

My Ontology



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ATHLONE	80
<i>Granard</i>	
GRANARD	26
(<i>Armhach</i>)	
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BALLINAGH	5

I am a part of all that I have met
Alfred Lord Tennyson

Introduction

The Bigger Picture

Can you see what I see?

Triptych

Using Story

I hope in telling my stories throughout my inquiry that you will clearly see my living theory as best described by Freire in his most famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

From these pages, I hope at least the following will endure:
my trust in the people, and my faith in men and women,
and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love.

Freire (1970, p. 40)

This Phd thesis has been checked on PC platform, Apple Mac, iPad, iPhone, google chrome book and is best experienced on an iPad when the PDF is opened with iBook. In this way you can interchange between the different modes of communication: audio, video and visual charts (pinching the charts outwards to enlarge them). The links provided allow you to listen to the music while also reading. Anytime you want to resume reading the text, just click back into the iBook icon. On an iPad flash does not work. In this thesis, this only relates to resource 7.1. which can alternatively be opened on PC or Mac. Hopefully this issue will be resolved in the not too distant future.

Abstract

How am I Bringing an Educationally Entrepreneurial Spirit into Higher Education?

The originality of my research lies in clarifying and explaining what it means for me to have an educational entrepreneurial spirit and the values I hold that demonstrate this spirit in an explanation of educational influence in learning. This explanation includes a responsibility for students and acknowledging my values of passion and care ('love' - of what I do), safety, creativity and excellence within my practice.

The unit of appraisal in a living theory methodology is the explanation of the influence in my own learning, the learning of others and in the learning of social formations. The methodological inventiveness, particular to the Living Educational Theory methodology, has afforded me an opportunity to express who I really am; body, mind and spirit. I use multimodal forms to communicate and express of the nature of the knowledge that I am generating. I can now claim that my values have become living standards of judgement.

Music plays an integral part of my life and has been a source of enjoyment and inspiration for me over the years. I have shown its importance by embedding it within my doctoral research to express and represent the meaning of emotion.

I explain the importance of addressing emotion in education and the merits of reflecting on our experiences in order to become more educationally entrepreneurial; by taking risks; awakening our creativity and bringing ideas into action.

Within these safe educational spaces I connect the head with the heart, marry the 'sense and soul' (Wilber, 1988) to create an integral psychology that combines a constructivist, behaviourist, cognitive pedagogical approach that avoids a fragmented learning experience as I inspire others to bring their ideas to fruition

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Introduction

We see the world as 'we' are, not as 'it' is; because it is the 'I' behind the 'eye' that does the seeing.
Anais Nin
(1903- 1977)

Section I: Getting the picture

Can you see what I see?

When I embarked on this inquiry, I was heartened by the advice of Yen Yen Joyceln Woo (2008) that we should think beyond viewing the research journal as the end goal and its readership as the audience of our research and scholarship and instead try to 'experiment with as many forms as possible, to communicate what we know about meaningful, just, and humane education to as many people as possible' (p. 327). Bruce-Ferguson (2008) also advocates the need to 'validate forms of research that can convey knowledge not easily encapsulated just within pages of text' (p. 25).

A concern of mine from the genesis of this doctoral research was how best to represent my research-based practice. Drawing on my 15 years' experience as a music teacher in post-primary education, 22 years as a concert producer and 10 years as a teacher-educator and multimedia creator, I have created a multimodal composition consisting of sound, video, images and text. This will enable the reader to weave in and out of multimedia forms of educational content.

Creating a synergy between the multimedia-rich resources and the narrative accounts is integral to fulfilling my aim of creating an effortless transition between text and visuals. I have considered that the required effort in trawling through an Appendix to find illuminating pieces of evidence may distract the reader and create a barrier to immersion in the narrative. I am passionate about using different forms of media in my teaching and I have therefore carried this through to the presentation of my research. Furthermore, such an approach is not in keeping with a changing society in which ubiquitous learning using iPads and Smartphones has revolutionised how we access and present information, as we make the 'gradual transition from a print culture to a digital new media culture' (Voithofer, R., 2005, p. 3).

Many of the concerts I direct include a narrator, or a master of ceremonies, whose role is to link the elements together. The narrator tells a story, while each individual act contributes to the overall performance and adds another layer of meaning. The need to broaden the forms of representation in our understanding of educational research has been advocated by, among others, Eisner (1993). Images are not just for entertainment but are important for many people in the sense making process.

Proponents of practitioner-research (Bruce-Ferguson, 2008; Whitehead, 2008; Laidlaw, 2008; Adler-Collins, 2008; Huxtable, 2009) have expressed their views on how multimedia representations of educational theories are bringing about an epistemological transformation in what counts as educational knowledge. Practitioner-researchers who wish to show their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of social formations, need to find new ways to represent their research and to reach a wider audience.

I am aware of the tension that exists within me about adhering to traditional scholarship. Yet I recognise that there is a greater need for change to encompass the many technological breakthroughs and further research into learning. Zull (2002) refers to the biology of learning, arguing that people learn much more effectively when they use images to represent what they know. Elkins (2008) calls for Higher Education ‘to take up the challenge of providing a visual culture “core curriculum” for all students. He believes imagery is central to our lives and it is time ‘that it becomes central to our universities’ (p.8).

My imagination and creativity drove me to explore a way to integrate research with teaching and learning. I know that using text alone will not express fully the flow of energy I feel when teaching and learning, and the beauty of the experience for me. My aim in this research study is to move away from the traditional approach to research and scholarship that usually expects one-dimensional formats. The use of multimodalities (Gee, 2004) will, hopefully, broaden the horizon and open up a ‘higher’ educational space: ‘so that we do not just converse among ourselves but rather increase the relevance of our work toward ameliorative educational goals and achieve greater influence with the public’ (Yen Yen Joyceln, 2008, p.321).

Recently a publisher agreed to produce a book I am editing about creativity and the use of visuals in Higher Education. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm for the idea did not extend to including images in

the book. This highlighted to me that although people may express their admiration for certain research, their limited understanding of its worth becomes apparent when there is a shortage of the funding required to put theory into practice. The introduction by Dublin City University (DCU) of composition as a form to present Ph.D. research is for me an important move in the right direction. It acknowledges the existence of other perspectives and that there is a need to find different forms of presenting our research, teaching and learning.

Stand back and take a different perspective

Each year, in my role as a lecturer on the Bachelor of Science and Education and Bachelor of Physical Education and Biology, I teach 75 undergraduate students as part of the Teaching Methodologies class. In one activity, I ask these prospective student teachers to form a line, with the smallest student on the left and the tallest on the right as I face them. I give them three minutes to complete this exercise, and observe them as they work through the process. In my experience, the students find it easy to categorise the very tall or very small people. To place those of average height calls for more attention to detail and more collaboration.

On completion of the activity, I ask the students if they are satisfied with the outcome. It is usually at this point that they see a need to fine-tune their initial decisions to get the line-up exactly right. Through analysis I draw their attention to the fact that they can only get a proper 'perspective' by standing back and observing. Through discussion, they deduce that the exercise presents difficulties for them only when they are too close to see the detail. They conclude that to complete the task correctly requires advice from others in order to get an objective point of view.

The following journal entry demonstrates a student's insight into this exercise and his reflections reveal a new perspective for him:

The activities, mainly the ones where we had to organise ourselves into ascending height order and darkness of hair colour, provided little hints for what other aspects were needed to become a successful teacher. The activities encouraged talking and listening to other people's viewpoints. What I discovered from this is that not everyone is going to have the same opinion & perspective on various topics and this is an important thing to have thought about before starting teaching. We need to stand back and listen. If I, as a teacher, were to only think my opinions mattered, I would consider myself a poor teacher.

(Ian Thorpe, personal communication, October 6, 2011)

In exploring the students' observations, I draw a parallel with their forthcoming life as teachers and with the fact that each pupil who will eventually sit in front of them may interpret what they present in a very different way. I use the metaphor of a road accident where each witness may have a

different perspective depending on their position, their view, whether they felt safe or whether they previously experienced an accident.

Drawing their attention to principles within the analogy, I suggest that the same principles can apply to life. Every place, happening or discussion might mean something different to those involved. We all have our own way of seeing things, and our own realities. We interpret what people say and do based on our own experiences, values, culture, faith and perspectives.

Healthier times ahead if we have the same perspective

When teaching, lecturing or presenting, it is important for me that my audience can visualise what I am talking about so they can understand what I am trying to say to them. I want them to see what I intend them to see, so that we share the same perspective from the start. To achieve this, I need to communicate clearly: if we are singing a different song, it can lead to disharmony. To have the same vision, we must all have a shared idea of what that vision is. To fail to communicate that idea as a teacher could destroy the love for learning in a student.

The importance of a shared vision and perspective in the education process was highlighted for me by a recent poignant, and ultimately life-changing, experience in another area of my life. That experience also reaffirmed for me the powerful impact of multimedia communication in creating a shared vision. This is the story of that experience:

Last year, my mother was diagnosed with cancer and I found myself in hospitals over a period of time. As she was a very active, healthy 76-year-old woman until this point, this news came as a shock for our family. A gentle, kind and fun-loving woman, with great faith, she embraced the challenge positively and with dignity. I could only find strength in her positivity and reassure her that my father, my brother and I were there to support her journey to recovery. We could all ‘see’ that journey ahead and that shared vision helped us to face any challenge. There would be many challenges. Hospitals are busy, under-resourced places, the pressure doctors and nurses were feeling was palpable. At times, I got a sense that the age on my mother’s chart dictated the level of active care. No matter how frustrated I felt, however, I knew making strident demands related to my mother’s rights would get me nowhere.

How did I get the medical staff on board?

I did not expect any medics to share my feelings for my mam but simply wanted them to see what I could, that beyond the chart lay a real and rich life that was worth fighting for despite her age and her worsening condition. After five chemotherapy sessions, my mother's immune system had begun to weaken. New medical challenges caused her to be twice hospitalised, discharged prematurely and re-hospitalised. A three-month chain of complications, along with some medical oversights, left her in intensive care. The sicker she became, the more doctors got involved.

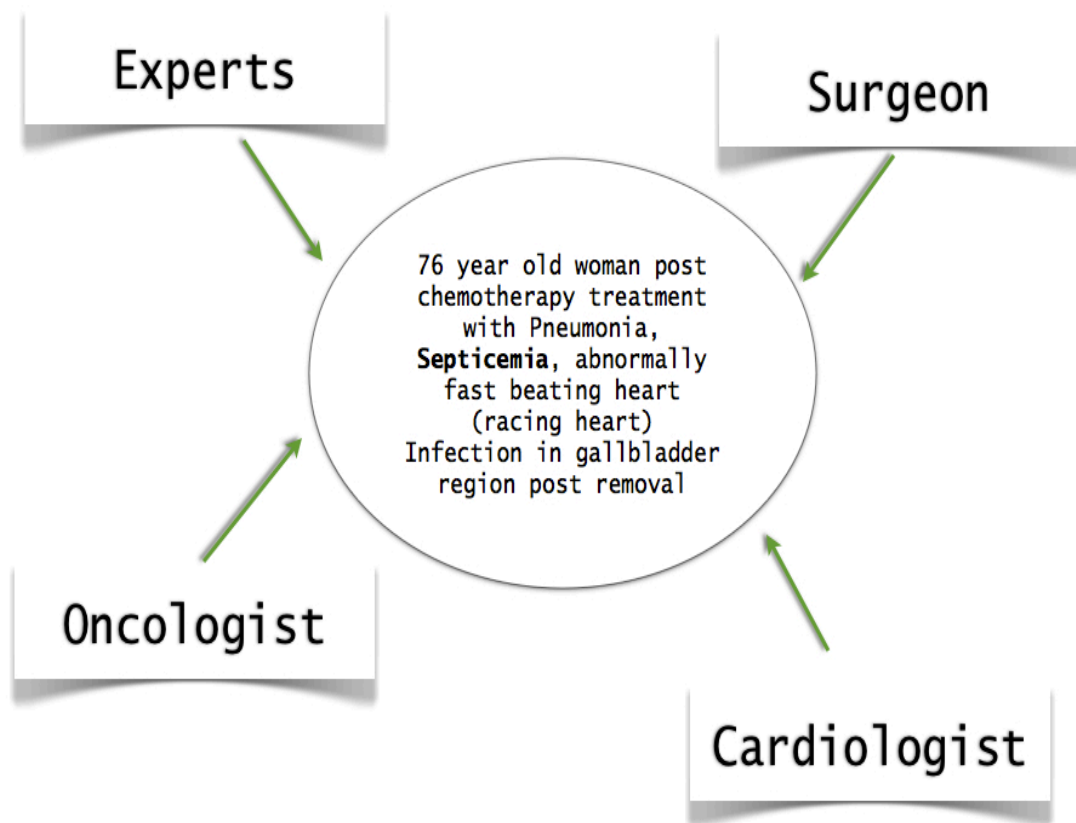


Figure 01.1. Experts Need to Connect

I knew I needed to become familiar with medical language to communicate effectively with the medics, so asked my friends who were doctors and nurses to teach me that language. By being present in the hospital for most of the time, I was able to act as my mother's communication channel and as a communication conduit between the many disparate people involved in her care. To humanise the situation, I showed photos on my iphone of my mother in healthier times. I told

stories of her unselfish ways as a mother, wife, sister, grand-aunt and friend. The staff allowed me to play a familiar CD to make her feel comfortable and try to stimulate her senses.

I cannot over-emphasise the power the audio and image had in injecting life into what had seemed a hopeless situation. This whole process helped to sensitise and mobilise staff: they could see what I could see.

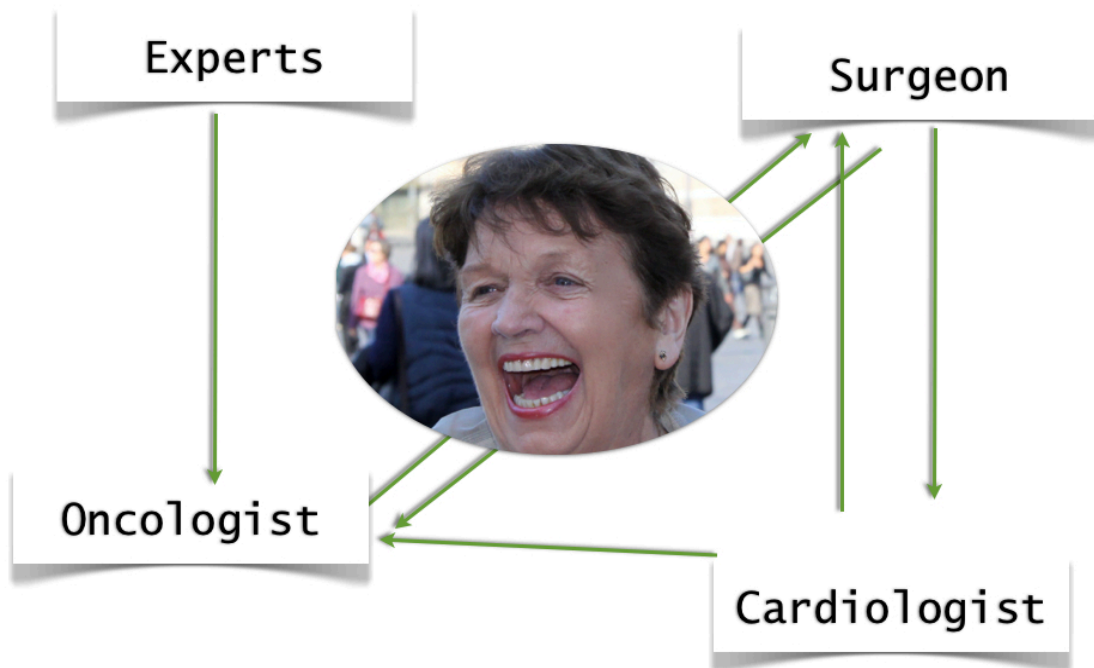
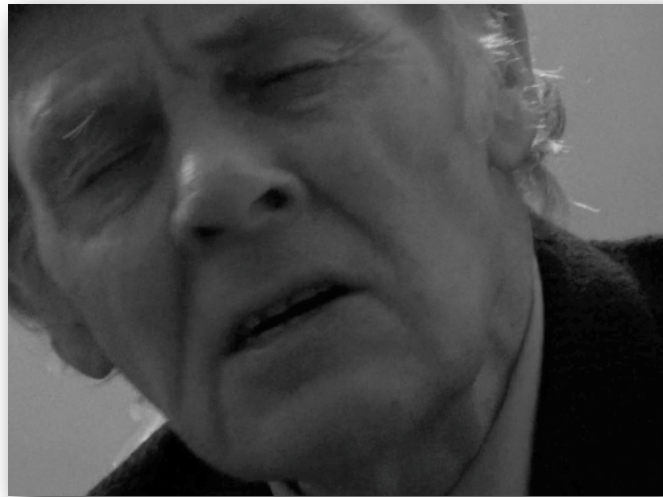


Figure 01.2. Stay Connected

I tell this story because the experience underline for me that it is essential that experts in all fields listen to each others' perspectives. I applied my expertise at that time in seeing where there was a need for me to help with some 'joined-up' thinking and communication. It is my strong belief that the visual triggers helped to communicate meaning to doctors, and that this made a difference. One doctor was visibly moved by a slideshow of pictures of my mother in good health, with a song my father had recorded for her, all accessed from my iPhone. That particular doctor went on to champion my mother's case and took an active part in the recovery plan that led to her being alive and healthy. Video 01.1 is the song my father recorded for my mother. Her name is Eileen.



Video 01.1. [My Eileen](#)

A Higher-Level perspective

Higher Education in Ireland is undergoing many changes. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) - the statutory planning and development body for Higher Education and research in Ireland - is making efforts to provide a nationally coherent and coordinated approach to the development of the Higher Education sector through the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 - Report of the Strategy Group (DES, 2011). The efforts have catalysed a significant amount of activity, soul searching, mission evaluation and partnerships within the Higher Education system. There are calls for the integration of research with teaching and learning as originally outlined by Boyer (1990). This vision for Higher Education focuses on a scholarship of discovery, teaching, engagement and integration, where the integration of research with teaching and learning takes place in an environment and in a context where 'a spirit of enquiry and questioning prevails and where staff and students are committed to an evidence based approach to their work' (p.54). The report refers to the need for Higher Education to improve the flow of knowledge from institutions to the wider society.

Following on from the recommendations of the National Strategy report, the HEA published a series of paper in February 2012 with the aim of addressing the report's strategy, objectives and recommendations. One of the papers, 'Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape', provides the starting point for institutions of Higher Education to review their mission and show how they fit within the new landscape developing in Ireland. Universities were traditionally seen as the centres of innovation and knowledge generation. However, it is now recognised that knowledge and ideas generation can come from a range of contexts. The students attending the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning), which I will hereafter call MEME, come from a range of

workplace contexts, and bring experience from their own field of practice. Universities can learn from these students. In using both text and multimedia, I hope to communicate the connections between each sector and how each can bring about much needed educational innovation and economic renewal;

Economic renewal depends on our ability to maintain and develop a workforce with a high level of skills and on an education and research system that is relevant and responsive to societal needs, capable of sustaining a base for high quality research and innovate. (Towards a Future of Higher Education Landscape, HEA, 2012, p. 4)

My own passion for excellence in teaching and learning is illuminated by carrying out a values-based self-study of my own educational practice to show how I engage students creatively in applied projects in their work context. This is accomplished by the creation of a caring and safe learning environment. The originality of my research is in integrating the value of care with the value of creativity and excellence, and generating a new understanding of the influences of an educator bringing an educational entrepreneurial spirit into the Academy. With an empathetic energetic relational quality, I provide an environment that combines the excellence of the Academy with the creativity deep within us. I am marrying the head and the heart and the sense and the soul in bringing ideas into action. I create an open, attentive environment and try to listen to students' feedback in an effort to combine it with the standards required by the University. Simultaneously, my heart guides my understanding of what is needed to create compassion when mistakes are made and events genuinely do go wrong for students. Through an integrated cognitive, behaviourist, constructivist educational space I foster a safe environment that allows people to reach their potential and flourish.

The transformational influence of eLearning in schools, universities and workplaces continues to grow. The National Strategy report recommends strongly the integration of technology into teaching and learning and DCU has risen to the challenge. In May 2012, DCU's president, Professor Brian McCraith, announced the establishment of the Centre for Digital Learning to 'transform student learning both on-campus and online through the dissemination of online resources and learning content and through research into teaching and learning in both environments' (Mc Craith, 2012). This announcement can be viewed at <http://www.dcu.ie/news/2012/may/s0512n.shtml>

I would add that it is important for educators to foster a reflective approach when integrating technology into teaching and learning. It is this process of action and reflection that will help to

stimulate innovation and creativity in the workplace. I am one of the founding members of the Centre for e-Innovation, Pedagogy and Workplace Learning which seeks to explore the enabling capacity of digital technology through the fostering of a reflective approach in developing innovation and creativity in the workplace. The Centre also seeks to collaborate with and empower practitioner-researchers in making explicit their implicit knowledge in the workplace, and strives to encourage actions based upon a fusion of knowledge and praxis.



Figure 01.3. [Centre for e-innovation, Pedagogy and Workplace Learning](#)

Inspiring others

I am a spiritual person. This word has its origin in the latin word ‘spiritus’ which means to breathe. Central to existing is breathing. I breathe so therefore I am alive. I feel spiritually alive when I am in relation with others and there is a positive spirit and energy generated by that interaction. I feel alive when I am listening to music because music breathes life into my very being and gives meaning to who I am. Zohar and Marshall (2004), claim that the spiritual within us ‘makes us ask why?’ (p. 43). The authors also suggest that there is a need to put our enterprises in the broader context and clarify what gives meaning and purpose to what we do. In order to breathe new life into my endeavours, I regularly use reflection in and on action (Schön, 1983) to evaluate how I can make improvements to my practice. This paves the way for my being part of a more meaningful existence where I can put my ideas into action. Central to feeling alive is my continual quest to find out what I value and what is important to me.

I am a dreamer. I dream up visions and make them a reality by managing my fears and seizing opportunities. It gives form and meaning to my life and attempts to give value to the lives of others. The benefits are not always economic but my motivation is not for monetary gain; my reward makes me feel spiritually uplifted and alive upon witnessing a spark of creativity ignite within my students. My profit is internal and I delight in helping others to see the bigger picture.

My value of passion for teaching and learning drives me to foster an environment where people feel safe enough to take risks and make mistakes knowing that they not being judged as people; rather the evaluation and feedback is on their assignments and is intended to assist them with future attempts. In this way, I am laying a foundation for them to self regulate their project work. To instill a confidence and trust in their own judgment is central to my fostering an educational entrepreneurial spirit in others and encouraging them to take these risks. This sense of trust and confidence in one's own belief takes time to nurture and is built through my continual feedback and monitoring of students work. This is at the centre of my 'pedagogy of the unique' (Farren, 2005).

As an educator I strive to inspire. An alternative word for 'inspire' is 'inspirit'. To instill a spirit of curiosity, creativity, autonomy, collaboration and awareness of the wider social formations is integral to my role as educator/lecturer and inspirer (Prensky, 2010). These attributes are all addressed in the Oslo Agenda for Entrepreneurship Education in Europe conference report (European Commission, 2006). In my role as producer director I understand the drive behind the Oslo Agenda to create a 'critical mass' of educators who have an entrepreneurial skillset.

I have always been aware of the need to be resourceful and link with the wider community to enhance the student learning experience. I, like many of my colleagues at post-primary level, had to accept educational cutbacks that resulted in larger classes and less facilities. In spite of the lack of available funding, teachers knew that school life had to go on, classes had to be taught and students had to be educated. Finding teaching methods to ensure that the lack of resources would not hinder the student learning experience was central to our thinking. Mindful of the impact a less than positive learning environment has on students' ability to be creative, to think critically and to use their own initiative, educators worldwide had to find ways to overcome these obstacles. To instill a love of learning and promote independent learning on a continuous basis calls on educators to be innovative in their thinking and actions. As an educator it is these challenges that have helped to develop my resolve and ability to become even more creative and entrepreneurial; it has motivated me to find different ways to create rich learning environments with less resources. It is this educational entrepreneurial spirit that lies at the heart of my own practice. This spirit will unfold in the various sections of this thesis.

It is vital that educators recognise their own value and the part that they play in nurturing individuals who go on to effect change both socially and economically. I am regularly struck by the number of successful business people who, when receiving awards, pay tribute to former educators who have inspired them. Educators should recognise that these entrepreneurial seeds very often have been sown in their own classrooms.

I wanted to bring the idea of an educational entrepreneurial spirit into my thesis as I passionately believe that entrepreneurship is not only about setting up a business for economic gain. An entrepreneurial way of being involves people being collaborative, reflective and creative and involves them taking risks in bringing ideas into action. This was brought home to me by a former Master's student Gemma Clarke who communicated the following to me.

By moving away from standardised testing, our Master's programme exposed us to an assignment-based approach, which very successfully promotes learning by encouraging creative, entrepreneurial and reflective thinking. As a result of being exposed to such an environment, I had come to appreciate how I had grown and developed significantly over the duration of the course.

(Gemma Clarke's personal journal entry: October 17th, 2010).

I use the term educational entrepreneurial spirit to make explicit the values that drive me as an educator to effect change at a personal, professional, social and economic level. These values include care and safety linked with creativity and excellence.

In chapter five, I address how I bring an educational entrepreneurial spirit into Higher Education as I employ a multimodal approach as advocated by the Oslo Agenda (2006). This spirit seeks to engage students' feelings and emotions in the learning process. In chapters six and seven, I demonstrate how I create an open environment in which students develop the necessary confidence to take risks. Chapter eight demonstrates my educational entrepreneurial spirit in action as I organised the International DIVERSE Conference in Dublin City University in June 2011 on the theme of 'Creativity - enhancing our Vision for the Future'. The focus of the conference was on the creative use of visual media in education. The final chapter demonstrates my own willingness to take a risk and leave my fear of the traditional approach behind.

Section II: Using a Triptych to see the overall picture.

Alice and the Cat: *Alice in Wonderland*

Alice: *Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?*

The Cat: *That depends a good deal on where you want to get to*

Alice: *I don't much care where.*

The Cat: *Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.*

Alice: *...so long as I get somewhere.*

The Cat: *Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough.*

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (1832 - 1898)

I have drawn on the extract from Lewis Carroll's '*Alice in Wonderland*' to highlight how important it is for a person to know where they want to go so they can take the right direction. Through telling my own stories, I seek to pave a way that allows you to experience some of the most influential times in my life so you gain a deeper understanding of how I have developed an entrepreneurial spirit which embodies my cherished values of care, passion, creativity, safety and excellence.

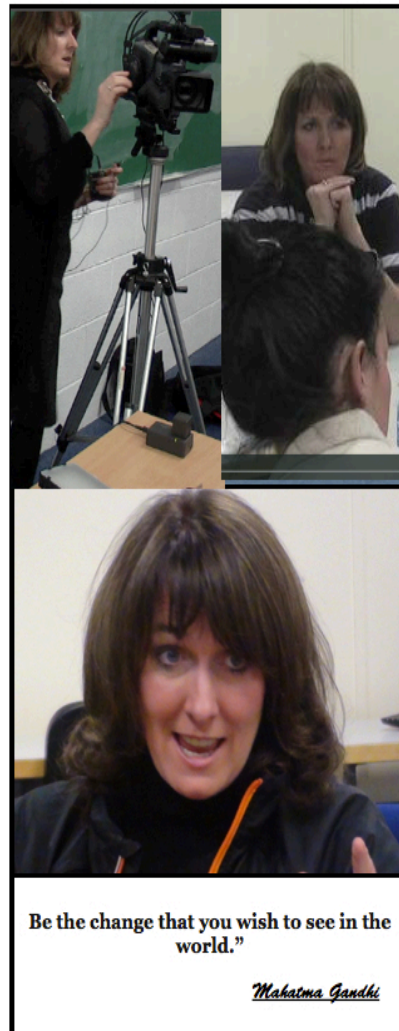
My values have their genesis in my past experiences and will become evident in the narratives that form part of my research inquiry. My thesis begins with a visual to explain my vision for the overall research inquiry. In this way, you can experience my work in the same way that you might explore a work of art. My intention is to convey an aesthetic, immersive, meaningful and engaging visual. I want to sensitise and stimulate the reader into accompanying me in my re-living of these experiences all these years later. I will draw on Ausubel's (1960) idea of the *advance organiser* by using the triptych as a way of representing my thesis. Ausubel and Fitzgerald (1962) believed that meaningful learning is new knowledge that relates to what is already known. They advocated what is known as an 'anchoring idea' to ensure 'the ideational scaffolding is clear, stable, and well organized' and say that: 'it is reasonable to suppose that it provides better anchorage for new learning and retention than if it is unclear, unstable, and poorly organised' (p. 244). Boettinger as cited in Duarte (2010) further outlines the need for structure in this way:

it's unwise to merely dump a pile of unstructured information into the laps of your audience. They will have the same reaction as if you take a watch apart, fling the pieces at them and say, 'here's all you need to make the watch. You might get high marks for research and energy but that is a low class consolation prize. By doing this you confess that you don't know what to do with all the stuff you've dug up, Audiences expect structure. (p. 126)

My Ontology



My Methodology



My Epistemology



Figure 01.4. The Thesis Triptych

As a musical producer, director and teacher, I need structure to engage my audience. The structure for this inquiry is around a three-panel artistic piece called a Triptych. (Figure 0.1.4). The panels show who I am, as they illustrate the past, present and future.

Given my deep love of music, art and all things cultural, I have chosen a triptych as a representation of my living theory. The word itself has its origin in the Greek 'triptykhos', meaning three-layered. Its origins refer to a three-part altar-piece carvings or pictures hinged together, and the word is said to exist from 1849. The work of art I refer to is divided into three separate panels that are hinged together and can be folded closed or displayed open. I want to present my values based self-study as a work of art that is divided into three distinct sections that can either stand alone or link together to represent the bigger picture of myself as the teacher and researcher. This type of multi-panel work

usually has a middle panel that is the largest with two smaller related works on either side. Triptychs do exist which have the same sized panels, but the panel at the centre of this study is a larger centrepiece that represents the research methodology - Living Educational Theory. This centrepiece will help to explain how I carried out my research and how I come to know my practice. The two other aspects of my triptych hinge on this methodological part that is integral to any research study. In particular, it is an essential component to showing the way I am in the world, which has influenced how I come to know and has led me to create my own *epistemology*.

My epistemology is portrayed in the third panel, with images of how I am bringing my educational entrepreneurial spirit into my practice. My students are seen engaged in the creative process and having fun as they produce podcasts and videos. This panel shows evidence of my influence in the learning of others. It also represents my influence in the wider social formations as the student take their learning into their current and future work practices. My ontology is represented through the panel on the left. This section is a collage of images from my past that demonstrate how I have come to 'be' in the world through the places I have been, the people who are an integral part of my life and my musical, sporting and educational activities. This piece impacts on the middle Methodology section as it demonstrates the values that underpin it: who I am will determine how I carry out my research. The centrepiece connects the left and right panel because 'I' am the link. Without it, these peripheral panels would have no relationship. The right hand panel is best understood in relation to how the present can lead to future possibilities. My middle panel represents who I am now. It understands the present in relation to my evaluation of my past. The third panel represents my desire to live my values as fully as I can to create a better future.

The fusion of the memories and philosophy of my life, *left* from the past into *centrally* who I am now helps to explain, provoke and inspire the knowledge creation in the *right* way and authentically reflect who I am going forward.

I emphasised earlier the importance of structure to engage the audience and Durate confirms this view:

The timeless structure of a story can contain information that persuades, entertains, and informs. Story serves as a perfect device to help an audience recall the main point and be moved into action. Once a presentation is put into a story form, it has structure, creates an imbalance the audience want to see resolved, and identifies a clear gap that the audience can fill. Durate (2010, p. 52)

I intend to use my stories to create this imbalance for the audience in the Ontology section. This will be later counterbalanced in the epistemology section with multimodal narratives of what I am doing in my teaching and learning and how I am influencing the students as they tell their stories of how they are improving practice. These accounts will shed light on my earlier stories and close the circle for the audience. The panels will become whole when the last chapter (Coda) has been read and there is space to stand back, reflect and view the overall triptych.

Section III: Using Story -The Narrative Turn

The only thing that keeps us from floating off with the wind is our stories.
They give us a name and put us in a place, allow us to keep on touching
Tom Spanbauer (1992)

In this section, I will use the word narrative and story interchangeably. I share the passion of Parkinson (2009) for the use of stories, and his acknowledgement that they are marvelous, magical things which are paradoxically mundane and everywhere' (p.17). I agree that 'we are all a story of how we have been and hope to be and of how we are and how we might be'. In McNiff's (2009) paper, *Learning for Action in Action*, she refers to her own use of a story made up of stories. This appeals to me because, like Jean, I am a teacher. It has always been natural for me as teacher to be a storyteller (Egan, 1986) and to use story as a way of explaining a topic to my students. In Nancy Durate's aptly named book, *Resonate*, she cites Terrance Gargiulo: 'stories are precious gifts of attention that never stop gracing us with sense-giving and sense-making moments' (Durate, 2010, p.106). These words resonate with me because I hope my stories will resonate with you as my 'gifts of attention' to my past to help shed light on my living educational theory.

The use of storytelling has been used mainly as an imaginative tool in classrooms for children under eight (Hamilton & Weiss, 1994; Engel, 1995; Cazden, 1988). I have found story to be an equally powerful way to engage adults at university level when making abstract content more meaningful. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) reinforce my long held view that, as humans, we derive meaning from our experiences by telling stories. Collins and Cooper (1997) add that stories also enable us to comprehend other people's experiences.

If you want to understand who I am, personally, professionally and academically, and what motivates me to work the way I do, and the nature of my original contribution to knowledge, then you will need to hear the stories that help me to define who I am and what I have become. My past stories communicate my identity. Mc Adams (1997) also alludes to this argument in his book '*The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*'. He emphasises the importance of people getting to know their own story:

If you want to know me, then you must know my story for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story. (Mc Adams, 1997, p.11)

Ontology is my way of being in the world as a daughter, sister, friend, singer and educator. In my role as a religion teacher in post-primary school from 1990 to 2003, I used story and the parables found in scripture as a method of teaching. Stories were both the method and the content. By this, I mean that the telling of the story was a great method to engage students as the message was conveyed in the process. Using story in my teaching in Higher Education came naturally: it was just an extension of what I did when I sang a song or produced a concert using themes that linked together to tell a story. I also related to my family and friends through the use of stories. I found the use of narrative crucial in giving meaning and understanding to whatever I was trying to achieve in my work.

When using the story in Higher Education, both as a form of research and as a method of teaching, that ideal continued to hold true, at both levels of the education system, I drew on stories such as ‘The Starfish Story’, as recounted in Figure 01.5 to provoke reflection on how each of us can make a difference, irrespective of how little that difference seems to make at the time. The story demonstrates how a boy’s simple action of throwing dying starfish back into the sea makes a difference to each one that he picks up. It is an engaging story as I hope you will see in this short video



Video 01.2. [The Starfish Video](#)

A young boy was walking along a beach upon which thousands of starfish had been washed up during a terrible storm. When he came to each starfish, he would pick it up and throw it back into the ocean. People watched with amusement.

He had been doing this for some time when an older man approached him and said, "Little boy, why are you doing this? Look at this beach! You can't save all these starfish. You can't begin to make a difference!"

The boy seemed crushed, suddenly deflated. But after a few moments, he bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he looked up at the man and replied,

"Well, I made a difference to that one!"

The old man looked at the boy and thought about what he had done and said. Inspired, he joined the little boy in throwing starfish back into the sea. Soon others joined, and all the starfish were saved

Figure 01.5. The Starfish Story

Each student's response to that story is unique, shaped by his or her individual perspective, values, family background and gender, along with other elements and experiences that shaped their worldview. Using story in this way has made a difference to me. The stories I used all carry meanings that helped my students to understand their life experiences more fully. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. xxvi) confirm my own experience when they suggest: 'Experience is the stories people live, and in the telling of those stories, reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones'.

Story has been used in fields ranging from education to psychotherapy, (Bruner, 1996; Stone, 1996) but its usage has not been without criticism. Mar and Oatley (2008) dismissed the art of storytelling as being only a story for entertainment purposes, and so not worthy of attention. I disagree: In the infographic, I show how I have used story successfully in my teaching and learning at all levels of the education system.



Figure 01.6. My use of Story

In 2007, Pinnegar and Daynes claimed that most of the academic work at that time was non-narrative, and that most research work was based on quantitative data and positivist assumptions about cause, effect and proof. The authors report that any ‘turn’ from numbers to using words as data in narrative as a research method, is not a rejection of numbers but signals the researchers’ understanding of the value for human experience ‘in specific settings with certain people, (2007, p. 7). I am one of those researchers.

With the advent of portfolio and composition as forms of representation for academic research, and its acceptance at doctoral level in DCU, I have been able to integrate my use of video and music to tell my story as part of my academic offering. Eisner (1993) saw this development as imperative for the future of educational research and extending the representations used by educational researchers in communicating forms of understanding. DCU demonstrates great foresight in adopting a portfolio and compositional approach to representing and presenting research.

As I present my research inquiry, I am in agreement with Carter's thinking : 'Story has become, in other words, more than simply a rhetorical device for expressing sentiments about teachers or candidates for the teaching profession. It is now, rather a central focus for conducting research in the field.' (Carter, 1993, p.5).

Taking McAdams (1997) point that I have to get to know my own story, I have focused on particular vignettes in my life. By this I mean key times or in my life that give a particular insight or window into my being. These have given me an insight into how and why I do what I do and reveal my ontology. The vignettes also reveal the epistemology. I hope to demonstrate how these learning experiences from my past have become my living theories (Mc Niff, 2007).

Donald Schön (1988) discussed storytelling as a mode of reflection and suggests:

.....for storytelling is the mode of description best suited to transformation in new situations of action....
Stories are products of reflection, but we do not usually hold onto them long enough to make them objects of reflection in their own right.... When we get into the habit of recording our stories, we can look at them again, attending to the meanings we have built into them and attending, as well, to our strategies of narrative description. (p. 29)

This resonates with me. I have taken time to document my stories because I see them as integral to my living theory. I present them as the first panel of my triptych, which represents My Ontology.

In his book, *'The Tact of Teaching'*, Van Manen (1991) concludes that 'there has been a recognition that education needs to turn back to the world of experience' (p.9). He believes experience could open up understandings that restore a sense of 'embodied knowing'. In my thesis, I turn back to my own experience and tell the stories of social and religious mores of my time.

Some of the stories do not reference literature because I do not wish the continuity of the story to be interrupted by other voices. I am aware how interjections within stories or songs can change the mood of the narrative and lose a real connection. To be truly appreciated, stories and songs must flow naturally and allow the listener time to understand the feelings and sentiment being conveyed. I am an experiential learner and need to experience a work of art, a piece of academic work or a song in its entirety before I can converse with another person about it.

I draw a parallel with my own presentation of narratives, which are visual and need to be seen as a whole. To break the flow of my narrative by introducing references and readings is to break the very essence of what I, as singer or storyteller, am trying to create. It is important, however, that I analyse critically what has been presented. Conversation is usual after any performance or telling of a story, especially if it has evoked something within us that we want to share. Feelings experienced prompt conversation and reflection. I wish to do justice to my values through conversations with other writers but at a more appropriate time and after the telling of the stories.

The process of writing my past narratives has crystallised them further for me. In the writing, I have remembered characters long passed, and relived the goodness I witnessed in their midst and the values I absorbed as a consequence. Grimmett's & Erikson (1988) words ring true with me and also mirror why I have used stories from my own life to make sense of why I teach the way I do.

We formulate the truths we live by when making meaning of our lives. We come to understand how we make meaning of our lives when we reflect on our own personal narratives. In reflecting on my two narratives, I can come to understand what I found meaningful as a young student (at least from an adult's recollection) and, perhaps extrapolate from those experiences some truths which I live by in my teaching.

Through analysis of my stories I see my values emerging. The third panel represents my epistemology section and it is here that I will demonstrate how these values emerge in my teaching. As T. S Eliot (1888-1965) suggests in 'Burnt Norton': 'Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, And time future contained in time past'.



Free to Be



My School Days
The Younger Years



Community
of
Practice

Chapter One

The Formative Years

Chapter One

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Chapter One

The Formative Years

Section I: Free to be

Bridging the gap: it is never too late to say thank you

I marvel at the energy, love and care my mother showed by bringing me to so many educational activities when I was a young person. I did not appreciate my parents' commitment as fully back then, but I have since been able to express my gratitude. Their delight in this reinforces for me that it is never too late to acknowledge another's goodness and contribution to our wellbeing. I have dedicated songs to my parents, and written about them, as a tribute to their devotion to my education. Without it, I would not be the person I am.

In the country: free to be

My mother and father come from the counties of [Roscommon](#) and [Cavan](#) respectively. (Video 1.1) gives a cursory glance at my parents two birthplaces. Their homelands of Castlerea, Co Roscommon, to the west of Ireland, and Ballinagh, Co Cavan, to the north, were full of immense possibility for my brother and I. We enjoyed roaming the fields around my grandparents' houses. In one particular field in Cavan, we spent time imagining ourselves to be medieval soldiers as we jumped soggy bog holes to reach a dry little patch. This was our island, and was where we imagined the safety of our castle to be. We would sit, talk and play there for hours before returning hungry to the house, which was only a stone's throw away and within our sight.



Photo 1.1. Our Medieval world - Daragh and I playing at my grandparents house in Cavan



Video 1.1. [Born to be free - Down the Country.](#) (Crotty. 2012)

We lived in Clontarf in North of Dublin city, where we did not have the same freedom to roam. I was never really allowed out on the streets as a child, and it was only in my early teenage years that my parents permitted me to ‘hang around’ with friends. In practice, this meant standing outside a friend’s house and I suppose it was part of my rite of passage. My parents preferred that friends call to my house, and I understand that now. During these gatherings in my mid-teens, my friends and I would sit around singing songs and telling stories with my family. My house felt like a safe haven all my friends enjoyed visiting.

My busy schedule with sports, music, drama and dancing meant I had very little time for socialising casually when I was young. I was lucky enough to live beside 270 acres of St Anne's Park and five kilometres of sandy Dollymount beach, but until I was 12, I visited them only when my father accompanied me to help me train for athletic competitions as I tried to improve my times for the 100 metre sprint.

During my primary school days, my term-time schedule was intense. It included harp and piano lessons and music theory three times weekly. Irish dancing classes took up two evenings a week and Saturday mornings were absorbed supporting my brother's hurling and football matches after I finished camogie training. I started camogie when I was 12, when the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) set up a new ladies' section. I had focused previously on athletics. Irish dancing competitions, called feiseanna, were frequent events at weekends, while Sunday was allocated to going to Mass and to all things sporting. We usually supported my father's Gaelic football club, where he was chairman, manager and player, often at the clubhouse in Islandbridge, west Dublin.



Photo 1.2. Civil Service Football Club, [Islandbridge](#), Dublin.

We watched whatever inter-county football matches happened to be taking place in Croke Park, the main GAA stadium and headquarters. As children, we were well aware of the part Gaelic games played in our history and that the stadium was named in honour of Archbishop Dr. Croke, one of the GAA's founding members.

This routine dominated my life from September to July and it was always a welcome release to travel to Roscommon or Cavan during the summer to be free and to simply ‘be’. My parents were both teachers so we all had the same time off from school. I savoured the hours spent saving hay, walking in the countryside, picking berries for jam-making with my grandmother, smelling and tasting the honeysuckle with my cousins, and finding dock leaves with my grand-aunt to cool nettle stings. I was free from the pressures of having to be anywhere at a particular time. That sense of freedom and timelessness enabled my imagination to bring me to play at being anywhere and anything I wanted to be.



Photo 1.3. My brother, Daragh and I at Flemings Folly in Cavan

Let’s céilí

Céilí is the Irish word for an informal social gathering involving folk music, singing, dancing or storytelling. This was a tradition in the country areas but has mostly disappeared. The words ‘let’s ceilí’ resonate with me because they remind me of my grandmother, or Nana, as we called her affectionately, asking me to get ready to visit the neighbouring houses in Cashel, Ballinagh, Co Cavan. She was a very positive woman and her attitude was contagious. As a young girl, I loved to

socialise with her and meet the local families, including the Smiths, Cosgroves, Gaynors, Mc Cables and Bradys. I felt special being with her, and particularly enjoyed hearing stories about my dad and his siblings when they were young. The neighbours at these gatherings were usually in their mid-60s, and I relished the opportunity to hear any tales that might throw light on my ancestry. I felt lucky to accompany my Nana and catch a glimpse of her world. A teacher and a great storyteller herself, she would ask me to tell her friends what had happened in my life since I had last visited their houses. Usually, I ended up performing a new song or dance I had learned. I cherished the sense of safety, love, warmth and confidence I felt.



Photo 1.4. The Clan - My grandparents, grandaunt, parents and aunt with my cousin

Simply the best

My recollections of childhood are of very hot summers. I was an active child and loved outdoor life. In Cavan, my father made skittles for my brother and me to play bowling. The pins were not sophisticated and it was an adventure to help make them. We also had great fun practising our bowling constantly to ensure we knocked down the blocks of wood with one strike. When we were called in for tea, I would laugh and mimic the adults and ask if it was ok to have ‘one more for the road’. It was all very simple but enjoyable. Summer festivals were common in Cavan and

Roscommon. We went along as a family, and I partook in activities including athletics, novelty acts and singing. Sometimes in the evenings, I sang on my own or with my dad at town hall concerts. It was a very encouraging and nurturing environment.

Fishing with hope



Photo 1.5. Gone Fishing -Fishing at [Lough Oughter](#) in Cavan with my father and brother

Cavan is full of beautiful lakes. My uncle was an avid fisherman and sometimes brought my brother and me along with our cousins to fish on Lough Oughter, which is 8km outside Cavan town. My father accompanied us too. We first searched for worms and minnows, which are tiny fish used as bait to catch bigger fish. Fishing was a calming activity as we had to stay quiet to avoid frightening the fish. My uncle was an austere man, or so it seemed at that time, so I remained quiet initially for fear of upsetting him, not the fish. Ultimately, I learnt the value of being contemplative and present in the moment. Even if the only reflection that I did at that time was looking in the water, the remembered simplicity, tranquility and happiness remain a comfort for me today. As I sat with fishing rod in hand, I learned to have hope. One tug at my line was enough to sustain my interest and keep me optimistic.



Photo 1.6. ‘Sole’ fisherman - My brother Daragh fishing at the age of eight.

The richness of a story

So why have I selected these particular personal narratives to include in my research inquiry? For me, each one demonstrates the origin of a value or values by which I live. These life events have influenced why I do what I do. They are the experiences that helped make me someone who would sit up all night by a hospital bed to ensure my parents are looked after properly. My mother and father’s unconditional love was modelled on that of their own parents, which I was also fortunate enough to experience as a grandchild. My relationship with my family provided a security that helped me deal with any insecurity I felt in more hostile environments. I experienced love and a feeling of safety and that remembered feeling is integral to why I now want to recreate an educational environment where people feel included, safe and valued just for being themselves.

My interactions with the older folk during my childhood in Cavan and Roscommon were wholesome experiences. I was given a chance to mirror the skills and competencies of my grandmother and her friends. Bandura’s idea of modeling and social learning come to mind. A pioneer of the social aspects of the learning processes, Bandura’s research was about observational learning, imitation and modeling. He refuted Skinner’s claims about behaviourism because he felt

that it was derived from laboratory experiments rather than from the real life environments where we learn a lot by taking others as our models (Bandura, 1977).

It was during those childhood times that I had an opportunity to develop what Bandura referred to as social learning. My grandmother and grand-aunt were very positive and positivity can help us to build positive habits of thought, speech and behaviour into our lives. I later tried to emulate that way of being both when socialising and when listening to my own students. There was something very special about this type of childhood learning. Robinson (2009, p.38) describes stories as ‘trance-forming’. Such was the interest of my grandmother’s friends in me that I remember them to be trance-fixed on my every word. They showed a great respect for performers that stays with me today. I am often disappointed to hear people talk during anyone’s performance. I advised my music students to find songs with lyrics that meant something to them. When teaching, I always advise the Masters students to research something that is meaningful to them. (Ausubel, 1978).



Photo 1.7. Dancing at a Céilí in Ballinagh, Co Cavan

I flourished in this caring, encouraging and loving environment and knew the most important thing required of me was to understand what I was singing so I could connect with my audience. When I was practising a song alone, I focused on the meaning of words. The technicalities were incidental to these audiences because the values of fun and communication were at the heart of our céilís. I do remember that the technicalities were important to me: I felt, for example, that communication might be compromised if I began a song in too high or too low a key. In retrospect, my

subconscious fears from my own schooling may have made me think in that way. These people created an environment where it was safe to make mistakes once I remained true to myself. As a result, I improved any imperfections. I cannot emphasise enough how the values of care, trust, love and truth that prevailed during this formative period have served as a base for my own philosophy of teaching.

If a song is not technically right, the communication of the meaning is affected, but context is very important. If a young child is learning to sing, it is more important to affirm and encourage that child than to hone in on imperfections. Technique will improve naturally while the child is in a flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) and experiences satisfaction in the process of singing. Flow involves a loss of self-consciousness where time seems to stop, a feeling of being at ‘one with the music’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The person absorbed in the activity may seem to enjoy it, but Seligman points out that the sense experienced seems to be the opposite to the positive emotion of enjoyment.

When one is totally absorbed, no thoughts or feelings are present – even though one says afterward ‘that was fun’. Flow only occurs when you deploy your highest strengths and talents to meet the challenges that come your way and it is clear that flow facilitates learning. (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 296).

Looking back on my stories, I recall having spent countless hours playing skittles, singing songs, dancing and playing sport. I considered them enjoyable because I was totally absorbed. If I am to accept Seligman’s theory, those feelings of enjoyment may have come subsequently in recalling the events. Csikszentmihalyi’s idea of ‘flow’ is similar to Robinson’s notion of ‘element’ (Robinson and Aronica, 2010): when ‘in your element’, you are aware of the immense pleasure you are feeling. Thich Nhat Hanh (1992) said the basic condition for happiness is our consciousness of being happy. This perception reflects the reality of my childhood time. It also makes more sense in the light of Robinson and Aronica assertions that the state of being ‘in your element’ (2010, p.8) occurs when ‘the things that you love to do come together with the things that you are good at’. Perhaps the authors idea describes best what was happening when I sang for these people: I enjoyed it and was aware of that feeling of the satisfaction of knowing that I was good at performing. Naturally musical, I also worked hard to learn new words of songs and practised my diction and phrasing. Those repetitive activities showed that I was in a flow and absorbed in practice. This resulted in my ‘being in my element’ then singing for others because I had freedom to explore my talents. In my teaching, I see all students, adolescents or adults, as being as vulnerable initially as any young person singing for the first time. Given a safe environment, the

technicalities will come. With dedication, students will arrive in their flow and eventually reach a point of being in their element.

As an energetic child, remaining quiet was something that I had to learn. These stories illustrate the very busy lifestyle I led as a young girl. It was good to be occupied, but I also needed to learn how to value my own thoughts and take time to reflect on my actions. This usually took place during my visits to the country. During school terms, homework, sport and music seemed to implode any quiet time. Schön's (1983) 'reflection on action' and 'reflection in action' is something I only started to understand and value during teaching practice. Schön, sees reflection as an important aim of education, and believes people should 'acquire the general habit of reflecting'. The reflection 'in action' occurs in the midst of the action, and in my case this occurred when I was teaching. The reflection 'on action' occurs retrospectively when there is time to stand back from the situation. Arendt's (1971) 'stop and think' links closely with this thinking: there is time to look back to the action to see how it could be improved for future practice. I was forced to 'reflect in action' about how to manage a difficult student in the middle of class. Subsequent 'reflection on action' afforded me an opportunity to have a deeper understanding of how I could better have managed the situation.

This discipline of reflection had been introduced to me when I went fishing with my uncle from the time I was eight years of age. It was a challenge to sit quietly with my cousins because I was intent on talking while they wanted to fish. As I remained quiet in the one place, I was forced to stay with my own thoughts. Mindfulness helped me to focus on the nature of my ongoing experience and what was actually happening. Over the years, my ability to reflect improved but seeds of reflection had been set many years ago.

Reflection is vital and making time for it is equally important. As a teacher of Religious Education in a post-primary school, I introduced reflection in the form of a meditation to give the girls time to reflect on the discussions that had taken place in class. My scheduling of quiet time for 30 students, in which they could experience meditation through lying on a chapel floor, allowed them into a quiet reflective safe place. When we analysed the activity afterwards, it also proved a very worthwhile experience for them. I was always amazed how some of the students labelled as having attention deficit disorder (ADD) - a behavioral disorder, enjoyed these sessions and behaved themselves perfectly for the 40 minutes. Likewise, in DCU, I have introduced journal writing as a mandatory practice both for undergraduate and postgraduate students. In today's world, I find it

necessary to take time to reflect ‘deliberately’. Blaise Pascal (1623 -1692), the French philosopher, once said problems all arise from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone. Like my days fishing, my requirement of reflection journals in teaching and learning starts as a challenge and a duty for my students but develops into a more worthwhile meaningful autonomous exercise that is habit forming. As an educational activity, it allows students to take time out to reflect on their learning. This will be explored further in my epistemology section.

My story of being ‘free to be’ in the country emphasises the importance of having simply to ‘be’. It was during these periods that I was most creative because I had time to be at one with nature. Free time meant I could carve out a world from the landscape in which I could lose myself in endless possibilities. On returning to Dublin, the memories transcended the location and I was back to my country habitat whenever I needed to draw on that time to be creative. It saddens me to think that the increase in digital viewing and playing of computer games has led to the decrease in this type of active, physical play (Anderson et. al., 2008). Young people need time to use their imagination and go beyond the closed environment of a digital game. I am an advocate of technology, but it is also my belief that my time in the country enhanced how I use software creatively. Without those exploratory experiences, I would be void of the imaginative input to produce the resources.

The skittle story highlights the importance of simplicity. The fun I had in the process of being creative while bowling is also an important aspect of that story. The fun sustained my interest, in searching for wooden blocks, setting them up and knocking them down, before setting them up, over and over again. I recall my father’s saying ‘necessity is the mother of invention’ and I adopted this thinking whenever a situation arose in my teaching career where funds did not seem to be available to buy resources. I tried to think laterally, keep things simple and be. Using simple homemade steady-cams is one example at higher-level education of how I resourced a multi-media section of the programme. The wooden skittles had worked for us because they were simple. Along with being fun, the adventure taught us that there was little point in lamenting what we did not have and instead to do what we could with available resources.

In an education system that values achievements, children are driven to achieve in order to feel that they are worth something. The research tells us that praising achievements can be counterproductive. If I had been praised for my singing only, I may have felt that I had to sing an equally excellent song every time to earn more praise. If I had sung less than perfectly, I could have

felt that my Nana and her friends would not have seen me as worthwhile. This was how I felt sometimes in school because some teachers created insecurity within the classroom and we felt that we had to get everything perfect to be worthwhile (Fox Eades, 2008). Later, as a teacher, I realised the value of praising students' efforts. The students knew I valued them for their hard work even if they did not succeed. In my role as a music teacher, I knew they all had the ability to make the effort but that not everyone had the chance or talent to achieve a lead role in a musical. I felt this approach to using praise and encouragement built more robust and resilient learners and more secure and motivated youngsters (Dweck, 2007; Fox Eades, 2008).

The next section tells of my younger years in school and shows how the praise I received in my times in the countryside sustained me through my primary years and went a long way to helping me become a more secure and motivated teacher.

Section II: My school days – the younger years

To begin this section, I have to emphasise that I was a happy child. My memories of day-to-day events during my early primary school days are quite vague. Nevertheless, I remember vividly the faces and names of the 46 girls who were in my class for eight years. They were not unhappy times, but I cannot remember them as joyful either. Fear of appearing to be stupid is the overarching feeling that remains with me. Threats and inducing guilt seemed to be the tools of discipline most implemented by my first teacher. If you did not know something, the teacher told everyone or shamed you into doing something for fear of the disapproval of your mother, father or principal. I presume that the purpose was to motivate us to work harder but for a five- to seven-year-old child this treatment seemed a little harsh.

As an educator, I now wonder at the pedagogical reasoning that underpinned the formation of this kind of learning environment for children. It had an adverse effect on me as a child and brought me to the point of paralysis because I was afraid of answering questions for fear of answering incorrectly. We had three teachers for the first eight years of schooling, from infants to sixth class. My first teacher was near retirement age so there was at least a generation gap in energy levels between her and our class of four- to seven –year-olds. I longed for the kindness at school that I experienced with my family.

During infants through to senior infants, we were not given much play time and were also expected to eat our lunch indoors. I am not sure whether this was because of constant bad weather or because it was a preference of our teacher, who felt supervising children in the yard would take up too much energy. A broken wendy-house stood at the back of the classroom. A wendy-house is a small playhouse for children, large enough for one or more children to enter so in a class of 46 girls equity was not possible. It was left unoccupied for the year. Instead, our play time consisted of talking quietly with the children on either side of us. The fear was that doing anything different could mean being sent to the principal. The principal was a kind woman so we did not fear that outcome as much as we feared hearing the raised angry voice of our teacher. We were a well-behaved class and few of us were ever sent to the principal.

My experience of education in the senior section of primary school was more pleasant. Learning from years seven to nine were animated and interactive because of this teacher's more engaging style. She had a warm manner and fear did not dominate her classroom in any way for the 18

months we spent in her care. For the final three years, we had a teacher with the same traditional style as my first teacher.

I acknowledge that my final primary teacher was a very erudite woman. Although her methods were not particularly engaging, they were effective and well intentioned. Over the three years in her care, we learned the rudiments of writing the English and Irish language. Our comprehensive command of Irish vocabulary put us at an advantage to that of our peers when we first began in post-primary. We also knew our maths tables by heart. It was no coincidence that a great number from this primary class were placed in the top stream when we started in an all-girls post-primary. This can only be attributed to the extensive amount of work she had covered with us. Nonetheless, they were very fearful years. We worked very hard at our studies but there was an anxiety and lack of enjoyment in the learning process.

A memory that remains with me to this day is the 'lazy row' in fourth, fifth and sixth class, from the ages of nine to twelve. My three good friends, to whom I still remain close, were in the *good* group of six. The lazy group contained 10 girls who may have had what we would now call learning difficulties. They were not lazy and certainly were not badly behaved. Like the rest of us, they were too afraid to say anything. Whatever the problem, they needed care and attention. As an adult, I mourn the lost opportunity for these vulnerable young children. Instead of being a place where they found solace and security, school highlighted their limitations. Their feelings were never considered. An atmosphere created by the teacher around this group told the rest of us that we would end up like these children if we did not work harder.

I feel a sense of pain for these classmates and hope they found happiness and the care they deserved and did not find at school during those formative years. Two of them since took their own lives and I often wonder if there is a connection. I try to ensure in teaching that I always keep an open mind and never label anyone: the world is too colourful and creative a place to categorise people into boxes.

Harry Chapin, the American singer/songwriter, was inspired to write the song 'Flowers are Red' after his secretary's son came home from school with a report card saying he had been playing a rhythm out of line with the other drummers. In the correspondence to Chapin's parents, the school reassured them their son would be at the next performance with the marching band playing like

everyone else. Chapin knew the boy was a good musician but was using a different approach to the rhythm. His song addresses the whole issue of trying to mould children into seeing things from a linear one-dimensional perspective that results ultimately in non-critical thinking. This resonates deeply with me as I recall the conformist way in which we were forced to behave at school. I have since recorded the song and have developed it into a teaching resource for both undergraduate and postgraduate students to prompt a mindful approach and emphasise the importance of fostering people's creativity and critical thinking skills at any age. These are the words of the song:

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>FLOWERS ARE RED</i></p> <p><i>The little boy went first day of school He got some crayons and started to draw He put colors all over the paper For colors was what he saw And the teacher said.. What you doin' young man I'm paintin' flowers he said She said... It's not the time for art young man And anyway flowers are green and red There's a time for everything young man And a way it should be done You've got to show concern for everyone else For you're not the only one</i></p> <p><i>And she said...</i> <i>Flowers are red young man Green leaves are green There's no need to see flowers any other way Than the way they always have been seen</i></p> <p><i>But the little boy said...</i> <i>There are so many colors in the rainbow So many colors in the morning sun So many colors in the flower and I see every one</i></p> <p><i>Well the teacher said.. You're sassy There's ways that things should be And you'll paint flowers the way they are So repeat after me.....</i></p>	<p><i>Chorus.</i> <i>But the little boy said...</i> <i>There are so many colors in the rainbow So many colors in the morning sun So many colors in the flower and I see every one</i></p> <p><i>The teacher put him in a corner She said.. It's for your own good.. And you won't come out 'til you get it right And all responding like you should Well finally he got lonely Frightened thoughts filled his head And he went up to the teacher And this is what he said.. and he said</i></p> <p><i>Flowers are red, green leaves are green There's no need to see flowers any other way Than the way they always have been seen</i></p> <p><i>Time went by like it always does And they moved to another town And the little boy went to another school And this is what he found The teacher there was smilin' She said...Painting should be fun And there are so many colors in a flower So let's use every one</i></p> <p><i>But that little boy painted flowers In neat rows of green and red And when the teacher asked him why This is what he said.. and he said</i></p> <p><i>Flowers are red, green leaves are green There's no need to see flowers any other way Than the way they always have been seen.</i></p>
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Figure 1.1. Flowers are Red Lyrics

As in the lyrics of the song, we were never encouraged to critically think for ourselves while in primary school. Possibly, to think differently may have proved too challenging for our teachers. There were three main groups in the class in the final years: the excellent group, the good group and the lazy group. Most of the class were in the good group. The irony was that my close friends told me some years later that they had not benefited from being labelled as excellent because it had affected their confidence. They had not wanted to be seen as something extraordinary but instead had wanted to be normal. Some spoke of their fear of not being that special. As was evidenced later in post-primary, these girls were intelligent but others in the middle section of the class had smart intellects too. The excellent group enjoyed post primary school because unlike their primary schooling, they were not set apart from anyone and felt more included in the class grouping.

On deeper consideration of this method of labelling children, it has occurred to me only recently that the 'good' group hailed from the same locality in North Dublin. Some of the students in the 'lazy' row were from a working class area. My own experience, as a teacher in a working class area of Dublin, showed me that you cannot generalise. Suzanne, one of my friends, remembers how one incident had led her to feel a tremendous guilt for taking sides when the teacher had made the class vote on whether I should be put amongst the dunces for a day because I had forgotten my homework. Incidentally, my brother had brought it with him to school by mistake. I had no memory of the voting incident, but did remember the upsetting outcome that resulted in my demotion for the day to 'lazy row' status. To this day I remain cognisant of the power educators hold over people and the responsibilities I bear in supporting students to fulfil their potential as opposed to crushing their confidence with pedagogically unsound methodologies. I support the idea that we should turn to the 'open avenues of learning and gift-creation for all' (Hymer, 2009, p. 6).

Play less fun: - we had no 'act' in it

In retrospect, my life in primary school was a very serious place to be and there was no fun and games other than at lunchtime. Even these break times were monitored very strictly. Despite the fact that I started school the same year as a revision of the curriculum for primary schools entitled *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) was written, I experienced very little of a schooling based on a philosophy of education that incorporated the following three primary aims of primary education:

- to enable the child to live a full life as a child and to *realise his or her potential as a unique* individual

- to enable the child to develop as a *social being* through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society
- to prepare the child for further education and *lifelong learning*.

(updated Primary School Curriculum 1999, p.7)

Since that time, over three and half decades ago, there has been a notable change in policy and legislation to protect children as seen below:

1991	Childcare Act
1992	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
1996	Quality Targets in Services for Young Children
1998	National Forum on Early Childhood Education Strengthening Families for Life Education Act
1999	Best Health for Children Developing a Partnership with Families Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Childhood Education Primary School Curriculum Children First – National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children National Childcare Strategy, Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare
2000	National Children’s Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme Education (Welfare) Act
2001	Children Act

2002	Investing in Parenthood to achieve best health for children: The Supporting Parents Strategy Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
2004	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act

Figure 1.2. Policy and legislation changes in Irish children’s law

Recent reports such as *Síolta* published by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2006) and *Aistear* published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) brought welcome change. The first of these reports, *Síolta*, was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education on behalf of the DES. It was published in 2006 after a three-year developmental process that involved consultation with over 50 organisations representing childcare workers, teachers, parents, policy makers, researchers and other interested parties. The second report, *Aistear*, is for all children from birth to six years. The NCCA published *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Aistear in 2009*. It too was the outcome of extensive research, consultation, planning, and development by the NCCA in partnership with the early childhood sector. The advent of these reports somewhat alleviates the regret I feel around not having been part of a warm, fun-loving school environment where ‘relevant and meaningful experiences make learning more enjoyable and positive for children’ (NCCA, 2009, p.11). The recognition of the importance of play as a context for learning and development and ‘as central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child’ (DES, 2006, p.9) gives me hope that there is a movement to counteract the harsh learning environment my friends and I experienced. These framework documents build on the learning environment that promotes the ‘uniqueness of the child’ and to instill a ‘child’s sense of wonder and natural curiosity’ talked about in the updated primary school curriculum (DES,1999).

As a pedagogue, I can now see the positive impact play has on children and how it can link with their sense of wonder and natural curiosity to bring about positive change and development. I

advocate continually the importance of incorporating fun and play into the curriculum for adult learners studying for their Masters degrees in the area of Career Guidance and Counselling and Education and Training Management (elearning). My own negative experience as an infant in school has prompted me to particularly encourage early childhood teachers to introduce play as a very powerful way for children to learn. Fun and play are very important ingredients for successful learning across all levels of the education system and outside school.

The Aistear Learning Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009, p.53) categorises play into the following five groups:

1. Language play;
2. Games with rules;
3. Pretend play;
4. Physical play;
5. Creative play.

Through telling stories, focusing on words and rhymes, *language play* can improve children's vocabulary and language skills. Using board *games with rules* highlights how collaboration, fairness and working as a team enhance problem solving and cognitive thinking development. *Role play or pretend play* builds on children's listening, problem solving and cognitive skills. In pretend play, children learn to substitute one object for another, which is a representational skill needed for reading. We all played in the schoolyard for lunch breaks, which benefitted our control and direction, balance, hand/eye co-ordination and spatial awareness, but this *physical play* only occurred more in the senior part of primary school. Nevertheless, my active life in the country and playing with my brother and cousins, along with beginning Irish dancing at the age of five, helped to develop the skills *physical play* offers.



Photo 1.8. Irish Dancing in the St Patrick’s Day Parade

There could have been more room in the earlier primary school years for the development of our fine motor skills, the movements that use small muscles in the fingers, hands and wrists, if we had partaken in more creative artistic play. This was a subject area of little interest to our first teacher as I remember her telling our class we had been too messy with paint to continue with the task. Another six-year-old and good friend, Áine, was chastised when she went ahead with her painting instead of remaining with the rest of us. This event triggered my thinking around the Harry Chapin song. Our punishment resulted in not being allocated any art time for the rest of the year. The activity of reading and writing was the main focus of these junior years.

Type of play	Description
Creative	<p>Creative play involves children exploring and using their bodies and materials to make and do things and to share their feelings, ideas and thoughts. They enjoy being creative by dancing, painting, playing with junk and recycled materials, working with play-dough and clay, and using their imaginations.</p>
Games with rules	<p>Another type of play involves games with rules. Even babies and toddlers can partake in these, as <i>peek-a-boo</i> and turn-taking games have rules. In the beginning children often play by their own rather flexible rules! In time they also partake in more conventional games with ‘external’ rules. Language is an important part of games with rules as children explain, question and negotiate the rules. Rules are often an important part of pretend play where children negotiate rules about what can and can’t be done.</p>

<p>Language</p>	<p>Language play involves children playing with sounds and words. It includes unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of these, often with rhythmic and repetitive elements. Children like playing with language – enjoying patterns, sounds and nonsense words. They also love jokes and funny stories.</p>
<p>Physical Play</p>	<p>Physical play involves children developing, practising and refining bodily movements and control. It includes whole body and limb movements, co-ordination and balance. These activities involve physical movements for their own sake and enjoyment. Children gain control over their gross motor skills first before refining their fine motor skills.</p> <p>Exploratory play involves children using physical skills and their senses to find out what things feel like and what can be done with them. Children explore their own bodies and then they explore the things in their environment.</p> <p>Manipulative play involves practising and refining motor skills. This type of play enhances physical dexterity and hand-eye co-ordination. Over time children need to experience a range of different levels of manipulation if they are to refine their motor skills. This type of play includes manipulating objects and materials.</p> <p>Constructive play involves building something using natural and manufactured materials. As children develop, this type of play can become more complex and intricate.</p>
<p>Pretend Play</p>	<p>Pretend, dramatic, make-believe, role, and fantasy play involves children using their imaginations. It includes pretending with objects, actions and situations. As children grow, their imaginations and their play become increasingly complex. Children use their developing language to move from thinking in the concrete to thinking in the abstract. They make up stories and scenarios. Children act out real events and they also take part in fantasy play about things that are not real, such as fairies or super heroes. Children try out roles, occupations and experiences in their pretend play.</p> <p>Early literary and numeracy are clearly evident in this type of play, for example children make lists and menus and pay for cinema tickets. They also get the chance to play with different forms of ICT such as mobile phones, keyboards, cameras, and calculators.</p> <p>Small world play involves children using small-scale representations of real things like animals, people, cars, and train sets as play props.</p> <p>Socio-dramatic play involves children playing with other children and/or adults. It provides opportunities for children to make friends, to negotiate with others, and to develop their communication skills. This play helps extend language. The ability to write stories also has its roots in socio-dramatic play.</p>

Figure 1.3. Play guidelines adapted from The Aistear Learning Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009, p.53)

My own artistic needs were met when my mother brought me to the National Art Gallery for a free week of art classes held annually. The gallery was teeming with many budding artists and the occasion mirrors for me what was highlighted in a position paper by Jolongo in 2003 published in the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) that every child has a right to creative thought and expression. This annual event tried to provide an opportunity for us children to express ourselves practically and creatively. This progressive child-centred, democratic approach to education as supported by John Dewey (1859–1952) and Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) was, unfortunately, lacking in my school because ‘learning by doing’ in art, music and drama did not feature. We did however, read *about* doing all these things rather than exploring them creatively. It was the education system where we were at the mercy of one teacher’s personal subject preference for long periods at a time. As it happened, my teachers possessed a passion for reading and writing. This kept happy the majority of parents who had expectations about children developing their reading and writing skills. The parents did not understand the importance of play as a learning tool at this level (Nic Craith & Fay, 2008). This methodological approach did not consider the impact that this type of learning would have. Egan (2001, p. 4) argues that ‘we can easily introduce literacy in ways that suppress some of these oral capacities and as a result, diminish children's imaginations’.

I agree with the ACEI when it suggests in reference to students:

We need to do more than prepare them to become cogs in the machinery of commerce. The international community needs resourceful, imaginative, inventive, and ethical problem solvers who will make a significant contribution, not only to the Information Age in which we currently live, but beyond to ages that we can barely envision (Jalongo, 2003).

I believe that the seeds for this kind of creative innovative thinking need to be set as far back as the early years of our childhood through playful enjoyable learning so that children can begin to express themselves creatively. As an educator, over the years I have tried to make up for the lost years of creativity where we have fallen foul of an education system that has managed to educate people out of their creativity (Robinson and Aronica, 2010).

In his book ‘*The Tact of Teaching*’ Van Manen suggests:

An educator needs to believe in children. Specifically he or she needs to believe in the possibilities and goodness of the particular children for whom he or she had responsibilities. My belief in a child strengthens that child - provided of course that the child experiences my trust as something real and something positive (Van Manen, 1991, p.167).

This sense of trust where children feel safe enough to be creative needs to originate with the educator. Trust was replaced by fear during my formative years at school. The climate of fear we

experienced, regardless of what we achieved, was at a cost to our feeling of wellbeing and happiness. I found little creativity in the system.

My interpretation of the word fear is as a very strong negative emotion that I perceive to be a response to an imminent danger. It is not an emotion I have experienced many times in my adult life as I have learned to manage any fears that I have experienced. When I use the word in relation to my early school years, it is because it was a deep-seated, intense emotion that was at times crippling. Over the years, I embraced and worked my way through challenges and saw them more as creating anxieties rather than fear. I became ‘fearless’ in the way Wheatley (2002, p.4) suggests. In ‘*Turning to One Another*’, Wheatley refers to the need for us to become fearless:

Fear is everywhere these days, and it’s only increasing. Fear destroys human capacity; therefore, we are called to be fearless. Fearless doesn’t mean that we are free of fear. It means we learn how to face our fear so that it stops controlling us ... If we don’t learn how to move past our fears, we will not be able to host conversations or become active on behalf of this troubled, still beautiful world (Wheatley, 2002, p. 4).

From a more mature perspective, I see fear as having existential connotations. For example, when teaching in a school in West Dublin, I witnessed students’ fear when their houses and lives were under threat because of their families’ involvement in local feuds. Parents feared for their lives and those of their children when money lenders came chasing. In religion classes, I showed documentaries to my students in which we witnessed the faces of those who lived in fear of their lives while defending their religious beliefs. A fear of failure that causes the spirit and self-worth to die can bring people to a point of paralysis comparable with the feeling of fear people experience in war zones. I recently felt a fear when I did not know whether my mother was going to survive a serious illness. It affected me physically because I feared intensely that she would die, but I chose to let fear take control of me because the situation was beyond my control.

I can accept the notion of fear put forward by Ben-Shahar (2007), the psychologist, who developed the concept of ‘stretch zones’. However, his meaning of the word fear does not equate with my understanding of it. Ben-Shahar (*ibid*) says learning spaces involve a certain amount of fear and uncertainty to allow you to move into your stretch zone. My understanding of his concept is that moving beyond your comfort zone takes courage because you know there is a risk of failure. In my view, this is more aptly described as anxiety or worry. Being afraid is transient in this context and not akin to the constant state of fear that dominated my classroom from 4-7 and 9-12 years of age, where we were often stretched beyond a comfort zone into the “panic zone” referred to by Ben-Shahar (*ibid*). I have experienced stretch zones many times in my adult life, and have learnt

through the challenges involved. When in this panic zone, there is a feeling of being overwhelmed. In my teaching, I pay particular attention to the importance of creating a safe space where people can make mistakes, move beyond their comfort zones and feel they are part of a process which, although challenging, is intrinsically rewarding.

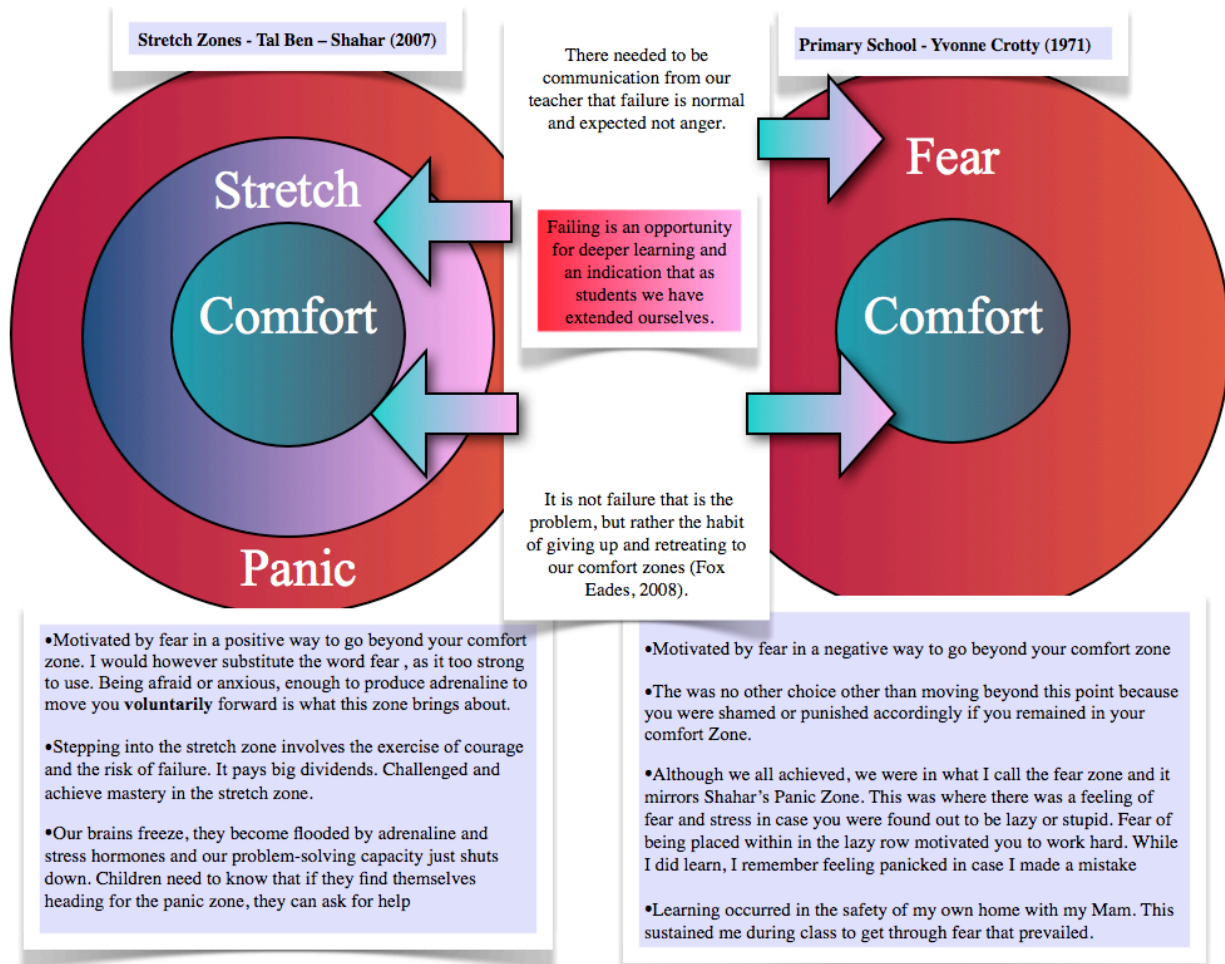


Figure 1.4. Our Stretch Zones

Fear is not a word with positive associations for me. In a world where fear dominates the lives of so many people struggling to survive, I fail to see how the same emotion could have had any other than an insidious negative impact on us. Vinoba Bhave, a primary school teacher who was a spiritual successor to Mahatma Gandhi, worked on the development of education based on the highest virtue that is fearlessness. According to Fisher (2010), Bhave believed this was the basis for emancipatory education: ‘The goal of education must be freedom from fear ...Until education is really based on fearlessness there is no hope of any change in society’ (p.6).

My experience of using a positive, fearless approach to teaching has been rewarding. I have enjoyed exchanging the autocratic environment I knew at school for a more democratic one where I introduce values of trust and safety to improve students' wellbeing of the students. This is a secure environment where students can be creative and paint flowers any colour they choose without fear of being exposed as being anything other than unique.

I wonder about the wellbeing of my fellow primary school students told daily that they were lazy and not good enough when I consider studies such as The Pygmalion Effect, carried out by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1966). Their study suggests that students live by other people's expectations of them. Brehm, et al. (2007) and Tauber, (1998) believe that one's expectations about a person can eventually lead that person to behave and achieve in ways that confirm those expectations'. The study carried out in elementary school tested students' intellect and then named some randomly as academic bloomers to be highlighted by their teachers. A repeat Test of General Ability (TOGA) at the end of the year revealed that the students labelled as academic bloomers had a more significant increase than their peers. The study drew criticism on the grounds that the TOGA tests were fundamentally flawed because they were administered by teachers, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1966) claimed 'expectations could influence students'.

The low expectations the teacher had of these students, coupled with the social rejection they experienced, would certainly not comply with the guidelines for children's wellbeing and the importance of nurturing equality and diversity:

Nurturing equality and diversity is important in early childhood. Promoting equality is about creating a fairer society in which everyone can participate equally with the opportunity to fulfil his/her potential. Diversity is about welcoming and valuing individual and group differences, and understanding and celebrating difference as part of life. (Aistear's Learning Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009, p.8)

Although I am unaware of the socio-economic backgrounds of the 10 children placed last in my class, I do recognise the social rejection they experienced by being grouped together. Research carried out by Eisenberger, Jarcho, Lieberman & Naliboff (2006) suggests that social rejection activates the same place in the brain activated by real physical pain. Zull (2011, p.76) points to the growing research suggesting that the suffering that one experiences when excluded from the group is one of the most common and damaging experiences of school. Zull reports on a neuro-imaging studies carried out on people rejected by a group playing a virtual ball tossing game, finding that the area of the brain associated with this social rejection were very similar to the areas activated when physical pain is experienced.

In the next section, I address my experiences in post-primary school as I leave the fear of primary school behind and embark on a fearless journey of belonging to a community of learners.

Section III: The Community of Practice

In order to embrace future change, it is vital that we are able to critically reflect on our past and current learning experiences. (Alheit, cited in Illeris, 2009, p. 116 -128)

Post-primary schooling: 'to be or not to be'

As a post-primary student in a very traditional academic school, I experienced a very strong emphasis on the teaching of language and mathematics. If someone was excellent at maths, they were deemed very intelligent. An excellent music or art student was seen to be very talented with no reference to intelligence. Dewey (1933) said schools in a democracy should teach children how to think, not what to think. With the exception of maths, most subjects called on my ability to memorise rather than to develop an ability to think. This approach impacted on me because it was very linear. Trying to remember information for exams disengaged me, as it did most of my peers. I had a very good memory so I did well academically. I always learned through association of words with people, places and things. In the teaching of these subjects at school, there was little emphasis on how much the student understood the content by the end of a class session. The task of memorising the information, for a later date, was compromised because of the superficial nature of students' understanding of the subject.

My school friends and I are all professionals now, which demonstrates that the system worked at one level. However, in conversations with classmates from my schooldays I am reminded that our educational experience could have been more enjoyable and meaningful. In post-primary school, I was fortunate to know my classmates very well because the majority of this cohort had been my peers since primary school. As teenagers, we were close and had good fun together in school, although healthy competition kept our attention focused. We shared knowledge during the class breaks and these interactions often provided the seeds of understanding needed to unlock difficult concepts. This informal learning and collaboration was the connection we needed to analyse critically what we were learning. I believe that it was a key skill for each of us in our future success. Gee (2004) draws our attention to a notion that has been long associated with school, where we have been taught that pleasure is fun and learning is work, and therefore work is not synonymous with fun.

As a student, I enjoyed the practical aspect of learning and being involved in projects that involved using visual representations that helped me understand the concepts that we were learning. Like

Dewey (1859 -1952), I believe ‘education should not be a preparation for life because education is life itself’. My experience as a pupil in a post-primary is that a holistic practical approach to education was missing. Most of my learning involved writing assignments. Outside school, I was experiencing involvement with music, singing, Irish dancing and sport, which were different and invaluable learning opportunities, as most of the classroom resources in our lessons were text-based. We did not experience the use of visuals to enhance subject matter, apart from some illustrations in books. In general, the teachers were didactic in their methodological approach and there was little true engagement between teacher and student.

One notable exception was a dynamic English teacher, Elizabeth McCullagh, who inspired creativity and encouraged cross-curricular activities. Mrs Mc Cullagh’s learning to learn approach fostered authentic learning. We analysed stories, poems and drama critically. This approach was not just about developing skills but having a deeper comprehension. The teacher demonstrated her beliefs and values, while at the same time being versatile enough to engender in us the desire and enthusiasm to learn. Although we explored dated literary works, interactive group projects planned around these works brought us into the real world of lifelong learning.

To give one memorable example, we worked on one project in groups to draw life-size images of Shakespearean characters that were later displayed at a public exhibition entitled ‘Visions’. While creating cutout characters, we were asked to summarise each of the characteristics attributed to the cast of the Shakespearian drama on our course. This exercise captured our attention and allowed us to lose ourselves in the task at hand and learn in a similar process to the ‘flow’ experience as described by Csíkszentmihályi (1975). It was inclusive and absorbing, and our knowledge, understanding and collaborative skills were developed through first-hand practical experience and evaluation. I felt it was important for all of us that our work was of the highest quality and we were proud to show it. It is no coincidence that the majority of the class achieved top-honours grades in this subject when assessed in our National State Examinations at both Intermediate Certificate (now renamed Junior Certificate) and Leaving Certificate levels.

My teachers were methodical and worked hard to ensure we would achieve high marks, but I feel that it should not be all about the mark at the cost of inspiring us to connect with the subject content. I can remember the process and feelings around rote learning as a group but I cannot remember the content of what we were repeating. This was certainly not the way to connect with any subject. Experience since made me realise that the school system often militates against hard-

working teachers trying to break from tradition to try new methodologies. The fear within schools is that the teachers' efforts would fail and result in lower marks for their students, a chance that could not be taken in a points-driven society.

In my capacity as a coordinator of the MEME programme, I am delighted to be able to support traditional-style teachers who are eager to change and feel safe with me as support in that transition. They are making great progress in transforming subject content and revitalising themselves and their students in the process. One science teacher I am supervising for her masters brought me back to my own experience of science while in third year in post-primary. I took part in the Young Scientist Exhibition with two friends in 1982. Aisling subsequently became a doctor and Anne took a non-scientific route to become a lawyer.

At that time, I enjoyed the experimental work that had been involved in the project. However, my love of science changed at Leaving Certificate level because of the change to more theoretical non-experimental methods.

Since I became involved in an EU Seventh Framework Inquiry-Based Science Education project as explained in video 1.2. I can see that a more inquiry-based approach was lacking. I do not forget the care of the teacher but, unfortunately, I disengaged with the subject because learning terms for regurgitation in the exam hall did not appeal to my learning style. Had I been made more aware why we needed to understand the practicality of the terms, I might have engaged more with the learning process.



Video 1.2. [Pathway to inquiry based learning European Seventh Framework project](#)

Overall in my post-primary education I think that emphasis on student understanding was only one of the teachers' many agendas. In retrospect I am sure the teachers were concerned that we understood but their effort to ensure that this was the case seemed array and they appeared to be solely focused on summative examinations with interim tests. If teachers had adopted a Teaching for Understanding approach, that would have required them to ask the questions of the following kind:

'How do I decide what is important for my students to learn?'

'What are my students really getting out of this class?'

'How can I make my class mean more to students other than getting points in their Leaving Cert?'

'Can the learning be transferable to another area of their life in the future?'

As a student, I would have found a Teaching for Understanding (TfU) approach, as advocated by Perkins and Gardner, far more meaningful. As Principal Investigators of Project Zero, which is based at Harvard Graduate School of Education, Perkins (1994, p.6) recognised that
'..understanding is being able to carry out a variety of "performances" that show one's understanding of a topic and, at the same time, advances it. We call such performances "understanding performances" or "performances of understanding'

As an educator I realise that having a TfU approach might have entailed a whole new restructuring of curricula and contain risks on the behalf of the teacher that they were not willing to take. Instead the overarching concern that content was learned word for word to reproduce in our exams remained the dominant methodology within our classes. However, in contrast I endeavour to counteract what I experienced in order to make learning more creative and innovative. This involves risk-taking as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve my objectives. These are all characteristics of the entrepreneurial spirit positively modelled from my childhood in the country or as antithesis to what I experienced in my schooling. In the next chapter I will explore my musical and sporting years and explain how they have contributed to my values of passion, care and excellence.



Chapter Two

On a Different Note

A Game of Two Halves

The Sporting Years

The Musical Years

Chapter Two

On a Different Note - A Game of Two Halves

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Chapter Two

On a Different Note - A Game of Two Halves

Section I: The Sporting Years

Introduction

Sport was always a huge part of my family life and dominated most Sundays because my father was chairman of a GAA football club in Islandbridge, Dublin. The GAA (www.gaa.ie) is a volunteer organisation that aims to develop and promote Gaelic games, and which is at the core of Irish identity and culture. GAA clubs were, and still are, part of the very fibre of our society and the influence of their philosophy of inclusion, participation and lifelong learning stretches far beyond the game itself. In addition to playing on the senior team, my father managed an intermediate level team. Being immersed in this sporting tradition gave me a deep understanding of the games of football and hurling, which transferred easily when I started playing the game of camogie at 13. [Camogie](#) is an Irish stick-and-ball team sport played by women, which is almost identical to the game of hurling played by men.

Team building

As I trained with my team on Tuesday and Thursday nights, I learned to understand the value of the commitment required to achieve the levels of fitness needed to win matches. Having competed in athletics, I was aware of the personal benefits of regular training. I had practised repeatedly for the 100m and 200m sprints in the community games and this taught me the importance of endurance. The photo 2.1 shows my success as a 13 year old girl in the local parish community games which was part of the [Clontarf](#) Community Festival.



Photo 2.1. Sports Award - 12 years old

Overall, I knew that my lack of personal fitness would have implications on the team if I could not maintain the pace of the game. Such was the team bond that we did not want to let anyone else down. I knew I was an important part of the team and I knew the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. Sport encouraged me to experience a sense of excellence. Success required mental resilience, hunger to achieve and commitment to an overall goal. The goal might have been simply to knock one second off my running time for the 100m, or alternatively trying to score a goal to win the Senior Leinster School's Camogie Final. I achieved these goals by believing that I could, and by applying determination and very hard work. I learnt to interact with people and understand what they needed from me, whether I was playing as a midfielder, goalie, forward or back.

I played in all positions at different times and each place taught me to view the game from a different perspective. I remember, as a full- and centre-forward, willing the ball to come down to my half of the field so I could score goals. As a back, or goalie, I loved being in possession of the ball and relished the opportunity to save a shot when it came straight for me. It was invigorating to catch the sliotar (ball) and immediately 'puck' (hit) it down to the far end of the pitch. This enabled me to understand the importance of not standing back to let someone else get the ball but of instead taking control. A 'puck out' is when the ball is hit out from a goal, usually by the goalie, to resume play after it has gone over the end line. I remember clearly one time I scored a goal from the puck out, when the sliotar (ball) landed in the square in front of the goal and caught the goalie off guard. This incident has always encouraged me to aim for goals that may seem out of reach but are not

beyond possibility. I have used it since as a metaphor for life. I value excellence but I also know that it comes from working at your talent. I am reminded of Dweck's book, '*Mindset*', where she tells the story of how discipline helped Michael Jordan, the famous basketball player, rise to excellence. After winning or losing matches, Jordan would return home to practise for hours. Jordan is famously quoted as saying:

I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed. http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Michael_Jordan

As a young player, I benefited greatly through sports in terms of my own personal development. I knew I had a responsibility to treat others with fairness and respect. We all embraced these values on a personal level, and we grew collectively as a team. We were joyous when we won together and, more importantly, we learned how to lose graciously. Despite my hunger for success, I was always aware that it was only a game and being with the players mattered as much to me as the match itself. I certainly cannot recall the number of wins we had, but I remember the team players because of the feelings of joy, pride, sadness and courage that I experienced with them. My mantra was that there was no 'I' in team. As I planned for success with my team, I also learned about the bigger picture of life. I realised, for example, that real commitment must also mean attending those weekly camogie practices and finding yourself on the sideline when the match comes around.

I am fortunate that injury never prevented me from playing and I always got a chance to play the full match, but I remember one girl on the squad who gave a commitment for years but very rarely got to play a match. Our squad was 12 players and usually four other reserve players. Many girls joined the panel but left because they did not get to play on the team, but Miriam continued to attend training sessions and matches. As the years went by, people's commitment waned and she began to get her game. Some years back, at a club reunion, a few of us were talking about who we would most want in the line of the defence. Miriam was nominated because she was tenacious and no one would get the ball when she had it. During her years on the sideline, she seemed to have built up a mental resilience that enabled her to cope with anything the game dealt her. She had always been happy for us when we had won. It was obvious that she was learning her lesson from the sideline and I have since learned mine. Miriam taught me to presume little, because anything is possible with hard work and commitment. Bruce Jenner, a decathlon gold medalist in 1976, attributed his win to the fact that he had dyslexia. In trying to surmount his special need, he learned

how to get on in life by working hard. I realise that it is not beyond possibility for most people to reach their goal provided they are prepared to put in the hard work.



Photo 2.2. Post-Primary School Junior Camogie team

Sport taught me well - the impact it had on my teaching

So what was it about my sporting years that had an influence on my personal and professional life? What seeds were sown that have grown to impact on the way I am as an educator now? My sporting years provided me with ample opportunities to experience fairness and learn how coping mechanisms to deal with disappointment. My ability to communicate with others improved as I learnt to show empathy to my team members, offering support and encouragement. This stood me in good stead when I started my teaching career. Adhering to the rules and regulations laid down by the GAA, I learnt to value a disciplinary system that protected its players and upheld values such as honesty, generosity, sportsmanship and commitment. Community and team-work are also values at the heart of the GAA.

My ability to ‘reflect in action’ (Schön, 1983) was certainly tested by the quick pace of camogie matches. Reflection ‘*on* our action’ took place at the end of the match when we analysed collectively how we could have worked together better as a team. Reflecting on the sporting years in my life has highlighted to me the invaluable lessons I learned regarding taking instruction on board and also dealing with constructive criticism. Those are lessons I brought into my own teaching in post-primary school and Higher Education and into my supervision of teachers on initial teacher education programmes. The post-match reflections also called on us to take responsibility for what we had done and the process always helped to consolidate our overall sense of the meaning of being a team. Integral to the GAA was a sense of creating an environment that looked after its members and kept them safe:

Everyone involved in our sports and activities should accept the roles and responsibilities that they undertake as we commit ourselves to maintaining an enjoyable and safe environment for all. The safeguarding of our members will always be a key priority as we recognise that the welfare of the child is of paramount importance in our work.

http://www.gaa.ie/content/documents/publications/child_welfare/Section3_Code_of_Behavior_for_all_Persons_Working_with_Young_People_100111131125.pdf (p. 42)

Belonging to a bigger unit was something I valued especially because I came from a smaller family. There was something special about being a part of an association that was unique to the Irish culture yet known and respected worldwide. My experience of the GAA, globally, nationally, and locally, gave me a sense of connection and inclusion. Being steeped in this culture, as an observer and participant, I experienced that sense of safety and individuality that I had not witnessed in primary school. The association’s philosophy informed my need as an educator to recreate an inclusive environment where people are free to grow:

The philosophy that the GAA has adopted in the promotion of our Games recognises that every young person has the right to enjoy an inclusive, safe and supportive environment. This we can achieve through the manner in which we coach our young players, play our games, recruit our managers and other personnel and by adopting good practice procedures that ensure players’ needs are catered for in a balanced and holistic way.

(http://www.gaa.ie/content/documents/publications/child_welfare/Section15_Child_Welfare_and_Protection_in_Sport_100111133231.pdf p.42)



Photo 2.3. School Senior Camogie Team in Croke Park

The picture above shows our team in Croke Park 1985 when we won the Senior Leinster schoolgirls Camogie final. The three adults in the photo from Left to Right were very dedicated to sport. Our Principal (Back row, Left,) for my final two years in school was Sr. Una Collins. She was a great supporter of the Camogie team and was later to prove to be a great help to me personally when choosing a career path. Sr. Margarita (Back row, second from right,) had pure passion for sport and her dedication at weekly training sessions carrying sticks is representative of her physical strength as well as being reflective of her strength in character. Mrs O Mahony (Back row, right) had incredible discipline and was a very dedicated and committed coach.

Section II: The Musical Years

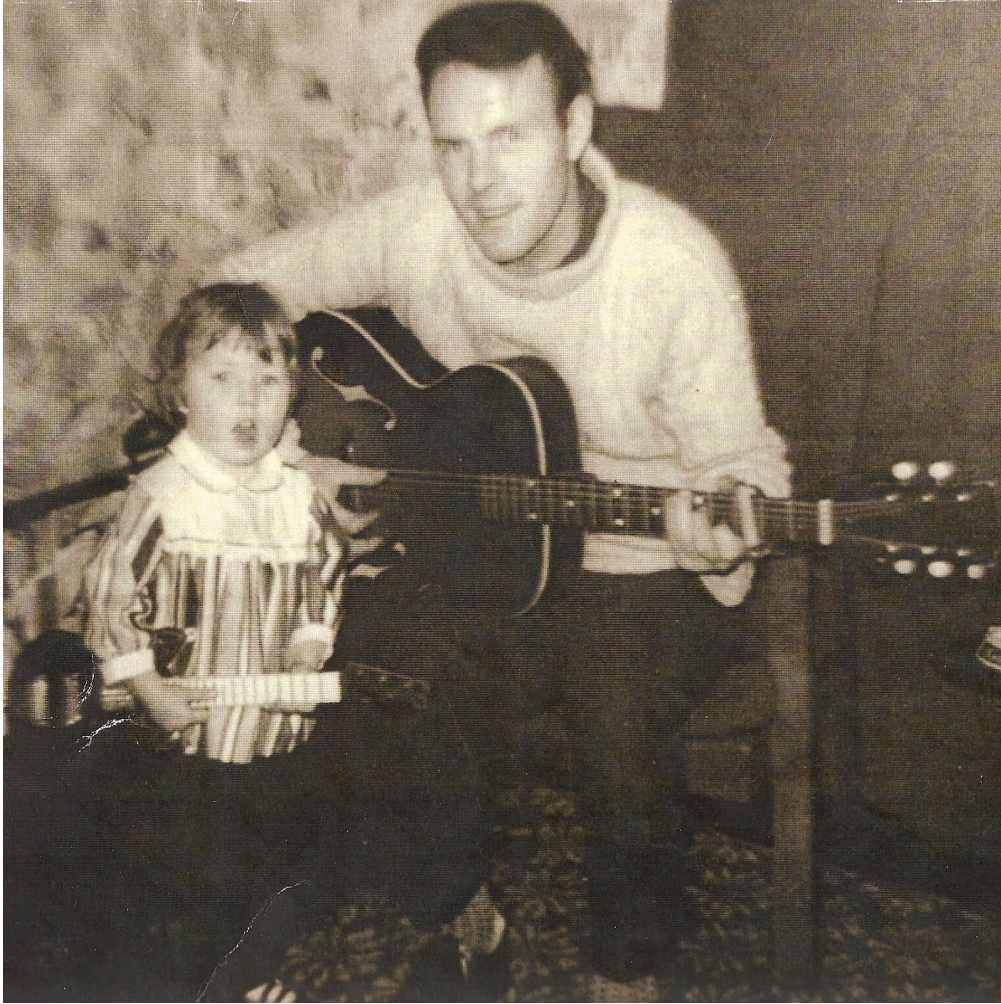


Photo 2. 4. Singing with my Father at the age of three years

Some sing low and some sing higher

My father grew up in a musical family. He sang and also played the piano, piano-accordion and the guitar. From a young age, I remember my mother telling me that she could not sing. At social occasions, when she was called upon to sing, my father, brother and I would smile and say politely that Mam's culinary skills were excellent but she could not hold a tune. We didn't believe that she could sing, and wanted to protect her from embarrassment. Mam had previously told us a nun had not allowed her into the choir because of her lack of musical talent. Respectful of authority, my mother channeled her energies into other subjects.

There are two aspects of my mother's failure to get into the choir that link to my own experience in post-primary school. As a post-primary student, I was heartbroken when I auditioned for the top choir and was instead included in the 'alternative' choir. Our choir teacher told us each Monday

morning we had just spent two 40-minute classes desecrating songs. In another room, meanwhile, the chosen singers were learning three and four-part harmony melodies in preparation for Christmas festivities and choral competitions. I was 13 and studying for my grade six examination with the Irish Associated Board of Music in piano and harp. I was able to read the music notation the teacher was using to accompany the choirs. I remember my friends in the top choir encouraging me to ask their choir mistress, if I could switch. Reassuringly, they told me my exclusion must have been a mistake. I reacted similarly to my mother, afraid initially to approach anyone in case that would be considered impudent. Unlike my mother, I later took the opportunity to raise the issue with my class tutor, who said it was too late to change. While disappointed, took comfort in getting the lyrics from my best friend and learning the tunes they were performing when I was at home. Practising with my friends at break-times made me happy and I was delighted to join in from the audience when they were performing at the Christmas concert.

The sense of worthlessness experienced by students in the alternative choir was tangible. These students regularly alluded to themselves as ‘crows’. This was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thomas’ (1928, p. 527) words are relevant to my narrative: ‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.’ We were labelled the not-so-great choir and so lived up to that expectation. The lack of enthusiasm on the part of our teacher, who showed her despair at having this type of group every year, made the situation worse. Performing was a key activity that could have been nurtured at this time, but we never performed as a group even though there was talent among us. Performance might have focused our attention and encouraged us collectively to rise to the challenge. I feel this was a wasted opportunity for all, because a teacher has the power inspire and change.

Nevertheless, I was philosophical about my disappointment. I had confidence in my ability because of the affirmation I had secured through playing a lead role in the College of Music’s operetta and winning various singing competitions outside school. My singing had not been validated in school, but had been by my Nana and her friends, whose support of my efforts helped sustain my confidence. All these musical encounters influenced my decision to teach music, produce musicals and sing in a harmony group I co-founded with four others, which is named Acabella www.acabella.com Thankfully, my experiences with my family, grandmother and her friends nurtured my passion for music and my schooling did not impact negatively on my love of music in

later life. These early experiences did, however, shape my thinking on how not to approach my teaching of music or production of musical events.

Later, in my capacity as a music teacher I crossed paths with the teacher of the 'A' choir at choral competitions. We both had very different styles but were equally as successful. She was an excellent and well-known choir mistress and it was through her accomplished no-nonsense policies that she achieved high standards with her choirs. In retrospect, she was probably very busy at that time without having to deal with the concern of one girl's hope for entering her choir. Nevertheless, it was experiences like these that helped me in the teaching of music and to realise the importance of Emily Dickinson words in the poem 'If I Can Stop One Heart From Breaking':

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain*
(Emily Dickinson, 1830–1886)

I have always tried to listen to someone's concern, no matter how busy I have been. It has sometimes been very challenging and I know that, like with the 'A' choir teacher on that occasion, I have not always succeeded.

All through my years of practising piano and harp, I could not reconcile my mother's supposed lack of musical talent with how she knew if my rhythm or notes were incorrect. She spent countless hours listening to help me improve and often asked me to repeat the parts to ensure that they sounded right. She had an ability to hear the first few notes of a tune and name the melody immediately. It was only years later in my early 30s, when I came across her singing in the kitchen, that I realised she had a singing voice. It was a small voice because of its lack of use, but it was very musical.

As a music teacher, I am well aware that people can be in denial about their singing ability. We only have to look at some of the entrants on television shows such as the X Factor to witness this. As a teacher and producer, I had to manage sensitive situations where students needed a lot of work

to get them to a point of musicality. My own past experiences helped to guide me in choosing the right words and in giving constructive criticism. Through research, and my own experience, I have learned that having just one adult who believes in you makes you feel valued and gives you hope in yourself. This is also confirmed in the literature (Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987). I was careful about how I encouraged and discouraged students' involvement in singing. I wanted them to experience the fullness that music has to offer in their lives, irrespective of whether they had a good voice.

My experience of teaching music, coupled with my mother's less than positive experience, has confirmed for me that to be musical is not synonymous with having a good singing voice.

Listening to someone's music in their soul can be the sweetest sound, and this can only happen through inclusion, not exclusion. If we are quick to exclude, without really listening to the voice of another, then we fail to be in a position to hear what is being said. Margaret Hillis says listening is the key to producing a beautiful sound when singing and maintains that singers should listen to themselves because it gives balance. I would argue that this is something that we should apply not only to music but in approaching life. This is also emphasised by Frazes when referring to Hillis work;

When a chorus listens to itself, it immediately informs them of balance, blend, unison within sections and intonation. Their act of listening makes a tremendous difference to the sound ... It is not a natural process and requires regular reminders from the podium. (Frazes, 2002, p.15)

The art of listening is integral to being a good educator. A consequence of having a good ear for music is that I am very attentive to sounds. A sigh may denote displeasure or lack of contentment, a quiet voice may show a lack of confidence, silence may depict fear. Music has given me the ability to hear how the various sounds within an educational environment need to be addressed. Adhering to my values of passion and inclusion has helped me to bring music to the heart of all I teach. Aware that people learn in various ways, I used the lyrics of songs to engage students who may otherwise have opted out. Using songs helps evoke student's auditory learning styles when using other text might have disengaged them. Keeping material relevant was important for me as a teacher and I knew this from my own days learning piano and harp with a very old-fashioned austere teachers who disliked using modern sheet music.



Photo 2.5. Practising the harp

Classical music was their preferred genre and their teaching style did not instill any passion for the instruments, though it did give me the technicalities required for playing the instruments. If not for my mother's love of music, her musicality and commitment to my musical education, I may not have continued with the lessons as long as I did. It was only later in life, when I was free to learn the music that appealed to me, that I began to enjoy fully the process of learning music. I do have a deep appreciation for classical music, but feel that there is a need to capture the student's attention first with relevant popular music while simultaneously teaching the more technical piece that classical music provides.

My own experience of piano lessons affected how I approached the teaching of music. I aimed to bring a sense of balance to keep students' interest while still remaining inclusive. The word choir had negative connotations as many students associated choirs with singing more classical or gregorian chant style of singing. To avoid that perception, I always referred to my students as being involved in 'a singing group'. I was aware of the technicalities involved in singing, and the importance of warming up the voice, so taught all the exercises associated with classical music but found modern pieces that contained the necessary passages to practise them and make the rehearsals relevant and enjoyable. I relate to what Davison (1971) says when speaking about my role as a conductor in those singing practices 'A rehearsal should be enjoyable in the widest sense. The conductor or singer who does not anticipate the fun, as well as the artistic profit, should stay at home' (p.9). Nevertheless I was always aware from as young an age as seven what Decker and Herford say: 'While a well-trained voice is an asset, the purpose and the quality of demonstration is more important' (Decker & Herford, 1988, p.97).

The idea of performing in front of another person motivated me and ensured that my singing or playing was of a high standard. The prospect of a performance always sharpened the focus of my practice. I was mindful that my performance needed to be enjoyed by others and not endured. Irrespective of who was in the room with me, I would pretend I was on stage with a large audience listening. When I was seven, Santa Claus gave me a tape-recorder. He wrote to me every year until I was 12, expressing his delight that I had done so well in my music exams. My visual literacy skills were not as good then as now because I failed to recognise my father's writing. On receiving the tape recorder, I amused myself in my dining room pretending I was a presenter with Radio Teilifís Eireann (the Irish broadcasting television station). I recorded many tapes of myself playing the harp and piano and singing songs, enabling me to listen back and see if I could improve what I was doing. This iterative process provided me with much fun as I used the process as a method to focus and perform better every time.



Audio 2.1. Recording time at Christmas (aged 7)

An old recording, (Audio 2.1) from that time gives you the sense of the fun I derived as a young girl engaged in this activity. I later employed this method in my teaching. I recorded students on video and they watched it back and asked if they could they do it again to improve. This process allowed the students to evaluate their own performance without my pushing them, much as I had done when I recorded myself at seven.

As a music teacher, I have been surprised at the impact that instilling belief into a student achieves. Green (2008), in her project Musical Futures in England, calls on teachers to draw on informal popular music as a classroom resource that will engage and connect with students and develop their passion and enthusiasm for the subject. It was a project such as this that my secondary choir teacher could have employed in order to get the best out of the alternative choir.



One Step in the Right Direction

One Step Beyond

One Step Further

Chapter Three

Three Steps to Heaven

Chapter Three

Three Steps to Heaven

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Chapter Three

Three Steps to Heaven

Section I: A Step in the Right Direction

Providence: things happen for a reason.

This narrative chronicles a period of my life as a teacher from the early 1990s in Coláiste Bríde post-primary girls' school in Clondalkin, west Dublin. There were few, if any, times I did not enjoy there. Returning to the educational environment in my new role gave me a chance to relish learning all over again. I sought to create a secure environment for my students as we tried to learn together. I had a great love of learning, for me nurtured mostly outside school as a youth, and had found that there was nothing as satisfactory as the pleasure of discovery, understanding and taking pride in being able to converse about new issues and information.

Clondalkin village is ten kilometres west of Dublin. It has a wealth of culture and is home to an eighth-century round tower that serves as a focal point. My appointment to teach in an all-girls post-primary there attracted many comments and it amazed me that people were ready to condemn a whole village because of negative newspaper headlines. I met regularly with quizzical looks from people surprised that I was alive and smiling despite working in a place with such a reputation. I was very protective of the area because my experience was positive. I found it to be a friendly place with a community of people who were willing, unfailingly, to support the school. For this community, the school was not just a building in isolation from the rest of the village but at the very heart of the area. There was a secure familial feel that mirrored the same warmth and sense of inclusion that I loved about my times in the country: it was a community that supported its people. The fact that it had been had been a picturesque country village before becoming a busy satellite town of Dublin had influenced this sense of place.

My time as a teacher in the school was punctuated by memorable experiences that helped me to grow personally and professionally. Coláiste Bríde was a Presentation Sisters school with a Catholic ethos. I will return to this later in my memoirs of my Nano Nagle years of my life there. Sr. Assumpta was my first principal and her management style gave me freedom once again to 'be' myself. I remember feeling as if I had been transported back to the fields of Cavan; once again, I

was experiencing the same freedom to be creative. Sr. Assumpta interviewed me for my job in a very short, business-like interview. She was matter of fact in her way, and abrupt at times, but I later experienced her as a loving and kind person. She fostered a very creative environment because she trusted the teachers to do their job. A clever and astute woman, she was at all times aware of what was going on in the school and would comment constructively and critically on an initiative only after it had been tried. She was supportive of events and never responded negatively to any of my requests to organise them. This encouraged me to work hard, and think of all possible eventualities, so that she would not regret having granted permission.

When I first accepted the teaching position, I was a little concerned whether the culture of this all-girls convent school would mirror the very academic and fragmented environment of my own all-girls post-primary schooling. The previous year, I had carried out teaching practice in a well-managed community school in Dublin's Tallaght. I felt I would prefer a position in this type of mixed school because I had found it to be a very appealing, vibrant, balanced teaching environment. I accepted the position at Coláiste Bríde hesitantly and was undecided for a while whether I had made the right decision. A watershed moment occurred during a parent/teacher meeting at the end of my first year when a mother expressed her gratitude to me for helping her daughter to settle in post-primary.

I had known her daughter had come from St Mary's Primary School for deaf students on the Navan Road and that she was finding it difficult to adjust to the challenges presented by our hearing school. Teachers had to wear special microphones around their necks so she could hear and this immediately set her apart from the other students. Earlier in the year, I had learned through casual conversation with the girl that she missed the security of her old primary school because there had been a real understanding there of her disability. In further discussion, I discovered that her going to Coláiste Bríde had been her mother's idea and she had not wanted to disappoint her Mam. I empathised by explaining that I was not sure about the school either as I had wished to teach in a mixed environment as a change from what I had known growing up. I said I was prepared to really give the school a chance if she tried to give it a chance too. We made a pact and went our separate ways as I joked about the familiar saying that faraway hills are greener. This incident helped me personally and I reflected on my own words as I began to focus on what I had and dismiss thoughts of what might have been had I another position in another school.

The following day, as I entered the classroom to teach, I saw her rushing past me crying because she had been teased by other students. On the strength of my conversation with her the previous day, the protective side of me was prompted into delivering a passionate lecture to the class that changed the course of their journey as a group. Highlighting the hurt she must have felt, and the hurt I felt as a human being looking at their behaviour towards their peer, made them reflect. Over the following months, the group dynamic changed and the bond grew stronger. We had fun learning together and they were very mindful of their new-found friend. Suzanne is married now in Canada, with children, and has many friends from that class who were at her wedding. One of the ringleaders who had teased her, Edel, is now a fully-qualified primary school teacher in England. Throughout Edel's remaining years in post-primary, she showed evidence of care and leadership as she coached others and won sportsperson of the year in sixth year. At the parent teacher meeting, I thanked Suzanne's mother for the beautiful gift that she and her husband had given me. Her confusion said it all; it was Suzanne who had bought the present herself and not her parents. This had a transformative effect on me and from that day I never looked back.

Interested to know how Suzanne now felt about that period I contacted her recently through Facebook, unsure that she would even answer or even remember the incident.

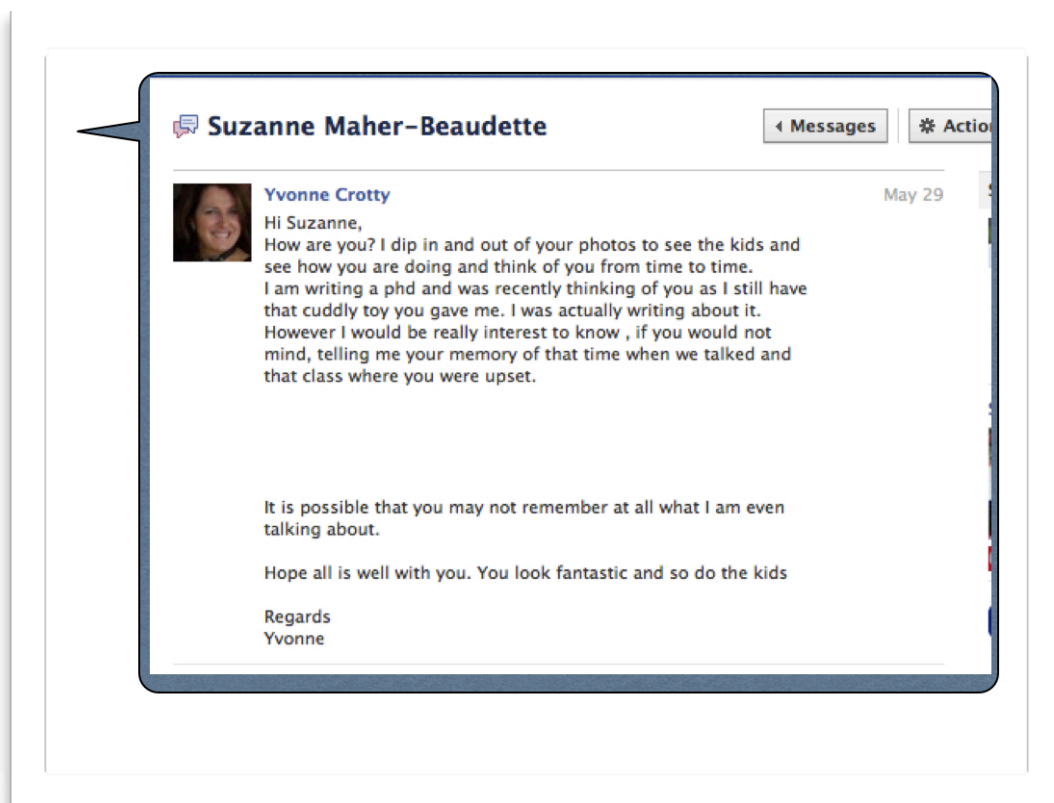


Figure 3.1. Facebook message to Suzanne

I was touched to see in her reply how transformative that incident had been in her life too, and I noted how reflective and aware she was of her own situation. Her feeling of isolation during that period was startling for me to read and her comments highlight the gravity of what may have happened had I dismissed the incident as teenagers ‘who will get over it in time’. I had heard many such comments during my years of teaching and had tried to draw attention at those times to the importance of the pastoral role of educators in helping to guide young people. The extract I have chosen from Suzanne’s reply demonstrates how closely aligned our interpretation of the period was. I am so glad that I took the time to care about her. It is incidents like these throughout my teaching that continue to make me mindful of the importance of prioritising people and of taking time to make a difference even when busy. Overall, I have found in life that these are replenishing experiences that no amount of status or money could replace.

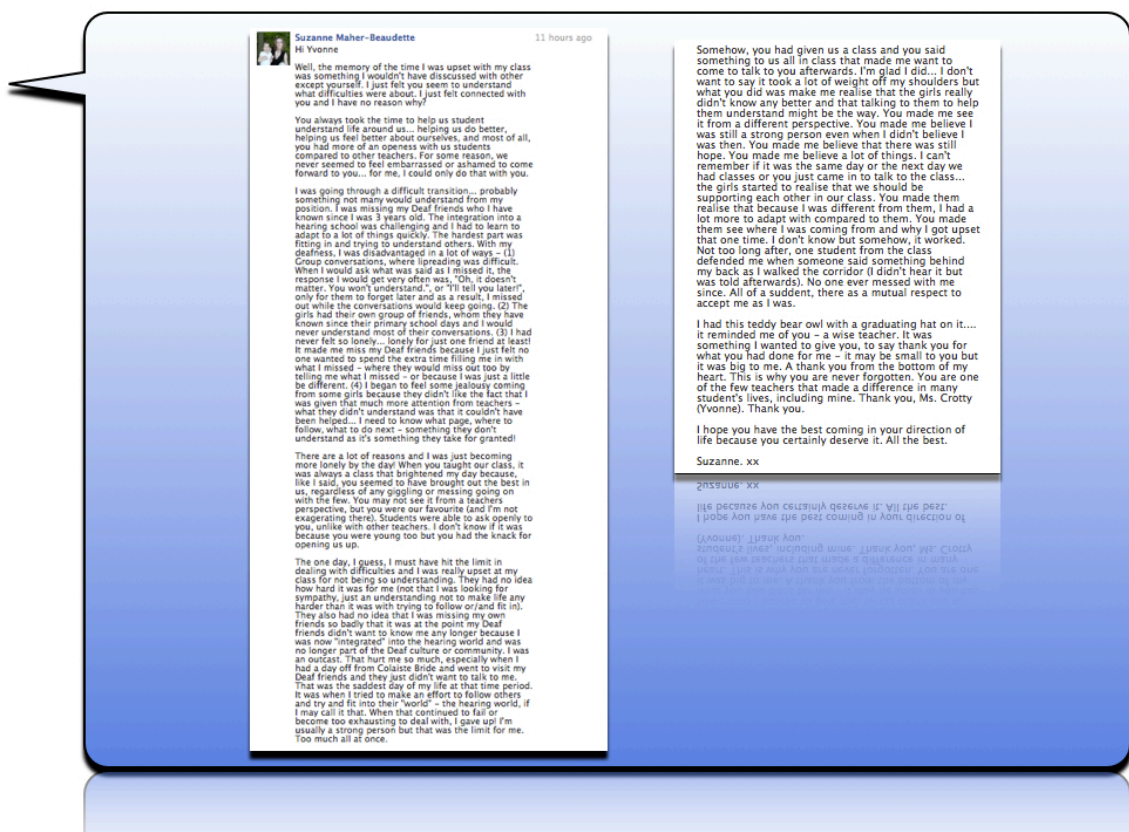


Figure 3.2. Facebook response from Suzanne (Text below)

I was just becoming more lonely by the day! When you taught our class, it was always a class that brightened my day because, like I said, you seemed to have brought out the best in us, regardless of any giggling or messing going on with the few...

Then one day, I guess, I must have hit the limit in dealing with difficulties and I was really upset at my class for not being understanding. They had no idea how hard it was for me (not that I was looking for sympathy, just an understanding not to make life any harder than it was with trying to fit in). They also had no idea that I was missing my own friends so badly and that it was at that point my Deaf friends didn't want to know me any longer because I was now "integrated" into the hearing world and was no longer part of their Deaf culture. I was an outcast. That hurt me so much. That was the saddest day of my life at that time. It was when I tried to make an effort to follow others and try and fit into their "world" - the hearing world, if I may call it that. When that continued to fail or become too exhausting to deal with, I gave up! I'm usually a strong person but that was the limit for me...

Somehow, you had given us a class and you said something to us all in class that made me want to come to talk to you afterwards. I'm glad I did... I don't want to say it took a lot of weight off my shoulders but what you did was make me realise that the girls really didn't know any better and that talking to them to help them understand might be the way. You made me see it from a different perspective. You made me believe I was still a strong person even when I didn't believe I was then. You made me believe that there was still hope...

You made them realise that because I was different from them, I had a lot more to adapt with compared to them. You made them see where I was coming from and why I got upset that one time. I don't know but somehow, it worked. Not too long after, one student from the class defended me when someone said something behind my back as I walked the corridor (I didn't hear it but was told afterwards). No one ever messed with me since. All of a sudden, there was a mutual respect to accept me as I was...

I had this teddy bear owl with a graduating hat on it.... it reminded me of you - a wise teacher. It was something I wanted to give you, to say thank you for what you had done for me - it may be small to you but it was big to me. A thank you from the bottom of my heart. This is why you are never forgotten. You are one of the teachers that made a difference in many students lives, including mine. Thank you, Ms. Crotty (Yvonne). Thank you.

(S. Maher-Beaudette, personal communication, June 10, 2012)

The Wiser Owl

I received great support from a group of more experienced teachers whose knowledge proved invaluable in helping my transition to teaching. They became more than colleagues and grew to be great friends. They were there to help whenever I was organising anything related to the school. In my capacity as a music and religion teacher, I enjoyed organising many charity and musical events. Religion and music connected as subjects because the religious calendar also meant organising some musical liturgical events. These were seminal times in my career and provided me with endless opportunities to learn my craft as a director, producer, teacher, project manager, fundraiser and many other things.

My first sixth-year graduation mass paved the way for many subsequent events I organised in my career. Some sixth-year students were unhappy at that time that one of the other choir teachers were preparing Latin songs. They felt disconnected from this language and wanted the songs to be

more meaningful to them. This was a delicate situation because I understood their point of view but also felt sad that they did not appreciate what the other teacher was trying to achieve. She was one of the best choir teachers I had ever met and could hear a melody and write the notes on paper at lightning speed. Some students did not value the classical training they were getting from her but through discussion and compromise I negotiated that we would sing a medley of songs chosen by them after the final blessing. This involved all students joining the smaller choir and singing as a group from the altar. It worked well, sounded beautiful and adhered to the Mass regulations of not using secular music within the ceremony. To this day, the tradition of a final school medley remains for the graduation Mass in Coláiste Bríde. The irony is that there is a different choir mistress and no more Latin songs. All songs are now chosen by the students.

This first event gave me a taste for organising bigger events. Every December, I organised Christmas concerts in the school hall. Over the years, as my skill-set improved, the concerts improved. As I grew more accustomed to my surroundings and students, I became more adventurous in my undertakings. The annual variety concert showcased talent from the whole school as I tried to incorporate all groups in one way or another. I was fortunate to have every class group for either religion or music. What I did not unearth by using the story of the ‘parable of the talents’ in religion class, I discovered through music class. I had all Junior Certificate students for a class of choir each week (though I did not call it choir because of the negative connotations the word seemed to have). I had all sixth-years because I devised a rota involving eight-week modules that meant each of the four religion teachers had the sixth years at some stage. This worked very well and promoted great collegiality amongst the team of religion teachers. The system also afforded me a chance to discover other talents in students because I was usually organising some type of event. I derived immense pleasure from seeing someone unleash the goodness that lay within, and that goodness or talent did not have to be musical.

My experience of organising school events over the years confirmed for me that post-primary students benefited greatly from being able to apply themselves to real-life situations. In organising concerts, (Video 3.2) fashion shows, dramas and student community weeks (Photo 3.4) and through producing charity CDs, I witnessed the students’ joy and enthusiasm in participation. They flourished as people. On many occasions, I saw the more troublesome demonstrate how focused they could be when given a chance to shine. The feeling of being included gave students a sense of worth and they rose to any challenge presented to them. They welcomed the responsibility and I

was there to facilitate their learning as we co-created educational spaces. At many times, the transformation was almost incredible and very rewarding to see as a teacher. When I was working with students, there was invariably a sense that anything was possible. We conspired together to make things happen in an enjoyable way. The students' joy was infectious. Together we mobilised other teachers into being involved in projects where otherwise they may have been reticent.

I loved being involved with the fashion shows as it really showed me a side to students I did not get a chance to see when teaching in class. As a result it enhanced my teaching of French and Irish classes because of the relationships that had been formed during these events.
(S. White, post-primary teacher, Coláiste Bríde, personal communication, December 14, 2011)

One particular memory is of collaborating with a group of senior students in 1999 to produce a magazine called 'On Track', targeted specifically at teenage wheelchair users. Through class discussion on values, and specifically on values around inclusion, we had identified that most teenage magazines were targeted at able-bodied students. Many years of involvement in a volunteer capacity with the Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) prompted me to address this gap. I particularly wanted to honour a lovely, fun-loving student in our school who was a wheelchair user and who died from an inherited disease known as Friedreich's Ataxia. This illness causes progressive damage to the nervous system and her heart eventually gave way at eighteen years old. There was a tremendous sense of loss in the school community when Aideen passed away.



Photo 3.1. Aideen with David Hall from Make a wish Foundation (1998)

Along with Jennifer, another wheelchair user, she had helped to bring about an awareness of accessibility that made our school a richer place. There was a great sense of care for Aideen. When she initially got ill, teachers set up a rota to bring her to and from school every day. As a tribute, I also wanted to produce a concert that involved the whole Clondalkin community to coincide with the launch of the ‘On Track’ magazine. The sense of compassion and sensitivity I witnessed in the students as they collated that magazine, and their pursuit of excellence, was overwhelming. The project allowed students to learn as they incorporated their design and literacy skills into a very fruitful production. It involved introducing the use of computers in a real way and the space that I co-created to complete the project meant I learnt to become adept at using technology. The IWA later disseminated the magazine to all young wheelchair users nationally.



Photo 3.2. Launch of ‘On Track’ Magazine with President Mary Mc Aleese.

I was familiar with the IWA because its headquarters was in my home village of Clontarf. I had been involved with the association as a young girl because my friend Áine’s mother worked with it. In our teenage years, a group of us helped organise charity events, which proved very enjoyable. They mirrored what I was doing with my students and were invaluable learning experiences. This early connection with the association resulted in my later involvement with it as a teacher. I was able to understand and explain to my students the real impact of their efforts. I recorded a charity CD with my students for the IWA and also worked on an ‘Angel’ campaign. Angels were small lapel pins sold by the IWA for its national fundraising day. By organising a National Art competition for post-primary school students, I hoped to raise awareness around disability among second-level students. The competition proved very successful and twelve angels designed by art students nationally in 2003 are now still sold for the Irish Wheelchair Associations’ charity day. Waterford Crystal sponsored a beautiful original prize of a piece of cut-glass crystal designed in the shape of the winning angel design.



Video 3.1. My Music Students sing Charity CD on Television (Crotty, 2012)

Fifth-year Community Week was an initiative I started in response to the apathy teachers were witnessing in students in the interim year between their Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examination. My aim was to make this group of students feel it was a special year for them, giving them something to look forward to and to motivate them. Failing to show an effort in school work throughout the year was theoretically punishable by exclusion from the Community Week. A testament to the project's success was that no one was ever excluded. In reality, exclusion was not an option for me and I would have found another activity for a student to do to prove herself before it ever came to that point.

The week meant that all students left aside their time-tabled classes to get involved with community events. I enlisted the help of my colleagues on the staff and also experts in their fields from the locality to talk to students about their work. The input from community guards and the local prison,

for example, resulted in all fifth-year students experiencing the judicial system from start to finish as they visited the inside of the headquarters of the Garda station, the Kilmainham courthouse (photo 3.4) and Mountjoy prison, all in Dublin. Fundraising for charity, and performing in a concert, usually brought the week to a close. Overall, the project fostered a tremendous sense of wellbeing, which is consistent with the role of community outlined in the Teaching Council of Ireland's Code of Professional Behaviour (2011): 'Teachers, through their schools, utilise the community as a learning resource. The community, in turn, is enriched by its interaction with teachers who have a tradition of contributing to a range of community activities' (p.19). I, like (Spiro, 2009, p. 145) see wellbeing as 'providing the best possible conditions for learning'.

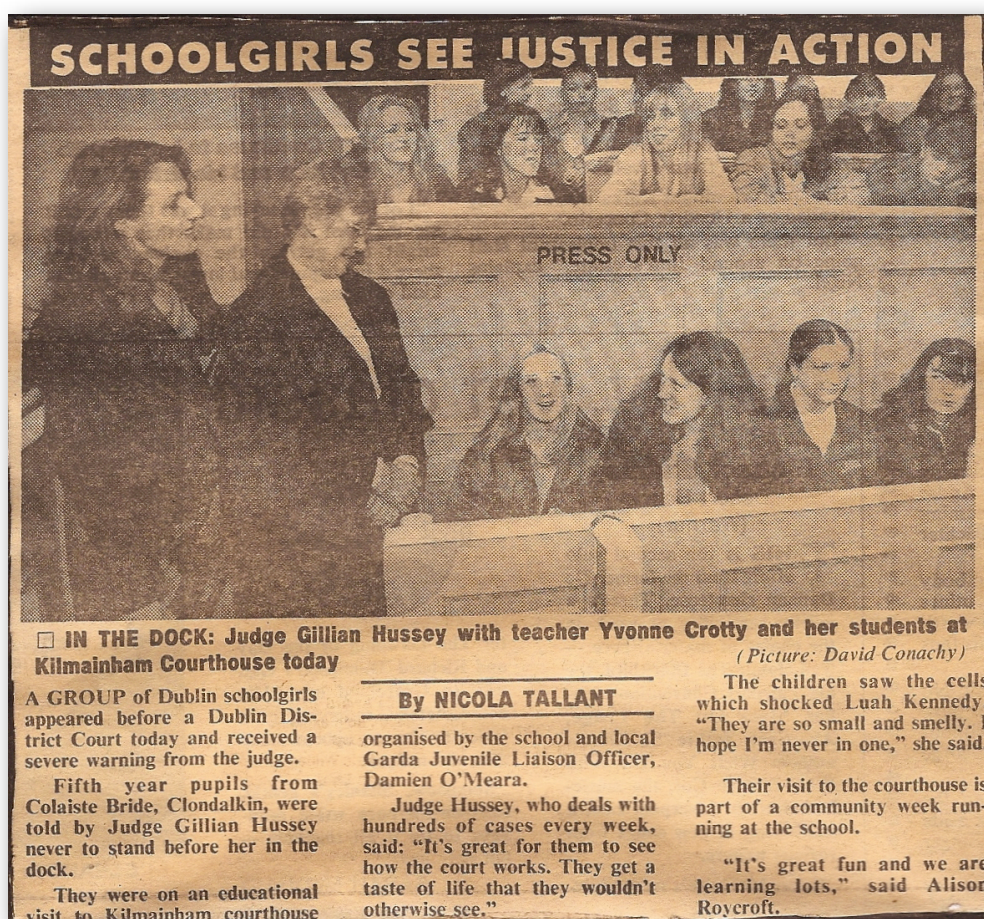


Photo 3.3. Schoolgirls see Justice in Action -Part of Fifth Year Coláiste Bríde Community Week.

Using projects and events to focus student learning

Many years later, I have the correct educational language to describe what was happening pedagogically all those years ago. Project-based learning was the dynamic approach to teaching I used with my students to explore the real-world problems and challenges involved in organising events. With this type of active and engaged learning, my students were inspired to obtain a deeper

knowledge of what they were doing. Their learning resulted in demonstrations of performance and the real tasks brought about problems to solve. This provided a context for students to learn how they had to be as adults. From the perspective of a religion teacher, the events incorporated the values of honesty, integrity, collaboration, care and respect that I normally taught through the curriculum. A structured curriculum where students are tasked with learning different subjects at set times was replaced temporarily by an experience where they had to learn out of necessity.

The production of the ‘On Track’ magazine helped to build vital workplace skills and lifelong habits of learning for the students involved. Through reflection and critical thinking, they addressed community issues, explored possible careers, used technology, interacted with adult experts and presented their work to audiences outside of the classroom. These are all key components of project-based learning. Student involvement in the many projects throughout my years of teaching quite definitely helped to motivate students who might otherwise have found school meaningless.

Project-based learning	‘On Track’ project
Project-based learning is intended to teach important content to students	The content had to be well written and grammatically correct, while adhering to academic standards.
Project-based learning requires critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication.	The students in the project did much more than just remember information. They had to listen to each other and make their own ideas clear when speaking. They researched a variety of material and included what was needed. They expressed themselves in various modes and made effective presentations to all participants throughout the process. Although this happened in the 1990s, this was at the cusp of the skills and competencies that we now call the 21st century skills. These were the prerequisites for success in the 21st-century workplace.
Project-based learning requires inquiry as part of the process of learning and creating something new.	Students ask questions, search for answers, and arrive at conclusions, leading them to construct something new: an idea, an interpretation, or a product which in this case was ‘On Track’.

<p>Project-based learning is organised around an open-ended motivating question.</p>	<p>Throughout the production of ‘On Track’, the students were driven to ask the question: “Is this appropriate for students who are wheelchair users?” They continually tried to balance the content of the magazine to be inclusive yet not appear patronising. The project focused their work and deepened their learning as they framed important issues and challenges that arose along the way.</p>
<p>Project-based learning creates a need to know essential content and skills. Project-based learning reverses the order in which information and concepts are traditionally presented. A typical unit with a project add-on begins by presenting students with knowledge and concepts and then giving them the opportunity to apply them.</p>	<p>The production of the magazine for teenage students who were wheelchair users gave students a very clear focus. They knew it was going to be disseminated throughout Ireland and felt responsible to do their absolute best.</p>
<p>Project-based learning allows some degree of student voice and choice.</p>	<p>The students worked independently and took responsibility for their own area. They made the choices and I supported their work. The process gave them an opportunity to express their learning in their own voice and they were totally engaged educationally.</p>
<p>Project-based learning includes processes for revision and reflection.</p>	<p>The students were constantly giving and receiving feedback to improve the quality of what they were doing. They welcomed constructive feedback because they were aware of the importance of producing a good quality magazine.</p>
<p>Project-based learning involves public audience. Students present their work to other people, beyond their classmates and teacher.</p>	<p>The magazine was being launched by the Irish President, Mary McAleese in the National Concert Hall on the night of the commemorative concert. The presence of Aideen’s family and friends also motivated the students to produce high-quality work. It all added to the authenticity of the project.</p>

Figure 3.3. Project based learning project ‘On Track’ Magazine (Adapted from the Buck Institute for Education.)



Video 3.2. Commemorative Concert for Aideen Bolger in National Concert Hall 1999

(Crotty, 2012)

During my teaching, I put many processes in place to help students interact and accomplish the various goals needed to produce quality events. I also provide time for reflection, as Dewey (1938) said, in order to learn by doing it is important to reflect on what we have done. I gave direction and closely monitored the students to ensure they enjoyed working collaboratively. Before any project started, I highlighted that we were all in it together and appealed for their best efforts. I found this challenging occasionally because I was aware that it was a learning curve for the students even though I wanted the best quality event. If I discovered that something was done incorrectly, I had to be mindful to guide any change in direction without detracting from the confidence of a student who had tried her best. I also wanted to scaffold the students' learning so they could achieve excellence independently.

I praised their efforts continually and if something needed to be changed or improved I demonstrated by example. This cooperative learning process worked very well because my close monitoring ensured that the students worked on their own initiative, in collaboration with others, secure in the knowledge that I was there to support and guide them. I encouraged them to try out new ideas and one of the most rewarding outcomes from working in this way was that students regularly came up with ideas that really enhanced the events. My role was to ensure that the ideas were implemented with excellence.

It was difficult to pinpoint when exactly the learning took place for myself or my students over the many years working on projects. Papert (1993) uses an example about making croissants and his many failures before he finally got it right. When reflecting on the process, he realised that the significant moment was when he was able to: 'feel the consistency of the dough in my fingers' (p.

31). That resulted in his making a perfect croissant. He suggests that there must be a connection between the body and the matter in order for the 'click' to occur. Having plenty of preparation time was a key component in the success of these events as learning did not happen quickly. Students needed time and my learning also occurred over time. I knew exactly how to facilitate others' learning as a result of my experience and recognise now that there was a great deal of unseen learning over my teaching years that led automatically to my having many 'in my finger' moments.

I have always been passionate about my role as teacher. Over the 15 years I taught, I felt that it was a very privileged position and that this honour brought responsibility. I had a duty of care and wanted to make a difference for my students by creating a positive learning environment where they could flourish. It is my belief that if a student gains confidence she or he can overcome any obstacles to become the best they can be. In an area plagued by unemployment and crime, I tried to ensure that the school environment was a warm, enjoyable one that would serve the needs of all students including any marginalised ones whose needs were not being met outside school. Jensen (2009) addresses the fact that if a school environment is good there will be less risk of it being an impairment to students' academic success and goes on to say that: 'The whole point of school should be to enrich the lives of every student. Enrichment should not mean 'more' or 'faster' schooling. It means rich, balanced, sustained, positive, and contrasting learning environments' (p. 44).

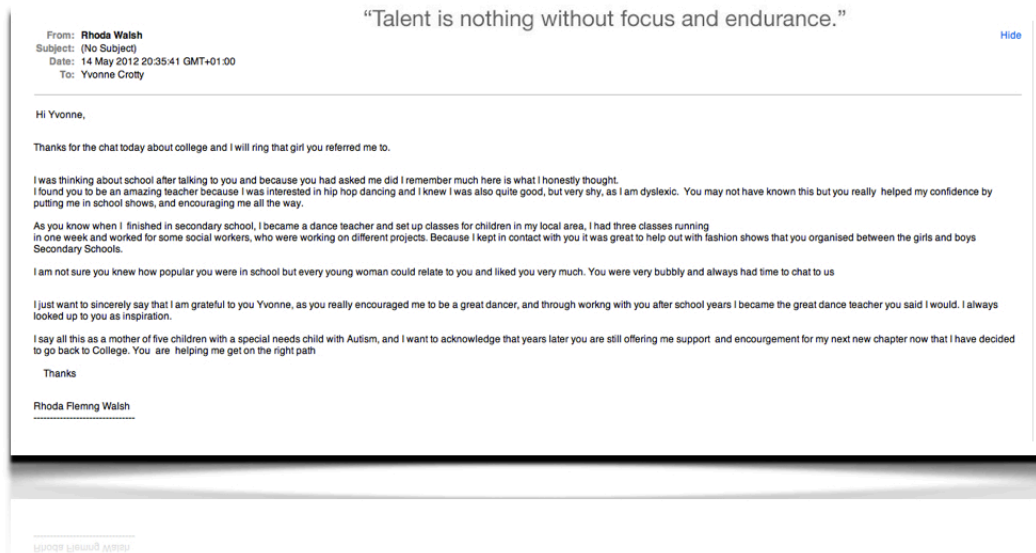
Encouraging students to take part in concerts or organising events was a method I used to help build their self-esteem and confidence, and this usually had a positive impact on their classroom behaviour. I encouraged students using incremental prompts. By this I mean that if I knew there was something a student was capable of doing, and which might benefit from her involvement, I would sow a seed first by talking about that possibility. I would leave the germ of an idea with the student for a while and return to broach the subject at a later stage. In my experience, this approach worked better because the initial surprise of being asked to partake or perform proved daunting for students at times, but after a little thought and time they accepted the invitation. I tried to leave the door open for those who declined initially and found that they too came on board when they witnessed the pleasure of the other participants.

One student, who I was in contact with recently, substantiates this claim. She wrote to me through Facebook looking for advice about returning to further education. I remember Rhoda, who is now a

mother of five, to be a shy, quiet and talented dancer. Whenever I organised a concert, I asked her to help out and I also invited her back to help with fashion shows and school concerts after she left school. In addition, I arranged that she could use the school hall as a base to start dance classes commercially. When she made contact again a short while ago, I took the opportunity to ask her about her memories of those times. Her follow-up email told how her involvement in school events helped to build her confidence at a time when she was self-conscious because of her dyslexia. On receiving that email, I was very touched and it once again made me realise the value of making an effort to be inclusive rather than exclusive. I did my best to work in the direction of my value of inclusion because I was mindful that to fail to do otherwise would have resulted in a wasted opportunity to transform the life of a student such as Rhoda.



“Talent is nothing without focus and endurance.”



Hi Yvonne,

Thanks for the chat today about college and I will ring that girl you referred me to.

I was thinking about school after talking to you and because you had asked me did I remember much here is what I honestly thought.

I found you to be an amazing teacher because I was interested in hip hop dancing and I knew I was also quite good, but very shy, as I am dyslexic. You may not have known this but you really helped my confidence by putting me in school shows, and encouraging me all the way.

As you know when I finished in post-primary, I became a dance teacher and set up classes for children in my local area, I had three classes running in one week and worked for some social workers, who were

working on different projects. Because I kept in contact with you it was great to help out with fashion shows that you organised between the girls and boys Secondary Schools.

I am not sure you knew how popular you were in school but every young woman could relate to you and liked you very much. You were very bubbly and always had time to chat to us

I just want to sincerely say that I am grateful to you Yvonne, as you really encouraged me to be a great dancer, and through working with you after school years I became the great dance teacher you said I would. I always looked up to you as inspiration.

I say all this as a mother of five children with a special needs child with Autism, and I want to acknowledge that years later you are still offering me support and encouragement for my next new chapter now that I have decided to go back to College. You are helping me get on the right path

Thanks,

Rhoda Fleming Walshe

(R. Fleming, Walshe, personal communication, May 14, 2012)

Figure 3.4. Email from Rhoda Fleming Walshe

Knowing is transformative

In the very act of using project-based learning, there was a transformation from the more traditional classroom where students were seen as recipients of knowledge rather than creators of knowledge. A project-based approach invigorated my own teaching as I co-created an educational space with my students that linked our sense of knowing to the wider audience.

I agree unequivocally with Eisner (1997) when he argues that it is too difficult to break learning down to a list of objectives and measure quantitatively whether it had actually occurred. In the post-primary education system, summative assessment plays a pivotal role and students continue to acquire information in a fragmented way by learning small manageable pieces at a time. In a race to acquire points for college entry, rote learning tends to dominate our Irish education system. At university level, I have witnessed undergraduate students experiencing difficulty in trying to put the pieces together in a meaningful way and apply their knowledge to new situations. Eisner (1997) advocates that we should adopt a ‘connoisseurship model’ (p. 63). This means that I, as a knowledgeable educator and evaluator, should ‘know’ through a blend of experience and skills whether or not the curriculum has been successful. In keeping with this model, I reflect on these past projects and, because of my experience and skills, I recognise the nuances/subtleties of what I was looking for. This model emphasises whether the learning has been a quality experience. I have embraced Eisner’s thinking and provided a description of the learning environments and example projects in which the students participated. I have also provided an interpretation of these events by placing them in context.

Section II: ‘One Step Beyond’: The Musical of Nano Nagle

Nano Nagle was a Champion of the poor, of the right to education for all and of religious freedom. She was a pathfinder and a model for many other Irish religious congregations. She was a woman who in her simplicity, yet dared greatly and fearlessly. She has left a legacy which lives into the future: she is a ghost of the past whose voice echoes now in our memories with a love that will last (Liam Lawton , [Echoes in our memories](#))

Introduction

The Nano Nagle Odyssey began in February 1999 when I produced and directed the musical ‘One Step Beyond’. The cast included seventy past and present students and teachers from Coláiste Bríde. The musical was inspired when I attended a concert called Celtic Spirituality in the National Concert Hall in April 1999. At that concert, I was very moved by a song called ‘One Step Beyond’, written and performed by Liam Lawton and dedicated to Nano Nagle, the founder of the Presentation religious congregation. Nano’s story involved leaving a life of wealth in her hometown of Cork, Ireland, to dedicate herself to the education of the poor. Having taught in a Presentation school for 10 years, I observed the tireless work carried out by the sisters. Although I knew little about Nano Nagle at that time, I did know she was responsible for setting up the Presentation congregation in Ireland and that this led to the growth of Presentation schools all over the world.

I was asked by my principal at that time, Sr. Margarita, to organise a commemorative event around the Presentation congregation as part of the Millennium celebrations. She was a woman who allowed me the freedom to be creative and of which I am grateful. In the meantime, I set about reading the book ‘One Pace Beyond’ by the late Sr. Raphael Considine. I found myself enthralled by Nano’s story, which became the motivation and inspiration for the special commemorative millennium celebration concert that followed. As a religion and music teacher, I felt it was important for students and teachers of Presentation schools to know about the woman who was instrumental in the pioneering of Irish education. I also felt it imperative to show an appreciation of her legacy, the ongoing contribution of the Presentation congregation to the local community and her contribution to communities in the Third World. I adapted the book to script a narrative in collaboration with two other good friends and colleagues in the school, Helen O’Keeffe and Bernardine Nic Giolla Phadraig, for the musical production of the story of Nano Nagle.

I built the production around the song 'One Step Beyond'. The group singing consisted of students who were in the school and I knew from music class, as well as past pupils who had a love for singing. I also involved musical teaching staff. The first concert took place in the local parish church which was transformed artistically into a spectacular venue to appeal to the wider Christian community. The concert was so successful that the local community, sisters and friends of the Presentation congregation nationwide requested a repeat performance. Much to the delight of all involved, the second concert took place the following month on 7th April 2000 in the church. My initial aims for this project were to create awareness, foster creativity and build confidence, and all this came to fruition.



Video 3.3. 'One Step Beyond',
Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Clondalkin, 14th February 2000
(Crotty, 2012)

As a teacher, I value inclusion and this motivated me to link in with the Presentation primary schools by getting students to join in for the last song. I also involved the local community, businesses and the nearby Wheatfield prison. I wanted to include the Presentation sisters and it was heartening to see them singing with such pride about their founder when they joined the cast at the end of the show. The project developed even further and the final live performance took place in the National Concert Hall the following October 2000. Wheatfield prison continued to provide

support by printing our programme. Many businesses gave generously of their time and money to sponsor the event. This more in-depth version of the earlier production had a representative of five pupils and one religious sister from each Presentation school nationwide. All the pupils joined in for a choral rendition of the song 'One Step Beyond'. The performance was attended by Presentation schools from all over Ireland which enabled many more students to enjoy and learn about Nano Nagle. The correspondence from sisters and teachers who attended was overwhelming and it lifted the spirits of the Presentation sisters, who had been experiencing a decline in the numbers of novices entering the convent .



Photo 3.4. 'One Step Beyond', National Concert Hall, October 2000 (Crotty, 2012)

Overall, the production was a wonderful experience that I really only appreciated fully years later. Over the two years I had been fully immersed in its organisation; practising with students, launching and updating the Nano Nagle [website](#), preparing visuals, designing costumes, choreographing dances, directing the drama, advertising and procuring funding. It would have been a luxury to have had the time to stand back to evaluate the experience fully. Reflecting on episodes as they happened was, instead, the norm. The success of the event created even more work. And so it went on. Real evaluation only came when it was all over as I had been so driven to complete an excellent production. I had wanted to ensure that the students, teachers, musicians and all involved would be able to look back with pride, knowing that they were once part of something bigger than themselves and had individually made a difference.

What do I mean by excellence?

To explain fully what I mean by excellence, I need to recount a story that happened when producing and directing 'One Step Beyond'. The production had a 70-strong cast consisting of past pupils, students from first to sixth year and a number of teachers from the Presentation school where I taught. At one stage, a soloist fell ill and was unable to perform in the National Concert Hall, so another student in the chorus offered to take her place. I was very slow to respond positively to her offer and found it a very difficult decision because the student's talent was not at the high level I had wanted for the show. If I had adhered to my value of inclusion, I would have said yes immediately and would have been glad of an opportunity to reward this girl for the tremendous effort and commitment she had given to that point. However, as I also valued excellence and wanted to produce a show that was of the highest standard while still remaining fair to the fantastic talent of everyone involved, I could not justify saying yes to a person whose performance was not of the calibre worthy of a solo piece. In addition, knowingly putting someone in a position where they would be open to criticism and ridicule was contrary to my value of creating a safe environment for people to perform and learn. As an educator, producer and director, it was important for me that any solo performance did not detract from the overall production. I had a responsibility to the others in my care. Any decision had to be based on merit rather than on sentimentality.

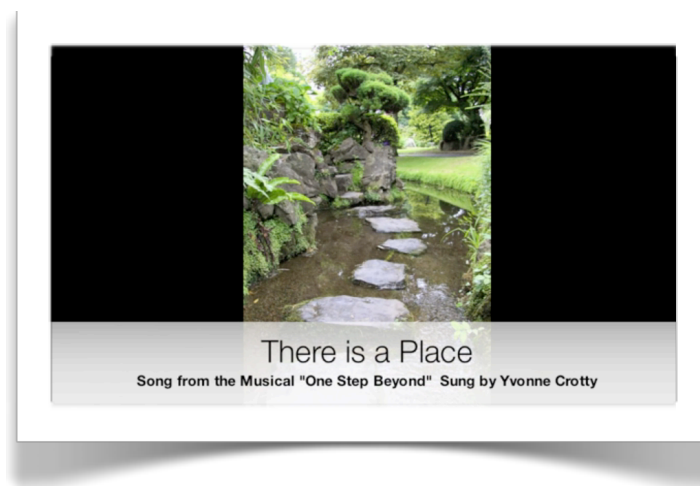
I tell this story to highlight the importance of keeping high standards and excellence for the overall good. My ultimate decision allowed everybody to be proud that they were accomplishing the highest quality production, knowing that there was no weak link. There was an appreciation of the long hours and hard work everyone invested to achieve these standards. This show improved even more when touring the US as we had concerts in New York, Boston and Florida. Feedback always described it as a very professional show. Turning down the girl who wanted to sing the solo song led to my creation of a whole new dimension of that production to find an appropriate role for her. Following her initial disappointment, her acting talent was realised when she played the main character in a cameo part. With her self-esteem intact, the production still remained at the highest standard and I remained true to my values.

Figure 3.5. What do I mean by Excellence?

The excellence exhibited in the National Concert Hall in October 2000 led to invites from the Irish Presentation Sisters for the production to be performed in the US. Others felt initially that the

musical would be lost in translation but I believed it would work and secured funding to bring the show there the following year. We raised a considerable sum through fundraising events and proceeds from the sales of a CD of the musical, and this enabled us to travel and perform in the Troy Savings Bank Musical Hall, Albany, New York, and in Fort Lauderdale's Broward County Library Theatre, Florida. The entire venture was spiritually, culturally and artistically rewarding for all concerned: students, teachers, nuns, musicians, sound and lighting technicians, costume designers, set designers and the local community. The combination of age, gender and varying talents of the 70-strong crew contributed to the whole experience having a very special spiritual dynamic for which there will always be a place in my heart. This is evidence of my educational entrepreneurial spirit in action.

The following video is a song from the show and I have used it to make a sildeshow of the Masters in Education and Training Management (elearning) on which I teach. I will explain this further later in my thesis.



Video 3.4. [There is a place](#) (Crotty, 2011)

Special Memories

I have three special memories from my time working on this project, which were also three key memorable learning points in my life.

The first is a story of a girl who I heard singing quietly to herself in the corridor around the time I was bringing together a group of singers for the concert. Laura was a very hard-working fifth-year student, who was quiet-spoken and shy. Her friends and I had never heard her singing previously, though she had danced in my previous productions. On hearing her sing, I suggested that she might

sing a song for me that would suit her voice. Although it took some time, Laura eventually came to me and sang her version of the chosen song. She had a much more beautiful and pitch-perfect voice than I had anticipated. Over time and practice, it became even more developed and powerful. What surprised me most of all in Laura's journey was her parent's expression of delight upon hearing their daughter's singing voice for the first time on the first night of the show. They were very appreciative that I had uncovered their daughter's talent. They were proud, as was I. Laura went on to sing the solo part of a song when we were asked to sing on RTE's afternoon show. She also recorded the song 'I will be the Vine' on [*'The One Step Further'* album](#). I often reflect on this and am reminded that we can find talent in the most unexpected places, even in passing someone in a corridor. When undertaking any project, I feel that it is always important to have a vision first. Having a vision helps to focus the mind and assists in finding what you are looking for.

The second memory links with an earlier story about a girl called Suzanne who had attended a primary school for deaf students. As I have already mentioned, being inclusive is important to me and the 'One Step Beyond' production was no different in abiding by this value. I asked Suzanne, who was now in sixth year, to use her sign language skills to accompany Laura's song in the concert.



**Video 3.5. (L to R) Laura and Suzanne performing on RTE's, Afternoon Show
October 2000**

Suzanne's involvement meant a group of people from the deaf school attended. A few non-hearing people approached me afterwards to convey how they had been very moved. One said she had

loved the energy the concert had transmitted while another spoke of the beautiful singing, storyline, dancing and visuals. The experience really made me think about the power of the visual. My aim was to be inclusive, but I had not fully understood in real terms how such a musical production could translate to the wider audience of people who cannot hear. I reflected on the fact that the energy transmitted through the smiling faces told a story in itself, irrespective of sound. The words could be lip-read, the dancing could be enjoyed and the visuals could be seen and relished by all. This brought home to me how energy can be relayed among people in a non-verbal way. If that energy is affirming, it can encourage us, motivate us and influence us to do great things beyond what seems impossible. These people had been able to connect with this affirming energy emanating from the 'life' of those performing in the concert.

My third abiding memory relates to a student who was involved in the concert and was also in my tutor class. Retelling her story highlights for me that people can achieve great things with positive influence. At the time of the concert, a student called Marie got into some trouble in school. As a tutor, I had a pastoral role that required my taking the attendance roll each day and supporting the students with any personal issues. I knew my tutor group very well because I taught them Religious Education for two years. The problem occurred when Marie threw a table across the room in a rage during her English class. She had been provoked by another student's taunts. Her agitated English teacher approached me and demanded that, as Marie's tutor, I should forbid her from participating in the musical as punishment. Wanting to remain respectful to my colleague, I approached Marie to see what had caused her to behave in such an unacceptable manner. She said that her reaction was prompted by hearing her classmate use names to insult her sister. While acknowledging the hurt the name calling would have caused Marie, I pointed out that she had reacted less than appropriately. I explained that her actions had now placed me in a compromising position where the situation needed to be addressed but I did not want to use the musical as a means of penalising her. I knew this type of punishment would break Marie's spirit and yet also knew that the decision not to adhere to my colleague's request would cause controversy and ill feeling between us. The musical was a lifeline for this girl, and a vital escape from a less than easy family background. I made a choice to allow her remain in the production but only told her after three days of letting her wait for my decision. She needed that time to dwell on the implications of her actions. I told her the positive outcome of my decision came with conditions and I requested that she write a letter of apology to the teacher and address the class publicly explaining her remorse. I also asked her to talk to the other girl about her behaviour and explain why she had reacted the way she did. I later addressed

anger management with the class and we looked at this example by means of introduction to the topic. Privately, I explained to her that I had given her a chance and appealed to her not to let me down.

To say that I was surprised at what happened to Marie after this event would be an understatement. For a student who had been previously barely passing in her subject exams, she began to achieve A grades. She settled down in class and became more reserved but quietly confident, and she grew more popular amongst her peers. She began to smile and laugh more. Teachers began noticing the difference and she responded accordingly. Such was her behavioural change that the teacher who had advocated her dismissal from the choir relented and became less hostile with me. Marie raised over €8,000 towards our funds to help perform in the US and ultimately went on to achieve a very good Leaving Certificate. She is now a qualified accountant.

Taking one step back

Palmer (2007), believes that ‘we teach who we are’ (p. xi) and he encourages us to be open and to examine ourselves. If I want to grow as an educator, I must reflect upon what is significant to me about my work and learn more about the relationships with my students and about my strengths and weaknesses. To do as Palmer (*ibid*) says is to take one step back from this time and try to put perspective on how it has influenced my life and the lives of others. I identify with Seligman’s (2003) sentiment when he talks of his children:

Raising children I knew now, was far more than just fixing what was wrong with them. It was about identifying and amplifying their strengths and virtues, and helping them find the niche where they can live their positive traits to the fullest. (2003, p.28)

Throughout this epoch I saw the Nano Nagle cast as a family and strove to find their strengths and illuminate what was best in them. I was passionate about the process and took time to pay attention to the finer detail to be able to identify what was needed. I recently set up a Facebook page for all those involved in the Nano Nagle project and asked them to document any memories from that time. One comment twelve years later highlights the family feeling Emma had experienced when she was in the group:

Hey Yvonne
 I have loads of Happy memories of being part of the ‘One Step Beyond’, we were all like a family. Being part of the ‘One Step Beyond’ was the happiest days of my life. (E. O’Donnell, personal communication, May 15, 2012)

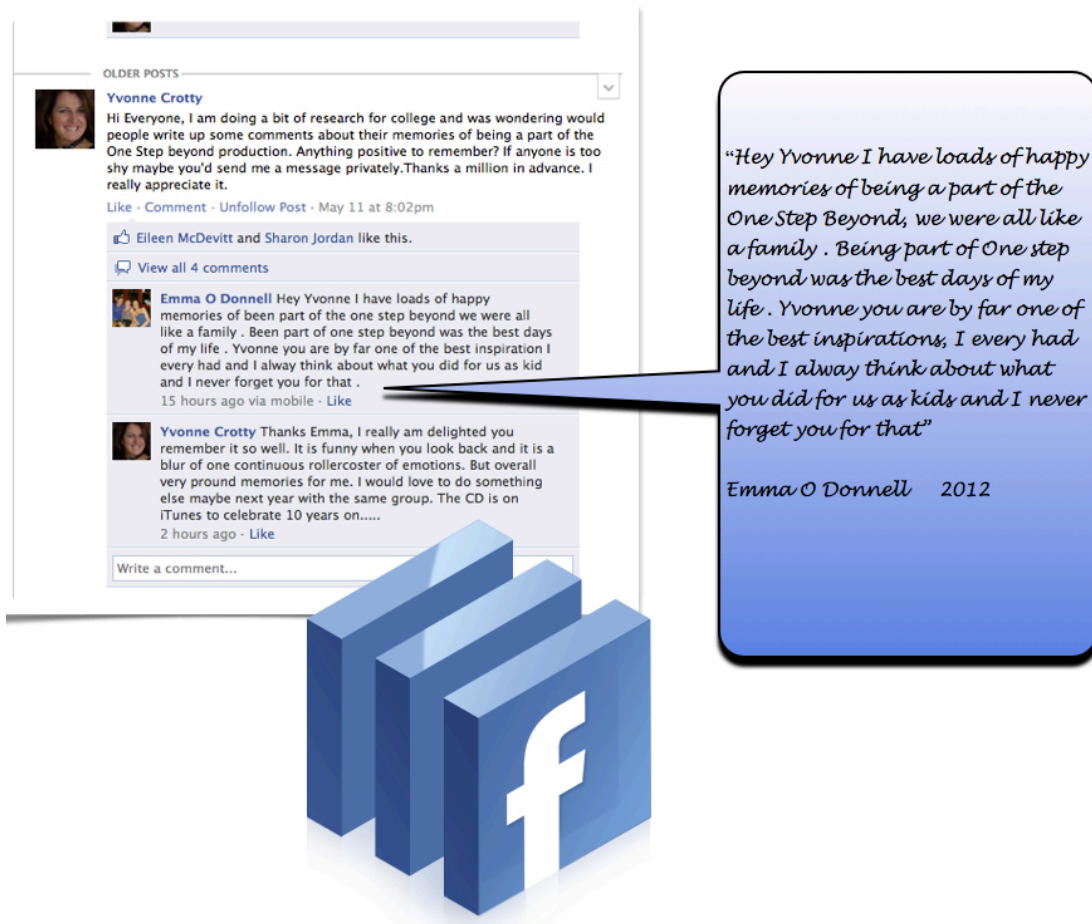


Figure 3.6. Nano Nagle Facebook Page

Many of the students were from disadvantaged backgrounds and some were underachieving academically. A few were not aware of their abilities because they had been disengaged from the school curriculum and had lost confidence. Marie’s story as described before, highlights how her fate might have been different had she not been a part of the Nano Nagle project. This was a watershed moment for her which gave her the confidence she needed to help excel in her studies. Laura also went from strength to strength and has started her own business singing at weddings. This demonstrates how much she has flourished since I first heard her sing. Laura’s reply on Facebook highlights how her involvement had given her confidence:

It was a really huge thing for me at the time, and was definitely one of the things that helped my confidence grow in those teenage years! I've always felt grateful to you for that, and always had great admiration for the way in which you approached the whole thing with such determination and achieved what you did....it was fantastic! (L.McHugh, personal communication, May 13, 2012)

She goes on to say that it did have an impact on her present involvement with music:

It was definitely the first stepping stone for me ... and I really believe that if I hadn't been involved in it then I possibly also would not be involved with the group I'm involved with now.
(L.McHugh, personal communication, May 13, 2012).

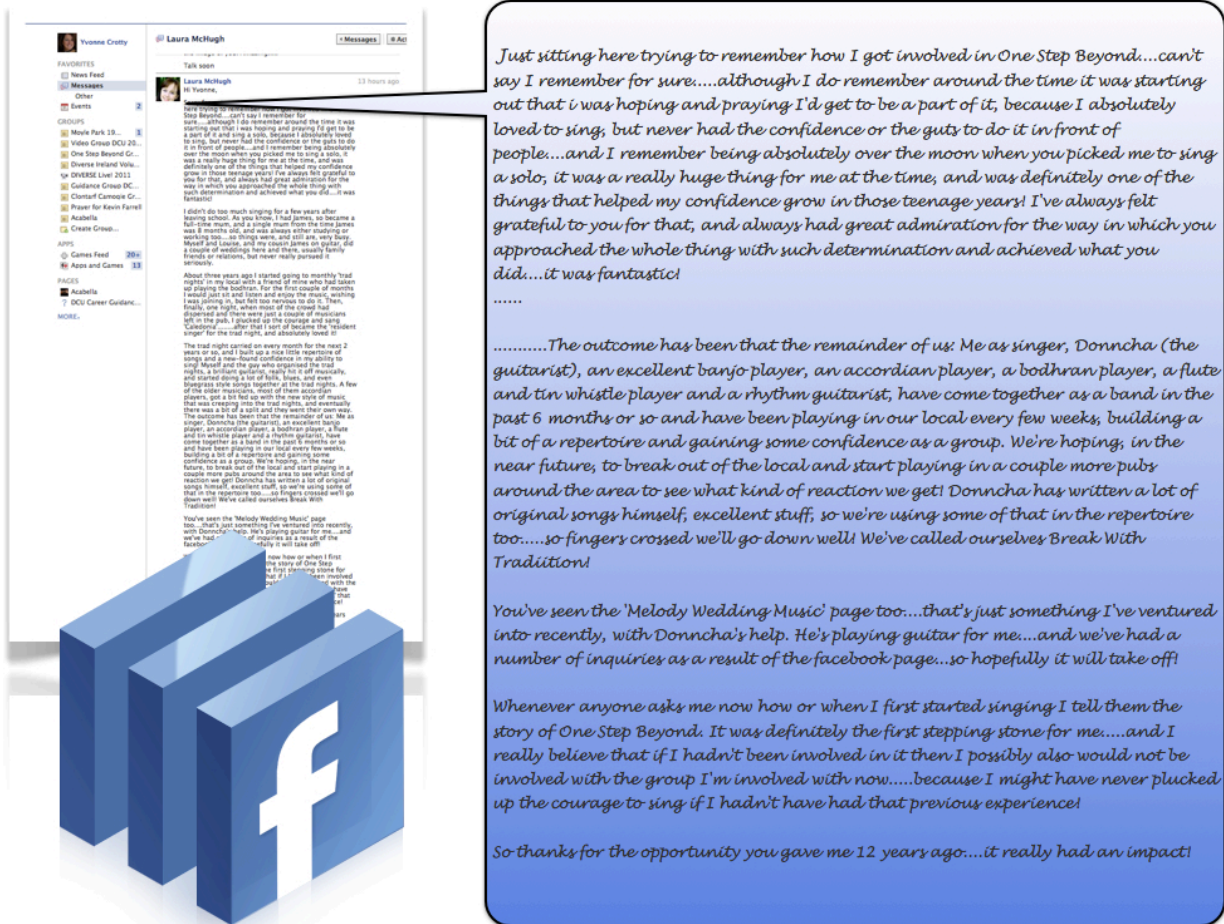


Figure 3.7. Laura McHugh's Facebook Message

Melody Wedding Music

Voice and Guitar
Church and Civil Ceremonies
Traditional and Contemporary Songs

E: melodyweddingmusic@gmail.com
f Page: Melody Wedding Music



Figure 3.8. Laura McHugh's Melody Wedding Music Company

I draw a parallel in my own work to Jackson's (2011) research as explored in *'Pedagogy of Confidence'*, where she uncovered hidden capacities of disadvantaged students (in her case African-American students) once they were given the right conditions. Like Jackson (ibid), I had to create the right conditions to allow my students' to flourish. To achieve this, I created a positive environment where students could feel happy and engaged, and free enough to be themselves, safe to make mistakes and to learn from them. This resulted in a very successful and enjoyable process.

Nettle (2005) confirms this type of optimal functioning through the introduction of positive emotions and experiences. Initially, I created positivity through affirming the students' efforts in attending practices and highlighting that it was delight and a pleasure for me as well. To affirm their musical achievements was unrealistic at the very early stages, but each day I asked a passing teacher, caretaker or student to listen to whatever new piece we had learned. This method proved very rewarding as it allowed both groups to feel privileged and special in that symbiotic interaction. It also helped to create a happy atmosphere around the school in which the larger community felt included in the production. These small, manageable performances gradually instilled confidence in the students so they became visibly proud and happy. A similar version of this process occurred in the evenings, which facilitated the adult members of the cast who could not attend practices during the day because of work commitments. This enabled these past pupils to still feel included in the larger Presentation school community. There was a happy dynamic when the two groups combined that gave the project an extra impetus. It all helped to sustain them during the hours of practice while in their flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and perfecting the songs. As the sound improved, and the harmonies all came together, their sense of well-being also harmonised.

To begin talking to the students about perfection and excellence in the earlier practices might, I believe, have killed the dynamic and any possibility of growth for the project. To practise intensely, focusing on the level of perfection I wanted to achieve, might have destroyed the relaxed comfortable atmosphere that was initially established. Excellence needed to be the 'by-product' of what emerged from this pleasurable process. I had confidence that excellence would come over time and commitment and building gradually on our initial vocal efforts, where everyone got a sense of what songs were like, was crucial to this development. My vision for the students was also important because they had no idea of their capabilities or what was required to achieve excellence.

It was challenging for me at the beginning, because rather than meeting a group for choir practice at fixed times during the week (a discipline needed for mastery of any activity be it sport, playing a musical instrument, or singing) I had to be flexible to facilitate students who worked part-time and be patient with students who opted initially to attend other activities. I hoped that students would gradually become ‘hooked’ by the fun we were having. Koumi (2006, p.108) uses the term ‘hook’ in relation to producing a video. The concept centres on the idea of including something dramatic or funny that will engage an audience early to want to watch more. This is a method I have always tried to employ in my teaching, producing, writing, or learning. If students missed rehearsals, I met with them individually. I also arranged with other students to work in groups as they learned or worked a section of a song together. This process of cooperative learning instilled much confidence in the students, who by that time were working with their peers to achieve the same goal. Slavin (1990), a key proponent of this type of approach, supports co-operative learning opportunities such as these, which he says help to raise the students’ self esteem, their love of school, their increased interest in the subject and their attendance. This thinking mirrored exactly what occurred during the process of the Nano Nagle project.

To achieve high standards, everybody, including myself, had to give a commitment to the project. I was more lenient about attendance at practices in the early days because it was impractical to need all of the students there all of the time but there came a point where I could not accept anything but the fullest commitment. Throughout the various stages of the project, students had begun to feel the reality of being a part of a successful enjoyable project and had internalised the consequences of attending. Success may make us happy, yet happiness also brings about success (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005).

I recall some of my colleagues’ disbelief at my attending after-school practices regularly and missing the relaxation time associated with the lunch hour. ‘How could you be happy working so hard?’ was a familiar comment. Nevertheless, I consider this hectic six-month period of preparation to be one of the most meaningful, engaging and happy times in my life.

Authentic happiness, according to Seligman (2003), is obtained from three major types of experiences:

(1) *A pleasurable life* experiencing pleasure and strong positive emotions regularly with a sensory component;

(2) *An engaging life* experiencing a high level of engagement in satisfying activities that involves being in a state similar to what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to as flow;

(3) *A meaningful life* as we use our strengths and talents to serve something greater.

Although this was never my aim, I could apply the three criteria above to measure the satisfaction I felt emanated from the participants during the project. My involvement in the Nano Nagle concert also gave me an opportunity to experience all the three types of happiness.

The coming together of the many schools countrywide and internationally highlighted the impact of an event like this in connecting to the wider community. Above all, the project was very meaningful and gave me hope that great things can be achieved for the greater good with time, belief and vision. In 2011, Seligman published the book *Flourish*, which shows a shift in his thinking from the idea of happiness to the concept of wellbeing and how the latter can promote the flourishing of a person. Seligman shifts from the idea of ‘authentic happiness’ as being ‘inextricably bound up with being in a cheerful mood’ (2011, p. 314) to a recognition that the goal of happiness is not about measuring life satisfaction. I can relate more to the idea of wellbeing as now elaborated by Seligman in his book. This change in his thinking to flourishing has a different objective and involves positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, all of which I can also say I experienced during the overall project.

The purpose of my research is not to measure the happiness or wellbeing of my students, in the manner that Seligman suggests, but I do claim that I cared about them and valued providing an environment where they were safe to flourish. My effort to provide a sense of wellbeing for others involved starting with the pleasurable experience and then moving towards the engaging experience within which one finds meaning. This approach to teaching is linked to my understanding of what it means to be spiritual as each person develops a sense of their own self-worth and experiences a connection with others. Spirituality, for me, is closely related to wellbeing as opposed to being defined in terms of religiosity. This might seem like a contradiction because the ‘One Step Beyond’ project centred on a woman who founded a religious congregation. Ghaye sees spirituality as an attempt to capture the multi-dimensionality of human experience (2004). For me, spirituality involves expressions of care, hope, faith and occasion that provide a strong sense of wellbeing. I felt all of these while being spiritually connected to those involved in *One Step Beyond* from 2000-2001.

Whitehead (2008) says that ‘Most lives involve some form of narrative wreckage in which difficulties have been encountered that require some effort in re-channeling destructive emotions into a flow of life-affirming energy’ (p.113-114). It would be remiss of me to paint a picture that suggests I experienced life-affirming energy all of the time. I experienced that feeling for a great proportion of the time in the earlier concerts in Ireland, but the American part of the project at times compromised my own sense of wellbeing. There was never a time in my life that was so bad that I could not find something redeemable to propel me forward, and some positive comments I received recently from some of the members of the ‘One Step Beyond’ cast on Facebook reaffirmed for me that the personal challenges I had to face and overcome during those times were worth it. Some wrote about their joy at being involved and how the project impacted on their lives positively, in some cases transforming them.

I remind myself that even a very negative, violating encounter with a boorish American man cannot tarnish the affirmation those comments provide. The elderly man, who resorted to bullying techniques with everyone he met, was in charge of organising part of the tour and knew that it all depended on his making the concert work in New York. While alone on a reconnaissance to arrange the logistics of the forthcoming tour, I experienced violence in the company of this man on several occasions that could have caused me to pull out of the trip. However, I found depths within me that I did not know existed, as I simply did not want to return to Ireland with news that all we had worked for was cancelled. On one occasion, I even feared for my life as the man in question drove down a motorway at high speed in the snow screaming at the top of his voice because a plug for a camera had been left in his office. Initially, I felt very fearful but I was then overcome by a feeling that somebody was looking out for me and filled by a sense of calm. That was the last time I felt such existential fear as an adult. As I managed to overcome and control it, I felt liberated. I can honestly say that I now feel there is nothing that cannot be achieved with an inner resilience and belief in oneself. I do acknowledge that the learning through that experience may have been at a cost to my wellbeing. The question I now regularly ask of myself rather than creating a downward spiral by ruminating on difficulties is this: ‘Is it for the greater good?’ At that time it was.



**Video 3.6. 'One Step Beyond', Troy Savings Music Hall in Albany New York State, USA,
(Crotty, 2012)**

Section III: One Step Further

Áras Chrónáin is an Irish Cultural Centre in a Georgian house in the heart of old Clondalkin village. In March 2002, a concert took place there to raise funds for families of the 9/11 firemen victims. What marked this event for me was that it was the maiden voyage for a group of five singers, of which I was a part. We performed as a group called Acabella. We had started harmonising together while in New York for the Nano Nagle Concert. This particular concert in the Arás was very poignant because we had visited the twin towers while on the US tour. The name Acabella was chosen to play on the phrase *A cappella*, which refers to choral music without instrumental accompaniment. At that stage, we sang unaccompanied. As we were all women or ‘belles’, we chose to link the two words to form our name. With an eye to the future, we also knew it would be good to have a name starting with the letter ‘A’ so that any of our albums would be placed in alphabetical order at the top of the chart lists.

I had known each of the girls individually before the ‘One Step Beyond’ production because of their association with Coláiste Bríde, yet they had not known each other. Bernardine Nic Giolla Phadraig was a colleague who had collaborated with me in the scripting of the Nano Nagle storyline and had also narrated it for the concert and on the CD. Sarah Jayne Carey was a former student of the school and coincidentally sang solo when part of that first group of sixth-year students I had introduced to the medley tradition at the end of their graduation Mass. Deirdre Harrington had been a pupil in the school prior to me teaching there. I knew her from my involvement with the fifth-year community week links with the local post-primary boys’ school, Moyle Park College. At related social gatherings, she had been asked to sing regularly. In addition, she was a daughter of another colleague, the choir mistress who had been teaching the Latin Gregorian chants to the sixth-year students for that graduation Mass many years earlier. Eileen Mc Devitt was the fifth and final member of the group and hailed from Donegal. She had been involved in the Áras Chronain community and had sung with Bernardine in a Traditional Irish group. Her involvement with the ‘One Step Beyond’ concert came when she stepped in for the American tour after a soloist fell ill two weeks before our departure.

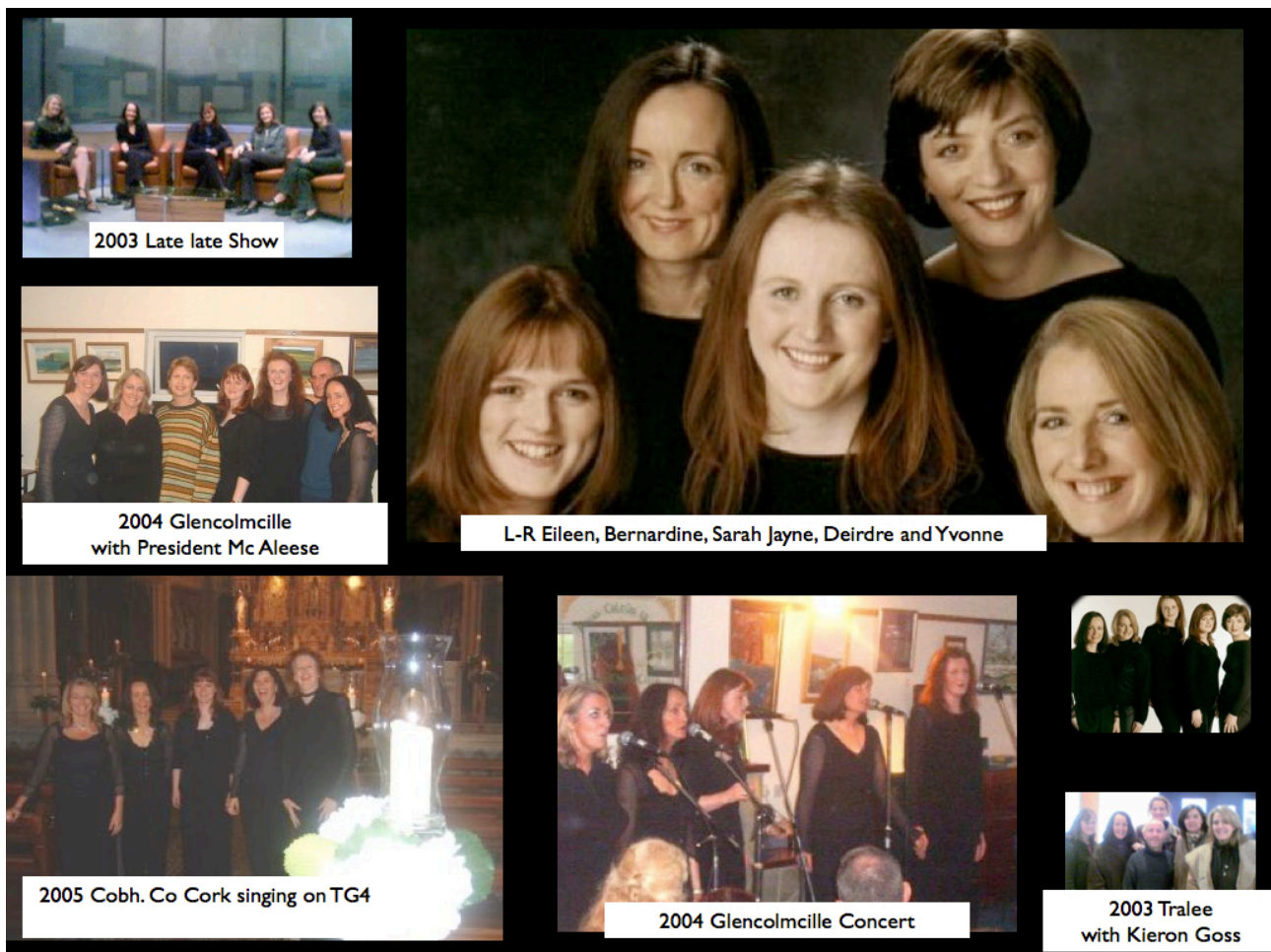


Figure 3.9. Acabella

To establish how the five of us came together as a singing group requires me to return to our time on tour in the States in 2001. Following our first very successful concert on 7th April 2001 in the Troy Savings Music Hall, the cast was invited to dine at the Ancient Order of the Hibernians headquarters in downtown Albany, in New York State. The presence of so many talented musicians and singers created an atmosphere where it was normal to burst into song and this occasion was no different. As the students danced, the musicians played Irish music to accompany them and people were called upon to sing Irish folk songs. When Sarah Jayne began to sing the Stephen Foster song *Hard Times*, it sealed our fate as a group because four of us joined in with different harmonies. That night led to *Hard Times* becoming the anthem for the tour and sowed the seed for us to continue singing together.

The positive feedback we received from others was inspiring and the intrinsic satisfaction each of us felt when we sang together motivated us to organise weekly group practices on our return to Ireland. During these sessions, we arranged songs together and the sense of achievement when our

harmonies blended was empowering. Irrespective of the fact that I had spent many years discovering talent in others in my role as a music teacher, I still found it difficult to believe we were making such a lovely sound together. In the beginning we were lost in hours of practice as time passed while we perfected our art. We still arrive at all harmonies naturally and do not use sheet music to guide us. Singing with Acabella has given me a real feeling of wellbeing. It has been an invigorating and spiritually renewing experience. The sense of camaraderie amongst us can be likened to all that is good about belonging to a family. Over the ten years, I have grown to know and love these girls as I do my own family. We reinvested the money earned into the development of the group and worked together collaboratively. There have been differences of opinions but like any family, the love of what we are doing is stronger than the minor issues that presented themselves to us along the way. We have learned through our collaborative experiences and as result we have grown individually. This is in accordance with Bertrand's (2003 p. 260) view on the premise of collaborative learning: '... based on consensus building through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition where others best other group members' .

In over a decade of singing together we have never competed against each other because we were all too aware that the whole group was greater than the sum of its parts. Mutual respect was central to what we were trying to achieve and we valued the fact that each of us had something unique to bring to the group.

Our roles are not sacrosanct but I am credited with being the 'anchor' because I sing the lower register notes and have grounded our weekly practices in performances of a grander scale by writing the group into various concerts I have produced. One such event is the Console annual concert. Console is a charity to help families who have lost someone to suicide and it has a commemorative concert in the National Concert Hall each June. It also has a remembrance evening at Christmas time to help families who have lost a loved one. Bernardine's initial encounter with this charity when she was producing an advertisement for a suicide awareness campaign first introduced me to Console. Sarah Jayne can comfortably sing all the higher-pitched notes and has found many suitable songs to enhance our repertoire. Bernardine, an Irish teacher, is a fluent speaker of Gaelgoir and over the years has re-introduced us to our native language. We sang, for example, during a concert in Donegal for the then President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, when she and her husband Martin, were learning Irish in the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking region). The fourth member of the group is Deirdre, who has a silky-smooth voice and whose culinary skills ensure our

physiological needs are met when we are practising or travelling. Finally, Jackie Dooley is our newest member. She replaced Eileen, who moved to Sligo more than five years ago because of family commitments, and her light hearted traditional Irish style of singing was a refreshing addition. Together, we have shared over a decade of responsibilities that accompany being part of a five-part harmony group. On reflection, the experience has highlighted for me how being a member of a group has gone a long way to fulfilling all the individual human requirements Maslow (1943) refers to in the hierarchy of needs; physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self actualisation.

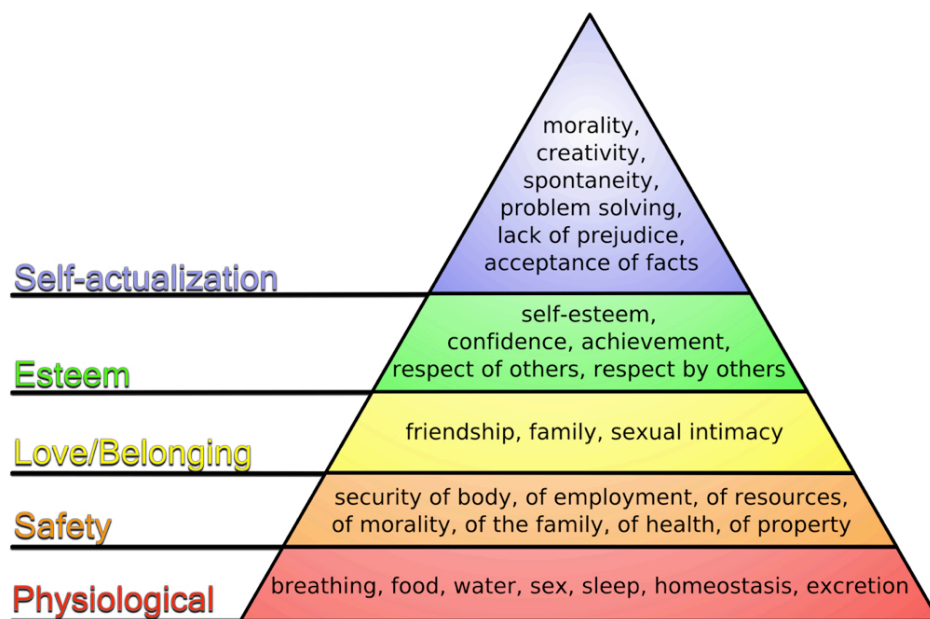


Figure 3.10. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Confidence among the group members grew as a result of participating in a number of concerts and we produced our first music album in 2003. We entitled it 'After Albany' in honour of the town where we first sang together. Following the launch of our CD, we appeared on Ireland's most popular chat show, The Late Late Show. To perfect our craft as singers, we scheduled six months of concerts in theatres and churches around Ireland. My time with the 'One Step Beyond' musical journey proved invaluable as I was able once again to deploy my skills in the branding, advertising and organisation of this national tour.

I believe music is the language of the soul that has the ability to affect not only those who are making the music but those who hear it. It is a language that can surpass other barriers in society and when we sang together as a group there were no labels, age or class barriers, only a collective love of ‘musicing’. This is a term used by Elliott (1995) in his book *‘Music Matters’*. He often uses the word ‘performing’ interchangeably with ‘musicing’. He reminds us that singing and playing instruments existed before musical compositions and that ‘Many cultures still view music as something that people do’ (p.49). Before these concerts, we travelled to the venue, met the local people and were interviewed on radio shows and sang at the local Sunday mass. Our link with the Presentation Sisters living in these towns was very helpful in securing these liturgical engagements. I believe what we were doing was musicing, in that we were bringing people together through impromptu singing and music, linking with our own culture in the process and feeling personally fulfilled as a result. This brought me back to the early years of ‘ceilidh’ with my grandmother in Cavan.

In his lecture ‘Hosting the Stranger’ at Boston College in 2009, the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney referred to hospitality as a practice of reciprocity and a process of relationality. This idea resonates with me and captures what happened on our journey from county to county as we encountered people and sang in the local venues.



Video 3.7. [Hosting the Stranger Lecture, Boston College](#) (Hartcrane, 2009)

We used our ‘bodied imaginations’ (Kearney 2009) as a way of responding to the those we came in contact with. Kearney draws on the philosophical ideas of Ricoeur (1930–2004) and Derrida (1913–2005). I am attracted to Derrida’s (2005) idea, as discussed by Kearney, that hospitality is

unconditional and the stranger a guest who we give to unconditionally. I observed that my parents' hospitality knew no bounds and they accepted others into their home with a generosity of spirit and warmth of heart. I experienced an open welcome from the community in Clondalkin, to whom I was initially a stranger, when people tried to help with a project that I had undertaken for the good of the students, school and community. This example of pure hospitality has no expectations from the giver, other than to give for the greater good of humanity. This concept of hospitality was magnified later in 2006, when Acabella was invited to perform in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, as part of an annual Irish Summer festival. We were strangers from another country who were invited into people's homes to stay, eat and sing. I believe the welcome that we experienced was of a very trusting relational quality, spiritual in nature and difficult to quantify.



Photo 3.5. Acabella

It could be argued, using Ricouer's idea of hospitality that what we experienced was conditional because of the expectations that accompanied our visit. After all, we were there to sing as part of the community festival. Collectively, we were known singers from Ireland who would provide entertainment. Yet individually we were strangers. When we were invited each day to dine with different families from the Irish community in the Sioux Falls there were no conditions. We were accepted into the homes of others who had little or no knowledge of us as individuals except that we were singers. Although not strictly adhering to Derrida's (2001) notion of hospitality, I would say being with Acabella in Sioux Falls and meeting strangers who invited us into their homes was as near to Derrida's 'pure hospitality' as I have experienced.

According to Derrida:

I open my home and that I give not only to the stranger (furnished with a family name and the social status of a stranger etc.) but the absolute other, unknown and anonymous; and that I give place (donne lieu) let come, arrive, let him take his place in the place that I offer him, without demanding that he give his name or enter into some reciprocal act. (Derrida, cited in Kearney 1999, p.6)

Over the years, irrespective of background, age, country, creed or colour, singing with Acabella has opened doors, broken down barriers, dispensed with any personal conditions other than partaking in the pure love of music. I can also say that I have brought into my classroom at all levels of the educational system a philosophy of educational hospitality towards my students. By this I mean that it is a relationship as a practice of reciprocity and a process of relationality: I create a safe environment where students will flourish provided they work for the benefit of the whole group rather than as isolated individuals. I create a hospitable space and welcome students into this environment irrespective of their previous educational achievements. There are no preconditions other than it is a relational process and that students should do their best.



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