Contents

Chapter 3 Developing Your Professional Portfolio 52

Chapter 8   Lesson Planning

143

Becoming a Teacher: Current Issues in Education

What kind of teacher do I wish to be?

What changes have occurred in education in recent years?

What are the key issues in teacher education?

Once you have worked through this chapter, you will have:

- Gained insight into some of the changes that have influenced Irish education in recent years.
- Recognised the significance of critical reflection and reflective practice as central aspects of teacher education.
- Developed an appreciation and understanding of teacher identity as an evolving and significant concept in your development as a teacher.
- Come to recognise the significance of working positively within a diverse and constantly changing society with varied social and educational needs.
- Developed an appreciation of the key contribution of educational research to teacher education.
- Gained a degree of understanding in respect of the concept of leadership, and its intrinsic and ineluctable role within teacher education.

THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM 1999

TASK 1.1: 'THE SABER-TOOTH CURRICULUM'

J. Abner Peddiwell wrote his essay 'The Saber-Tooth Curriculum', published in *The Saber-Tooth Curriculum and Other Essays* (1939), as a humorous observation outlining how unquestioned customs of schooling could lead to a reluctance to embrace badly needed changes. Peddiwell believed education needed to be receptive to the developing needs of life and he thought education and curriculum in his time were adhering unduly to outdated needs instead of embracing necessary changes.

Read 'The Sabre Tooth Curriculum' (widely available online) and address these questions:

- What would you consider to be the fish-grabbing, horse-clubbing and tiger-searing of our time?
- What motivated New-Fist to design a curriculum?
- How do the aims of education today differ from those of the Paleolithic era outlined in the essay?
- If you were to design a new primary school curriculum for the twenty-first century, what areas would you prioritise and why?

The Irish Primary School Curriculum (PSC), published in 1999 and gradually implemented over a number of subsequent years, amounted to a substantial revision of the 1971 curriculum (Department of Education 1971). You may have experienced several aspects of the 1999 curriculum in the course of your education. The 1999 publication was the outcome of a lengthy process of collaborative curriculum design undertaken by representatives from a broad range of partners within primary education (Looney 2001).

The PSC 1999 was the second major curricular initiative in Irish primary education in a period of thirty years. The 1971 curriculum had initially outlined the first clear statement of child-centred principles for all national schools (Department of Education 1971). The 1999 documentation claims 'to incorporate [those] principles and develop them' (NCCA 1999: vii). That intention is maintained in several key ways. There is a similarity in aims, with both curricula advancing aspirations firmly located in the child-centred tradition. Emphasis in both cases is placed on 'enabling the child to live a full life as a child' (Department of Education 1971: 12; NCCA 1999: 7) and preparing the child for further education. Stress is placed in both curricula on the importance of a rounded development for each child, individual difference, activity methods, the principle of

subject integration and the importance of environment-based learning (Department of Education 1971; NCCA 1999).

TASK 1.2: THINKING ABOUT BROAD AIMS

In pairs, discuss and develop two broad aims for a group of learners. Choose the age group you wish to focus on. Keep the aims broad rather than subject specific and prepare a rationale for your choice of aims.

However, the authors of the PSC 1999 are keen to emphasise the impact of a broad range of recent influences on society, and the need to incorporate and prioritise these in the curriculum (NCCA 1999). Developments within child-centered understandings of education are to the fore, with an emphasis on the developmental and aesthetic aspects of learning (NCCA 1999). Moreover, greater emphasis is placed on language development and on incorporating other 'key issues…of relevance to primary education' (NCCA 1999: 9). These key issues are presented as representing the landscape of change in education, culture, society and spirituality in Ireland and elsewhere. Changes and issues in these areas are seen as having a considerable ongoing influence on all our lives, not least on children in school. In the area of education we see matters relating to quality of education, the enhancement of literacy and numeracy, the crucial role of early childhood education, the role of information and communications technology (ICT) in schools and society, the importance of catering for children with special needs, and the role of the curriculum in contributing to equality of access to education. Equally, considerable importance is also placed on questions of our national identity within the European and global dimensions of our modern society, the development of pluralism in our schools and society, along with developing tolerance and nurturing the spiritual dimensions of life (NCCA 1999).

M-LEVEL TASK 1.1: REVIEWING KEY ISSUES IN THE PSC 1999

Review the 'Key Issues in Primary Education' outlined in the *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (NCCA 1999: 25–31) (http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum).

- How significant are these issues now?
- Have they stood the test of time?
- Could you suggest some further issues that merit attention now?
- Can a curriculum exert a considerable impact on the shaping of society?

Specifically, the PSC 1999 puts to the fore the importance of enabling 'children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance, the demands of life both now and in the future' (NCCA 1999: 6) and this aspiration finds further expression in three broad aims:

1. To enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual
2. 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
3. To prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning

(NCCA 1999: 7)

TASK 1.3: AIMS IN ACTION

Read and reflect on the aims of the PSC 1999, outlined above (NCCA 1999: 7).

In a group discussion, choose one of these three broad aims and tease out some implications of this aim for classroom atmosphere, the role of the teacher and the significance of subject content.

Draw on your own schooling experiences, which may have been gained through your encounter with the PSC 1999, with other curricula in other societies or in non-formal educational settings.

The PSC 1999 provides a broad set of learning experiences and endorses a variety of approaches to teaching and learning with a focus on catering to the varying needs of individual children. The aims of the curriculum aspire to all children being introduced to a range of learning opportunities that acknowledges the learner's uniqueness, develops their full possibilities and enables them to meet the challenges of present and future living. The emphasis is on the child as an active learner, and, by means of a diversity of teaching methodologies, the ambition is to nurture the development of significant skills in communication, inquiry, problem-solving, investigation and analysis, critical thinking, social and personal awareness, and interaction (NCCA 1999).

While the curriculum emphasises the need for greater attention to be paid to students with special educational needs and also the needs of gifted children, it also seeks to facilitate the growth of the individual child in all aspects of his or her life; these aspects are cited as spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical (NCCA 1999).

According to the authors of the PSC 1999, the curriculum is reflective of the educational, cultural, social and economic aspirations and concerns of Irish society. It also wishes to take into account the evolving nature of our society and seeks to enable children to adapt

to these changes. Specifically, the curriculum is divided into the following broad key areas, which are again further divided into 11 subjects:

- Language (Gaeilge, English)
- Mathematics
- Social, Environment and Scientific Education (History, Geography, Science)
- Arts Education, Visual Arts, Music and Drama
- Physical Education
- Social, Personal and Health Education

Initially, the PSC 1999 was set out in 23 documents, consisting of an introduction, 11 curriculum statements associated with each subject and the same number of teacher guidelines. These are now available online: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Primary-Education/Primary_School_Curriculum/.

In the case of each curriculum statement there is an outline of its rationale, aims and objectives; very structured content and assessment approaches for each of the four class levels are also laid out. These class levels are presented as Infants; First and Second; Third and Fourth; and Fifth and Sixth. The teacher guidelines are intended to provide a comprehensive range of resource materials to support a variety of approaches to teaching and learning.

TASK 1.4: CURRICULUM STRUCTURE

As a very comprehensive curriculum document, you will encounter the entire Primary School Curriculum 1999 many times throughout your training as a teacher. Gaining an initial understanding of its structure is worthwhile. Choose any one subject and familiarise yourself with the structures employed in presenting that subject within the curriculum. In particular, take note of aims, objectives, strands and insights on evaluation.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1999

TASK 1.5: SOCIETAL CHANGES, EDUCATION AND THE CURRICULUM

In the course of your own experience of schooling and society, you may have noticed and lived through many changes. Identify a number of societal changes that you have encountered and assess the extent to which schools, curricula, and education structures and services have accommodated these changes.

In the years since 1999, Irish schools have encountered considerable challenges; ones that have demanded previously untried responses. Some merit consideration in this book, particularly as they inexorably influence your pre-service education, your sense of a growing professional identity and your prevailing understanding of the role of teachers in Irish society. To the fore are challenges around the inclusion of children with special learning needs in mainstream classrooms, the early and prompt identification of children with special learning needs, the need for schools to adjust to a significant increase in the number of children entering schools from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, the requirement to build a new sense of partnership with parents, and an emphasis on enhancing a sense of social inclusion (Teaching Council 2011). Significantly, there has also been acceleration in ICT research and the availability of new technologies developed for classroom usage and the advancement of teaching and learning strategies. The period has also seen the enactment of an assortment of legislation that continues to influence the daily work of teachers in significant ways. Significant pieces of legislation include the Education Act 1998, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, the Equal Status Act 2000–2004, the National Qualifications Authority Act 2001, the Teaching Council Act 2001, the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act 2004 and the Disability Act 2005. Some of the spirit of this legislation might be gleaned from a key aspiration set out in the Preamble to the Education Act 1998; one that brings to the fore a key objective of giving practical effect to the rights of all children as they engage in education, ensuring that a quality of education appropriate to their needs and abilities be provided while also advancing equality of access to and participation in education. The Preamble contains the aspiration that

> the education provided respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society and is conducted in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff, the community served by the school and the state.

In January 2010, the Free Pre-School Year (FPSY) was introduced with the specific purpose of making early learning opportunities available to all children aged more than three years and two months on 1 September in the relevant preschool year (Ring 2015). Another significant development was the introduction of the Primary Language Curriculum in September 2016.

All told, the rapid nature of change within society and the aforementioned background of legislative and education initiatives have also had a significant and lasting impact on this society's understanding of teacher education. It became increasingly obvious that in order to embrace these and other changes in society and schooling, a significant reconceptualisation of teacher education across its entire spectrum was required (Teaching Council 2011). The Teaching Council, which was charged with this reconceptualisation, took the view that

> innovation is essential at all stages of the continuum if teacher education is to be effective in meeting the changing needs identified.... The Council sees the concept of innovation as encompassing those processes whereby fresh thinking is applied to teacher education with the aim of renewing and improving it. Initial teacher education must be reconceptualised so that it is fit-for-purpose in preparing 21st century teachers…. (Teaching Council 2011: 8)

Deficiencies in older models of teacher education were noted, including a need to create a new balance and dynamic between theory and practice (Teaching Council 2011). An over-reliance on pre-service teacher education with clear insufficiencies evident in ongoing career and professional development, as well as notable inadequacies within the induction process for newly qualified teachers were cited (Teaching Council 2011). The limited exposure of prospective teachers to the ever-widening spectrum of school experiences in the form of pre-service school placement became evident, and it was advocated that the school placement

> should take place in a variety of settings and incorporate a variety of teaching situations and school contexts: different age groups of students; different sectors… various socio-economic and cultural environments; multi-class and mixed ability teaching situations; and team teaching/co-teaching situations. (Teaching Council, 2011: 13)

Addressing these issues has come to be viewed as essential, particularly so as 'to ensure that tomorrow's teachers are competent to meet the challenges that they face and are life-long learners, continually adapting over the course of their careers to enable them to support their students' learning' (Teaching Council 2011: 11–15).

TASK 1.6: EXAMINING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

'Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while, or the light won't come in.'

Alan Alda, actor

Undoubtedly we all make many assumptions every day and assumptions are made about us. In the school situation, our assumptions can be very influential in our engagement as teachers with learners. In this exercise, choose a school setting that differs from your own primary school (e.g. single sex, multi-denominational, religious, urban, rural, DEIS, etc.) and pursue the following lines of inquiry:

- What assumptions could I make about my learners' families?
- What assumptions might I make based on where these learners live?
- What assumptions could I make about the gender of my learners and about what's 'appropriate' for different genders?
- What assumptions might I make about the kind of content my learners can manage?
- What assumptions could I make about my learners' values, way of life and life experiences?
- What other assumptions might come to mind?

(Adapted from Institute for Humane Education 2015)

M-LEVEL TASK 1.2: THREE PILLARS OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Read the Teaching Council's policy document entitled *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education* (2011a). This document argues that policy on teacher education should be based on three pillars: innovation, integration and improvement. Assess how well the document manages to integrate these pillars into the policy as a whole.

TEACHER EDUCATION: CHANGES AND CONSTANTS

Teacher education in Ireland has seen considerable review and reconfiguration in recent years at all levels of teaching: primary, secondary and further education. Reviews have been undertaken and are ongoing across many undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in teacher education. Attempts are being made to address issues such as an apparent theory–practice dichotomy, as well as the quality, duration and diversity of school placements and the length of pre-service education. At a more specific level, it

is arguable that addressing many of the following issues, as they relate to the education of a prospective teacher, has emerged as a central concern in a number of key reviews (Teaching Council 2011; Teaching Council 2013a; Teaching Council 2013b; Teaching Council 2013c):

- Making critical reflection and reflective practice central to teacher education
- Developing and exploring our sense of teacher identity
- Recognising, appreciating and working positively within a diverse and constantly changing society with varied social and educational needs
- Recognising the essential contribution of educational research to teacher education
- Understanding that leadership is an intrinsic and ineluctable part of teacher education

These five themes are treated as deeply interrelated in this book and should also be seen as such in your journey within teacher education. While they are not listed in any particular order here, it is intended that the initial attribute of critical reflection will provide a strong basis for all other concerns and act as a key touchstone for the development of your teacher education programme. However, the attributes are best understood as being interwoven and interdependent, with the potential for incremental development in a wide variety of contexts. Tasks, problems and activities within this book will seek to develop these attributes in a manner relevant to your experience as student teachers and future teachers.

Developing Reflection and Criticality in Teacher Education

M-Level Task 1.3: The Place of Educational Theory

Theory has often received a mixed reception within the teaching community. Speculate on why that may be the case. Develop some ideas in respect of what theory might or might not contribute to your identity as a teacher, drawing on Inglis's view below.

> Those who refuse all theory, who speak of themselves as plain, practical people, and virtuous in virtue of having no theory, are in the grip of theories which manacle them and keep them immobile, because they have no way of thinking about them and therefore of taking them off. They aren't theory free; they are stupid theorists.
>
> (Inglis 1985: 40)

The discourse of 'reflection', which is explored as a central and recurring theme throughout this book, has a lineage in teacher education. John Dewey was among the first theorists

in this area to explore the concept of 'reflective practice' by examining the dynamics that exist between experience and reflection (Dewey 1933). He was motivated by the concern about a culture of dependency among teachers – a dependency on textbooks and other external authorities. This dependency, he believed, prompted many teachers to 'flock to those persons who give them clear-cut and definite instructions as to how to teach this or that' (Dewey 1902: 152). The development of professional judgements and decision-making skills were neglected to a point where teachers might 'accept without inquiry or criticism any method or device which seems to promise good results' (Dewey 1902: 152).

In addressing the question of reflection, Dewey sought to distinguish between actions that are merely routine and those that are reflective, with those described as routine often finding their sole justification in tradition and authority (Dewey 1933). Reflective actions, on the other hand, are seen as involving processes which actively, continually and thoughtfully address routines, rituals and beliefs in a manner that is holistic, open-minded, wholehearted and responsible (Dewey 1933). Significantly, the process is not to be restricted to the application of a ready-made set of techniques. Instead, Dewey argued that reflection 'enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view or purposes of which we are aware, to act in deliberate and intentional fashion, to know what we are about when we act' (1933: 17).

We shall see later in this book how Dewey's work acted as a basis for others, particularly Schön (1983) (See Chapter 2), who managed in different ways to locate the concept of reflection at the heart of discourse within teacher education, where it remains to the present day.

One key concern within the discourse of reflective theory is that of the integration of theory and practice. Integrating theory and practice involves your analysis of meaningful, recurring patterns of experience, the deliberative application of those examined experiences to your practice and then making further modifications based on those experiences in the light of your continued, systematic and regular critical reflection.

Since there are many definitions and claims made in respect of critical thinking and reflection, their consideration in this initial chapter has limitations. We will therefore consider a broad set of insights in relation to critical thinking and reflection. Critical thought will be viewed as an inextricable feature of teacher reflectiveness and as *the* 'abiding attitude or disposition' (Dunne 1993, cited by Kelleghan 2002: 45) that underpins teachers' identity and engagement in their classrooms and schools. This adherence to critical reflection within teacher education is based on the argument that

> (h)uman existence, because it came into being through asking questions, is at the root of change in the world. There is a radical element to existence, which is the radical act of asking questions. At root, human existence involves surprise, questioning and risk. And because of this it involves actions and change. (Freire, cited in hooks 2009: 183)

It is indisputable that the development of critical thinking is key to our identity as reflective teachers or prospective teachers. For some, this may raise doubts or evoke a certain fear. Our experiences of schooling to date may not have encouraged it. American author and feminist bell hooks offers some reassurance; she contends the naturalness of criticality to the human condition, its rootedness in our humanity and its availability to us when we take the time and trouble to seek it:

> Children are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers. Across the boundaries of race, class, gender and circumstance, children come into the world of wonder and language consumed with a desire for knowledge. Sometimes they are so eager for knowledge that they become relentless interrogators – demanding to know the who, what, when, where and why of life. Searching for answers, they learn almost instinctively how to think. Sadly, children's passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only. Most children are taught early on that thinking is dangerous. (hooks 2009: 7–8)

TASK 1.7: A CRITICAL THINKER

The following is a description of a critical thinker by Paul and Elder, prominent authorities on critical thinking. Assess their perspective. There may be factors within critical thinking that the authors have omitted. You might also identify areas where you have specific strengths and indeed accomplishments that require further work and development. Finally, you might offer a conjecture on how critical thinking might underpin worthwhile teaching.

A critical thinker:

- Raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely
- Gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively
- Comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards
- Thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences
- Communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

(Paul and Elder 2009: 11)

DEVELOPING OUR IDENTITIES AS TEACHERS

Argyris and Schön (1974) argue that all humans require a developed disposition of reflective action as a prerequisite to the full development of their very humanity. If so, it is tenable that the exploration and development of our own identity, and, specifically, our teacher identity, should be a primary concern within this book.

Your time as a student teacher is a vital opportunity for you to develop your teacher identity. Throughout this book, we will seek to explore and discuss your experiences, recollections, perceptions, stories and situations. Such an approach will hopefully enrich the development of your sense of teacher identity. Student teachers can typically adopt some received notions of teacher identity that they may have gleaned from what they witnessed themselves in their years of schooling. However, exploring what it means to be a teacher with the support of critical guidance from teacher educators is crucial. Student teachers have the dual role of both students and teachers and may, therefore, 'labour under the responsibilities of independent and demanding roles that require a reformulation of identity' (Gaudelli and Ousley 2009: 936).

Developing Our Identities as Teachers
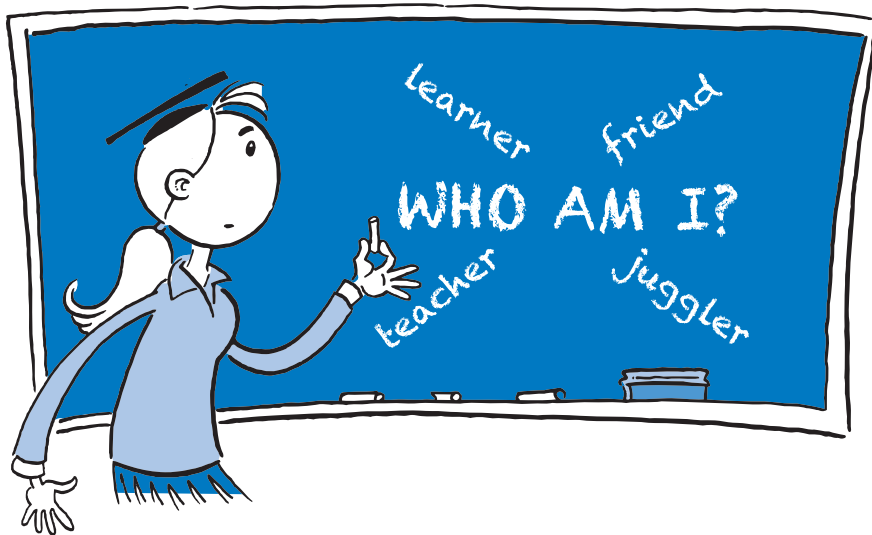
The very process of developing sustainable personal and professional identities is quite a complex and demanding one. By acknowledging Palmer's view that 'good teaching

cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher' (1998: 2), we can't avoid the seriousness of the issue of identity. One primary understanding of identity is that it is fluid and open to change: who we are now, how we think, what we feel, the values we hold, the perspectives we advance are not fixed forever. Our very identities, as they encounter changes, challenges and varying critical perspectives, can be seen to be in a process of continual renegotiation. Reflecting on emerging situations, and on how each individual's 'self' is challenged in fluid and varying contexts as it seeks to develop its own sense of authenticity and sustainability, is something to be welcomed. This concept of identity seems perennial, lacking finitude, and requires us to return, renew and reconsider with regularity, since

> teacher professional identity…stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed, nor is it imposed; rather, it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (Sachs 2005: 15)

In his book entitled *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Palmer asks teachers to undertake an expedition toward connecting with themselves, their vocation and their learners by examining their own lives and identities. He argues that the 'what' (content), the 'how' (our methods), and the 'why' (our justifications) of education have been discussed for years in various ways in education discourse; however, discussion of the 'who' or the identity of the teacher has been neglected since this has been seen as intrusive and overly personal for public sharing. Palmer argues that this inner self deserves our wholehearted attention. Three constituent and deeply interwoven elements of identity come from his analysis – the intellectual, the emotional and the spiritual – and he argues that each must be embraced equally (1998). If teaching was to be seen purely in terms of intellect, it might be reduced to an unemotional abstraction. Seeing teaching as an entirely emotional enterprise might be viewed as self-indulgent, and may reduce it to a solely spiritual quest, where some of its connectedness to reality might suffer. Consequently, all three elements are interdependent in teaching, simply because they are so interwoven within our humanity. Palmer explains all three as follows:

> By intellectual I mean the way we think about teaching and learning – the form and content of our concepts of how people know and learn, of the nature of our students and our subjects. By emotional I mean the way we and our students feel as we teach and learn – feelings that can either enlarge or diminish the exchange between us. By spiritual I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with

the largeness of life – a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching. (Palmer 1998: 4–5)

Palmer goes much further than just examining a range of professional skills involved in being a teacher and in this way addresses the idea of teacher identity from a holistic viewpoint. His key question is: 'Who is the self that teaches?' (1998: 4), and he maintains that good teaching emanates from the identity and integrity of the teacher. He describes identity and integrity in the following ways:

By identity I mean an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and to myself, the experience of love and suffering – and much, much more…. By integrity I mean whatever wholeness I am able to find within that nexus as its vectors form and re-form the pattern of my life. Integrity requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not – and that I choose life-giving ways of relating to the forces that converge within me: Do I welcome them or fear them, embrace them or reject them, move with them or against them. (Palmer 1998: 13–14)

Of significance, therefore, are questions about values and how you develop ethical dispositions in relation to both your own sense of self, and to other people and their ongoing professional engagement. It may seem that no artificial divide between different aspects of your life can prevail, nor can a generic teaching 'template' be applied when you, as an individual self, enter with integrity into the turbulent milieu of human learning, as this very profound encounter with learners can be seen as nothing less than participating in the 'building of true human life' (Buber 1947: 113).

This approach to identity can therefore challenge your present conceptions of yourself and your choices, your understanding of your so-called fixed traits, your personal understanding of continuity and habits, your conformity to others' ideals and ultimately your ideas of what constitutes 'you'. It raises provocative, uncomfortable and challenging questions about freedom of choice, and the possible fallibility of some of your traditions and precedents; it may point you towards a more critical interrogation of your comfortable routines, and supports a view of the self as 'a continuous reflexive project' (Hargreaves, 1994: 71), involving struggle, reassessment and openness to change.

TASK 1.8: DEVELOPING AN IDENTITY JOURNAL

Developing an identity journal should take place over a lengthy period of time. The process is not prescriptive and the thoughts expressed in your journal are private and should not be intended for others. You can return to your journal as ideas develop, and are challenged and overtaken by other insights. You may wish to consider some of the following questions as prompts to your thinking.

Why have I decided to become a teacher? Did I really choose it? Did other people tell me it 'would be a good idea' and did I then do what others expected of me? Did l long to do otherwise and develop another career? If I say I decided to become a teacher 'to get a job', why do I say that? How do my motivations to become a teacher influence my perceptions of teaching?

What are my key values and beliefs and how do they influence my perception of teaching? How does the learning context I'm living through as a student teacher impact on my ability to put these beliefs and values into practice? Should I explore my teaching identity and give it expression in the classroom? In what ways is my identity evolving over the course of time? How do I match my evolving personal identity with my learners' evolving needs, interests and identities?

Societal Change and Student Teachers

The pace of change in Ireland's educational, social and cultural landscape has accelerated considerably throughout the last two decades. Analyses have critiqued older assumptions about societal homogeneity and have indicated that the integration of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the associated implications require considerable attention in this society (Condon 2015). The effect of integration on schools is ongoing, sometimes major and often quite varied. Information amassed during the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) annual census for the school year 2013–2014 indicates that 23 per cent of Irish schools educated almost 80 per cent of children of newcomer families (cited by Duncan 2015). Clearly this period has seen demographic changes within many school communities, with considerable challenges and opportunities afforded by the integration of many different newcomer families.

TASK 1.9: US AND THEM

A report suggests that 'research shows there is a conception of "us" and "them" among some students, identifying white, settled, Catholic students as the "norm" and those from minority groups as "other". This perception can come across in the language of students and of teachers' (Devine 2005, cited in Carey *et al.* 2008: 26).

Explore this viewpoint by drawing on and sharing your own experiences in recent years, paying particular attention to intercultural education.

Pertinent to these considerable changes has been the need for teachers to develop a growing awareness of such opportunities and challenges, and teachers have been informed by publications such as *Guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School* (NCCA 2005), in which intercultural education is defined as having two focal points:

> [In the first instance, it is an education that] respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us. [Second]…it is education [that] promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and promotes the values upon which equality is built. (3)

Equally, the ongoing inclusion of children with special learning needs within mainstream schooling, the development of various programmes to counter inequality in education, the initiation of debate regarding the ownership and patronage of schools, the adoption of newer technologies, changes in family structures and hierarchies, and other developments would all indicate that the education of teachers requires the development, and the incorporation and application, of criticality and reflection in respect of established and emerging policy positions. Such a pathway of reflective criticality may be seen as central to the development of engaged professionalism and responsible citizenship, both of which identities are informed by and reflective of the view that 'critical thinking means that the critical person has not only the capacity (the skills) to seek reasons, truth, and evidence, but also that he or she has the drive (disposition) to seek them' (Burbules and Berk 1999: 48).

How do you prepare as a student teacher to understand and address the diversity of learners' needs, especially when this diversity may differ considerably from your own experience of schooling? Currently, there is little agreement in the literature on teacher education regarding a recommended singular approach for you to take (Churton, Cranston-Gingras and Blair 1998; Cochran-Smith 2004; Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2007).

Even the very language we use in this sphere needs scrutiny. Words such as 'diversity', 'inclusion', 'integration' and 'needs' are contested and may mean different things to different people. Considering the ongoing trend towards diversity among our school-age population, some discontinuity of culture, language, experiential backgrounds, expectations, values, and patterns of communication and interaction between teachers (including student teachers) and the learners in their classrooms may exist. To explore this further, you might begin by asking yourself the following questions:

- What is my understanding of diversity?
- How open am I to cultures, perspectives and ways of life other than my own familiar patterns?
- How can I develop my understanding of other cultures and ways of life?
- How might that benefit my development as a person and as a teacher?
- What might I surmise from this about entry to teacher education in Ireland?
- If I conclude that entry is less reflective of diversity than I might prefer, can I seek to explain that? How might it be addressed? Indeed, should it be addressed?
- What is my view of the following aspiration in respect of schools in Ireland from the NCCA report *Diversity and Inclusion*?

> An inclusive school welcomes, recognises, respects and celebrates diversity. A commitment to achieve equality of access, opportunity, participation and outcome for all its students is a foundational principle of an inclusive school. From the perspective of the learner, it is a school where the learner feels comfortable engaging with all aspects of schooling; where he/she has a strong sense that the school is working for them, in their interest; where she/he feels a genuine sense of belonging and well-being. (NCCA 2009: 8)

Questions in relation to the above aspiration might be:

- How is such an all-inclusive school to be achieved?
- How do I as a student teacher recognise my own strengths, talents, prejudices, fears and limitations, and how can that knowledge assist me in contributing to such a school?
- How does my own education influence me in respect of this statement?
- How am I challenged by this perspective?

In asking the above questions, we are exercising our innate sense of criticality and ability to think critically. Central to this book is the view that critical thinking empowers us, is

based on discernment, is inherently democratic, helps to ensure a strong link between theory and practice, requires a willingness to detach ourselves from our established views and maintain the belief in the fallibility of our inquiry, and reminds us that none of us has a monopoly on the answers. Re-examining some of our previously held views may be difficult or troubling, and yet may yield a sense of freedom and deep insight. bell hooks, while writing in terms of the classroom, posits the view that such a sense of criticality is deeply inherent to our own development and the development of societal well-being:

> The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks 1994: 207)

M-LEVEL TASK 1.4: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE IRISH?

Give some in-depth consideration to the following ideas and questions:

What does it mean to be Irish in the Ireland of today? Within the Irish population there is a great deal of diversity in terms of ways of living, beliefs and values. Yet, do we maintain and uphold a narrow definition of Irishness in the Irish primary classroom of today? Do culture and tradition define who we are? Is it necessary to define what it means to be Irish before we can understand the ethnicity of others? (adapted from INTO 2004).

Student Teachers and Research

Historically, much has been written about the relationship between teachers and research. This relationship has, at times, been seen as ruptured, underdeveloped and in need of considerable reinvigoration (Hargreaves 1999). The debate has often focussed on the dichotomies apparent between theory and practice in education. Many teachers, it has been contended, viewed 'theory (as) the soft-centre, not the hard-core around which their everyday practice revolves' (Richmond 1970: 23). Engaging with theory might have been viewed as either a form of 'philosophical abstruseness' or its very opposite: namely an indulgence in 'small talk about the tricks of the trade' (Richmond 1970: 23). Some perceived educational theory as being possibly detrimental to teachers and that it served only to obfuscate 'such natural understanding and seriousness as they might have' (Wilson 1975: 119). In many cases, however, teachers felt a skills deficit in respect of the

rigours of undertaking research. In other instances, institutional and research traditions seemed to exclude the teacher practitioner. However, an emerging and discernible shift in emphasis can be noted. This has involved a move from a degree of over-reliance on the non-teaching expert in the sphere of research towards the idea of the teacher–researcher, a concept wherein the activity of ongoing research is inherent to the teacher's identity, so much so that

> (t)here can be no educational research if teachers play no important role in the process of articulating, analysing and hypothesising solutions to complex educational problems. The specialist inquiries of professional researchers should be viewed as subordinate to this fundamental process. (Elliott 1990: 16)

It is clear that classrooms and schools are abundant with possibilities for worthwhile research. Equally, every student teacher and practising teacher has a rich set of experiences that they have garnered in school settings, including impressions, fixed ideas, recollections, notions about teaching, perspectives, recalled conversations, tentative theories and assumptions. Within the long continuum of becoming and practising as a teacher, it is significant to note that you can pursue what Cochran-Smith and Lytle call an 'inquiry stance' toward your own endeavours, a position that is 'critical and transformative'. This is linked not just to high standards for all learners but to 'social justice' and 'the individual and collective professional growth of teachers'. Teachers are empowered by such a stance because it 'talks back to, and challenges, many of the assumptions that define teaching and research on teaching in the current era' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009: 44).

Therefore, as a student teacher, you will encounter progressive challenges in the acquisition and development of research competencies. As you progress in teacher education, you will also encounter the opportunity to engage in a sustained piece of demanding and reflective research in the form of an undergraduate dissertation. It is envisaged that the incremental development of research competencies will ultimately contribute to the development of a research-based profession; one that is self-sustaining, resourceful and imbued with the view that 'theory is lived in practice and practice becomes a form of living theory' (McNiff and Whitehead 2002: 35). Towards this achievement, the qualities of critical reflectivity emerge as essential, and the benefits are multiple. A research consciousness among teachers allows adaptability in terms of engagement with learners, an ability to interpret, evaluate and adapt evidence from a broad spectrum of sources, an enhanced capacity to make decisions based on evaluated evidence, and a capacity to compare, differentiate and ultimately inform situations in a reflective and critical manner. In that sense teaching will move from being a dependent role to being one of engaged praxis, characterised by confidence among teachers 'that their kind of theorizing, relating closely and dialectically with practice, is actually the core of educational studies and not

just the endpoint of a system for adapting and delivering outside theories' (Walsh 1993: 43). In this book, readers will be introduced to some of the intricacies of research and some viable opportunities for inquiry (see Chapter 6). At the core of such an introduction lies the key touchstone of developing our sense of critical reflection, an attribute that challenges and disturbs previously held opinions with regularity and insightfulness.

TASK 1.10: WHAT IS THE PLACE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH?

Place the following benefits of educational research in your preferred rank order and offer some reasons to support your choice. You might then attempt to add at least three further benefits of educational research to your list. Before doing this, you might read the passage below, which offers a rationale for educational inquiry.

The benefits of educational research:

- Research insight can shape understanding.
- Research can inform action.
- Research should have inferences for broader project and policy implementation.
- Research can solve existing problems.
- Research should inform decision-making.
- Research can allow us to develop an in-depth analysis of complex problems.

A rationale for educational research:

Teachers are more than technicians or purveyors of information. Accordingly, they must be committed to lifelong intellectual, personal, and professional growth. Because both faculty and teacher candidates must continually develop these habits of mind, teacher education programs must stimulate the exploration and development of the full range of human capabilities. Thus, all our teacher education programs foster intellectual curiosity and encourage an appreciation of learning through the sustained analysis of ideas, values, and practices; and through intuition, imagination, and aesthetic experience. Teacher candidates are expected to develop a philosophy of teaching and learning. This philosophy and continuous professional growth should include values, commitments, and professional development…. This commitment means that undergraduate instructors rarely tell teacher candidates what it means to be an effective teacher, but instead provide guidance along with intellectual and practical entry points into the range of literature, scholarly debates, and experiences that help define contemporary education. Candidates, as a result of this inquiry orientation, will

develop the understandings necessary to become effective teachers. In other words, 'inquiry' and 'practice', 'research' and 'teaching', 'thinking' and 'doing' are expected to be integrated concepts and activities, rather than oppositional ones. (Indiana University Bloomington 2015)

Student Teachers as Leaders

Task 1.11: Teaching as Leadership

Review the following extract and discuss how the school situation described might differ from your experiences as a learner in primary school. Equally, you might speculate on the significant challenges such an approach would imply for you as a prospective teacher. How would you define teacher leadership? What hinders you from leading at times? Can you describe any experiences or situations where you were hindered from leading? Have you observed examples of good leadership in your past experiences (from students, teachers, support staff, parents, the community, etc.). In your opinion, what typifies these examples as noteworthy?

'I expect all the teachers in our school to think of themselves as pedagogical leaders,' said Martti Hellström, the principal of Aurora Primary School. All teachers are actively engaged in designing the school curriculum and setting the learning goals for their pupils. It's also up to teachers to assess how well their pupils achieve the learning goals because there are no external standardized tests in Finland. When asked about his role as the leader of the school, Hellström replied that he was 'like the leader of an orchestra. I try to get the best out of each and every person in our school.' Although teacher leadership is not a commonly used term in Finland, most teachers have a sense of leadership as members of a professional learning community in their schools. (Sahlberg 2013: 37)

Excellent leadership qualities are now seen as key features of a teacher's profile and are judged to be central to the development of learning, the development of schools, the undertaking of initiatives, the advancement of change and the formulation of policies within schools. It is envisaged that leadership capacity, based on reflective criticality, a keen research consciousness and an understanding of the dynamics of leadership, will further the professional capacity of teachers. Critically, the concept of leadership is one that now permeates all teachers' engagement and is no longer just the concern of principals and other promoted teachers. Teachers display leadership in a variety of ways.

Some roles are formal and have designated responsibilities, while other more informal roles can emerge as teachers develop greater competence as a result of interacting with their learners and peers. The variety of leadership roles ensures that teachers can provide leadership in a manner that is congruent with their talents and interests. Irrespective of the roles they assume, teacher leaders contribute to the culture of their schools, improve learning and influence practice among their peers. Teacher leaders model and promote the use of systematic inquiry as a critical component of teachers' ongoing learning and development. Fullan does not overstate the importance of this ongoing learning and development when he asserts:

> (t)o go down the path towards excellence requires a high-capacity teaching profession and school leaders to work collectively in focused ways on the consolidation of current success, and on the further development of the innovative learning methods essential for a complex but exciting global world. (Fullan 2013: 5)

As an inherent aspect of teacher identity, leadership underpins all aspects of school management, assessment, mentoring, collaborative work, curriculum development, in-service provision, methodological research and innovation, evaluation and implementation of technological and other advances, as well as many other emerging areas within education. As mentioned, teachers demonstrate leadership in varied, sometimes interwoven, ways. Education programmes for aspiring teachers seek to incorporate the development of leadership and its attributes as a key element, thus launching pre-service teachers on a leadership pathway that aims to ensure that they

> continue their professional growth throughout their careers [and] they also continue developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teacher leaders even as they serve as change agents in their schools. By beginning the process earlier in their careers, they will be better prepared to grow into and assume greater and greater teacher leadership roles as practicing teachers. (Bond 2011: 294)

M-LEVEL TASK 1.5: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO LEADERSHIP

Download and review the article entitled 'Overcoming the Obstacles to Leadership' by Moore, S. and Donaldson, M.L. (2007) (http://www.ascd.org/publications). Seek out parallels and differences between your experiences and those cited in the article. Evaluate the article on the basis of different cultural understandings and traditions of leadership. Assess the relevance of its recommendations to your situation and your disposition in terms of the demands of leadership.

A SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- In recent times, teachers in Ireland have encountered many changes that are the result of a rapidly altering society, particularly the inclusion of learners with special educational needs in the mainstream system and the previously unparalleled rate of integration of learners from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

- In this more diverse society, the teacher's role has required considerable re-examination; foremost to this is the concept of the teacher as a life-long learner in an era of continuing change and professional reassessment.

- Critical reflection and reflective practice are deeply intertwined with the idea of teachers as life-long learners and are also central concepts in teacher education.

- As reflective practitioners, we can bring recognition of the essential contribution of educational research to our work and help to ensure that our teaching is engaging, vitalised and informed by meaningful and appropriate insight and knowledge.

- A rich and varied understanding of leadership is an intrinsic and ineluctable part of our evolving identity as reflective and responsive educators.