1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the Irish primary school presents learning opportunities, but also many challenges. The implicit change requires, as Whitaker (1993 p49) informs us, ‘new knowledge and skills to enable us to adapt successfully to new requirements and circumstances’. But, Mahatma Gandhi’s dictum ‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’ means it’s not enough just to think about change, we must put it into action. My concern is that ICT should be used in a meaningful, interactive and structured way with the students. My research investigates how I can change my practice as a Learning Support teacher, by using multimedia and technology in a project that meets these criteria and empowers my students’ creative writing.

1.2 Context

I am an Assistant Principal and the ICT Coordinator in a 32 teacher primary school in Tallaght, Dublin. The school has designated disadvantaged status. Students with low achievement or learning difficulties receive ‘supplementary education’ in addition to their regular classroom programme. The Supplementary Education Team (SET) comprises Learning Support teachers, a Special Needs teacher, a Support teacher and Language Support teachers and was set up to co-ordinate the selection of students, teaching methodologies, individual programme planning and implementation of policies. As part of the SET I provide Learning Support to groups of students, mainly in literacy. The Learning Support Guidelines (Department of Education and Science 2000 p15) outlines the principal aim of this support as being ‘to optimise the teaching and learning process’ so that students with learning difficulties can ‘achieve adequate levels
of proficiency in literacy and numeracy before leaving primary school’. The use of ICT to achieve this aim is promoted (ibid pp86-89).

A Whole School Evaluation (WSE), carried out by the Department of Education and Science inspectors in October 2006, identified ICT integration as an area for development. Although a great deal of effort has been expended, the usage of ICT has been piecemeal and dependant on factors such as the level of teacher confidence, competence and motivation as well as budgetary and time constraints. In this context, the objective of integrating ICT use as a curricular tool that is part of the professional and automatic skill set of the average classroom teacher is still some distance into the future (National Council for Technology in Education 2004).

The area of creative writing is one that is highlighted in the curriculum (DES 2005). A whole staff decision was taken to use the First Steps writing programme (Education Department of Western Australia 2004a, 2004b), which recommends a structured approach to the writing process. Combining technology with writing ‘provides students of all ages with powerful resources, engaging activities, a genuine purpose for writing, and authentic audiences with whom to share their work’ (Kara-Soteriou, Xawilinski and Henry 2007). My approach to teaching the writing process is informed by Graves (1994), Calkins (1994), Atwell (1998) and Czerniewska (1989) and has been developed to suit the needs of specific students. I planned to explore ways to engage my students in active learning and help them benefit from the use of technology. I wanted to help their ‘voices’ to be heard.

Technology has not been used to good effect in promoting writing development in my school, thus there is a need to find an effective method of addressing the aims of the curriculum. I conducted a multimedia project ‘Readers Theatre’ in my school in April 2006 to improve my Learning Support students’ reading – see website http://homepage.eircom.net/~elearningsupport/ecchallenge.html. This encouraged me to conduct a more rigorous study in how ICT can be used to enhance education, the chosen area of focus being the use of technology in creative writing.

I seek now to improve my practice in the use of ICT in Learning Support, using a Living Educational Theory action research approach. It is a small scale intervention outlining, analysing and evaluating the steps I am taking to improve my practice as a
Learning Support teacher. I continuously ask the question ‘How do I improve my practice?’ (Whitehead 1988) and try to find answers in the cyclical action-reflection (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead 2003 p58) process of this qualitative action research. I approach this study from a social constructivist point of view, based on the premise that ‘interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of learning and the creation of meaning’ (Vygotsky 1978).

1.3 Values

‘Understanding one’s values’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2005 p24) plays an important part in the development of living educational theory. I examined my values and show through validated evidence in this thesis how I endeavoured to live my educational values in practice, using them as my living standard of judgement. These are my values:

- I value a social constructivist approach and wish to explore how to enable my students to adopt a more collaborative approach to their learning, developing a learning community.

- I wish to engage my students as fully as possible in learning, make the learning enjoyable and cater to their individual needs and learning styles.

- I believe it is important for students to have authentic tasks that develop transferable skills, e.g. write for a real audience.

- I want each student to feel valued, and to foster their creative voice.

- I am interested in exploring the potential of the educational application of technology in practice, sharing recommendations that can be of use to others in my field.
1.4 Objectives of the study

My research question is ‘How can I change my practice as a Learning Support teacher to use multimedia and technology in a meaningful and challenging project that will empower my students’ creative writing? The objectives can be stated as:

- To explore the potential that the multimedia authoring software technology 2Create A Story can play in developing creative writing in children.
- To stimulate the interest and excitement of the students in writing activities.
- To better cater to the learning needs and learning styles of my students.
- To develop my familiarity with the educational application of technology.
- To reap the benefit of others experience in this area which will inform my choice of suitable activities to carry out with the children.
- To reflect my values in the various elements of this study as I endeavour to optimise the teaching and learning process.
- To develop a ‘pedagogy of the unique’ (Farren 2005) in line with my values, in the search for a new ‘paradigm of training and education based on learning’ Reigeleuth (1999 p27).

1.5 Layout of thesis

Chapter Two reports on findings, in the literature, regarding the integration of Information and Communication Technologies in the Primary School Curriculum. The rationale for the use of ICT with Learning Support students is outlined. The potential of ICT to support the accommodation of the needs, interests and learning styles of individual pupils in the educational process is examined. Technology tools have the potential to augment and transform classroom learning and teaching through use of ‘innovative pedagogy and creative engagement’ (Somekh and Saunders 2007). Research
reveals how students can be engaged, inspired and empowered in the creative writing process through the use of multimedia and ICT.

Chapter Three outlines the living educational theory approach adopted in the study and the rationale for its selection as the research methodology. The methods used for data collection, in this qualitative research, are described and the steps taken to conduct a rigorous and ethical study examined.

Chapter Four gives a detailed account of the implementation phase of the action research cycles. The data collected is analysed and evaluated with reference to the literature.

Chapter Five identifies the conclusions drawn from the findings in the research project and summarises my efforts to ‘be the change you want to see’, within the limitations outlined. The study concludes with recommendations for improvement in my own practice to enhance and enrich creative writing in Learning Support students and empower their creative voices.