four groups entitled 'pulses', 'roots', 'green vegetables' and 'fruit vegetables'. My role at this stage was to provide all the resources needed to complete the task. Each group was given a pack with enough equipment for each member, a set of instructions and all the necessary vocabulary they needed for their topic. The groups worked well and to our delight stayed on task for the time allotted. We finished the class with another reinforcing activity.

Afterwards the class teacher commented that she felt progress was being made.

'Working in small groups was a good idea. Having adequate materials helped. Group work was effective. The students seemed to be very much involved and showed interest by asking questions, They worked well in teams. I could see some progress' (Class teacher evaluation 21/1/'98).

During the following weeks I was often stopped on the corridor and engaged in conversation by students from the group, who invariably would ask *'Will you be coming this week, will we be doing it again?' (from my field notes).*

Session Two.

The following week, we followed the same time scheme. Instead of starting with an input we used 'The Shopping Trolly' activity from the previous week. We noticed that the students went into their groups and completed the worksheet as a group activity. The students were anxious to complete their wall charts. They worked well together. I recorded their positive response in my journal.

Journal Entry 6/2/1998.

'Yesterday, during the Home Economics class, I noticed great enthusiasm from students when they knew we were doing it again. Although there were some different students, they fitted into the groups well.'

At the end of the class we displayed all the wall charts around the room. We awarded a prize not for the best chart, but to the group who worked most cooperatively together. During the following week, I asked two students from the class, who were not from my own tutor group to evaluate the worthwhileness of the intervention. They reported that they found the classes both enjoyable and beneficial (Appendix XXII).

Sessions Three and Four.

In these classes we repeated the same process, only this time the students worked on the topic fruits. Again the students were content and task oriented. There were still one or two students who found it difficult to work in a group. The teacher commented later in a written evaluation 12/2/'98.

'There are two students who are still having difficulty working in a group situation.---- needs a lot of encouragement, or push in order to get her involved.---- is still very much

withdrawn, the general feeling would be that other students do not want him in their group.''

As a result of this observation, we decided to give these two students as much extra individual attention as we could manage. We encouraged their efforts no matter how small, and deliberately engaged them in chat while we were working. I can say that they both did make a contribution to the end product.

Whilst the first student did join in with her group I wondered if the second student would ever be accepted by his peers because of his poor social skills. However, during a class discussion on exotic fruits the teacher asked for an alternative name for kiwi fruit. All of the students were eager to answer, but none of the answers were correct. They were stumped. To our surprise this boy put up his hand and said rightly 'Chinese gooseberries'. For a brief moment he was acknowledged and we rewarded him with a commendation (Appendix XXIII) for a good effort.

Personally that was a critical learning moment, when I was acutely aware of the significance of good learning support practice. It was one of those simple yet poignant episodes that teachers are privileged to when a student can find a space and show who he really is.

Learning Perspective.

I think this teacher support intervention was successful because we had clear goals, good classroom management and enough resources. It worked also because the lessons were geared to the needs and abilities of the class. Team teaching was the key element that allowed our planning to work. The fact there were two of us in the room made it easier to prepare and distribute materials quickly, answer students needs promptly and diffuse discipline problems without stopping the flow of work.

One of us was always available to the students, directing the work, while the other was managing resources and keeping the students focused on task, some thing that was difficult to do when there was only one teacher. Once the students experienced a good learning environment we hoped that they would want it to continue.

The class teacher wrote the following comment in her written evaluation after the final session 27/2/'98.

'*Having two teachers with the group has helped with discipline. Prior to the time Therese supported me in my teaching of this group the students were very noisy, they would shout at me, they would shout out of turn, now I find that most of them are willing to listen. There is a general calmness.*''

I think the real merit of what we achieved emerged during the next double class. I was unable to support the teacher at that time, and she had to teach the group without me. This time using our methodological framework she arranged them in their groups and set them the task of creating a board game around the theme of vegetables or fruits. To her delight, they were receptive, and worked to task extremely well. We intend to continue building up their cooperative skills for some time to come, to give them more positive learning experiences of achievement and success. When we have established a more stable learning environment, we will gradually introduce sewing skills.

One other important outcome from this learning support intervention was that the group experienced a great deal of affirmation from other teachers and students. They were congratulated and admired for their work which was now being displayed quite prominently in the main specialist Home Economics classroom.

The class teacher also described some of the affirmation she experienced.
She wrote the following,

"I have heard students from other classes making very positive comments about the wall charts. Also requesting that they 'do those charts as well' or can we do things like that Miss. I met a student on the corridor shortly after my class. Her comments to me were, 'Look Miss I'm eating a hard fruit' "(class evaluation 27/2/98).

Theorising my Practice.

While both of these interventions in action reflection cycles two and three supported students in their learning, they were unique, in that I was working directly with teachers in a new way to support their work with children with learning differences. My whole focus had always been on students and how I could directly intervene to support their learning. Now I was not the central agent; the rightful subject teacher - pupil relationship was still in place. I had not replaced that relationship; I, was working with and not instead of the subject teacher. In that sense no one's role was diminished. I could more easily move on and know that the child was continuing to be supported. Furthermore I could support far more children in this new process by supporting the class teacher.

In action reflection cycle three in particular, my expertise as the support teacher became a resource that the class teacher could draw on and use in her classroom. However my role had changed. On this occasion, I did not have to be in the classroom with her to support her. My colleague's perception of the learning support teacher had moved from someone who just provided the equipment needed from the learning support department resources, to being a learning support resource herself.

In a relatively short time, I had managed to push out the boundaries that were encasing my work as a learning support teacher. I do have to admit that it was far from easy. While in general I did encounter a tremendous welcome for my new practices I also experienced resentment from some other colleagues. It is my experience that teachers still suffer under the delusion that they have to be experts in their own classrooms. Teachers often find it difficult to express to

their colleagues that professionally they may not have all the answers. The climate is changing, and will be further changed through the courage of honest teachers, who are willing to improve their professional practice by searching for other ways to be in their class room.

Chapter Five Significance

My Original Concern

In my 'Preparation for Dissertation', I defined my area of interest as 'teaching children with learning difficulties' (Burke, 1997), and my aspiration was to establish a theory of learning difference. I tried to encapsulate my concern in the interrogative form,

'How can I support students with learning difficulties in my school?'

I formulated a number of objectives through which I hoped I would attempt to answer this question. In the process of working through three reflective action cycles the focus of my research changed and I discovered new questions, new foci which encompassed many dimensions.

Changing my World View.

Ontologically my own concept of reality developed. I had re-examined my values and in a sense redefined them. I became aware that some of my values were loose and confused and needed to be untangled and clarified (see chapter 4). Consequently, questions around epistemological issues such as the status of knowledge, and the ownership of knowledge predominated. I was particularly conscious of the whole role of the teacher as 'gatekeeper' of knowledge (Spender, 1981).

Most importantly the critical self reflective aspect of my research required me to look at who I was and where I was situated, both personally and professionally as I approached my twenty-fifth year of teaching. Some critics might dismiss this aspect of my research narrative. There was a time when I would have rejected such concerns as outside the brief of the research. Not any longer, for now I have come to realise that as a professional practitioner, I am not

compartmentalised. I bring all that I am to my task as a practitioner researcher. Dadds (1997, p 34) puts it well:

'The inner voice must be cultivated, personal theories must be evolved, belief in, and responsibility for the professional self seen as crucial and indispensable.'

This recognition of the contribution of my own professional development complements my own theory of learning difference. I no longer view the child as the sum of all her parts, but as an individual with her own ontological world views and epistemological needs, a person who can engage with others and use her potential to learn at this moment.

Responsibility and 'Caring for Growth'.

Like many of my colleagues I have often felt personally responsible to an exclusive extent for my students' learning, so much so that I was ill at ease in 'letting go' or 'standing back' to allow my students to organise their own learning. During my research I accepted that I cannot be wholly responsible in this way, nor is it necessarily good practice to attempt to do this. Daloz (1987, p 240) explains it well.

'We can acknowledge the power of our presence in our students' lives and accept the responsibility for providing them with the vision they may lack. But we can also recognise that we are only a single force among many and that our ultimate task is to help them to understand those forces so that they can travel ahead on their own.'
To do otherwise leads to frustration and possible burn out on the part of the teacher. More fundamentally it does not encourage personal autonomy on the part of the student. In this respect the writings of Freire (1994),Gadotti (1996) and Giroux (1997) have facilitated a mindshift on my part. I was particularly challenged by the idea of the 'emancipatory' role of the teacher, which appealed to me. Gadotti (1996) cites the writings of Lobrot (1972) in a passionate explication of his notion of authority. Lobrot suggests the most direct authority that people suffer is the educational authority of parents and

school teachers. Gadotti points educators towards what he refers to as 'institutional pedagogy', the aim of which is to,

'Unleash from the teacher-pupil group and on the perimeter of the classroom, a process of the transformation of the scholastic institution, and, thus a transformation of society itself' (Gadotti,1996 p 61).

For Gadotti (1996, p 62) this process begins when teachers declare power to be vacant.

'The power renounces his attitude of power' (Lobrot, 1972 p 215).

Pedagogy of Dialogue.

My experience of learning support was largely one of isolation. Now my research had helped me to work with other teachers, to support colleagues. In a spirit of equality, collaboration works well. I learned that it was the informal moments that were often more revealing, and I came to value those as much as the more formal interactions. I enjoyed the new partnership with colleagues that resulted through the action cycles. However it soon became apparent that there is a delicate balance to be achieved, once support is given, to know how to do so without overwhelming and when to withdraw without leaving the teacher feeling abandoned. I quickly discovered that negotiation and open discussion are the means of achieving success in this area.

It wasn't long before the action cycles developed a momentum of their own. Teachers initially grateful for support with a difficult situation, or a professional dilemma became empowered. By reflecting on a variety of methodological options, they then acted, to develop a positive learning environment and in so doing engage their students in learning. Not only did teachers develop new teaching methodologies, they also successfully adapted them for use with other groups. The development of new methodologies and the courage to

dialogue with colleagues on issues of classroom practice was one of the most satisfying and useful objectives that I felt my research had met.

It was a glimpse at what Gadotti (1996, page XV) describes as,

'the joy of being part of a generation of educators who looked for new paths and who tried to open them in discussion, and who didn't take the easy way out.'

Towards a Dialectical Position.

Another important influence on my understanding of a 'pedagogy of praxis' (Gadotti, 1996), also emerged from critical reflection on my research. This was the realisation that while I more easily rejected the methodology of the positivist approach, the positivist ontological view was so ingrained in me that I was still stuck in my understanding of truth as process. On reflection, I identified a pattern in my reflective action cycles. I noticed that I began by engaging with the students at the content level of knowing and each time was forced to move into a parallel focus on process. In student number 1's case the objective was to allow him to access the text through tapes. However I also learned that an equally valuable learning outcome was possible through engaging with the student's own views and ideas on the structure of tape work. One of the critical moments in this process that facilitated some epistemological insight on my part, was when we changed the structure of the term exam, to allow him to record his answers orally without interfering with the integrity of the exam process. That was the breakthrough point at which the child's personal sense of himself was reinforced and I felt I was witnessing his persona literally expanding in front of my eyes. It was by engaging with the process in an open fashion that real learning was facilitated for both of us.

Redefining my Goals

Traditionally teachers like me were trained in a content approach to education, in which the process was manipulated as a conduit for the presentation of

content. Through my research, I now believe that content to some extent is and should always be secondary in the learning equation. Daloz (1987, p 239) states,

'there is no such thing as 'content' apart from the way in which it is understood'.

I now see learning support as being much less about specifics such as accuracy in reading, writing or use of number, and more about students coping with learning, making choices, prioritising their needs and finding alternate strategies for effective living. It's not that I will neglect or reject the former, it's that I am now far more conscious of the individuality of each student's learning requirements and of the process through which I engage with each child. McNiff (1993) captured this idea in her description of teaching as implying,

'the process of opening the doors in my clients' minds that will make them aware of their own processes of development, and of their own potential for unlimited acts of creation' (McNiff, 1993 p 20).

In this model she has helped me to move from the idea of teacher as 'gatekeeper' of knowledge to 'facilitator' of or 'guide' to knowledge. I see myself as a catalyst for a more eclectic style of learning support. My research project pointed up how my changed approach to learning support had some promising potential for success. I believe I was able to show that the way both students and colleagues were supported facilitated learning. Being able to foster a more democratic style of teaching and learning was an important breakthrough for me.

I intend to build on this small beginning and develop this style of pedagogical approach as a central tenet of my future practice. I view this new understanding as being in line with world wide changes in the focus of education. In 1990 the World Conference on Education shifted the education debate away from the theme of literacy toward the theme of basic education. It was not that those who

had been illiterate, suddenly became literate. According to Gadotti (1996, pp166-170),

'this new theoretical vision can change practice....this means always searching for and renewing the meaning of education, and not fixing on inflexible theoretical models which are unable to read the great book of reality, in order to learn with it.'

I am now conscious of what I would like to name as an 'epistemological equality' between myself and my students. I do not have a monopoly on knowledge; mine is not the only way of knowing. Gadotti (1996) comments that Freire often states

'no one knows everything, and no one is ignorant of everything'

(Gadotti, 1996 p 167).

This was a significant learning experience for me as a practising teacher. There can be a smugness about those in education, myself included, who suggest that the values of the school system are the only values that matter, and that what it offers is the only way to be. I challenge this assumption. I believe the theory of individuality which is at the basis of an understanding of learning difference makes a nonsense of this. When I reflect on who and how I was in the past, I realise that I would always have paid lip service to this theory, but now I know its truth and I claim it as an educational value of my own.

Living with Paradox.

There is however a paradox in that through reading the literature and attending additional courses on learning difficulties and multiple intelligence, I have added to my knowledge content base. I cannot say whether it was an increase in technical knowledge and new information that empowered me to have enough confidence to challenge the system and change my view of reality, or whether engaging in the process of reflective practitioner research caused a paradigm shift in my thinking. Perhaps the two elements occurred in parallel. As with student number 1, did an ability to access text material through tapes increase his self esteem? Or did the experience of being accepted and valued

by his teachers and peers help his confidence enough to overcome his fear of failure and allow his abilities to shine through?

On first examining these questions I was inclined to dismiss them as unimportant. On closer reflection I realised they were addressing something fundamental to my approach to education. Am I theory driven, or person orientated? This relates to my earlier propositions regarding content and process. Each time I find myself thinking of Giroux's (1997, p 103) idea of teachers as 'transformative intellectuals'. Teaching is not just about conceptualisation but also about implementation of pedagogical practice. This is what McNiff (1993, page 19) refers to as,

'a process view of learning. There is no end product in sight, other than an "end product" of "no end product"; a final answer that there are only new questions; an end state that is the beginning of a host of new states.'

My Place in Education.

The dominant form of western educational systems is unjust in many ways. It is largely vested in a model of hierarchical control. During my research, I discussed my feelings of frustration with the present system with colleagues. Now I realise that I am also part of the system and I am not alone. There are many like me, so in that sense, the system has already been changed. Rather than opt out, I will continue to work for change from the inside out. I have learned through my life experiences that worthwhile and lasting change is often a slow process. I think in this case a 'bottom up' approach was vital to initiate movement by first improving my own practice. However one of the more useful aspects of the inclusive collaborative approach of my action research was that it allowed me to share my concerns and values with others.

I believe if I want to develop my role as a learning support teacher I have to begin to challenge current policy in an effort to influence it. To this end I submitted a policy document to my school management outlining areas where

I saw short term possibilities for improvement in learning support practice, while at the same time outlining my current vision for the future (data archive). This I know came about as a direct result of my action research. It has not just helped me to value who I am as a professional learning support teacher, and believe in my own voice. It has also empowered me to willingly turn and face into the cold winds of opposition and believe my own voice will be heard. Moacir Gadotti's (1996, p 7) inspiring and comforting words sum up my research experience as follows.

'In pedagogy the practice is the horizon, the aim of the theory. Therefore, the educationalist lives the instigating dialectic between his or her daily life - the lived school and the projected school - which attempts to inspire a new school. Pedagogical theory attempts to educate individuals as a point on the horizon but never a finished process because education is really an unending process. Educators look forward to a new reality which doesn't yet exist but which they wish to create. Education is at the same time promise and project. It is also a Utopia.'

Appendix I.

Ethics Statement.

At present I am studying for my masters degree in education. My area of interest and the topic I have chosen for my dissertation is

'Supporting the child with learning difficulties in school.'

As part of my preparation for dissertation, I am conducting research into this area, by interviewing parents and their children with learning difficulties, students, teachers and others in my school. I hope to monitor my work with these students.

I am formally asking you to participate (or allow your child to do so) in my research as follows

1. As a parent interviewee.

2. As a student interviewee or by working with me in my action research

3. As a teacher as part of the actual action research or as an interviewee.

4. As school management, by giving permission for me to conduct this action research in the school.

I am asking for your permission to use the results of your (or your child's) participation in the interviews or the action research in my dissertation. This will be done anonymously and confidentially. You or your child or the school will not be identified. I would also add that it is your right to withdraw your consent at any time.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Signature of researcher._____

Signature of consent._____

date._____

Appendix II.

Conversation with an Educational Psychologist, 10/10/1997.

Psychologist. I do see a difference between the terms 'learning difference' and 'learning difficulty'. 'Learning difficulty' as I see it is the difference in the style of learning we all have and that children have in the class room. A 'learning difficulty' doesn't relate so much to the style as to the fact that they have a problem

Therese. Could you use both terms? Do you think all children with learning difficulties are just children with learning difference?

Psychologist. I am not so sure.

Therese. I am thinking of the Spectrum conference we went to, one speaker said you could change the word 'difficulty' to 'difference' and really difficulty was a very bad word to use. You are emphasizing the weakness, instead of building up his strengths.

Psychologist Well I mean I can take his point on that. You could use these words interchangeably , but on the other hand it is more useful to make the distinction for the reasons that he said.

Therese Would you say we all have learning differences?

Psychologist Absolutely.

Therese Whereas only certain children have learning difficulties.

Psychologist We all have learning differences and I am sure we all compensate and over compensate in various ways. I suppose if you are average or above average intelligence it's easier to compensate, but if you have a difficulty, it might not be so easy to compensate.

Appendix III.

Extract from conversation with Student Number 1,
in which he outlines some of the classroom survival strategies he used.
3/11/'97.

Therese Would you find sitting in the front seat helpful?

Student No, I prefer to sit at the back, at least the teachers don't give out to you as much. If you need help, you can talk to the person beside you.

Therese Is it important to get the answer?

Student Yes, If you want to get your work done in five not twenty five minutes.

Therese Why?

Student If you don't want lots of homework.

Appendix 1V.

Extract from a conversation with an Educational psychologist concerning current provision of learning support in schools on 10/10/1997.

Therese. Children who are sent to you for assessment would they all be the same or very different?

Psychologist. There is no one general hermogenous group. I think probably you get the ones who are falling behind the ones with obvious learning difficulties. You get the ones who are called dyslexic with specific learning disabilities. You also get ones, though it's not quite relevant with different learning styles where the class room technique used by a particular teacher just doesn't happen to suit that particular child.

Therese. Do you find that often.

Psychologist. Yes, in a sense particularly with dyslexics, maybe a teacher is concentrating on a phonics approach with the class, and that may suit 95% of the class, but it may not suit the other 5%.

Therese. All dyslexics obviously don't have the same traits.

Psychologist. You have auditory and visual dyslexics, or a combination of the two.

Therese . How do you get round that then, is it hit and miss. Should each child have his own separate programme which seems impractical really .

Psychologist Well I think you do have to get some one in from the out side really. No teacher, few anyway, will have time to sit down and analyze this and even the remedial teacher hasn't the time to do this.

Therese. So if a teacher in the ordinary classroom has a child with auditory perceptual problems and visual perceptual problems and someone else with attention deficit disorder and someone else, I know this is a bit extreme . I suppose it is possible to have four or five in her class. How does that teacher develop a style that incorporates all those children's learning styles. Is that possible?

Psychologist. If you find a number with the same type of difficulty if you find five with auditory then you can afford to sit down and work out a programme and give time to that particular difficulty. It's where you have a wider variation,

Therese. That's the difficulty.

Psychologist. That's the difficulty ,we are back talking about individual teaching. That's just not possible. The best you can hope for is some sort of group **.**

Therese. So say the Geography teacher goes into a class of thirty and she has five with different learning styles. Where can she go for a resource. What would you say to that person.

Psychologist. That person is probably going to be you , the remedial teacher, she's probably the best resource person.

Therese. With the limited time and resources, that I would have, or any of us have, more than likely this teacher is going to be on her own. If there is going to be any targeting it's going to be for reading and literacy skills. Is there any way I as a remedial teacher can help this teacher. and say, if you do it this way or if you try it that way, that might help that child to learn better. I hear this multi sensory approach all the time.

Psychologist. Well a multi sensory approach that's a safe one. That would suit everybody, I don't think it's realistic to expect a subject teacher to be able to start to vary her approach for X number of different children in the room , it's not a possibility. If she has a viable group, who appear to have a particular problem then it's possible.

Therese. Would you see then that the support should be given to the child outside maybe with the homework or teaching him ways of tuning in better rather than the emphasis being put on helping the teacher, help the student.

Psychologist. Well that's how I would see it.

Therese It's more practical.

Psychologist. I think it is.

Appendix V.

Student number 1's reading tutor described his attitude to reading when they first started working together. The following is an extract from a taped interview we had together.20/1/1998.

Therese What is he like when he is reading?

Tutor. He won't hide the fact that ' No I don't like reading. What's the point of reading if you tell me what's in that book, I'll know it quicker'. He'll put it down to, it's not that he can't read he doesn't like it, and I think that's his excuse, 'why should I do something I don't really like'.
Right from the beginning I did get that from him . He didn't see the point of reading, when someone could tell him. He seemed to take in what somebody told him quicker than what he could take in himself. He seemed to remember it better.

Appendix V1.

Student number 1's English teacher wrote the following evaluation of his learning problems and how she accommodated him in her class. 17/12/'97.

The student.

I discovered early in September that student number 1 had problems with both his written work and his reading. I discussed this problem with Therese Burke. I noticed that his oral work in class was quite good, so we decided to help him by putting the class novel -' Could I Love a Stranger' by Marlyn Taylor, on tape.

The class have a Christmas test in English in which they have questions on Poetry, Media and the Novel. We decided to read the questions to him and he would write the answers to the Media and Poetry sections. The novel questions would be read to him and he would then record his answers onto a tape.

Preparation for his English exam.

He is such a slow reader that I knew he would not be able to get through the novel like the other students.
His summaries of chapters were not very good and would be insufficient as a source of revision for the exam. I suggested to him that I would divide the novel into two parts,
1) The 'Diary' story set in Germany before and during W.W.2.
2) The modern day story.
I then recorded myself reading the Diary extracts so that he would have this story from beginning to end, without the modern story weaving in and out. I also recorded a summary of the main plot i.e. The modern day story.
I divided the novel into two separate stories as I thought this would be easier for him to understand when listening to the tape.

I made out a chart of the characters in the novel and I showed how the characters were connected to each other and most importantly I showed on the chart the link between the two stories in the novel. A character called Daniel was the link. The chart I photocopied for the whole class and it was used for a revision lesson. The chart was also put up on the wall of the classroom. In class I discussed certain incidents e.g.-
a) The unjust treatment of one character by another.
b) Saddest / Happiest incident in the novel.
c) Most tense moment.
d) Themes of racism.
Student number 1 participated very well during these sessions.

I used the tape in my class for all the students as I thought this would be a great way of revising the novel. We spent a few weeks reading the book now we could all listen and this I think is important - gives variety and reinforces what we have studied.
It was also very useful as the Diary extracts were all together and the sequence of events - plot of the Diary became much clearer in all student's minds. I think it had a very positive influence on the class. Student number I was not the only one to benefit. Because the class used the tape as well it did not make him feel different I also enjoyed myself- the process.

Appendix VII.

Student number 1's reading tutor described his reaction to the tapes. The following is an extract from a taped interview we had together. 20/1/1998.

Tutor He actually brought the tapes into show me. He brought them in and said 'look, what I got,' it was the tape of the novel that the English teacher had given him. He showed me the actual cassette . He said 'I'm going to listen to it and I can listen to it again and again and I can keep listening to it , until I know what it is and then I can do my exams.' And he was very confident about the exams when he got the tapes. I have it in my notes the week people were talking about the exams that you were going to have, he was really down. He was worrying about the exams. The following session he had the tape, so the worry of the exam was lifted. He was confident about the exams.

Appendix VIII.

In a taped conversation with student number 1 we discussed the first Geography and English tapes.15/12/1998.

Therese How did you find it, listening to the tape?
Student It was good.
Therese What was good about it?
Student I could learn more, it was easier you learn.
Therese How?
Student Cause it was quicker, I just hear all the information...
Therese I want you to think for a minute, was it easier using the tape to do your
            homework or your revision, or would it have been just the same without them?
Student It's easier.

In a taped conversation with student number 1 we again discussed the value of having tapes of school text material. 5/1/1998.

Therese. In what way was it helpful to have it on tape?
Student I knew them.
Therese Would you have known them if you had to read them out of the book?
Student I couldn't read that much.

In the same conversation we also discussed his end of term exams.

Therese I wanted to ask you about your exams. How you found using the tape for your
            English, what was it like?
Student It was better, it was easier and all . I could say what I thought instead of saying
             what I thought and then writing down something else that I knew.
Therese What do you mean writing down something different than you knew?
Student Cause I didn't know how to spell it.
Therese Oh! right. So you could say exactly what your ideas were?
             Do you think you got more information across on the tape than you did by
            writing
Student Yes.

Appendix IX.

Student number 1's English teacher comments on his end of term exam performance, in a written evaluation 30/1/'98.

Difference between answer on tape and written answer.
Student number 1's written answers were very accurate in content which proved that his comprehension is quite good but spelling and length of answers were not to the same standard.
The answers on the tape were excellent both in content, length and structure of answers. His answers on tape were among the best in the class.

Appendix X.

In a conversation with student number 1, we discussed the use of putting instructions on the tapes. The student found they interfered with his learning. 2/2/1998

Therese: Did you notice a difference in the tapes.
Student ; There wasn't much difference.
Therese :Would you prefer the instructions to say stop here and turn page?
Student. It depends, listening once can be enough. You can hear it all in the one go.

Appendix XI

I recorded my process of reflection regarding the purpose of making tapes in my journal.

Journal 7/2/98
Had a thought, on (student Number one's) tape I spelt out key words---next time I will include flash cards of key words in the pack. There is a lot of work on tapes, to make them. They are very individual things.

Journal 8/2/98
I have been thinking about the value of the tapes I made for---.

In discussion with a colleague , another learning support teacher, we acknowledged that students who have problems reading avoid it and tend to get information in other ways. This ties in with his paired reading tutors observation, that he felt he didn't need to read, or to do this paired reading. The question I am pondering is will the tapes add to this attitude?
In tape one ,(Geography) he didn't listen with the book and read the book with the tape. He preferred to listen to the whole tape right through from beginning to end.
In tape two (novel) he was happiest he didn't have to use the book. The teacher instruction was to ignore the book .
In the second Geography tape, he found the instructions to read the book, after each page annoying and questioned it's value, saying he got the information by listening to the tape. He wouldn't go back over the book because he felt he knew it.
In tape four(History).
I included questions after each section and spelt out any key words. The question is have the tapes helped him to feel comfortable with the printed word? Is this possible or useful to a dyslexic child? Am I encouraging and reinforcing his bad habits. The original point of the tapes was to help keep abreast with the class work. To cut through the barrier he has with the text to help him learn. He wouldn't read anyway. He copied homework, he felt frustrated. There was no alternative. we offered paired reading as a way of encouraging the joy of reading. Also he still uses texts in class in all subjects

Journal 9/2/98.
------ said he didn't need this. (for me to spell the words out on the tape.)

Journal 13/3/98.
Surely the point is to short cut reading and give him success at homework.

Appendix XII.

After four months, three of student number 1's class teachers commented as follows.

'He is more confident to participate as part of class. Obviously more content that he is not so 'different' to his peers. He has more understanding of his work and eager to show off his knowledge of subject. Homework is now being completed. It is more organised. There is a sense of pride in his work.'

' Student number one has gained in confidence in class. He is more attentive and participates more in class. The quality of his homework has improved immensely. He handed up one of the best exercises in English class last week. He does not feel different to the others in his class. They and he accept as normal the fact that his homework is given to him on tape. At the parent teacher meeting his mother said she was very happy with his progress.'

'I was very surprised when I corrected his homework, it was very good a huge improvement on his earlier work. He had very few spelling mistakes and the quality of his writing was much improved. His confidence in answering questions has also improved.'

Appendix X111.

<u>Learning support for my tutor class.   Teacher :   Subject 5/1/1998.</u>
I want to support the students in my tutor class in their learning.
I am asking subject teachers to pick any section of their class work over the next four weeks, that I might be able to reinforce in my class with them.

Can I teach vocabulary, reinforce an idea, work on spelling, sequencing of ideas or facts etc?
Can we make wall charts or displays or make a tape of a page in the text? Can I help in any way

JANUARY 1998   **TOPIC / VOCABULARY/TEXT PAGE / Etc.**

5th - 9th	
12th - 16th	
19th - 23rd	
26th - 30th	

Appendix XIV.

Activities used in English class, to teach Home Economics content.

1. I Played word games and spelling games with the vocabulary.

2. The students did a classification activity and vocabulary extension exercises through the use of a recipe for stir fry vegetables, which the teacher was planning to use in her practical cookery class that week.

3. I developed a sequencing exercise by using the instructions for making the stir fry dish as the exercise content. This was also revision after the practical cookery had taken place.

4. Finally I made up a revision worksheet, using cloze exercises around the previous three exercises on the topic 'vegetables'.

Appendix XV.

Evaluation of part one of action reflection cycle two.

At the end of four weeks I checked with the students and the two participating teachers for feed back on the merits of the first part of action reflection cycle 2 Intervention from their point of view. In response to the question.

DO YOU FIND IT HELPFUL TO GO OVER WORDS OR SPELLINGS FROM SCIENCE CLASS IN MY CLASS?

There were nine affirmative replies.

As a follow up to that response, their individual responses to
. *HOW DOES IT HELP YOU? included,*

1. SPELLINGS, WORDS GET STUCK IN YOUR HEAD.

2. BECAUSE OF THE THINGS ON THE WALL (KEY WORD WALL CHARTS.) AND TO LEARN AT HOME.

3. IF YOU KNOW HOW TO SPELL THE WORD THEN IT IS EASY TO REMEMBER.

4 . IT DOES HELP ME WHEN I HAVE MY CLASS I KNOW THE WORDS.

5. THEN YOU KNOW YOUR SCIENCE OR YOUR SPELLINGS FOR TOMORROW.

6. IT HELPS US LEARN HOW TO DO THEM FOR HOMEWORK OR CLASSWORK.

7. IT HELPS ME SPELL BETTER IN SCIENCE.

8 . HELPS TO REMEMBER.

9. IF YOU DO IT IN CLASS AND DO IT AT HOME IT WILL HELP YOU.

My teacher colleagues also commented as follows

Science Teacher.

'The students are more familiar with the vocabulary than usual, and spelling has improved. It supports my work in class by means of extra exposure. Science is reinforced through linking with other subjects and through the classroom wall charts.'

Home Economics Teacher.

'Student -- was very keen to find out if 'mange tout' was a green or a pulse vegetable. I did hear a little discussion re vegetables from them during practical cooking. Yes I did notice the improvement and the help you gave to the students.'

Appendix XVI.
Student views on using a study plan, before introducing it as a daily practice.
Just before I proceeded with the last part of my second action reflection cycle, I asked my students the following question.

DO YOU THINK A STUDY PLAN IS A GOOD IDEA?

There were nine replies, six replied yes and three replied no.
The students replied in the following manner to the question

HOW DO YOU THINK IT WILL HELP YOU?

1. You will know the questions.
2. What you learn gets stuck in your head?
3. It could be good.
4. It could help you to read, so you can get a job.
5. It will help you get your homework right.

6. I don't think it will help me.
7. It doesn't help.
8. No way.

9. No answer given.

At the end of week one I asked the class to answer the question
'*Did the study plan help you?*'
To which all nine students replied *yes.*
When asked to say *How it helped .*The following replies are representative of those given.

1. I learned words that I wasn't in school (for).
2. It helped me because I knew what I was doing the next day.
3. I can spell the words I was given.
4. It helped me with new words.
5. It helped me because I knew them, because I didn't do them before.
6. Because it would be easy to remember the next day.

When asked *how the study plan helped*?
Six said with *home work* .   *Three* with *classwork.* The following are the replies,

1. We learn the spelling and they came up in the homework.
2. When I went to do it(homework) I knew it.
3. Because I learned it the last day before I did my homework.
4. If you get words, and if you knew the words when you do it on the study plan.
5. Because when I go home I forget what I was taught, but when I study ,it comes back into my
   head.
6. It helped me to know my homework.

1. We knew the answers we were asked.
2. Because when I went home (and studied it) and we got to do it in class (next time) I would remember it.
3. When you look over it every night you remember how to do it the next day

Appendix XVII

Study Plan Timetable.

Monday.	History.
Tuesday	Science / English.
Wednesday	Geography / Home Economics.
Thursday	Irish / Maths.

Ten minutes extra study time per subject per night.

Appendix XVIII

2/2/1998.

<u>To all Subject Teachers</u>.

I have been working with the class to encourage them to be active learners. We have made out a subject home study plan. After homework ,Monday to Thursday, the students will study one or two subjects each night for ten minutes extra per subject. It would be a great help if you would encourage them.

You might find out what night your subject is on for study.

You might point out a key idea, key words, a page in a chapter, that might be important to study.

Any thing you can do to reinforce the importance of the exercise would be great!

Remember it's only 10 minutes per subject extra.

If you notice any impact (positive or negative) this exercise has on the students, their work, or attitudes, would you let me know, I'd be glad of any feedback.

      Many thanks.

Appendix XIX.

NAME :————————

WEEK   **STUDY PLAN**

DAY / DATE	SUBJECT	TIME	WHAT WILL I DO	DID I STUDY

Appendix XX

Journal Entry 27/1/'98.

My response to the first Home Economics class session in action reflection three.

The total number on the class register is twenty one. There were only thirteen present. I felt that our opening input was more suited to students with longer attention spans. I felt we had to act decisively to stop students talking during the initial input. I walked around the room and quietly stood beside such students. I directed some to open their books at the relevant chapter page- even pointing to the line on the page. After that they engaged with the topic.
The worksheet was well answered. The group work although noisy at first was excellent. The students engaged very well with the task. Even when the teacher left the room and I remained alone with them they continued working really well. Perhaps a homework revision exercise might have reinforced the learning.

Appendix XXI

Home Economics activity sheet.

SHOPPING   TROLLY.

**1. Select four vegetables from your shopping trolly to use to make
    vegetable stir-fry.**
1_____
2_____
3_____
4._____

**2. Select four vegetables from your shopping trolly to use to make
    vegetable stew.**
1_____
2_____
3._____
4._____

**3.Select four vegetables from your shopping trolly to use to make
vegetable soup.**
1._____
2._____
3._____
4._____

**4. Select four vegetables from your shopping trolly to use to make
vegetable burgers.**
1._____
2_____
3._____
4._____

**5.Select four vegetables from your shopping trolly to use in
vegetable salads.**
1._____
2._____
3._____
4._____

Appendix XXII.

Student evaluation of Home Economics classes.

Some time during the week after the first two team teaching session in action reflection cycle three, I asked two students from the class, who were not from my own tutor group to evaluate the worthwhileness of the intervention. They made these comments to the questions I asked.

1. **Do you think the last two classes were worthwhile, or useful?**

'Yes I do, It was something we like doing, and we learn more because I
 was doing it myself.'
'It was worthwhile because we do not do anything like that in Home
 Economics.'

2. **Did you enjoy the classes?**

'I enjoy it because it was easy and different.'
'Yes it was something that we enjoyed.'

3. **Do you think you benefited from it? Did it help you with the
   classwork in any way?**

'I think I benefited from it because I enjoyed it. Yes it did help me,
 because I learned more from doing it myself.'
'Yes we learned much more about what we were learning. I learned much
 more than I would reading a book.'

Appendix XXIII

Commendation system.

The school operates a reward system, where students are commended for special effort. When a student merits a certain number of commendations he/she is awarded a certificate.

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