

An Educational Enquiry into the
implementation of the approach to writing
outlined in the English Language
Curriculum

By

Bernie Tobin

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Education Management,
Dublin City University

Supervisor: Margaret Farren

CHAPTER 1

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Arising from the recommendations of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (1990), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was invited by the then Minister for Education to initiate a revision of the 1971 Curriculum. The process was both evolutionary and developmental, involving all partners and interests in primary education. It can be said that the Primary School Curriculum (1999) represents a major departure in the history of primary education in Ireland. It reflects the economic, social and cultural developments in Irish society and promotes teaching and learning approaches, which will cater for the needs of the child in the modern world.

While the revision of the curriculum was the responsibility of the NCCA, the Department of Education and Science, through the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP), is responsible for providing a programme of in-career development for teachers to ensure the changes are disseminated and implemented. This happens through in-service for whole-school staffs, arrangements for school-based curriculum days and the provision of curriculum support services. Implementation of the revised curriculum guidelines is overseen through the Inspectorate.

However, the need for strategies and supports at school level to facilitate implementation of curriculum innovation and change had been recognised.

Coolahan states (1994, p.137) in *The Report on the National Education Convention*:

Most individuals have an in-built reluctance to change established attitudes, habits and practices, unless they are convinced of the reasons and value for so doing. Accordingly, it is incumbent on proposers of change not to be pre-occupied with the first order change of setting out objectives and lines of policy at the expense of attending to the second order of change, which involves the patterns, practices and attitudes of the individuals expected to take practical action.

Teachers need the opportunity to develop a clear understanding of the innovation, to be given time to become convinced of its value and of its potential to make a difference in terms of pupil learning. In short, as Kelly (1999, p. 119) summarises ‘there can be no curriculum development without teacher development and, if ... the teacher’s role is crucial to the quality of the pupil’s education, it becomes most important that they be given all possible support of this kind’. The challenge for school management is to put in place structures and procedures to support teachers in the actual implementation of the curriculum in the classroom.

1.2 The school context

Our school is a co-educational school, which developed rapidly from a two-teacher school in 1984 to a twenty-five teacher school in 1998. Currently, due to a decline in enrolment figures, the school has twenty-three teachers on staff, including an

administrative principal and five learning-support teachers. Classes range from Junior Infants to Sixth Class.

From the outset, the principal acknowledged, in accordance with Alexander (1992, p. 110), ‘that there is a substantial field of decision-making to do with the content and development of specific aspects of the curriculum which requires the expertise and time of others’. His leadership style is reflected in what Coleman (1994, p. 75) describes as ‘a capacity and commitment ... to establish and utilise structures and processes for empowerment’ of others in a shared approach to management. Hence, staff involvement in decision-making is facilitated through consultation and teamwork, in planned and informal contact. Recent implementation of the revised in-school management structures, arising from the Programme for Competitiveness and Work, endorsed instructional leadership and curriculum development roles of post-holders. It is in this context that a strategy for implementing the revised curriculum was developed.

While developing a strategy to facilitate the implementation of the revised curriculum, the deputy principal (Gallagher, 2000) introduced the model of school development planning described by Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991), which is outlined in Chapter Two of this dissertation. As part of this process, an audit was carried out to gauge the extent to which existing policy and practices met the revised English Language guidelines. Strengths and weaknesses were identified. Subsequent planning aimed to sustain the strengths, while specific oral language objectives were targeted for planning (Appendix A). Action plans were drawn up by the groups, detailing the specific prioritised objectives, which in turn became the

criteria against which progress and success could be judged, the tasks to be undertaken, the delineation of responsibilities and the resource implications (Appendix A). It was envisaged that future action plans would concentrate on the writing process in order to further develop the child's expressive and communicative abilities.

Throughout the review and planning process the link to staff development and the centrality of teacher ownership of the process was emphasised to ensure pupil progress and achievement. However, Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991, p. 67) acknowledge that '*implementation does not proceed on automatic pilot*'. Gallagher (2000, p. 136) recommended that the staff development programme be developed in the school 'to ensure that the knowledge and skills acquired be translated into classroom practice' during the implementation phase.

1.2.1 The status of the researcher

I believe that working with others, sharing in and utilising collective skills and experiences affords us the opportunity, as Murphy (1997, p. 139) acknowledges, to 'encourage personal growth and development and create a capacity to respond to change'. As part of the senior management team, I share responsibility for the effectiveness of overall management and administration of the school. In addition, as curriculum co-coordinator for the junior classes of the school, I have specific responsibility for advising on the content of the English Language and Mathematics curricula, methodology and classroom management. The internal conditions of the

school have enabled me to introduce action research as a strategy in the early implementation phase of the targeted oral language objectives. This provided opportunities to work further as a team where, McNiff (1995, p. 28) suggests, the ‘parties are there to improve their work by acting as challenging and supportively critical colleagues, each for the other’. Ideas were put into practice. Teachers reflected on their actions and discussed their findings with each other. Classroom observation as a means of teacher learning had begun to emerge. The opportunity was afforded to me to demonstrate new strategies in the classrooms, which Joyce and Showers (1988, p. 68) maintain ‘greatly facilitates learning’ and the transfer of knowledge and skill to classroom practice. Action research employed in this instance also became an evaluation tool, which provided feedback on the changing needs of teachers in terms of knowledge, skills and resources, and highlighted barriers to implementation at classroom level. It is in this context that I proposed to continue to use action research in working with teachers to develop and implement a strategy to improve the teaching of the writing process in the junior classes of the school.

1.3 The aims of the dissertation

The aim of this study is to develop and implement a strategy to improve the teaching of the writing process in the junior classes of a primary school. The objectives of the research are:

- to use action research in developing and implementing a strategy to improve the teaching of the writing process;

- to plan, implement, observe and assess the knowledge and skills necessary to enable the children to engage in the writing process;
- to improve my management of the professional needs of teachers in promoting pupil learning.

1.4 The plan of the dissertation

Chapter Two reviews literature on the management of the process of change, particularly literature relating to the implementation phase of curriculum innovation at classroom level. Extant research reveals the strategies necessary to support innovation at organisational and classroom level and highlights the implication of change for the classroom teacher. Literature on the writing process is also reviewed.

Chapter Three describes the qualitative approach to research used in this study. Action research, as the preferred methodology, is explained. The research methods and procedures for dependability and credibility of the study are also outlined.

Chapter Four describes the implementation phase of action research. In line with Elliott's (1991, p. 88) recommendation, it adopts a 'historical format; telling the story as it has unfolded over time'. Illustrative data and their analysis are weaved into the narrative.

Chapter Five summarises the main findings and limitations of the study.

Conclusions are presented and recommendations are made to cultivate a learning environment conducive to the writing process.

CHAPTER 2

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review is divided into three sections. It begins with an examination of literature on the management of the process of change, particularly literature relating to the implementation phase of curriculum change at classroom level. The strategies necessary to support change at organisational and classroom level are then considered. Finally, literature on the writing process is reviewed.

2.2 Approaching educational change

In approaching educational change, Fullan (1991, p. 5) explains that:

...we need to keep in mind the values and goals and the consequences associated with specific educational changes; and ... we need to comprehend the dynamics of educational change as a sociopolitical process involving all kinds of individual, classroom, school, local, regional and national factors at work in interactive ways. The problem of meaning is one of how those involved in change can come to understand what it is that should change and how it can best be accomplished, while realizing that the what and the how constantly interact and reshape each other.

He argues that the two areas which need to be fully understood when implementing change are the *what* of the change and the *how* of the change process, and maintains

that many attempts at change fail because people have not distinguished between them. Hopkins et al. (1994, p. 20) make the same point, explaining that it is only 'through being self-conscious about the change process that one learns how to manage innovation, as well as how to implement specific curricula or teaching initiatives'. Hord (1987, p. ii) stresses the importance of attention being given to using the new programmes and 'their integration into existing educational practice'. This is reiterated by Hopkins et al. (1994, p. 19) who maintain that successful 'change builds on the excellence we have already achieved and judiciously blends it with what we can achieve'.

To implement change successfully, Fullan (1991, p. 93) recognises that the 'theory of the meaning of change and the change process provides us with an underlying conception of what should be done'. He (ibid, pp. 105-107) identifies the following implications for those involved in planning and implementing educational change:

- successful implementation consists of some transformation or continual development of initial ideas;
- effective implementation is a *process of clarification*;
- conflict and disagreement are not only inevitable but fundamental to successful change;
- people need pressure to change (even in directions that they desire), but it will be effective only under conditions that allow them to react, to form their own position, to interact with other implementers, to obtain technical assistance;
- effective change takes time;
- planning and problem-coping models based on knowledge of the change process are essential (referring to Louis and Miles, 1990).

2.2.1 The process of change

Fullan (1991, pp. 47-48) describes the change process as consisting of three broad phases: 'initiation', 'implementation' and 'continuation' or 'institutionalization'.

The process is not linear in nature but 'rather one in which events at one phase can feed back to alter decisions made at previous stages, which then proceed to work their way through in a continuous interactive way' (Fullan, 1991, p. 48). Initiation is described by Hopkins et al. (1994, p. 36) as 'about deciding to embark on innovation, and developing commitment towards the process. The key activities in the initiation phase are the decision to begin the innovation, and a review of the school's current state as regards it'.

Implementation is the phase of attempted use of the innovation. Hopkins et al. (1994, p. 37) explain the key activities of implementation as 'the carrying out of action plans, the developing and sustaining of commitment, the checking of progress and the overcoming of problems'. It is a crucial stage of the whole change process and is regarded by Hord (1987, pp. 76-77) as 'the likeliest point that innovation breaks down' and as such 'is a serious business requiring considerable planning, nurturing and active involvement if it is to be fully realised'.

Institutionalisation, Hopkins et al. (1994, p. 38) explain 'is the phase when innovation and change stop being regarded as something new and become part of the school's usual ways of doing things'.

2.3 Change and the teacher

Educational change depends on what teachers do and think-it's as simple and as complex as that (Fullan, 1991, p.117).

Crooks and McKernan (1985, p. 138) agree that teachers are 'the central agents of curriculum change and without their support change is not likely to be effective'. Implementation ultimately involves changes in individual practice. Fullan (1991, p. 37) explains that the 'three components or dimensions at stake in implementing any new program or policy are: (1) the possible use of new or revised *materials* ... (2) the possible use of new *teaching approaches* ..., and (3) the possible alteration of *beliefs*'. All three aspects of change are necessary because together 'they represent the means of achieving a particular educational goal or set of goals' (ibid, p. 37). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1996, p. 202) also emphasise that the success of change revolves around the teachers' success 'in accomplishing the serious and difficult task of learning skills and perspectives assumed by new visions of practice and often unlearning practices and beliefs about students or instruction that have dominated their entire professional lives'.

Mortimore (1993, p.12) warns that it 'must not be underestimated just how difficult it is for practitioners to adopt new ways. When they have spent years planning and rehearsing their roles, adjustment to new expectations or procedures can be difficult'. But Fullan (1991, p. 42) recognises that changes in beliefs are more difficult as 'they challenge the core values held by individuals regarding the purposes of education; moreover, beliefs are often not explicit, discussed, or understood, but rather are buried at the level of unstated assumptions'. He (ibid, p.40) highlights the fact that

teachers' 'occupational identity, their sense of competence and their self concept' are in the balance when these changes are required. Hall and Hord (1987, pp. 52-53) state that 'change can be more effective if the concerns of the teachers are considered'.

2.4 Barriers to implementation

Failure to bring about change in an organisation is often recognized as the inability to overcome the initial resistance of organisational members to change. Gross et al. (1971, p.1) claim that this is an oversimplification of the matter. While resistance to change may account for some situations, they (ibid, pp. 122-148) identify such contributing factors as:

- lack of clarity about the innovation;
- lack of capability to perform the new role model;
- unavailability of necessary materials;
- incompatible organizational arrangements;
- lack of motivation to make efforts to implement the innovation.

During their study, Gross et al. noted that teachers were willing to attempt the innovation initially but over time, developed an unwillingness to give time and effort to improving implementation. While the first four factors were contributing factors to this mindset, evidence led Gross et al. (1971, pp.193-194) to conclude that

implementation was blocked because of two fundamental deficiencies in the strategies used by the director:

(1) it failed to identify and bring into the open the various types of difficulties teachers were likely to encounter in their implementation attempts; and (2) it failed to establish and use feedback mechanisms to uncover the barriers that arose during the period of attempted implementation.

2.5 Conditions for successful change

2.5.1 Leadership and change

Literature about effective schools refers to the importance of leadership. The principal has often been cited as a key figure in inhibiting or promoting change. Berman and McLaughlin (1977, p. 124) found that ‘projects having the active support of the principal were most likely to fare well’. They claim the principal’s actions as opposed to what he or she says, will impact on whether change is to be taken seriously not. However, recent research, according to Fullan (1991, p. 158), has identified some specific change-related behaviours of principals in which ‘more clarity and more precision about the complex role of school leadership’ is emerging. Fullan (1991, p.161) notes principals do not lead change single-handedly but rather:

The larger goal is in transforming the culture of the school. If successful, it is likely that some advanced models of the future will show collaborative groups of teachers organizing and conducting learning, perhaps without the presence of the principal as we know the role.

MacGilchrist et al. (1997, p. 15) explain the challenge for principals and senior management 'is to find ways of bringing the staff on board and getting them committed to and prepared to become involved in change'. An organisational approach will encourage, as Hopkins et al. (1994, p. 167) explain, 'good use of the expertise of all its personnel, provide sources of stimulation and enrichment that will foster their professional development and encourage positive attitudes to the introduction of new ways of working'. Leadership is thus seen as something widely distributed throughout the organisation, and central to this leadership is the empowerment of others. It involves the creation of such a collaborative culture, which encourages involvement, professional development, mutual support and assistance in problem solving, allowing the teacher to become involved in the work of the school outside of the classroom.

2.5.2 Internal features supporting the management of change

From their work with the Improving the Quality of Education for All Project (IQEA), Hopkins and his colleagues found that school improvement works best when a clear and practical focus for development is linked to simultaneous work on the 'internal features of the school, the "arrangements" that enable it to get work done' (Hopkins et al., 1996, p. 7). One of the most widely used strategies has been school development planning.

2.5.2.1 School development planning

Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991, p. 3), who spearheaded the School Development Project in England and Wales, state the purpose of school development planning 'is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in a school through the successful management of innovation and change'. In detailing the process of development planning, describing its distinctive feature of bringing together the school's aims and values, its existing achievements and its needs for development, they (ibid, p. 9) emphasise understanding 'the whole process of change, from defining the need for and value of policy, through its formulation, to its implementation and evaluation' as the key to success.

They (ibid, p.4) describe the four main processes in development planning as:

- *audit*: a school reviews its strengths and weakness;
- *construction*: priorities for development are selected and then turned into specific targets;
- *implementation*: the planned priorities and targets are implemented;
- *evaluation*: the success of implementation is checked.

By co-ordinating aspects of planning, the school acquires a shared sense of direction and is able to control and manage the tasks of development and change. Priorities for development are planned in detail for one year and are supported by action plans, which are working documents for teachers.

A new approach to school development planning according to Hopkins and MacGilchrist (1998, p. 410) is to ‘use it as a strategy to enhance directly the progress and achievement of pupils’. As distinct from focussing on the management of external change and the development of school wide policies, this approach begins with the learning needs of students and moves out from there. This new approach to development planning concerns the integration of three foci (ibid, p. 414):

- pupil progress and achievement;
- the quality of teaching and learning; and
- management arrangements to support the first two.

Schools that have identified clear learning targets for pupils use development planning to achieve these by concentrating simultaneously on related improvements inside and outside the classroom, and in particular, teaching and management arrangements. However, believing that development planning on its own cannot accomplish pupil achievement Hopkins and Lagerweij (1996, p. 77) state ‘the key strategy for linking development planning and pupil achievement is clearly in-service (INSET) or staff development’.

2.5.2.2 Staff development

Staff development according to Fullan (1991, p. 319) is ‘both a strategy for *specific, instructional change*, and a strategy for *basic organizational change* in the way teachers work and learn together’. Joyce and Showers provide further confirmation

of the link between staff development, implementation, and student outcomes. They (1980, p. 380) have identified a number of key training components:

- presentation of theory or description of skill or strategy;
- modelling or demonstration of skills or models of learning;
- practice in simulated and classroom settings;
- structured and open-ended feedback (provision of information about performances);
- coaching for application (hands-on in classroom assistance with the transfer of skills and strategies to the classroom).

Hopkins et al. (1994, p. 67) recognise that staff development in a workshop situation is insufficient to bring about change unless there is ‘opportunity for immediate and sustained practice, collaboration and peer coaching, and for studying development and implementation’. The quality of the working relationships of teachers is strongly related to implementation, for according to Fullan (1991, p. 132) ‘the more teachers can interact concerning their own practices, the more they will be able to bring about improvements that they themselves identify as necessary’. Hopkins et al. (1994, p.62) add to this by stating that central ‘to any successful approach for teacher development is the need for reflection on experience’. This reflection was central to the review of current practice in relation to the writing process as outlined in the *English Language Curriculum* (1999).

2.6 Writing

Effective teaching of writing requires knowledge of the function of writing, an appreciation of the difference, and interdependence, between oral and written language and an understanding of the task undertaken by the writer in the process of writing. The issues are now examined now in the literature.

2.6.1 The function of writing

Writing, according to Langer and Applebee (1984, p. 169) is ‘above all else a means of communication, one of the many forms of interaction that we have developed in our exchanges with one another’. Cox (1991, p. 140) argues that written language ‘serves many purposes for individuals and for society as a whole, and is not limited to the communication of information’. Larson (1975, p. xix) describes writing as ‘the act by which a student explores his or her world and feelings, the art by which his or her dreams and discoveries, wishes, and perceptions are preserved for others to apprehend and enjoy’. As Smith (1982, p. 16) points out, writing ‘can be an extension and reflection of all our efforts to develop and express ourselves in the world around us, to make sense of the world and to impose order upon it’. Willig (1990, p. 25) also describes this social cognitive view of writing, but attaches equal importance to writing as a communicative act:

Writing is a key element in the search for meaning because it allows us to reflect on and to order our encounters with the world and the impact they make upon us. Equally importantly, we write to share thoughts and feelings with others through communications ranging from hastily written notes to formal, carefully argued essays on complex issues.

2.6.2 The communicative act

Writing is seen as different from oral language. Browne (1993, p. 3) explains that writing functions differently to oral language as it is not ‘dependent on the presence of an audience nor is it linked to context as spoken language often is’. Graves (1983, p. 161), who has been involved in writing research for two decades in the United States, explains the difference in written and oral expression:

Writing wears the guise of speech since it uses the same material; words, information, order, organization. But there is a chasm between speech and print. When I write, I supply everything. Alone and in silence I provide energy, initiative, information, language, order, and the conventions to communicate with an unseen audience of one or thousands, who may not read my writing for days, months, or years.

The writer needs to be explicit in referring to the context, as the reader may not share the writer’s context. He or she must organise language into words, sentences and paragraphs with due respect to both the topic and intended audience. Punctuation and text structure are used to order the information to be presented by the writer. Writing has a permanence which speech does not have. It encourages reflection on the intended message, giving the writer power over the way the ideas are expressed. Cox (1991, p. 140) explains that although spoken language also allows thought to be formulated and clarified into one’s own words, ‘written language has the added advantage of making a detached reflection on them possible’.

But in explaining writing and speech as different, Graves (1983, p. 162) acknowledges that ‘writing, without an understanding of its roots in speech, is

nothing. The human voice underlies the entire writing process, and shows itself throughout the life of the writer’.

2.7 The approach to writing outlined in the primary school curriculum

The approach to writing outlined in the *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (1999, p. 14) ‘presupposes a gradual development of the child’s ability to write through the actual process of writing’. In the Infant classes, the definition of writing is ‘broad enough to include any graphic representation the child attempts ... and the distinction between this and art activity will be very blurred’ (ibid, p. 77). It envisages that the child’s ability to use letters and words will evolve through the experience of a print rich environment, the teacher acting as scribe and modelling writing for the children, and in copying letters and words from the environment. It also acknowledges the reciprocities between early reading and early writing, for, as Clay (1998, p. 136) explains, when the teacher ‘helps the learner to use either activity to support the other, ... the learner’s literacy repertoire is enlarged’.

This process approach to writing incorporates a number of significant principles (ibid, p. 76):

- The process of writing is as important as the product because, it is through consistent practice in using that process that children learn to write.
- Children will write for different audiences, on a wide range of topics, and in a variety of genres.

- Children will have a significant amount of control over the subject of their writing and the audience for which it is written.
- Children will have a consistent experience of drafting, editing and redrafting a piece of writing.
- The teacher will act as mentor and guide in the process of drafting, editing and redrafting, helping children to develop expressive abilities and accuracy.
- Through this interactive process children will gradually develop the ability to self-correct their writing and so become independent writers.

The methodology envisaged in the Primary School Curriculum is in line with current research carried out internationally into the teaching of writing to children.

The National Institute of Education (NIE) in the United States funded a two-year research project into first-third grade writers and their teachers. In this study, the children learned to write by engaging in behaviours of real authors, including daily time for writing, conferencing with teachers and their peers during drafting. They dictated the pace of the writing and experienced the opportunity to publish what they had written. The children also exercised a right to write on a range of topics and in a variety of genres.

In the United Kingdom, the School Curriculum Development Committee set up a National Writing Project in 1985. Its director, Czerniewska (1989, p. 46) explains its aims:

‘to develop and extend the competences of children ... to write for a range of purposes and a variety of audiences, in a manner that enhances their growth as individuals, their powers of self expression, their skill as communicators and their facility as learners.

Many of the findings of this project is reflected in the National Curriculum proposals *English for Ages 5 to 11* (DES 1988), cited by Czerniewska (1990, p. 7).

I propose an examination of their findings to explore the underlying principles of the writing process as outlined in the English Language Curriculum.

2.7.1 Underlying principles of the writing process

Czerniewska (1992, p. 83) describes the process approach to writing as reflecting ‘a shift in thinking away from the products of writing towards the process of writing and from the text to the writer’. It is in marked contrast to once-off writing. The focus is on helping the child understand and engage in the act of writing. Writing is taught as a craft where, Czerniewska (1992, p. 101) explains, the pupil’s role has changed ‘from novice to author, and the teacher’s role changed from giver of rules to demonstrator of a craft’. Graves (1983, p. 3), an NIE researcher, outlines the benefits of the process approach to writing:

Surprises come when children begin to control writing as a craft. Children learn to control writing because their teachers practice teaching as a craft. Both teachers and children see the control of the craft as a long, painstaking process with energy supplied along the way through the joy of discovery.

In addition, there is recognition that the child is responsible for decisions about writing, being in control of his or her writing as an owner of the writing process.

Graves (1990, p. 27) outlines the four components of the writing process programme as ‘adequate provision of time, child choice of topic, responsive teaching and the establishment of a classroom community, a community that has learned to help itself’. But central to process writing, Czerniewska (1992, p. 84) explains, is an ‘analysis of writing as a series of stages with a distinctive type of behaviour’. These stages are described by Graves as topic choice, selection of information, composition, reading and rewriting, and are what is envisaged in the approach to writing in the English Language Curriculum.

In his study Applebee (1984, p. 188) concluded that the process approach to writing instruction has been inadequately and improperly conceptualised. He found that sometimes students are ready to write without completing a prewriting activity and that sometimes a topic may not be worth or does not demand revision and that often (ibid, p. 188) these ‘processes are trivialized when they are divorced from the purposes they serve’. But Graves (1994, p. 82) acknowledges that the writing process is ‘an untidy business’, explaining that the process is recursive rather than linear with many of the steps occurring simultaneously where ‘each child uses them differently. We simply cannot legislate their precise timing’.

Graves (1994, p. 103) states that ‘there are some systematic and highly structured elements to teaching writing’, but he recognises that ‘good writing doesn’t result from any particular methodology’. He explains that it is as a result of conditions of learning created in the classroom. Literature is now examined to ascertain the role of the teacher in creating a learning environment conducive to the writing process.

2.7.2 The role of the teacher

Graves (1994, p.109) contends that the teacher is ‘the most important factor in creating a learning environment for the classroom’. In regard to writing, McCormick Calkins (1994, p. 183), a fellow NIE researcher, argues that as teachers we need ‘to anticipate how we will initiate, scaffold, and guide ... and to select rituals, arrangements, and classroom structures’. Atwell (1998, p. 20) explains this as the ‘writing workshop, with plenty of time to write and plenty of opportunities for choice, response and publication’. As a studio subject, writing means that the children can choose their own topic, decide how to use their time, consult with others, and move about the room. Applebee (1984, p. 187) maintains that to ‘implement such activities effectively, the teacher must shift from a position of knowing what the students’ response should be, to a less secure position in which there are no clear right or wrong answers’. But Atwell (1998, p. 20) further elucidates that it is ‘not handsoff: the adult is active, directive, and involved in the task. It’s not a handout: the child is active, intentional, and involved in the task’.

An essential principle for the effective teaching of writing outlined by Graves (1990, p. 26) is that the ‘teacher teaches most by showing how he/she learns’. This clearly defines the teacher’s role as one of modelling or showing children how to develop the skills needed to improve as writers, illustrating the thinking that accompanies each stage of the process, from topic choice to final draft.

Active listening on the part of the teacher is long recognised by Graves as a necessary in the process. Pupil-teacher conferences play a vital role in this process,

in helping a child to achieve that which without help he or she is yet unable to achieve. Graves (1983, pp. 271-272) proposes six scaffolding characteristics, which should be part of the exchange between teacher and child over a series of conferences:

Predictable -

The child should be able to predict most of what will happen in the conference.

Focused -

The teacher should not centre attention on more than one or two features of the child's piece.

Solutions demonstrated -

Teachers need to show what they mean rather than tell a child what to do.

Reversible roles -

Children should be free to initiate questions and comments, to demonstrate their own solutions.

Heightened semantic domains -

Both teacher and child need to have a growing language to discuss the process and the content of subjects.

Playful structures -

There ought to be a combination of experimentation, discovery and humor.

In his later work Graves (1994, p. xvi) also argues for the necessity of the teacher to know 'when to step in, when to teach, and when to expect more of our students', based on a real knowledge of the child.

2.7.3 Topic choice

Writing, as Graves (1994, p. 106) states, is ‘to help students learn to think through issues and concerns of their everyday lives’. In his earlier work he (1983, p. 31) explains that ‘voice is the dynamo of the writing process, the reason for writing in the first place. The voice starts with the choice of the topic’. Acknowledging that the easiest place for a writer to begin is with something he knows, Graves (1983, p. 21) observes that a ‘child writes about a topic because he thinks he knows something about it’ and later (1994, p. 113) adds that children choose topics ‘in order to discover what moves them and what they think’.

Yet Graves (1983, p. 31) contends that children ‘don’t learn to make their own decisions and choices of topics in a vacuum’. He maintains that children need to realise that there is a process in choosing topics. One way of helping children to choose topics for writing is in the teacher demonstrating topic choice and composing a piece of writing, which Graves (1983, p. 30) explains also exposes the children to ‘the appropriateness of the different genres and the situations out of which she decides to write’. Graves believes that when children write daily they do not find it difficult to choose topics and also considers (1994, p. 77) that the act of writing itself ‘prepares us both consciously and unconsciously to see more possibilities for writing subjects’.

Graves (1994, p. 108) acknowledges that topic assignments are sometimes helpful and even necessary. Atwell (1998, p. 23) also recommends the benefits of assigning topics but reminds teachers to explain how the assignment serve the children’s

purposes too. This is supported in the recommendation of the National Writing Project in United Kingdom (*Ways of Looking*, 1990, p. 18) that ‘we organise the learning context so that it provides a range of literacy processes and products, and so that children have greater control over their learning’.

Children may stick to the same topic or experience disappointment in topic choice where the topic is too broad, leading to a feeling of lack of control or accomplishment. Graves (1983, p. 21) believes that writers ‘who do not learn to choose topics wisely lose out on the strong link between voice and subject’. McCormick Calkins (1994, p. 12) further contends that ‘we cannot teach writing well unless we trust that there are real, human reasons to write’.

The *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (1999, p. 80) advocates that children be encouraged to write for a wide audience and in a variety of genre, helping them to ‘recognise that different registers of language are needed for different purposes’. The ‘diverse functions and possible outcomes of writing’ were also reported by Czerniewska (1990, p. 10) as good practice in the teaching of writing in the findings of the National Writing Project in the United Kingdom.

2.8 Assessment of writing

Writing is described by Cox (1991, p. 140) as an ambiguous term, which refers to the process of writing, the written product, the compositional aspects of writing as well as the secretarial aspects of handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammar. However, he (*ibid*, p. 150) stresses that teacher response to children’s writing should

not merely concern itself with the ‘surface features of the writing, or the routine correction of technical errors’ but rather should aim to ‘foster a child’s confidence in the exploration of ideas and the manner of their presentation’. Beard (1988, p. 115) reiterates the importance of acknowledging the overall view of the writing process in dealing adequately with the task of assessing writing:

Fundamental to this perspective is the distinction between composing and transcribing, the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of writing. The ‘why’ of writing must also be borne in mind too, as a consideration of identifying the aim in using this time-consuming and rather contrived language skill is central to creating a sensitive context for assessment.

Prior to the introduction of the revised Primary School Curriculum, studies into the teaching of writing in Irish primary schools pointed to a traditional focus on the skills of handwriting, spelling and punctuation in the evaluation of and response to children’s writing (Hall, 1992; Kavanagh, 1998; Healy-Eames, 1999). In reporting on her study, Healy-Eames (2000, p. 224) recommends that teachers ‘would benefit from an understanding of the use of more balanced approaches to writing assessment’. The process approach to the teaching of writing, as emphasised in the Primary School Curriculum, Shiel and Murphy, authors of the *Drumcondra English Profiles*, (2000, p. 119) explain, ‘should lead to assessment practices that focus not only on the text that pupils produce, but also on the processes in which pupils engage as they write’. This, Beard (1988, p. 116) explains, involves the ‘children themselves in the whole process of assessment, seeking their views and encouraging them in self-criticism’. The teacher’s role in cultivating this dialogue ‘in a helpful, non-threatening atmosphere’, encouraging the pupils to play an active role in their learning, is underlined by Cox (1991, p.150).

Literature (Graves, 1983, 1994; McCormickCalkins, 1994; Atwell, 1998; Shiel and Murphy, 2000) acknowledges the writing conference as central to the process approach in the teaching of writing and as an important means of assessing the children's engagement in each stage of that process. The conference record sheet as a way of recording information 'on such aspects of the writing process as selecting topics, demonstrating awareness of purpose and audience, and reflecting on and evaluating ideas' is recommended by Shiel and Murphy (2000, p. 121).

The *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (1999, p. 93) regard work samples, portfolios and projects as useful in providing a longer-term summative picture of the child's 'ability, level of work, application and interest. This can also highlight some of the more persistent difficulties he or she may be experiencing'. Shiel and Murphy (2000, p. 132), in referring to Forster and Masters (1996), outline three models of writing portfolios which can be used in assessing children's development in writing:

- (1) *Working portfolios* - collections of ongoing and completed work such as notes, sketches, half finished drafts, and final copies.
- (2) *Documentary portfolios* - collections of pupils' work assembled specifically for assessment. They contain both the products of pupils' work, and evidence of the process that pupils used to develop those products.
- (3) *Showcase or best portfolios* - collections of the best of pupils' work, containing only the finished products.

By using an appropriate range of assessment tools, the teacher can 'monitor individual children's progress and so plan the contexts, strategies and content that

will contribute most effectively to their learning' (*English Language Teacher Guidelines*, 1999, p. 93).

2.9 Summary

This literature review began by looking at the relevant issues on the management of the process of change, particularly in relation to the implementation phase of curriculum change at classroom level. It related change management and its application to the individual teacher. Theory and practice needed to implement the writing process, as outlined in the English Language Curriculum, was then examined.

It is evident from the literature that responsibility falls on the school to manage the introduction of the curriculum within its particular context and it is at the individual teacher level that implementation of the writing process will succeed or fail. A strategy is needed to allow the teacher to develop a clear understanding of the nature of this activity and of the interventions required on his or her part.

CHAPTER 3

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to develop and implement a strategy to improve the teaching of the writing process in the junior classes of a primary school. Nelson et al. (1992, p. 2), cited by Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 3), point out that the choice of research practice depends ‘on the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context’. Applied to the context of this study, which seeks to work with others to understand and inform practice, an activity ‘made up of complex layers of meanings, interpretations, values and attitudes’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995, p. 26), a qualitative approach was chosen.

This chapter provides a rationale for the qualitative approach to research used. The preferred methodology of action research is then discussed. Elliott’s model of action research, used as a guide in this study, is outlined. Methods of data collection and analysis employed and procedures for dependability and credibility of the research are explained.

3.2 Characteristics of qualitative research

Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 3) offer a generic definition of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them.

This definition highlights complex human experiences and situations as the subjects of qualitative research. Being interested in understanding people's experience in their natural context, the qualitative researcher seeks in-depth information from small groups of participants, by assuming what Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 25) describe as a posture of 'indwelling' or 'being at one with the persons under investigation'. The qualitative researcher is acknowledged as human-as-instrument or 'the person with all of her or his skills, experience, background, and knowledge as well as biases which is the primary, if not exclusive source, of data collection and analysis' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 26). By beginning with a broad and open-ended focus, these authors explain (ibid, p. 44), the researcher is afforded the opportunity to investigate and respond to 'exploratory and descriptive questions'. The meanings of events for the individuals who experience them and the interpretation of those meanings by the researcher are thus discovered or uncovered.

Data collection and analysis is carried out simultaneously, and from an early stage, in qualitative research. Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 123) explain this 'concomitant action on the part of the researcher allows the research design to emerge over time, suggesting the direction for subsequent data collection efforts'.

While the process of data analysis in qualitative research takes many forms, including Glaser and Strauss' constant comparative method, content analysis, thematic analysis and discourse analysis, four cognitive processes fundamental to all

qualitative analysis are identified by Morse and Fielding (1996, p. 121) as ‘comprehending, synthesising (decontextualising) theorising, and recontextualising’. The critical question Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 245) propose is ‘whether the meanings you find in qualitative data are valid, repeatable, and right’.

Validity and reliability in the conventional sense are inconsistent with qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba, (1985, p. 43) state the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability ‘adequately (if not absolutely) affirm the trustworthiness of naturalistic approaches’. Mertens (1998, p. 181) explains credibility in qualitative research ‘asks if there is a correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints’. The use of multiple methods and sources of evidence in the qualitative study can demonstrate the credibility of the research. The burden of transferability, Mertens (1998, p. 183) explains, is left to the reader ‘to determine the degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context’, with responsibility resting with the researcher to provide sufficient information to enable the reader to make such a judgment. Dependability is the qualitative parallel to reliability in quantitative research and is achieved through a transparent discussion of data collection and analysis. Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 146) explain this builds an audit trail, which allows ‘you to walk people through your work, from beginning to end, so that they can understand the path you took and judge the trustworthiness of your outcomes’. Thus dependability and confirmability of the study are attested.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p. 26) point out that qualitative research ‘is often misunderstood as being one single, clearly defined approach. Tesch (1990), cited by Mertens (1998, p. 164) has identified over twenty different types of qualitative research practised. One such approach is action research, which emerged from critical theory. Cohen et al. (2000, p. 28) explain that the purpose of critical theory as ‘not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them’. In reflecting on the design and conduct of this piece of education research I found that my ontological and epistemic stances are within the interpretative, naturalistic paradigm. As this research aims to develop and implement a strategy to improve the teaching of the writing process in the junior classes in our school, action research is the preferred strategy of enquiry. It allows what Whitehead (1988, p. xi) describes as participative ‘critical engagement in the concrete struggle to study practice from within’, the intent being to improve practice.

3.3 Definition of action research

There are many definitions of action research available. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 162) offer this practical definition:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

The rationale for action research is elucidated in this definition. It is a form of practitioner research where there is professional intent to intervene to improve practice in line with values that are rational and just, and specific to the situation.

The intervention is in a form of systematic, deliberate cycles of planning, acting, reflecting and analyzing; action followed by research followed by action, over a period of time. This cyclical nature allows for responsiveness to the situation, to the participants and to their growing understanding or consciousness raising, actively involving them in their own educational process.

Carr and Kemmis (1993, p.237) state ‘action research helps practitioners to theorize their practice, to revise their theories self-critically in the light of practice, and to transform their practice into praxis (informed, committed action)’. These theories, Elliott (1991, p. 69) explains, ‘are not validated independently and then applied to practice. They are validated through practice’. And in addition, are tested against public opinion (McNiff, 1988, p.133).

Action research is research in partnership with, rather than on, the participants. The participatory element of action research, Carr and Kemmis (1993, p. 238) argue, ‘extends beyond mere presence in the exercise to *collaborative involvement*’ and requires ‘all participants to be partners of communication on equal terms’. Each person’s opinions and views are sought, valued and considered. The collaborative relationship between the researcher and the participants implies that the researcher’s own professional values are central to the investigation. The enquiry is not intended to be comfortable. As Lomax (1994, p. 160) explains the ‘action researcher is committed to interrogating her own values and examining any discrepancy between her values and her practices. She should question her own assumptions and be prepared to change the way she conceptualizes issues’. Action research therefore is an ethical enquiry and is undertaken within an agreed framework of ethics.

A criticism of action research is the tentative generalisation that emerges from an action research study. Action research is characteristically situational. It is concerned with a current ‘problem’ in a specific context. While acknowledging involvement, reflexivity, understanding and improvement (change) are key concepts of action research; it also must contribute to the general body of knowledge. Good action research should produce something that may be used by others, taking their particular contexts into account.

3.4 Action research methodology

Elliott’s model of action research, as seen in Figure 3.1. overleaf, was chosen as a guide in this study. Although this model seems ‘to represent the reflective process too mechanically, as a set of sequenced steps’ (Day, 1991, p. x), it allowed for a cluster of actions to happen simultaneously, accommodating the complex reality of everyday life in classrooms and schools. The process began by identifying the main idea, ‘a state of affairs or situation one wishes to change or improve on’ (Elliott, 1991, p. 72), in this case the teaching of the writing process in the junior classes of our school. Reconnaissance explored the situation we wanted to improve. This involved describing and then explaining the facts of the situation, leading to ‘a *critical analysis* of the context in which they arise’ (Elliott, *ibid*, p. 73).

Reconnaissance recurred, as Elliott (*ibid*, p. 70) maintains, ‘in the spiral of activities, rather than occur only at the beginning’. A revised general plan resulted, which included a ‘statement of the factors one is going to change or modify in order to improve the situation, and the actions one will undertake in this direction’ (*ibid*, p.

75). Actions steps were specified. The process of implementation and its effects were monitored through data collection and analysis described later. Moving from ‘simply monitoring the implementation and effects of an action step into a period of reconnaissance’ (ibid, p. 77), resulted in an amended plan and the action research cycle began again. This was carried out within an agreed ethical framework, as outlined in Appendix B.

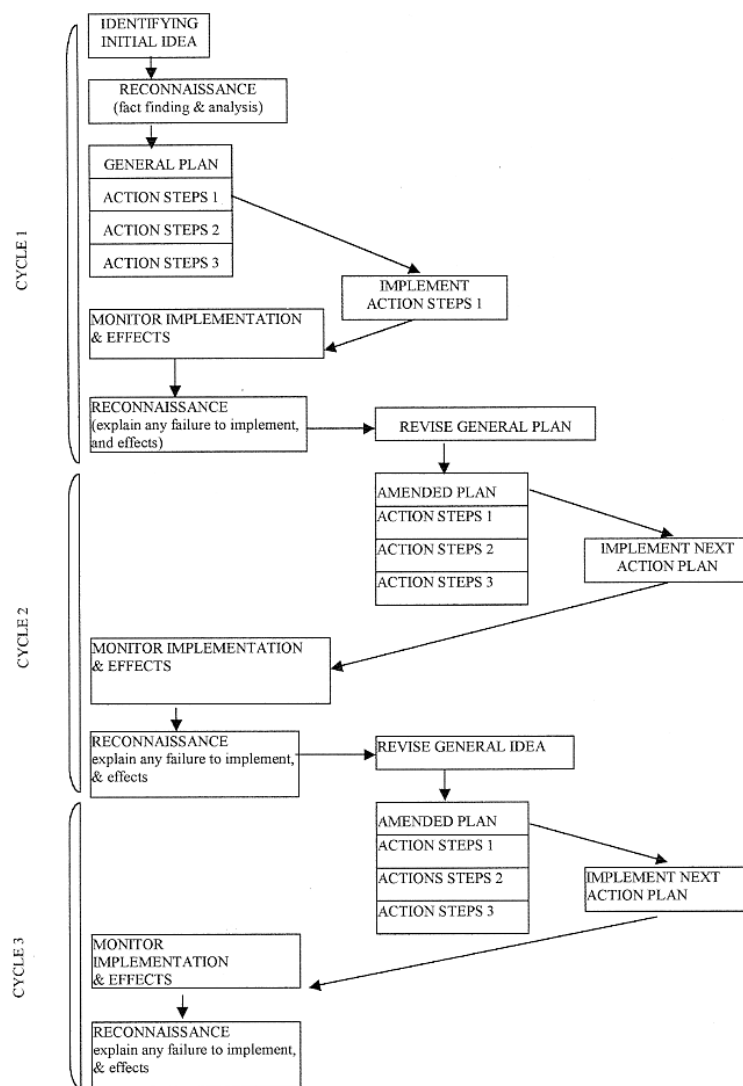


Figure 3.1 A revised version of Lewin’s model of action research
Source: Elliott, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*, p. 71.

3.4.1 Data collection and analysis

While aware that most research questions can be answered in different ways, I agree with Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 113) who state that ‘the question one poses for study suggests the kind of data that are necessary or potentially useful in trying to answer the question’. As this research aims to improve the teaching of the writing process, by encouraging us to be aware of our practice, ‘to be critical of that practice, and to be prepared to change it’ (McNiff, 1988, p. 4), the chosen methods of data collection reflected the nature of this enquiry.

One unstructured interview was conducted with a person involved in teacher education in the area of literacy. As this was during the initial stages of the action research I adhered to Elliott’s advice (1991, p. 80) ‘to remain as open as possible on the question of what information is relevant’, an unstructured interview format was used. During this interview, I took notes and then reconstructed the interview afterwards, in line with Maykut and Morehouse’s advice (1994, p. 83). This was subsequently checked by the interviewee, in order, as these authors (*ibid*, p. 103) explain, ‘to clearly understand the meaning the interviewee was trying to convey’.

Group interviews, defined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 104) as ‘*a group conversation with a purpose*’, were employed as a main method of data collection, through ‘*supportive work-in-progress discussions*’ (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 237), in referring to Kemmis and McTaggart (1992). These interviews were audio-taped, with the permission of those involved. Discussion involved open conversation around the implementation of the writing process. Although I prepared questions for

the final evaluation interview (Appendix K), these functioned, as Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 109) recommend, 'as more of a reference than a script'. Transcripts from the group interviews (Appendices I and K) were checked by the members of the group and prepared for use in data analysis.

A combination of other qualitative methods was employed. I maintained a research journal on a continuous basis, which contained my personal accounts of progress made throughout the process. It also reflected my values and recorded personal insights as these impacted on the data and its interpretations. Documentary evidence, as suggested by Elliott (1991, p. 78) provided information on relevant 'issues and problems under investigation'. This included samples of the children's work, curriculum documents and the school plan for English. In what Pink (2001, p. 93) describes as 'collaborative approaches to the production and interpretation' of visual images, data was also collected through video and photographic evidence.

Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 10) discuss the strength of qualitative data as being focused on '*naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings*, so that we have a strong handle on what "real life" is like', but acknowledge that the strengths of the data rests on the competence with which the analysis is carried out. An inductive approach to data analysis is a defining characteristic of qualitative research. Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 127) explain that 'the data are not grouped according to predetermined categories. Rather, what becomes important to analyze emerges from the data itself, out of a process of inductive reasoning'. In this research Miles and Huberman's (1994, pp. 245-246) tactics for generating meaning were used as a guide in data analysis, which encompassed noting patterns and themes, making

generalisations, comparisons and contrasts, building up a logical chain of evidence and finally theoretical constructs.

3.4.2 Dependability and credibility of research

McNiff (1988, p. 131) recognises three steps towards establishing validity:

‘(1) self-validation, (2) peer validation and (3) learner validation’, the interaction of each of these steps attempt the validation for our claims ‘to know’. Validation groups, she (1988, p. 134) explains, are part of the procedure of an action research enquiry ‘to critically assess the action with the researcher and agree criteria and examples of action that shows the realisation of educational values through practice’.

The claims made in this study of teacher, pupil and researcher learning were validated through my participation in validation group meetings, organised by my supervisor, with co-practitioners of action research, including Jack Whitehead (University of Bath).

Rigour in this study was assured through the adherence to Winter’s principles (1996, pp.13-14) for the conduct of action research, cited by Cohen et al. (2000, pp. 228-229), as outlined below:

- *reflexive critique*, which is the process of becoming aware of own perceptual biases;
- *dialectical critique*, which is a way of understanding the relationships between the elements that make up various phenomena in our context;
- *collaboration*, which is intended to mean that everyone’s view is taken as a contribution to understanding the situation;

- *risk disturbance*, which is an understanding of our own taken-for-granted processes and willingness to submit them to critique;
- *theory and practice internalised*, which is seeing theory and practice as two interdependent yet complementary phases of the change process.

This chapter provided a rationale for the qualitative research approach within an action research framework. It provided a theoretical understanding of action research as a research methodology and outlined the principles guiding this study, which is reported in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

4. ACTION RESEARCH

4.1 Identifying the general idea

An English Language audit was carried out as part of the school development planning process to gauge the extent to which current policy and practices met the guidelines of the revised English Language Curriculum. Strengths and weaknesses were identified. Subsequent planning aimed to sustain the strengths while weaknesses in practice were prioritised for planning for implementation. Action plans were drawn up to facilitate the implementation of specific oral language objectives (Appendix A). Future action plans would concentrate on the writing process in order to further develop the child's expressive and communicative abilities. Accordingly, two years later the need to review current practice in teaching the writing process provided the general idea of this study, which is in agreement with the important selection criteria as advocated by Elliott (1991, p. 72) in that it '(a) impinges on one's field of action and (b) is something one would like to change or improve on'.

4.1.1 Seeking consensus

Having acknowledged the need to investigate our current practice in the teaching of the writing process, consent was sought from both the principal of the school and

from the group of teachers that I hoped would become involved in the work. I approached the principal with the knowledge that action research would be well received by him, as was the case. The established process of school development planning allowed me to approach the group of teachers, with whom I work on a regular basis, with the certain knowledge of their willingness to examine practice.

Two meetings with the teachers were held, at which I circulated a copy of the research proposal and a photocopied page detailing the characteristics of action research (Appendix B). Of the eight teachers involved, four, including myself, had participated in the previous action research to implement an oral language objective. This experience had developed a greater collegial awareness; a readiness to learn from and work with colleagues, and a willingness to share expertise and experiences through observation of each other's classroom practice. One teacher who had participated in the previous action research study described this as being hard work but acknowledged the benefits of trying out ideas, feeding back to the group and learning from the experience of colleagues (Diary entry, 25th January 2002, Appendix P). However, this situation was different in that other teachers were now involved. Hence, questions arose over data collection. The use of video recordings in the classroom was seen as intimidating, not for the children, but for the teachers. I explained that it would be a matter of personal choice in agreeing to video-taping in the classroom. Questions raised on parental involvement, it was decided, would be discussed as the process was underway. The ethical considerations contained in the proposal were discussed and all teachers agreed to partake in the action research.

4.1.2 Reconnaissance

The reconnaissance stage involved the collection and analysis of information on two issues. Firstly, we needed information on current practice in writing to acknowledge strengths and to prioritise weaknesses for planning. Secondly, I needed to ascertain the group's perceived needs in implementing the targeted objectives. This concurs with Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991, p. 29), practitioners of school development planning, who warn against the dangers of rushing into the process without thorough preparation.

4.1.2.1 Conducting an audit

On January 31st 2002, the entire group of eight teachers and one special needs assistant met for the first time. Audit documents pertaining to the writing units of the curriculum had already been circulated to the teachers to provide them with prior opportunity to reflect on their current practice. The Infant teachers, including myself, and the First and Second Class group worked on their separate audit documents (Appendix C). This, as Rogers (1994, p. 39) states, entailed a fair amount of listening and sounding out of opinions, which allowed us to 'learn from other people's experiences and appreciate their perceptions and ideas for future improvements'. The individual audit documents were examined to assess strengths and weaknesses and to pinpoint areas of concern.

A nominated person from each group summarised the audit findings to derive a full picture from Junior Infants to Second Class. Indeed, it was while working on the

audit summary that I began to agree with Graves' (1990, p.24) description of writing as making 'sense of things for oneself, then for others' (Diary entry, 4th February 2002, Appendix P). Two further meetings (Diary entry 12th and 14th February, Appendix P) were conducted with the teachers to confirm the audit summaries (Appendix D). As part of the school development planning cycle, objectives for planning were prioritised (Appendix E). Action plans were then drawn up. (Appendix E).

Specific to this action research work, the Infant teachers had identified the need to enable the children to write for different audiences other than the teacher, with the opportunity to read personal writing aloud, or to have it read aloud. More choice of topics for drawing and writing and choice of the form of expression the child finds appropriate, along with encouraging confidence in the use of approximate spelling in this independent expression, were important considerations. First and Second class teachers had identified the need to foster the impulse to write by providing opportunities for children to write for different audiences, including purely personal writing. Children's writing, it was observed, needs to be shared with others in more real situations not only at final draft stage but also by allowing them to work with others when writing (See highlighted objectives Appendix E). At this stage, one teacher had suggested the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme as a context within which the children could choose their topics (Diary entry, 7th February 2002, Appendix P), though this was to change.

4.1.2.2 Teachers' needs

The question of the groups meeting separately was of concern to me. I felt it would be better to meet as one group, which would help teachers gain a fuller understanding of the development process of writing and better inform our practice. I spoke with the principal about the possibility of releasing the First and Second Class teachers from their classes to facilitate meeting with Infant teachers. He agreed and proposed that he and the learning-support teachers would supervise the classes to facilitate this (Diary entry, 15th February 2002, Appendix P).

Similarly, previous experience has shown the importance of conducting an 'analysis of needs' (Diggins, Doyle and Herron, 1996, p. 21) before embarking on this work. In consulting with the teachers, the need for some background theory on the writing process was raised. Dean (1995, p. 194) acknowledges this, explaining that teachers 'tend to be more effective when they have adequate theoretical backing for what they do and can use their theoretical knowledge to improve their practice'. The facility to experiment in the classroom and to provide feedback to the group was another identified need.

In addressing the need for theoretical knowledge on the writing process, I followed Maykut and Morehouse's (1994, p. 58) suggestion, in referring to Lincoln and Guba (1985), of consulting with 'experienced and

knowledgeable experts'. This led both myself and one of the teachers to discuss the targeted objectives with Thérèse Day, a staff member of the Special Education Department, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra (Appendix F).

Several issues emerged during this interview. From the outset, Thérèse Day outlined the importance of separating the conventions or skills of writing from the actual content of writing. Kavanagh (2000, p. 114) reiterates this, stating in the process approach that pieces of writing 'are regarded as growing things which need to be nurtured rather than as objects which need to be repaired or fixed by correction'. Emphasis was thus placed on the process of writing as opposed to finishing a piece of writing in a single attempt. In accordance with the *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (1999, p. 77) early writing was defined as 'any graphic representation the child attempts - lines, scribbles, drawing'. Thérèse advised that practical workshops be given to involve teachers in devising a framework for monitoring and assessing children's writing, in terms of content of their writing, the *what* and the *how* of expression, and then addressing the conventions of writing, handwriting, grammar and spelling.

The role of the teacher in the writing process was clearly elucidated. Not only was the importance of teachers experiencing writing for themselves pointed out, but also modelling writing as a teaching strategy was advocated. Graves (1983, p.43) explains that this allows the children to experience 'the middle of the process, the hidden ground - from choice of topic to the final completion of the work'. The physical organisation of the classroom and the daily routines need to be established

for different stages of the process: a daily scheduled writing time, pupil-teacher conferencing, pupil-pupil conferencing, the sharing of writing and the editing and publishing of writing. The suggestion was made that the teacher should try not to prescribe specific writing topics for the children, but rather to encourage them to write from personal experience. Graves (1990, p. 28) endorses this, saying that ‘a subject the child is aware that he knows something about, is at the heart of success in writing’. My colleague and I found this meeting to be very informative and beneficial in focussing our efforts at this early stage of the process.

4.2 General plan

Reconnaissance carried out led to a clearer picture of current practice in the writing curriculum, which acknowledged strengths and prioritised weaknesses for planning. Not only had specific objectives been targeted (Appendix E) but we had also been given an opportunity to reflect on what we value in terms of children’s writing. We wanted to foster the child’s impulse to write and to extend the children’s communicative competence through writing. Teachers saw value in the children sharing not only with the teacher but also with other children during the process of writing, as well as sharing the finished product.

The general plan had been refined. The group’s perceived needs in implementing the targeted objectives were ascertained. On-site training would be given to the group. Also, it had become apparent that a highly structured, predictable classroom environment is essential in the teaching of the writing process, the management of

which would prove to be the most complex issue for teachers. Ideas to help create an environment to foster writing and modelling strategies would provide a starting point for the implementation of the objectives in the classrooms. Feedback would be facilitated in regular meetings, time for which had been allocated to the group by the principal.

Literature from the National Writing Project (UK), *Perceptions of Writing* (1990), documenting children's perceptions of writing and how these were a catalyst for changing the writing curriculum, prompted us to question the children's writing experience and their perceptions of those experiences (Diary entry, 18th February 2002, Appendix P). This would be discussed during the on-site training session.

4.3 Action steps cycle 1

Elliott's model of action research allows for a cluster of steps to take place during every cycle.

4.3.1 Action step 1

To help implement the targeted objectives, the group had highlighted the need for theory and methodology on the writing process. Presentation of theory is recognised by Joyce and Showers (1988, p. 68) as a component of training 'necessary for an understanding of the rationale behind a skill or strategy and the principles that govern its use'. I undertook to deliver an on-site training session for the group on 21st February 2002 (Appendix G) which

would highlight the nature of writing and its pedagogical functions, stressing the need in the writing process approach to differentiate the primary skills of writing, the content of the child's writing, from the secondary skills of spelling, grammar and handwriting. The role of the teacher would be considered, acknowledging what Graves (1994, p. 109) says that how the teacher shows 'the meaning of writing as a craft' will have profound effect on the children's writing. Modelling as a teaching strategy would be introduced for each stage of the process, including acting as a scribe for the younger children as recommended by Thérèse Day and relevant literature (Graves, 1983,1994). In this context, the idea of the children choosing their own writing topics, as outlined in the *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (1999, p. 76) would be raised. This presentation would also explain that the assessment of writing should emphasise the child's engagement in the writing process, the content of their writing as well as their skill in the use of the conventions of writing. This process which would be aided by teacher observation and the compilation of documentary writing portfolios, which Shiel and Murphy (2000, p. 132), in referring to Forster and Masters (1996), explain contain 'both the products of the pupils' work, and the evidence of the processes that pupils used to develop those products'.

4.3.2 Action step 2

The teacher who accompanied me to St. Patrick's College agreed to present initial activities for classroom implementation, to highlight the need to create a highly structured and predictable environment in terms of structure and response, as seen in

Appendix G. Each teacher would be asked to set up a writing area or table. Writing materials and resources would be supplied, including blank paper in a variety of colours, sizes and shapes, lined paper in a variety of layouts and assorted writing implements such as pencils, pens, markers, and crayons. Assorted publishing formats of cards, concertina books, school letterheads, envelopes, and telephone and message pads would also be supplied. Immediately, the teachers in the First and Second Classes could foresee difficulties as they were in temporary, tight-spaced accommodation due to flooding in their classrooms over the Christmas holiday period. However, they decided to explore ways of creating a writing environment.

Each child would be provided with a writing folder, which would eventually hold a documentary portfolio of his or her writing. The children in First and Second Class would also be given a copy for drafting their work, as recommended by Thérèse Day.

Teachers indicated a willingness to allow children choose their own topics for writing. These would be elicited from the children. The teachers in the Infant classrooms would record these pictorially and display them on the wall in the writing area for future reference (Appendix O). The children in the First and Second Classes would record them as a personal list on the front page of their draft copy, to which future topics of interest could be added (Appendix O).

A fixed writing time would be decided on in each classroom. Modelling as a teaching strategy would be used to help children select a topic choice, to brainstorm and to create a story web (Appendix O) using a topic from this list. Sharing of ideas

would be encouraged from the start through the introduction of the author's chair or the writing stand.

4.3.3 Action step 3

The teachers would interview the children to ascertain their present perceptions of writing. Questions suggested for use were adapted from *Perceptions of Writing* (1990, pp.9-20) and can be seen in Appendix G. However, each teacher could select questions appropriate to his or her class.

4.3.4 Monitoring implementation and effects

Immediate observation noted the setting up of writing areas or tables in the classrooms. Each child had been given a writing folder. Lists of topics were displayed (Appendix O). Children stopped me on the corridor to tell me about their lists of writing topics. However, during the implementation phase, I was reminded of Elliott's words (1991, p. 76) that it 'may take some time to succeed at implementing a course of action'. Four '*supportive work-in-progress discussions*' as described by Cohen et al. (2000, p. 237), in referring to Kemmis and McTaggart (1992), were conducted throughout the month of March 2002. A number of issues emerged as follows.

4.3.4.1 Children's perceptions of writing

Analysis of the children's perceptions of writing in the Infant classes revealed that while some were confident in their ability to write, they generally identified family and friends as writers. Whereas, the children in First and Second classes not only perceived themselves as writers, they also had an awareness of authorship and public writing. One child explained:

Authors write books. If they weren't writing books then you wouldn't have any bedtime stories or books for little babies, and that's how you learn to read. (Appendix H)

Their reasons for writing varied from it being a fun activity to it being a means of communication with friends and in the work place. The concept of writing to learn emerged, illustrated by the comment *'I like writing because when I write, the things I write stick in my head'* (Appendix H). Likewise, the older children acknowledged that talking to someone prior to writing, to explain or generate ideas, helps *'you know what to write'* (Appendix H). However, the writing that children in general found boring was transcription, school book work and homework, which prompted one teacher to recommend that we give *'more different kinds of writing maybe as homework or this kind of thing [writing process] once we get it up and running'* (Group Meeting 1, p. 185).

Another teacher acknowledged that in her experience the children did not enjoy writing. She explained that *'so many ... absolutely hate writing and you know, it is tedious and I nag them and they're upset and I'm upset. It goes on, it goes on'* (Group Meeting 1, p.185). Yet, when she inquired, each one gave her what they

thought she would like to hear and said that they liked to write. However, most children consented that they liked to write. Although physical discomfort was recognised as one of their dislikes of writing, as one child depicted:

Your hand gets all sore and your neck gets sore and you get a cramp and ... you're getting tired of writing. (Appendix H)

In defining what it means to be a good writer, the children in the First and Second classes were definite about the accuracy of spelling and neat handwriting as being important. While they seemed to be aware if they were good writers or not, they only saw themselves developing as writers because they were '*able to spell hard words*' and were '*good at copying from the blackboard*' (Appendix H). Comments like '*I am making writing smaller and trying to make letters perfect*' and '*... I always go home and practise my writing and my Dad does always give me spelling tests*', also supported this view. (Appendix H). Even the teacher is seen as a good writer because she '*can write very fast and she is able to spell very difficult words*' (Appendix H). Here orthodoxy, Graves (1983, p. 236) explains, is '*dominant in the craft*'. Consequently, later discussions on teacher response to children's work highlighted the importance of first emphasising the content and the expression of their ideas in their work as opposed to editing for conventions of writing fearing that they '*could easily be discouraged*' (Group Meeting 2, p. 195). This is congruous with what Graves (1983, p. 238) points out that '*the child who can take control of his information will soon take control of mechanical conventions*'.

4.3.4.2 Understanding the writing process

Feedback initially saw the teachers grapple with certain aspects of the writing process. Writing topics had been generated with the children. As teachers, we became aware that writing from real experience or on a topic of high interest facilitates opportunity for the children to have ownership of their writing. While initially this can be threatening for a teacher if he or she feels lacking in knowledge of the topic, as expressed by one teacher (Group Meeting 2, p.190), it was recognised that this allowed the children the opportunity to take responsibility for what they know, endorsing what Graves (1990, p. 28) says, that ‘the most important thing children can learn is what they know and how they know it’. As one teacher described:

But that is nearly better because one of mine was writing about Toy Story and I had never seen the film and I couldn't understand what the film was about from reading and I said, 'Well I have never seen the film. ... Who is Woody? And how did it end?' So he had to explain to me who each one was and what happened at the end and then he went back and wrote it down. (Group Meeting 2, p. 191)

While it was felt topic choice should be left as far as possible to the children, the repeated use of the same topic by an individual was a cause of concern for one of the Infant teachers. An exchange of ideas showed that the teacher may need to prompt the child to help him explore his ideas or at times to direct him to a new topic and that encouraging the children to share their writing would ‘spark off ideas’ and generate new topics. (Group Meeting 2, p. 207) This, Britton (1970, p. 164) reminds us, is because writing ‘floats on a sea of talk’.

Discussions on the prewriting stage of brainstorming centred on the generation of ideas as distinct from the planning stage, which we defined as structuring ideas and allowing the whole text to emerge before drafting a piece of writing. The benefit of children's willingness to engage in brainstorming and planning was articulated by a teacher who recognised that '*usually trying to get them to organise their ideas is hassle. ...they want to start writing without thinking at all*' (Group Meeting 2, p. 190). The necessity of planning a piece of work is also recognized by Hodgson (1995, p. 11) who explains that when 'children complain of running out of ideas, or not being able to start or finish, it is usually because they have not planned their writing'.

In considering our response to the children's work, a shared understanding of conferencing at this initial stage of the process emerged, described in the book *Dancing with the Pen*, (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1992, p. 104) as focussing on 'what the writer *can do* rather than *not do*'. Each teacher would focus on what the children know and help them talk about their work. We concurred with Shiel and Murphy (2000, p. 120) that conferencing should happen at each stage of the process and a class record sheet was developed which could be used to record this experience (Appendix J). A simple structure for conferencing with the children was agreed in which the content of their writing, as opposed to the conventions of writing, was emphasised. It was suggested that a positive comment be made about the work and when necessary, one suggestion for improvement be given to make the child's meaning as clear as possible. One teacher described her early experience of conferencing with the children thus:

Well I got them to come up to me. ... either to tell me about their web, if they were on the web or some of them had started writing, using the web. So I got them to read that to me or if they preferred I'd just read it and then I said one good thing and then I said one thing that could improve.

(Group Meeting 1, p. 178)

She commented further, explaining that she didn't want to '*spend the conference pointing out the spelling mistakes, it's about the ideas that I was conferencing on*'

(Group Meeting 1, p.179).

This concurs with Graves (1994, p. 268) who stresses that children need to be able to write freely 'and not be preoccupied with accuracy at this early stage'. Editing was seen as being a later stage in the process, in which the children could improve their spellings and handwriting in readiness for publication of their work. However, at this early stage in the process, it was felt that if the children wanted to publish, the teacher would edit the work and they could then copy the corrected version. In reflecting on the targeted objective, which was to enable each child to 'have regular opportunities to write for himself or herself or for others', we were reminded that this included personal writing. One teacher remarked, '*they are not doing every piece of writing for the purpose of publishing*' (Group Meeting 2, p. 194). Rather, the children would self-select their pieces of writing for publishing. Published work, it was decided, must show respect for the audience and be presented as '*the very best that they can do*' (Group Meeting 2, p. 199).

4.3.4.3 Implementation in the classrooms

The writing workshop approach

Clay (1991, p. 112) acknowledges that ‘Organizationally it is difficult for teachers to be everywhere at once and continually available to help with writing, but there are many solutions to this problem’. The use of the writing workshop model (Atwell, 1998, p. 28) as a teaching strategy epitomised the approach with the older children, although the level of implementation varied from class to class at this stage. This is a whole class teaching session where all the children are engaged in the different writing activities at the same time. Teaching can happen at the beginning of the session, in the form of mini-lessons, in conferences with individual children throughout, and in sharing time at the end of the session. This is illustrated by one teacher who, when asked about what the child does following conferencing explained:

That’s in their drafting copy and they can’t publish that, they can’t write that into a book or onto a page or into a letter until it had been edited. So they have to wait until I bring it home at night and correct it. So they go back to their topic list and pick the next topic and they do the next web and they just keep going independently. (Group Meeting 2, p. 194)

Emergent writing in the infant classrooms

It was recognised that writing in the Infant classrooms differs from the workshop approach to writing adopted in the First and Second Classes. Here the emphasis was on the emergent writer and learning to write. Writing areas were used to encourage the children to write, in an area where all necessary resources are to hand. However, as Wyse (1998, p. 23) explains that the practice of the writing workshop ‘can be

modified for infant children', we also involved the children in whole class writing workshops, with the teacher modelling the writing behaviours, conferring with one group of children a day and acting as scribes to record the children's ideas (Appendix O).

The management of the process in the Infant classroom dominated much of our talk. The lengthy time it takes to scribe for children, led to suggestions to involve the senior children in school, as competent writers in this activity. The benefit to the older children was recognised but it was left to later in the process to discuss this issue again. While anxious to sustain strengths in the teaching of handwriting, it was agreed, in accordance with the *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (1999, p. 78) that more time would be 'devoted to expression and communication' in writing. Excerpts from my research journal, provide the reader with an account of this experience in my own Junior Infant classroom (Diary entries 1st-19th March, Appendix P).

4.3.5 Reconnaissance

Monitoring implementation had provided formative information to be used in planning for further action. But in describing and explaining our learning we began to develop what McNiff (1988, p. 1) describes as our 'own personal theories of education' from our classroom practices. We had moved forward in our understanding of the writing process. Each stage of the process had been teased out in terms of its implications for us and for the children. Action research had allowed

us to develop a clear understanding of the innovation thus far, which Gross et al. (1971, p. 202) explain ‘will be positively related to ... ability to implement it’.

While classroom management issues were of concern initially, attention soon turned to what Hall and Hord (1987, p. 13) describe as impact concerns, which looked at ‘increasing the effectiveness of the innovation’. The First and Second classes had experienced the writing workshop approach in tight-spaced, temporary classrooms, due to flooding over the Christmas holiday period. From this experience, a teacher described the ideal physical environment of the writing classroom as having specific areas for each stage of the writing process, with the necessary resources available on hand for the children (Group Meeting 4, p. 218).

The role of the teacher in modelling each stage of the writing process was highlighted in our discussions. It was recognised that children need this instructional scaffold, as Langer and Applebee (1984, p. 176) explain, to provide them with appropriate ‘models and strategies for addressing new problems; these are in turn internalised by students, providing them with the resources to eventually undertake similar tasks on their own’. In the Junior Infant classes, while we were aware that the child at this stage could not work completely independently on planning or sequencing a story, we could see the value in modelling this behaviour for the children (Diary entry, 15th March 2002, Appendix P).

The reciprocal connection between oral language, reading and writing was recognised. As Clay (1998, p. 135) explains what ‘is being learned in the beginning of reading, overlaps with, and informs, what is being learned in the beginning of writing *if it is allowed to do so*’. As a Junior Infant teacher, I was conscious of integrating this literacy experience for the children (Group Meeting 3, p. 206). Likewise, the importance of oral language work prior to writing was also identified in our discussions, as emphasised in the *English Language Teacher Guidelines*, 1999, p. 13. One Senior Infant teacher described his experience in the classroom, saying ‘... *if we discuss the topics, you get loads of ideas ... They seem more excited*’ (Group Meeting 3, p. 216). Teachers looked at topics of interest to the children, but had specific criteria in mind:

I chose because I wanted topics that would have a start, a middle and an end.
(Group Meeting 3, p. 211)

But I was thinking if the topic is limited, you really are limited in what you can do. One of mine was talking about swimming. We were able to do things about swimming. Getting dressed. Going to the swimming pool. Swimming and going home. (Group Meeting 3, p. 212)

Consequently, Senior Infant teachers felt that topic choice should be limited during writing workshop time to allow the language and sequence of story to be further developed.

Children’s learning had begun to emerge too. They had begun to engage in the writing process. But they also began to use writing in learning. One teacher spoke about one of the less able students who, during the writing workshop, had been to the class library and had picked up some reference material for two other students in the

class because he thought they might be helpful to them. This experience for the child was, in her words:

... probably more valuable than what I've been doing with him all year. You could be writing and writing and he copying your writing and he mightn't be taking in a thing. (Group Meeting 1, p. 187)

As curriculum co-ordinator, working collaboratively with a group of teachers, I recognised that as individuals we bring different concerns, attitudes and skills to situations. At this early stage, in trying to understand the point of view of others, I began to appreciate what Whitaker (1997, p. 23) describes as the 'complex processes of personal adaptation that inevitably accompany' change or difference in practice (Diary entries, 5th March and 13th March 2002, Appendix P). This personal side to change was underlined by the experience of the younger teachers who, with the demands of the probationary year, inspector's visits and parent-teacher meetings, were not, or had only just begun to implement the process in the classroom. In sensing what was happening, while remaining sensitive to their needs, I offered practical support of working alongside the teacher in the classroom, when my own Infant class had gone home for the day.

We had completed the first cycle of action research. As teachers, we had asked questions about classroom practice. We had answered honestly and with due regard to the consequences of implied change in that practice. By being critically aware of our own practice, we had begun to develop and enhance our insights into the teaching of the writing process and its implementation in the classroom. And,

importantly, as Jean McNiff (1988, p.1) explains, we were participants in our own educational process.

4.4 Action research cycle 2

In what Elliot (1991, p. 77) describes as shifting ‘from simply monitoring the implementation and effects of an action step into a period of reconnaissance’, an amended plan of action began to emerge. After the Easter break, the following action steps would be put in place.

4.4.1 Action step 1

Junior Infant classrooms

While daily informal use of the writing table would continue to be encouraged, classroom routine had been agreed. Structured writing time would begin with mini lessons, with the teacher explaining or demonstrating aspects of writing. Each person, including the teacher would then have his or her time to write. Having written alongside the children, the teacher would then circulate around the room, talking briefly with children as they wrote. Following this the teacher would confer with one group of children, acting as scribe if required. Every session would end with the oral sharing of one child’s work, which provides, as Cox (1991, p. 142) writes, ‘the greatest encouragement for children to communicate in writing’. Shared writing, in which the teacher writes this child’s chosen sentence, would allow the

children to engage in reading behaviour and further develop their concept of the conventions of print. This approach emphasises what Clay (1998, p. 131) expresses as ‘the reciprocities between *early* reading and *early* writing’.

Senior Infant classrooms

While informal use of the writing table would be continued, it was decided to limit the children’s choice of topics during formal writing time. Different phases of the writing process would be modelled each day, with the children working on that phase with their own topic. The use of invented spelling would be encouraged, allowing the children ‘to use vocabulary from their oral language which then flows on into their writing’ (Ministry of Education, New Zealand (1992, p. 59).

4.4.2 Action step 2

Still in the early stages of the writing process, the First Class teachers would continue to implement the writing workshop approach in the classroom. These activities would be introduced by me in one of the classrooms, referred to by Joyce and Showers (1988, p. 68) as modelling or demonstration of skill which ‘greatly facilitates learning’ and transfer of knowledge and skill to classroom practice.

Conferencing would be introduced, working with the children on the expression of ideas in their writing. A conference record sheet, as recommended by Shiel and Murphy (2000, p. 121), to be retained in the child’s writing folder, would be used to

record the child's learning strengths and needs (Appendix J). Although the pupil-teacher conference is recognised as central to the writing process, the *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (1999, p. 84) recommends that 'opportunities should be given to groups and pairs of children to discuss each other's work and to offer advice'. Peer conferencing, which had already been initiated in one of the Second classes, would be introduced to the children. Teacher demonstration would model the necessary skills of listening, commenting positively, asking for clarification and suggesting improvements, to 'lead children to a helpful and affirmative attitude towards each other's work' (ibid, 1999, p. 84).

4.4.3 Action step 3

The Second Classes would continue with the writing workshop approach. Peer conferencing would be introduced in the other class under the agreed framework (Group Meeting 4). Emphasis would now move towards the editing and publishing stages of the process, helping the children to develop proof reading skills which 'can be an arduous stage of the writing process for many children, and they often find it difficult to take responsibility for checking their writing' (Hodgson, 1995, p. 15). An editing checklist was designed by the group to help the children to prepare for this (Appendix O). However, in recognition that writers, as Graves (1983, p. 58) points out, 'edit as far as they can, and then editors take over', the teachers would help the child edit what is in their grasp, and correct the remaining errors themselves. The use of word processing in the publishing phase, it was decided, would be encouraged to 'enhance the quality of the final presentation and so constitute both an

incentive and a source of pride to the child' (*English Language Teacher Guidelines*, 1999, p. 15).

4.4.4 Action step 4

Each class had a number of children who were experiencing learning difficulties and who were receiving learning support. This is seen as a whole-school responsibility, which emphasises 'close co-ordination and continuity in the learning programmes offered to pupils by the class and learning-support teachers' (*Learning-Support Guidelines*, 2000, p. 42). It was felt that the time was now opportune to meet with the learning-support teachers to share this work with them. This is a central issue of action research, encouraging, as McNiff (1988, p. 133) explains, 'teachers to make their intuitive knowledge public, by engaging in debate with others about their claims to know'.

4.4.5 Monitoring implementation and effects

Following the Easter holiday period, the teachers worked at implementing the action plans as decided. We continued to meet during the April and May period to monitor progress. However, for a time, the Infant teachers met separately to the First and Second Class teachers, depending on the issues being discussed. A letter was sent to the parents requesting permission to photograph and video-tape the children at work in the writing workshop (Appendix L). This video-taping would be used as evidence of what was happening in the classrooms.

4.4.5.1 Meeting with the learning-support teachers

On April 24th 2002, the First and Second class teachers and I met with the learning-support teachers. In presenting our work, we circulated the original handouts used in the initial workshop (Appendix G). While I gave an overview of how we had engaged with the children in the writing process, it was what we had experienced and valued in our teaching and learning with the children that we discussed. Experience was shared on issues such as how to help when a child had run out of ideas, or what to do when a topic is inappropriate or could upset someone in the classroom. Teaching to the needs of children was highlighted by one Second Class teacher, who explained how she introduced a mini-lesson on ways to start sentences, after she had observed the children using the same word to begin sentences throughout a story. In this process our claims to know were validated by these teachers who agreed that our ‘findings will be useful to their practice’ (McNiff, 1988, p. 133), as one teacher commented:

This is a clear and interesting study and I would use it to initiate children to write. (Diary entry, 24th April, Appendix P)

4.4.5.2 Infant classrooms

Writing had become an anticipated activity in the classroom, even observed in the play activities of the children. In my own classroom I had placed pencils and notepaper in the play corner and the children began to use them in constructing their play. Some began to take orders in the ‘restaurant’ (Appendix O). The writing they

had created resembled something we may call scribbles but, as Goodman (1986, p. 7) explains, this ‘is a serious expression of meaning for the beginning writer’. They demonstrated their knowledge that writing communicates specific and purposeful messages by asking others to read their writing for them or by reading what they had written to others. This had also been observed by another teacher who had been receiving letters from a child (Group Meeting 5, p. 227). Some children also showed, what Hall and Robinson (1995, p. 11) noted, ‘not simply a knowledge of some of the purposes of print but of the social contexts in which these purposes were embedded’. Following my absence from school, one child had presumed that I had been ill and wrote a Get Well card for me (Appendix O). Her use of writing for this purpose illustrates the learning she has encountered, as Sulzby (1986, p. 86) noted, ‘from interaction with adults directly’, from what she has seen her parents and older siblings doing in her presence.

Many of the children continued to write ‘via drawing’, in which they worked out, as Sulzby (1985), cited by Parker and Morrow (1989, p.149), explains, ‘the relationship between drawing and writing, not confusing the two’. Yet it was noted (Group Meeting 5, p. 233) that they had begun to show an interest in letters and words. These began to appear in the drawings of some of the Junior Infant children (Appendix O). However we continued to act as scribes (Video, 00.00), ‘to help children become writers and record the stories which they want to write in language that seems too hard for them’ (Clay, 1991, p. 110).

Writing for and with the children helped them learn the nature and possibilities of the composing process, by making explicit, as Graves (1983, p. 45) describes, ‘how

words go down on paper, and the thoughts that go with the decisions made in the writing'. A class-constructed story about the children's experience of a nature walk in the nearby park, scribed by the teacher, illustrates this. This activity afforded the children the opportunity to consult with each other in recalling the experience and in sequencing thoughts to decide the chronological order of what would be written, and to link writing skills to learning in another area of the curriculum. Having drafted the story, further discussion led to the decision to amend one sentence in it, to allow the intended meaning become more explicit for future readers (Appendix O).

Each writing session in Junior Infants concluded with the oral sharing by a child of his or her story in the 'author's chair', recognised by McCormick Calkins (1994, p. 69) as a suitable way to support the child's earliest writing. We found that this sharing also stimulated other children to use or create ideas for their own writing. Modelling or giving direct instruction in asking questions helped the children to respond to their friend's work. (Video, 04.53). In this way, the children began to develop an understanding of the concept of authorship and audience, as expressed in their interpretation of this video recording (Appendix N).

The author usually dictated a sentence for the teacher to write about his or her work. Children read the sentence pointing from left to right, using voice-print match. A duplicate sentence was written on card and cut into words and matched onto the original sentence (Appendix O). This 'interactive liaison between composing and constructing a written message and reading it back', as Clay (1998, p.132) explains, provided opportunities for 'the construction of common knowledge resources about print for literacy learning' (ibid, p.

135). The children experienced writing being produced from left to right across the page and the words written down could be used to build up the child's own reading vocabulary.

In reflecting on her earlier experience, one Senior Infant teacher stated, '*I have changed my approach that many times, I'm confused*' (Group Meeting 5, p. 228). However, during this action cycle, the Senior Infant writing time had become more structured. Limiting topic choice during formal writing sessions had worked for the Senior Infant teachers, who had wanted to allow the language and sequence of story to be further developed. This teacher chose to prescribe the topic, being mindful of its relevance and interest to the children, and to brainstorm this with the whole class. The children's individual stories emerged (Appendix O). Conferencing happened with one group during each session (Video, 8.03). However, difficulties remained. Children differed not only in their ability to express their ideas but also in their ability to work independently, as described by this teacher:

It's just that for them to think of ideas, like K. went away and he was fine and then he came up to me and he says, 'I don't know what to do.'
(Group Meeting 5, p. 235)

Discussion highlighted the need to plan time carefully in accommodating their needs, by conferencing briefly with them during each writing session (Group Meeting 5, p.237). Teachers could scaffold the children's learning by asking the questions Graves (1983, p. 117) suggests 'that they might become able to ask on their own'; rather than telling the child what to write, the teacher might ask questions that would teach the child what to do when stuck for an idea.

While conferencing with the children, the teachers continued to act as scribes scaffolding ‘ their writing attempts, thereby moving them towards more conventional systems’ (Teale and Yokota, 2000, p. 10). They encouraged the children to try to use approximate spelling, recognised in the *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (1999, p. 85) as important in the developmental process of children as they ‘attempt to master the complexities of English spelling’ and become more independent writers. One teacher describes this experience:

I mean I’m acting as a scribe but I’m saying to them, ... ‘What does “going” begin with?’ And they’d be able to say /g/. But I just find that some of them just lack confidence. ...They won’t write the words, they won’t go away and attempt it on their own. (Group Meeting 5, p. 226)

While it was necessary initially to actively encourage the children to ‘feel confident to take risks, and know that mistakes will be seen as a necessary part of their development’ (Wyse, 1998, p. 22), later video evidence shows the children were beginning to engage in approximate spelling using sound-letter knowledge, with the teacher helping the child towards conventional spelling (Video 1, 06.90).

4.4.5.3 First and Second classes

4.4.5.3.1 Peer coaching

Joyce and Showers (1988, p. 72) maintain that ‘teachers can acquire new knowledge and skill and use it in their instructional practice when provided with adequate opportunities to learn’. As a group we had discussed the underlying theory of the writing process to guide our classroom practice. But the occasion to work alongside

one of the younger teachers of a First Class demonstrating the different phases of the process, had introduced the idea of a coaching partnership, which Joyce and Showers (1988, p. 94.) explain as ‘simply a partnership in which two or more people work together to achieve a goal’. The opportunity was provided for this teacher to watch the children’s response to the task and to discuss how to help them respond and use the necessary skills (Diary entries 8th – 12th April, Appendix P). The writing process was under way in this class.

4.4.5.3.2 The writing workshop

Teachers had concentrated earlier on developing classroom routines, which would sustain the process as the writing workshop continued to be implemented.

Fortunately these classes had been returned to their newly renovated classrooms, which afforded the space for the teachers to provide a more stimulating writing environment for the children to write, within ‘a publishing cycle that mirrors aspects of the publication process in the world outside of the classroom’ (Wyse, 1998, p. vi).

Colour-coded labels (Appendix O) for each stage of the writing process had been given to the children, who were required to clip the relevant label to the top of their work to encourage them to think about their involvement with the process of writing.

One child viewed this as a way to interact with others who were working on the same stage of the process, indicating that he began to see himself as part of what Graves (1994, p. 130) describes as a ‘writing /learning community’:

Why don't we get into groups and all the people who're on the planning can sit together, and then we can discuss. (Group Meeting 6, p. 250)

These labels also had the benefit of allowing the teacher to see at a glance the stage of writing on which each child was working, as one teacher explained:

I can say 'Everybody hold their copy in the air' and look around and see what stage they're at. (Group Meeting 6, p. 250)

Revising

Wyse (1998, p. 5) explains that the 'idea that writers often redraft many times and make decisions on the most appropriate language to use is one that children develop slowly and with much input from their teacher'. Teachers made every effort to facilitate this redrafting process. Pupil-teacher conferencing continued to happen, to guide this learning, although teachers noted that interruption in the school day had an effect on the scheduling of the conferences (Group Meeting 7, p. 258). Teachers gave feedback on the content of the children's writing but also focussed on aspects of the process they are trying to develop. They often discussed the sequence or presentation of ideas with the children to further clarify the meaning in their writing. By questioning the children on how they would amend their writing, the teacher noted that this helped the children not only to reflect on what they had written but also to learn, as Graves (1983, p. 110) points out, 'to speak about the process of writing... not in the abstract but through their own experience in writing'. Video evidence (14.25) shows how opportunity arose in the conference for children, as

Graves (1983, p. 271) suggests ‘to initiate questions and comments and to demonstrate their own solutions’.

Opportunity was afforded to prompt children to a more expressive use of language in conveying meaning, sometimes making connections between classroom writing and published text. Video evidence (14.25) shows the teacher helping a child reflect on a recently enjoyed story, *The Owl who’s Afraid of the Dark*, and suggesting that the child might use one of the author’s forms of expression to convey meaning in her own story. Here the teacher is seen, as Graves (1983, p. 271) recommends, showing what she means rather than just telling a child what to do.

These discussion points were recorded on the conference on a record sheet, which was retained in their writing folders as a reference to guide their future work.

Consequently, the children began to expect to come away from the conference ‘knowing what to focus on’ (Hodgson 1995, p. 28). One child illustrates this in his interpretation of what had happened in a pupil-teacher conference:

Teacher told me that she liked the language, and the way I used speech marks when James was talking. I have to put the ideas in a different order.
(Appendix N)

Providing opportunity for the children to work with others while writing allowed them to experience the response of their peers, enhancing their sense of audience. Through discussion and demonstration, a safe environment was created in which the children learned to respond constructively, offering one positive comment and one suggestion for improvement. The children began to work with each other to improve

their writing; sharing their efforts and accepting ideas from each other. One child describes this experience:

I'm reading my story to L. and she is telling me what is good about it, and things I can change, like I can tell how dogs play. (Appendix N)

With this real audience, Wallen (1989, p. 9) notes, the act of writing became a 'work in progress, an experiment in meaning, and so sharper attention is focussed on the writing process itself'. As one teacher observed:

...because somebody says to them, 'You've used the word "then" a few times.' ...now they actually go down and get the dictionary, or look on the Word Card because there is some purpose to it. (Group Meeting 7, p. 257)

As the children began to demonstrate an awareness of what is good in writing, the teacher became aware, as Graves (1994, p. 223) maintains, that they were becoming better readers and more independent writers.

Armed with suggestions from both the teacher and their friends, the children then returned to the first draft and proceeded to revise it. This was done by adding to it, using arrows to show where the new ideas would be inserted into the piece, by reordering the draft in numbering the ideas in the piece, or by deleting from it. However, it must be noted that not all pieces were revised. It may have been a private piece of writing that the child may not have wanted any one to read. Or some children may have decided that their topic choice was not a good one, and in 'living by their own choices' (Graves, 1994, p. 116), they decided not to continue with the piece.

Editing

Earlier in the process when the children had wanted to publish a piece of writing, the teacher corrected the work and the children simply re-wrote it in their preferred publishing format. Now they were required to indicate their decision to publish, by writing 'for editing' across the top of the work. They now knew a further conference with the teacher in which 'respect for the audience now guides the writer's efforts' (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1992, p. 60) was required. While composing and drafting the attention focussed on having the meaning as clear as possible, at this point questions of spelling and grammar were addressed, with the children learning 'about these conventions in the context of their own writing' (*English Teacher Guidelines*, 1999, p. 82). In this way the children learned about 'the kind of work that goes into readying a piece for final writing' (Graves, 1983, p. 56).

In introducing the children to this skill, one teacher conducted a conference with a group of children ready for this step (Video, 19.92). As part of her preparation, the teacher spent time proof reading each child's piece of writing. She inserted the editing symbols (Appendix O) on the work, which were then taught to the children. Handy hints were given to the children in correcting misspellings (Appendix O). The piece of writing was returned to each child, who had to re-read it and try to make the changes, prior to publishing the work. Individual help was given to the children. Here the link was made to previously learned skills; spelling rules, synonyms, and dictionary skills, developing, as Cox (2000, p. 13) recommends, a 'common vocabulary for teachers and pupils to discuss their own writing'. While Hodgson (1995, p. 16) argues that 'a neat cross-out is preferable to using an eraser, because

any effort can be seen and the editing skills the child is using can be noted’, these young children, who were still writing in pencil, were allowed to use erasers and to insert the corrections.

We felt that consistent modelling of this process would be necessary before the children would begin to develop proof reading skills, leading to self-correction in as far as is possible. However, writing every day ‘in a print-rich environment, for real purposes and real audiences, understanding the importance of communicating clearly’ had created ‘a positive climate for teaching and assessing grammar and punctuation’ (Shiel and Murphy , 2000, p. 124). The children’s earlier perceptions of what it means to be a good writer had acknowledged the place of handwriting and good spelling, but now they had developed an understanding and appreciation of the editing process and its function, as revealed in their comments, including that of one child who is learning English as a second language:

To have a good story, to share with others, make sure you do your corrections – like spelling mistakes.

To make sure it’s correct so that other people understand it when they read it. (Appendix N)

Proof reading skills, Shiel and Murphy (2000, p. 121) state, ‘can be developed by devising a set of questions that the pupils should ask themselves as they edit their texts’. We had devised a simple editing checklist (Appendix O), which was beginning to be used to encourage the children to consider the need for punctuation, to speculate on words that might be incorrectly spelled and to make corrections where possible, prior to the conferencing with the teacher.

Publishing and sharing

Writing, Graves (1983, p. 54) reminds us, ‘is a public act, meant to be shared with many audiences’. And the children wanted to publish! But the writing workshop approach had helped the children to view publishing as an important part of a long process, in which they presented a final version of their writing. Here the teachers emphasised handwriting and presentation. Some children presented their pieces in their best handwriting, while one class used the computer as a tool for publishing. For a child who found the re-writing tedious, Microsoft Word eased this work load, enhancing ‘the standard of presentation of a child’s work, giving him or her an added pride in the final product’ (*English Language Teacher Guidelines*, 1999, p. 92). Ideas for presentation, in particular designs for book covers, had impacted on how the children published their work (Appendix O). This published work was displayed on the wall, while others were added to the classroom library, allowing an opportunity for the writing to reach its audience.

4.4.6 Monitoring and assessing children’s writing

As a workshop approach to writing had been operating in the classrooms in which the children were encouraged to write independently, a range of assessment tools was used to enable the teacher to ‘monitor individual children’s progress and so plan the contexts, strategies and content that will contribute most effectively to their learning’ (*English Language Teacher Guidelines*, 1999, p. 93).

Simple checklists (Appendix J) and cardboard labels (Appendix O) allowed the teacher to monitor, at a glance, where each child was in the process of writing. Teacher observation, as in gaining insights from being with the children, had been an integral part of the teaching process. This happened through spontaneous interaction with the children as well as in the context of instruction. Conferencing with the children at each stage of the process offered formative information on their engagement in writing, which was recorded on the conference record sheet, yielding ‘an objective and ongoing record of the child’s progress’ (Hodgson, 1995, p. 33).

The children’s writing folders were also very useful in providing an overview of the children’s development throughout the duration of this work, highlighting the progress as well as persistent difficulties children were experiencing. These contained a documentary portfolio of the children’s work that included, as described by Shiel and Murphy (2000, p. 132):

- finished samples that illustrate writing in a variety of genre;
- texts which reflect the process of writing – outlines of initial ideas, unedited first drafts, revised first drafts, evidence of editing/proof reading, final drafts;
- notes from individual writing conferences.

As one teacher summarised, ‘*Well I suppose you’re always assessing the process*’ (Group Meeting 6, p. 249).

However, to encourage thinking of ways to assess the quality in children’s writing the First and Second Class teachers and I looked at a selection of writing samples across the ability ranges in these classes. While individual response to the writing

was noted, discussion led to deeper insights into what the children could do as writers in terms of what Ratcliffe (1990, p. 86) describes as:

Substance - focusing on matters such as the content, the organisation, the language;

System - focusing on matters such as spelling, syntax, punctuation and other conventions of writing.

Two writing samples (Appendix O), from children in Second Class, are used to illustrate this process. The first sample was written about a bird called Ric, a soft toy, whose adventures were regularly recorded in a class diary by the children. Initial discussion centred on the purpose the child had in writing, and whether this was reflected in the genre used:

She set out to write a story. She had her web and she had all the words to remind herself what she wanted to include in the story, so she knew her beginning, middle and end before she started. (Group Meeting 6, p. 238)

In looking at how the writing was organised, we identified characteristics of the story genre in the writing. Centring around three characters, it consisted of a beginning, middle and an end, and contained a plot, which was brought to a climax and finally resolved. However, while there was structure, order and coherence in the writing, her teacher noted that the plot was not fully developed:

...we don't know what he did for the three days, he must have had adventures, he'd have to go looking in different places. (Group Meeting 6, p. 239)

The need to talk with the child on this point, being careful to allow her to retain ownership of the writing, was expressed by her teacher:

Well you'd definitely do it through the conference, and then you'd ask her, maybe you know, 'What happened there? Have you anything to write about that?' And you'd see. But you're not going to insist that she'd have to add something because you think it should be there. (Group Meeting 6, p. 239)

This underlined for us, as Beard (1988, p. 116) points out, the need to involve 'children themselves in this whole process of assessment, seeking their views and encouraging them in self-criticism'.

Teachers commented on the child's ability to use language appropriately in conveying meaning. While the vocabulary is age-appropriate and achieved its intended effect, the noted non-use of adjectives prompted the suggestion to introduce 'a mini lesson on adjectives and describing' (Group Meeting 6, p. 242). It was felt that the complex sentence structures, with correctly used conventions such as capitalisation and punctuation, including commas and the apostrophe to indicate ownership contributed to the sense of tension in the story and indicated 'a developing awareness of audience' (Robinson, 1988, p. 109):

I was just reading 'He forgot to lock his girlfriend's baby's cage door!' Not many children could string that many words together successfully. And she had her exclamation mark, so she really had meaning, she knew that she was building up to something. (Group Meeting 6, p. 240)

The surface features of handwriting and spelling examined were found to be age-appropriate. In expressing her ideas, it was felt that this writer showed an ability to spell conventional words correctly, with recognisable approximate spelling of unknown words.

This second sample, *Animals* (Appendix O), is also a story, even though it had been noted that the child's brainstorm had pointed towards the drafting of a factual or informational text. This, it was decided, could be clarified during a pupil-teacher conference (Group Meeting 6, p. 243).

While it was immediately obvious that this child had difficulties with the conventions of handwriting, punctuation and spelling, we acknowledged that as a writer she could express her ideas well. This somewhat lengthy piece of writing had a recognisable story structure with a beginning, middle and end representing 'the way events unfold in time' (Shine Thompson, 2000, p. 69). Comments were made on her use of phrases, some of which were reminiscent of phrases in a story from children's literature, in helping the reader understand and visualise her intended meaning:

And actually that's quite like Where the Wild Things Are. I think it echoes that. At the beginning he has 'through a day' and 'in and out of a week', and it goes on like that. I mean you can see that there. And then 'how come you didn't die of hunger', that's nice. It's very good. And 'he ate raw meat and real alive spiders', even that's very dramatic. (Group Meeting 6, p. 242)

This child's difficulty with spelling was discussed. While many of the spellings were reasonable phonetic alternatives of conventional spelling and '*have most of the*

syllables, which is good’, her teacher pointed out that she did not have automaticity of basic spelling vocabulary, ‘*even the very basic words we’ve done for weeks she is spelling phonetically*’ (Group Meeting 6, p. 244).

In looking at the writing samples we developed a shared framework to assess the quality of the children’s writing, establishing criteria (Appendix L) relevant to the needs of the children at this stage in their writing development and which reflects the values we had in initiating this work, by being sensitive ‘to the writing process as well as to the finished product’ (Cox, 1991, p. 143).

4.4.7 Reconnaissance

Although further reflection was needed on the editing stage of the writing process, end-of-year time constraints and tasks had meant this study had come to an end. A full group evaluation meeting, held on 28th May 2002, moved us from monitoring implementation and effects into a period of reconnaissance, in which the learning encountered in this process was discussed.

However, while I had concluded the study, a distinguishing characteristic of action research, as Bell (1999, p.8) points out, is ‘that the task is not finished when the project ends’. The refined general plan now is to continue to review, evaluate and improve practice. But most importantly, there are moves afoot to include more people involved in and affected by the practice in question. The group plans to share this work with the remainder of the staff early in the coming academic year, using

the video recording of the children at work during the writing process. The idea of extending the writing community by involving older children to act as scribes for younger children will also be discussed at whole staff level.

Plans are also being made for an ‘open afternoon’ in which the children will launch their published material for their parents. As teachers we recognise that the support and involvement of parents will be an important factor affecting the successful implementation of this change in approach, as has been the case in previous years in introducing shared and paired reading literacy approaches. Fullan (1991, p. 248) endorses this practice when he says that the ‘most powerful combination for learning is the family and school complementing each other’.

But time was now opportune to make our ‘intuitive knowledge public’ (McNiff, 1988, p. 133). In this reconnaissance period, two external validation group meetings afforded me the opportunity to make our work available to others. On 30th May 2002, I joined co-action researchers in a videoconference with Jack Whitehead of the University of Bath. This allowed me to discuss my research question and to present what we had done as a group of teachers engaged in action research. His response affirmed my claims as a valid description of our educational process as we lived through our values in the teaching of writing, and confirmed my own thinking on how I had influenced the learning of my colleagues and that of the children.

These issues were further discussed at a second validation group meeting on 6th June 2002. In a supportive yet challenging atmosphere, the following four questions were used, as suggested by my supervisor, to guide in the discussion:

1. Is the description and explanation for the teacher-researcher's learning comprehensible?
2. Is there sufficient evidence to justify the claims being made?
3. Are the values that constitute the enquiry as 'educational' clearly revealed and justified?
4. Is there evidence of the teacher-researcher's educational influence in the learning of others?

Having heard my description of the learning encountered in this action research work and having considered the evidence presented to support my claims, the group acknowledged that we had realised our educational values through practice. This validation process was most helpful in moving my ideas forward in preparation for the writing-up of this action research report.

The conclusion to be drawn from this period of reconnaissance and the implications arising will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter begins with a re-iteration of the aims of this study. In referring to Winter's (1996, pp.13-14) principles for the conduct of action research, cited by Cohen et al. (2000, pp. 228-229), I show how it has encouraged us to learn through the generation and testing of our educational theories, allowing us to live out our values for children's writing in our practice, which are now the standards by which we can judge this practice. Recommendations arising from this study are outlined. A suggestion for further study completes this chapter.

5.2 Aims of the dissertation

As curriculum co-ordinator, my principal aim in undertaking this study was to work with a group of teachers to develop and implement a strategy to improve the teaching of the writing process in the junior classes of our primary school, as outlined in the English Language Curriculum (1999). Its objectives were:

- to use action research in developing and implementing a strategy to improve the teaching of the writing process;
- to plan, implement, observe and assess the knowledge and skills necessary to enable the children to engage in the writing process;

- to improve my management of the professional needs of teachers in promoting pupil learning.

5.3 Creating a living educational theory

In aiming to understand and inform our practice as teachers, an activity which is ‘made up of complex layers of meanings, interpretations, values and attitudes’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995, p. 26), a qualitative approach to research, within an action research framework, was used. McNiff (1988, p. 4) describes action research as an ‘approach to improving education through change, by encouraging teachers to be aware of their own practice, to be critical of that practice, and to be prepared to change it’. For us, this began with ‘dialectical critique’ and ‘risk disturbance’ (Winter, 1996, pp. 13-14, cited by Cohen et al. (2000, pp. 228-229)), in acknowledging that our educational values for the children’s writing experience were not being lived in our practice. We wanted to foster the children’s impulse to write, extending their communicative competence. We sought that children should be enabled to share their writing, not only with the teacher but also with other children, during the process as well as sharing the finished product. Action research allowed us to change our practice and to accommodate new ideas through collaborative dialogue and reflection. While theory initially informed our practice, we developed our own personal theories of education from practice, acknowledging, as Winter (1996, p.13-14, cited by Cohen et al. (2000, pp. 228-229)) states, that theory and practice are ‘two interdependent yet complementary phases of the change process’. In this way we have managed to live out these values in our practice, developing a strategy to improve the teaching of the writing process.

We learned that the nature of our interaction with the children had significantly affected their view of writing and their success in their learning attempts. Our teaching is now ‘characterised by a highly interactive teaching and learning dynamic’ (Meaney, 2000, p, 198). Teacher modelling and oral discussion had helped the children to begin to use the thought processes necessary for every stage of the writing process. Central to this approach, we learned, is the pupil-teacher conference, in which teachers scaffold the children’s writing attempts and through which dramatic changes were seen in children’s writing. This also facilitated the monitoring and assessment of progress, the children’s involvement in which is seen as important, and so helped ‘plan the contexts, strategies and content that will contribute most effectively to their learning’ (*English Language Teacher Guidelines*, 1999, p. 93).

The value we placed on the process of writing and expression of ideas, as much as the written product, had achieved its intended effects. Children now know writing-as-a-process, expressing ideas first and then managing the conventions to share these ideas with a wider audience in a final draft. Teachers noted that the children, in particular those with learning difficulties and who lacked confidence, wrote freely because they had learned that the first emphasis was placed on getting their ideas down on paper. No longer were they anxious about the conventions of writing, they ‘*weren’t afraid to make mistakes*’ (Group Meeting 7, p. 257). In this way they had come to realise that the primary function of writing is to communicate or express ideas. Later, in the editing process they learned if the conventions of writing were not attended to, then the clarity of the writing can be affected, as one child explained:

Look out for full stops that you haven't put in, mistakes you've made or things you should have/shouldn't have to make a story better. (Appendix N)

These skills however were learned in the context of their own writing.

As a form of expression, writing had given them further opportunity to communicate with others, developing a sense of authorship and audience. By watching others in the act of writing, and by participating in shared writing activities, these children also began to develop 'oral language about written language' (Goodman, 1986, p. 11), learning the concepts of print.

Although it was recognised that some children continued to have difficulty in knowing what to write, they all had topics of interest that they wanted to write about. In choosing topics for writing, the children were helped to value their own experience and knowledge as worthwhile writing material. One teacher remarked that in discussing their writing, pupil-choice of topic meant that the children themselves had to organise their ideas and this ensured '*a proper dialogue...rather than this artificial feeding them what you want to hear*' (Group Meeting 7, p. 259).

The children had come to learn that writing, as Graves (1990, p. 27) describes 'is a social act'. They were willing and enthusiastic to share their writing, whereas previously '*it was mainly the brighter people in the class that would volunteer their story*' (Group Meeting 7, p. 260). Teachers had previously spoken about children working in pairs to generate ideas and compose text together (Group Meeting 6, p. 247). But most importantly the children began to appreciate that sharing of ideas is helpful in clarifying thought. Not only did this build a developing sense of

audience, but it also gave them ‘an early appreciation of the benefits to be gained from co-operative efforts’ (*Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*, 1999, p. 17).

By consciously reflecting throughout the process, and in reviewing literature, I had been helped to develop clearer insights into the necessary conditions supporting curriculum change at classroom level. The implementation of the writing process had been facilitated through what Fullan (1991, pp. 105-106) describes as a process of clarification or development of initial ideas. This had been supported through the effective use of the existing management structures, which promote teacher collaboration, teacher learning and teacher commitment to student learning. The opportunity to try out ideas and reflect on their effect, helped to clarify what was entailed in improving this practice, as one teacher remarked, ‘*I came out of it knowing well I tried that and that didn’t work, and that did*’ (Group Meeting 7, p. 254). I am aware also, as Hopkins and Llagerweij (1996, p. 77) state, that ‘the key strategy for linking development planning and pupil achievement is clearly in-service (INSET) or staff development’. On-site training in the early stages had provided an understanding of the theory of the writing process and had informed our practice. The opportunity to provide hands-on classroom assistance had facilitated what Joyce and Showers (1980, p. 380) explain as the ‘transfer of skills and strategies to the classroom’. Availing of this assistance would, as one teacher expressed, be a matter for individual choice:

It depends on the individual, some people are really set in their ways, you’re not used to people seeing what you’re doing... (Group Meeting 7, p. 255)

Action research was, as McNiff (1988, p. 5) describes, an appropriate ‘vehicle for enhancing the teaching-learning situation’ providing a mechanism for feedback and exchange of ideas as we looked at our practice with critical awareness. I felt it had enhanced our existing work relationships, which is important in implementing change for according to Fullan (1991, p. 132) ‘the more teachers can interact concerning their own practices, the more they will be able to bring about improvements they themselves identify as necessary’.

5.4 Recommendations

Being characteristically situational, this action research concerned a current ‘problem’ in our specific context, in which the internal conditions, management structure and supports allowed teachers to work together to reflect on practice, leading to understanding and improvement. Reflexivity in action research insists on modest claims from judgements made from this personal experience, but these have been validated through collaboration with other teachers, and in my own participation in a validation group with co-action researchers. Others, taking their particular contexts into account, may be able to use its findings and recommendations.

Central to this action research was the development and implementation of a strategy to improve of the teaching of the writing process. In aiming to ‘enhance directly the progress and achievement of pupils’ (Hopkins and MacGilchrist, 1998, p. 410) planning concerned the integration of three foci, under which I make the following recommendations:

5.4.1 Pupil progress and achievement

To directly enhance the learning of children, teachers need to begin by building on their natural desire to write, recognising that the easiest place for a writer to begin to write is with something he or she knows, although they need to realise there is a process of choosing topics. Where topics are assigned, children should understand their purpose. In learning to write independently, children need to see writing as-a-process. They need to learn that initial writing effort is concerned with the expression of ideas, this is especially important for those who experience learning difficulties. The children need to learn that it is through the process of drafting and revising that meaning is clarified. Opportunities should be provided for children to share and discuss their writing, not only with the teacher but with their peers also, throughout this process of meaning making. They must be helped learn that if the text is to be read by others, the conventions of writing must be attended to. These skills are taught within the context of the child's own writing. Importantly, throughout the process the children should be helped to self-correct their work as far as is possible, through conferencing and in sharing work with others.

5.4.2 The quality of teaching and learning

A stimulating print-rich environment in the classroom helps create a purpose for writing, but teachers need to create a highly structured and predictable environment that is necessary for the writing development of the child. This means a writing workshop approach in which writing is taught as a craft. Teachers need to enable

children to know what to expect in terms of time given for writing, when and what to expect in the conference time with teacher or peers, and what to do when stuck for an idea or when finished writing on a topic. Resources and materials for writing should be on hand for the children.

Teachers need to understand that writing is a complex activity process, linked to skills of oral language and reading, which requires reflective thought and is used to communicate purpose and meaning. Teachers need to model the thought processes involved in each stage of the process by writing with and for the children. The pupil-teacher conference is central to the writing process, in which the teacher can actively scaffold the children's learning, further modelling strategies that they might later be able to use on their own. Teachers should work on devising a framework for the assessment of children's writing, which recognises their engagement in the process of writing as well as addressing the finished written product. This framework should inform their teaching. It is also essential that the children are involved in the assessment process.

5.4.3 Management arrangements

Management should seek initially to address the needs of the teachers in their efforts to implement change at classroom level. Time and resources should be given to teachers to work collaboratively, in small groups using such strategies as action research, to reflect on, understand, inform and evaluate practice. Appropriate feedback mechanisms should, as Gross et al. (1971, p. 213) recommend, be put in place 'to keep in close touch with the process after the wheels of implementation

have been put in motion'. In recognising the differing needs and concerns of staff, support for professional development should also include on-site training, demonstration of good practice by staff with expertise and peer coaching and observation, as recommended by Joyce and Showers (1988). Linking with other schools and colleges, as was the case in the initial stages in this study, will prevent the danger of becoming introspective.

5.5 Suggestion for further research

This present study concentrated on developing and implementing the teaching of the writing process as outlined in the English Language Curriculum, in the junior classes of a primary school, which resulted in a writing workshop approach. An area of interest for further study would be to investigate ways in which children could be helped to use the skills they have learned through the writing process in other areas of the curriculum.

5.6 Coda

This process has been a rewarding experience for children, teachers and myself. It has enabled the children to develop not only their writing skills but to experience being part of a community of writers. Teachers have been enabled to take ownership of the implementation of the writing process in their classrooms. And I, in writing up this research have experienced that writing, as Graves (1994, p. 36) states, 'means first discovering where writing comes from, then seeing how it gets onto the page'.

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