STALKING WITH WORLD-STORIES

AN ARTS BASED NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO AN ARTS CURRICULUM IN A SCHOOL LIBRARY IN THE JUNIOR CYCLE SCHOOL PROGRAMME (JCSP) LIBRARY PROJECT

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Abstract

This thesis is an arts-based narrative inquiry into an arts curriculum in one of the thirty Junior Cycle School Programme (JCSP) Library Project school libraries. Inquiring into the library's creative writing and visual arts initiative and into its senior writing club, it seeks to make visible how participants engaged together in these activities. The research also explores whether engagement in library-based activities might help students to develop the Junior Cycle key skills of Being literate, Being creative, Staying well and Communicating. In addition, the thesis highlights the fact that this library is one of fifty such school libraries promised to schools in designated disadvantaged schools.

Situating it in a critical theory framework, throughout the research I drew on the writing of critical theorists such as Freire, Giroux and hooks among others. In doing so, I brought forward Biesta's question (2013: 2): 'What do we want education for?' (Italics in original.)

Clandinin (2007) reminds us that narrative inquiry requires us to be attentive to social, cultural and familial stories – our own and those of our participants. Thus I employed autoethnographic footholds throughout the research to reveal the roots of my social justice and political leanings and to story my development as a narrative inquirer. Four cameos and an intermezzo – stops on the landscape (Applebaum, 1995) - are woven into the thesis as windows into my thinking and to illustrate the impact the research has had on me. Drawing on Pelias, Spry and Pineau among others helped me to realise the possibility and power of incorporating performativity into research.

The thesis is divided into five landscapes which document different stages in the research process as I world-travel (Lugones, 1987) to the academy and the research field. Situated within the landscapes are conversational spaces with my participants. As students discuss their experiences of the arts-based library curriculum they illustrate a pedagogy that is 'a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy' Giroux (2005: 155).

In the thesis I discuss international and Irish research into libraries. However, in contrast to a range of international research that points to the benefits of school libraries, there is currently a dearth of such research in Ireland. In the light of the absence of reference to school libraries in recent Department of Education policy documents. I hope that this thesis may help to ameliorate this situation. By doing so and by asking why the fifty JCSP libraries promised under DEIS have not yet been delivered, it may open up spaces for 'stories for otherwise' (Caine et al. 2022: 140).

Dedication

This inquiry was inspired by the work of the Junior Certificate School Programme Library Project and all who have worked in it. Their vision and creativity have opened up new possibilities for learning and I have been impressed by their joyful, imaginative responses to education. The Project librarians and Senior Project Librarian Kathleen Moran continue to develop and re-imagine the original ideas first voiced in the Curriculum Development Unit, Dublin.

In particular, I wish to thank the students and staff of the school in which I carried out this inquiry. Your generosity in letting me be part of this world for a while will never leave me. In your library I saw and heard imaginative ways of working together and I learned so much from all of you. I will never forget those days in the library as you engaged in creative writing and visual arts workshops, laughter and learning going hand-in-hand.

To Rachel, the librarian, your care for your students and your thoughtful, imaginative responses to what education can be continue to impress and inspire me. Thank you for making it possible for me to enter that warm and fascinating world that is your library. Thank you also to facilitators Colm Keegan and Jole Bartoli who so kindly made space for me in their workshops and for sharing their insights with me. I would also like to thank the principal and the Board of Management of the school for kindly facilitating this inquiry.

I wish to thank Dr Grace O'Grady for her constant support and guidance as I engaged in my narrative inquiry journey. You were always there to encourage, challenge and inspire. You shared your own knowledge and insights generously with me and gently helped me to find my place in the narrative inquiry landscape. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Dr Bernie Grummell, not least for first sharing possibilities of narrative inquiry with me. You have guided and inspired me, opening up new ideas and providing challenge and affirmation along the way. Your insight has been invaluable.

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my late parents whose steadfast belief in education, in justice and in me has travelled with me throughout my life. I also wish to dedicate it to my husband who has supported my desire to carry out this inquiry and walked alongside me

on this winding path. The thesis has accompanied us everywhere over the past few years and without your support, encouragement and insight it would not have been completed. Together, you and my parents have been the gentle light along the way. Thank you.

Stalking with World-stories

An Arts Based Narrative Inquiry into an arts curriculum in a school library in the Junior Cycle School Programme (JCSP) Library Project

How can you be nervous? Don't you see? We're in a library."

— Eilis O'Neal, *The False Princess*

Landscape 1: A Pilgrim Maps a Research Journey

1.1 Introduction

This thesis is an arts-based narrative inquiry into one of the Junior Cycle School Programme (JCSP) Library Project school libraries. Inquiring into the library's creative writing and visual arts initiative and into its senior writing club, it seeks to make visible how participants engaged together in these activities. I also wished to explore whether engagement in library-based activities might help students to develop the Junior Cycle key skills of *Being literate*, *Being creative*, *Staying well* and *Communicating*.

Carrying out this inquiry brought me on an autoethnographic journey of self-discovery as a pilgrim which I chart in the thesis from my initial reflections on my narrative beginnings to my movements along the research journey. Pilgrim is defined as[1]:

> one who journeys in foreign lands
> one who travels to a shrine or holy place as a devotee

and I use the word in this thesis to create a sense of how I became a narrative inquirer.

1.2 Setting the scene

This chapter presents an outline of the JCSP Library Project and why I wished to research it. It provides some insight into my journey as an emerging narrative inquirer attempting to find footholds on the research path. It describes why I chose a narrative inquiry approach,

[1] Merriam Webster Dictionary

drawing on my understanding of the case study methodology to focus on one research site. In this chapter I outline my emergent theoretical framework and how and why I incorporate autobiographical elements into the thesis.

As the dissertation traces my journeying, I have chosen to set it in landscapes to evoke a sense of movement along the learning path as I engage with epistemological and ontological questions and eventually find footholds in the world of narrative inquiry. Thus each chapter will bear the title of landscapes and I will return to this metaphor frequently in the dissertation, considering as I do that research is life as it is lived on the landscape (Phillion, 2002). I also draw on Lugones's (1987) concept of world-travelling in an effort to capture a sense of my movements on the inquiry landscape, as I come to understand more about research theories and methodologies, and to draw together threads of my writing, composed in different physical and theoretical landscapes over time. I elaborate on the landscapes and the metaphor of world-travelling in sections 1.3.2 and 1.3.3 respectively.

The following sections place the research in context, as I discuss the rationale for my choice of theoretical framework and methodological approach. I then outline how the thesis is presented before moving into a discussion of the research itself.

1.2.1 Critical theory as research framework

As a beneficiary of an education that was either free or grant-aided at the point of access, I have, nonetheless, been aware for many years of those who struggled to participate fully in the system. Perhaps they were caught up in generational poverty – a poverty that the education system had not been able to resolve – or the tensions between an education system designed 'for all' and familial, cultural lives and expectations. During my career I became increasingly aware of such tensions as I worked in, and with, schools that cared deeply about education and the families and communities they served. As a young teacher working in a centre for juvenile offenders, I began to wonder about the true purpose of education and for whom it was designed. Questions such as these remained with me during the decades that followed, decades that brought improvements in the lives of many, but where many were further impoverished or disenfranchised. In trying to answer such questions I have often been drawn to the writing of critical theorists such as Freire, Giroux

and hooks among others and perhaps it is not surprising then that I have used critical theory as a framework for my inquiry.

I have witnessed many developments in education over the years, yet Freire's (2005) description of the banking model of education in which students receive, file, memorise and repeat information deposited by those considered knowledgeable, resonates still today. Despite welcome changes brought about in the Irish education system by developments such as the Junior Cycle, there is still a strong focus on assessment which rewards what may be described as rote or formulaic learning. Schools must prepare students to engage in competition with each other in a race for points and are placed by some in the media in league tables based on the numbers of students who enter university.

Perhaps there is little surprise here. Biesta (2013) suggests that policy makers, politicians, the media, the public and international development organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) want education to be predictable and risk-free at all levels. Looking at the close attention paid to the results of the influential OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores and national rankings, I can understand his point of view. I do not suggest that testing does not have at least some value, but I find myself wondering about the aspects of education that cannot be measured by testing. How, for instance, can we test the learning that takes place within the JCSP Library Project? Later in the thesis I discuss in greater detail the type of learning that takes place in the library. Here, students engage with an arts-based curriculum and learn to debate what it means to be a writer, an artist, to discuss questions of morality. Their learning in this space is illustrated in many ways including creative writing, visual art and performance. It does not conform to any specific curriculum with its learning outcomes and cannot, I believe, be measured by tests.

Of course certain areas such as literacy development can be - and are - tested in the libraries through the use of standardised reading tests. Schools employ a range of tests approved by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in order to track attainment. They also engage in international assessments such as PISA, the results of which are employed by policy makers to inform education practices and targets. Further, Gilleece et al.[2] (ERC, 2020) in an analysis of PISA 2018 suggested that data from PISA could be

[2] Reading, mathematics and science achievement in DEIS schools: Evidence from PISA 2018 (ERC, 2020)

supplemented with data from national standardised assessments at post-primary level. In a follow-up report, Nelis et al.[3] (ERC, 2021) examine differences in the home backgrounds of students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools and consider broader student outcomes such as wellbeing. The authors (ibid: v) note that 'while achievement in reading, mathematics and science represent important outcomes of schooling, they offer a partial view of the purposes and outcomes of education.'

I also ask how we write learning outcomes for a creative writing project or assess achievement in an arts-based curriculum. Indeed, if '[a]ny educational practice based on standardisation, on what is laid down in advance, on routines in which everything is predetermined, is bureaucratising and anti-democratic' (Freire and Faundez 1989: 41) should we even attempt to do so? I have been guided by questions and tensions such as these throughout my research project.

If, as Giroux (2016: 58) suggests, in 'a culture drowning in a new love affair with empiricism, that which is not measured withers', where might this leave learning spaces such as the libraries, intentionally different in design and curriculum from the rest of the school in which they are situated? Each library is determinedly *not* a classroom, its physical and relational structures setting it apart, even while being central to what happens in the school. In this thesis I inquire into these differences inherent in the Library Project and how they influence the development of the Junior Cycle Key Skills of *Being literate, Being creative, Staying well* and *Communicating*. In doing so, I carry with me Biesta's question (2013: 2): 'What do we want education *for*?' (Italics in original.)

Thus, to help me inquire into, and write about, such questions I have turned to narrative inquiry set in a critical theory framework. I will now discuss why I chose a narrative inquiry approach before moving on to explain how the thesis is presented.

1.2.2 Why a narrative inquiry approach?

Narrative inquiry, with its focus on people's lived experience and relational ethics, seems an apt process of inquiry into storied lives. In undertaking the inquiry I consider my

[3] Beyond Achievement: Home, school and wellbeing findings from PISA 2018 for students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools (ERC, 2021)

justification for the research – personal, practical and theoretical/social. Russell and Kelly (2002, in Watt, 2007) state that good research questions arise from our values, passions, and preoccupations. I look back and consider the winding path that is my life and career and how that has brought me to this point.

Familiar with the JCSP Library Project and having worked closely with Senior Project Librarian, Kathleen Moran for several years, I knew of the Project's commitment to the schools and communities they served. I was also aware of the importance the Project places on providing its students with access to cultural experiences and events. Meeting students and librarians at some of these events I noted the warmth of the relationships between them, the easy respectful conversations they engaged in together. Becoming increasingly interested in student experiences in the Library Project, I wondered how I might capture some of the stories they were telling. As a teacher myself, and having previously carried out some research with my own students, I was conscious of the need to gain trust in order to listen carefully to student voices.

Thus I was drawn to Clandinin and Connelly who remind us that narrative inquiry is grounded in relationships that 'offer both researcher and participants a narrative space for telling and retelling experiences they have lived, and are living' (in Clandinin et al. 2011: 34). As I thought about being in library spaces with participants I read Pinnegar and Daynes (2007: 15) and was struck by the emphasis they too placed on relationships, as they told us that narrative inquirers 'embrace a relational understanding of the roles and interactions of the researcher and the researched'. Clandinin (2007) reminds us that narrative inquiry requires us to be attentive to social, cultural and familial stories – our own and those of our participants. It was beginning to become clearer to me that this methodology could help me to listen to the stories of others and that it would fit with my critical theory framework, focusing as it does on the need for both individual empowerment and social transformation. And writing this thesis in a time of Covid, a time when global and social inequalities have become increasingly obvious, I think of Denzin (2016: 8) who speaks of 'a historical present that cries out for emancipatory visions, for visions that inspire transformative inquiries'. Mindful that relational ethics means we must attend to our social responsibilities, I hope that my research may highlight some of the inequalities and struggles I have witnessed. In doing so, it may help us to think about learning in school libraries in alternative ways.

I found the words of Huber et al (2013) who suggest that narrative inquiry has the potential to shape pedagogies and relationships – our stories to live by – resonating with me and my belief in the commitment the Library Project has to its schools. And looking along the landscape I find myself uplifted by Giroux's (2004) belief in schools as venues of hope, places where young people can be empowered.

I now discuss how I came to focus on one JCSP school library as the site of my inquiry. I will begin by briefly giving some background information to the Project before describing how the case study methodology informed my approach.

1.2.3 A case study of one JCSP library

The JCSP Library Project was launched in 2001 as part of the Early Literacy Initiative. The Library Project stemmed from proposals from the National Co-ordinators of the JCSP, Bernadette Kiely and Aideen Cassidy, along with the Director of the Curriculum Unit, Aidan Clifford (Henefer, 2003). While it was initially planned that fifty such libraries would come on stream in designated disadvantaged second level schools, currently only thirty have been delivered. The libraries are staffed by qualified, professional librarians whose remit is the improvement of literacy levels, the development of a whole-school reading culture and the enhancement of learning experiences of students in their schools. Initially, I considered basing my inquiry on all thirty libraries and employing a quantitative or mixed methods approach. However, wishing to do justice to some of the afore-mentioned stories and capture some of the richness of the arts-based programmes in the Library Project, I began to consider narrowing my focus. Drawing on discussions in the academy I turned to the literature on case-study methodologies. Reading Merriam (1998: 27) I was struck by her description of a case as 'a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries' and her suggestion that 'I can "fence in" what I am going to study'. She also notes that a qualitative case study is 'an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit' (ibid: xiii). For me, this resonated with Stake's (1995: xi) description of a qualitative case study as a 'study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances' (p. xi). I wished, after all, to write about one particular programme – the Junior Cycle School Programme – and, in particular, one part

of that programme – its Library Project. It was becoming clearer to me that focusing on one school library – one entity – would allow me to study it in greater depth.

Stewart (2014) notes that case study can be used in conjunction with other methods. Further, Parker-Jenkins (2016) asserts that detailed, in-depth descriptions are common to both ethnography and case study. Thus drawing on my exploration of the case study approach helped me to understand how focusing on one research site could help me to provide rich descriptive detail to illuminate some of the practices of the Library Project, using narrative inquiry as my methodology.

To borrow the language of case study then, my unit of analysis is one library, part of the JCSP Library Project, situated in a designated disadvantaged school and is bounded by participants' engagement in the arts programmes that have evolved there. As a DEIS school working from within the system, the school seeks to ameliorate disadvantage by setting targets in areas including literacy, numeracy, attainment and partnership with parents and others. My reasons for selecting this *particular* library were two-fold. Through my work as JCSP advisor while on secondment to the Department of Education, I was aware of the interesting arts-based programme that had been run here for several years. Additionally, I was acquainted with the librarian and principal who keenly supported it. Their belief in the power of libraries to promote student engagement suggested to me that that it could be possible to gain access and that inquiring into this library would help me to answer my research questions. I draw on these threads later when I discuss the arts-programme and my own links to the JCSP Library Project in more detail in sections 2.4.1 and 1.5.6 respectively.

The participants of the study are the librarian, a group of students (past and present), two arts facilitators, the Senior JCSP Project Librarian, the principal of the school and one teacher. The librarian contributes to DEIS planning in a range of areas through, for example, the promotion of reading, the provision of resources for students and teachers and the implementation of initiatives designed to promote access to and engagement in cultural events.

Stake (1995: 136) noted that '[F]inishing a case study is the consummation of a work of art.' Considering these words, I felt that perhaps this was one more reason that being informed by a case study approach might enhance this arts-based narrative inquiry.

As I began to think more about how I might enter this research field, how I might work with these participants, I thought of Caine et al (2013: 576) who speak of 'entering the practice and artistry of lives lived'. And I resolved to try to capture something of the shimmer of story-telling lives in this library. Aware that I, too, am in the research, I used elements of an autoethnographic approach which I elaborate on now.

1.2.4 Listening to stories: autoethnographic footholds

'That story is working on you now. You keep thinking about it. That story is changing you now, making you want to live right.' (Basso, 1996: 59)

I have already noted that the metaphor of a journey is carried throughout my work and that I have set the thesis in landscapes, in part to reflect my movement – both figurative and literal - alongside others in my inquiry and to reveal my own efforts to find footholds on the path to becoming a narrative inquirer. I discuss this in some more detail now as I think it is important to explain my reasons for choosing to set the thesis in a series of landscapes, cameos and an intermezzo before I begin to discuss my research into the Library Project.

As I sat in conversational groups with the participants in my inquiry and other research students in college, I thought about how we share our stories of the world – some detailed tellings, some just tiny fragments of a whole - with each other. I think about my journey through the landscapes of my life, how I arrived in the landscape of the library and how as my participants and I weave stories together we reveal parts of our story and ourselves to each other, at times more and at others less. Some landscapes – perhaps like people - can seem to reveal everything to the eye while some, undulating, shadowed, hide their mysteries. I am mindful that we are not separate from the territory we are viewing (Silko, 1996).

I have always felt interested in stories that are visible but also hidden (Prosser, 2007) and wanted to listen to the voices in the library. I knew that through the Library Project students often found their voices in writing and working together. I wondered about the stories they – and I – would tell and re-tell. Would they be stories of resistance – to the educational, societal landscape?

Acknowledging that people also live their stories in 'what they do not say. They live them in attending to the words of others rather than their own words' (Neumann, 1997: 107), I knew that calling forth their stories was an ethical undertaking and that I must acknowledge their right to exercise control over knowledge produced about them. As a narrative inquirer I hoped to do this through co-composing texts and paying close attention to what we are doing in relation to others (Arendt, 1958). Indeed, Clandinin et al (2018) remind us of our obligations to engage in a relational ethics for narrative inquiry and I return to this later in the thesis.

The concept of being wakeful to others helps me to link the image of landscapes to Clandinin and Connelly's (2006) three commonplaces of narrative inquiry - temporality, sociality and place - and Lugones's metaphor of world-travelling as I move back and forth on the landscape of the library telling and listening to stories that may be worked on by memory and time, learning not to be 'an arrogant perceiver' but adopt an attitude of 'playfulness' (Lugones, 1987) as I learn to see others in their world and be visible to them (ibid).

The metaphor of landscapes is also used to depict my journey as emerging inquirer and how I moved along this path sometimes stumbling, sometimes at a standstill seeking to find footholds on the inquiry path. On my research path there are twists and turns as I try to find my researcher-self, doubling back at times, walking along switchbacks, navigating the world of research theories. Greene's (1995: 1) words resonate as I feel that 'I am forever on ... [my] way.'

Conscious that I am *in* the landscape, I use my own world-travelling in Ireland, the Middle East and Europe to help me tell my story past, present and future, a type of pilgrim's progress. Landscape 2 will discuss in greater depth some of my travails on this journey as I crossed the borderlands between narrative inquiry and other traditions, at times straying into one or other as I came to a greater understanding of what it means to be a narrative inquirer.

My journey through the landscape and in the borderlands also evokes memories of the borders near my childhood home, borders which restricted access, signified closure (physical, yes, but sometimes of minds too). These were borders to smuggle goods and ideas across, where cultures bumped up against each other, where words were left unsaid.

Perhaps listening to conversations puzzling about the purpose of borders and how to traverse them lingered in me and inspired a curiosity about, and resistance to, them. The dismantling of the infrastructure of the borders that brought with it an air of hope, an openness to crossings, suggests to me the importance of world-travelling – to other people, other ideas, other theoretical positions – and learning to live and love in the world. Engaging in autobiographical narrative inquiry to frame a research puzzle is an important aspect of narrative inquiry. We undertake this process to help make our contexts – social and personal – evident (Clandinin, 2013). Indeed Sarris (1993) reminds us of the need to understand ourselves in order to understand the other. Such autobiographical storying may include memories from childhood such as those I have included in this chapter in *Cameo 2*. Details such as these are brought forward not merely as simple tales but to help reveal more about the positioning and context of the researcher.

I include four such autoethnographic cameos in this dissertation, in part to enter into the story myself, but also to try to draw cultural, social and theoretical ideas together in a composite whole, a type of tapestry perhaps. As autoethnographic stories also should be artful (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) they fit well into the warp and weft of arts-based narrative inquiry. I hope that they may be fit for purpose, resonating with the reader helping the inquiry to achieve something akin to a 'universal significance' (ibid, 2016: 239).

In acknowledging the cultural landscape of the library with its focus on conversation, writing and art among other representations, I have chosen to present some of my research through performance. I discuss this briefly below and return to it later in the thesis.

1.3 How the thesis is presented

In this section I will outline how I have constructed the thesis, using the metaphor of world-travelling to move from one landscape to another as I learn how to engage in research as a narrative inquirer. I begin by discussing how I draw threads of theory and research puzzles together.

1.3.1 Performing theory and stories

The move towards performative approaches and the power of performance will be discussed in more depth in Landscape 2 but I pause here to reflect on how I came to be drawn to such approaches. I did not realise at the beginning of the research that I would learn to perform research in the academy. Denzin (2006: 300) speaks of performance as 'a radical critical pedagogy of hope', perhaps helping us to engage in critiquing culture and society. I had not yet begun to think about the different meanings of performativity and performance. And I was certainly not aware that research could be expressed in this way. As a drama teacher and having been a member of various drama groups over the years, I enjoyed stepping on to the stage, into the light and shadows. However, when I came to the academy I did not imagine that I would perform my research on the page through, for instance, music and poetry or on a stage in Sligo[4] – even in the virtual world[5]. But as I began to feel inscribed on me the stories my participants composed and read to each other, as I joined them on the floor in visual arts workshops and as a world of other writers – Pelias, Spry, Denzin among others - was opened up to me, I began to realise that an arts-based narrative inquiry could story itself in imaginative ways. Indeed I came to realise that 'performance is at once a method of discovery that is grounded in embodied participation in an event or context, an event to be analysed, and a way to understand and generate knowledge about the workings of cultures and positionings' (Holman Jones, 2018: 7).

As I journeyed alongside the participants in my research I listened to their stories, told and re-told, and thought about these words of Lewis (2011: 505):

> 'Story is central to human understanding – it makes life liveable, because without a story, there is no identity, no self, no other.'

Viewing theory as a kind of story and story as a mode of theorising and analysing (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) I have woven theory and reflection together in an effort to depict my journey as a narrative inquirer. The reflexive pieces composed during my journeying as narrative inquirer – sometimes stumbling and at other times moving easily - are presented in boxes and appear in different script and colour from the rest of the text as a means of perhaps developing communication between me, the participants in the research and our readers. I describe these as cameos, based on the following definition[6]:

[4] Irish Narrative Inquiry Conference 2018, Sligo
[5] Irish Narrative Inquiry Conference 2021, Online
[6] Merriam-Webster dictionary

> a gem carved in relief *especially*: a small piece of sculpture on a stone or shell cut in relief in one layer with another contrasting layer serving as background
> a small theatrical role usually performed by a well-known actor and often limited to a single scene

It is my hope that they help to illuminate the layered stories that I present and re-present, each delicately poised, holding on to each other, revealing more of the other as I walk alongside my participants. The word 'cameo' also makes me think of how stories are written and re-written over time, one upon the other, as time is inscribed on each of us. They draw on what Hoffman (1994: 2) describes as 'resonant remembering' and they help me to attend to events in my life and reveal how they affected me and positioned me in the research field. The reference to cameo as a theatrical role in the second definition sits well with the performative nature that is part of my storytelling as narrative inquirer.

Leavy (2015: 282) states that, '[r]eflexivity involves constantly examining your own position in the research endeavour, including your assumptions, feelings and decisions.' These pieces constitute an explicit evaluation of myself (Shaw, 2010) and acknowledge that I am situated in the research and cannot fully escape my own subjectivity (ibid). The reflexive pieces story my falling in love with narrative inquiry and my sometimes tumultuous love-affair with it. As in many such affairs there have been moments when we almost left each other. Each time however, the attraction was too strong to resist, and we are in love still, stronger together perhaps than apart.

The reflexive pieces also allow me to keep ethical commitments to the fore by being part of a conversation with myself where I ask questions about what I am doing, with whom and how. They are part of the relational ethics we engage in with our communities as we work out how to contribute positively to them (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). They help me trace my journey as I learned more about what it meant to research, the resilience it would demand of me and how it would be written on me.

The borders around these cameos are fragile, permeable, in line with my belief that theory and reflection cannot in fact be separated, concurring with Tamboukou (2011) who says that we are part of the story-worlds we are trying to understand. It is my hope that in my work I might approach Leavy's (2015: 17) description of qualitative researcher as one who composes, orchestrates and weaves.

Drawing on the language and movements of performance, I have positioned an intermezzo between the fourth and fifth landscapes. It reveals part of my reflexive wonderings about my research and the effect Covid has had as it swept remorselessly across the world. It is also a means by which I draw on performative writing and performance as I move from page to stage and back again. Goulish (in Holman Jones and Harris, 2019: 80) suggests that the reader may 'come to the realisation that all of the printed words make up only half of the book. Silence makes up the other half' and I think of the power of silence in a performance, questions floating expectantly in the air, waiting. So, too, might performer and audience inhabit silences, into which might come new imaginings. Madison (2009: 193) tells us that 'data travel to the public stage with the hope that the performance will invoke a response (ability) among a group or spectators' and I wonder if this alternative way of presenting data might also help the stories of the library find new audiences. I intend that its inclusion should contribute aesthetically to, and reflect, the arts-based nature of this research.

The cameos and intermezzo also support me to reveal the net containing my 'epistemological, ontological, methodological premises' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 26) as I trace my positioning as researcher and travel 'in the thinking that writing produces in search of the field' (St. Pierre, 1995: 365). Further, they act as markers on the literal, physical landscape written, sometimes, when thinking deeply about my research. Designed to 'create a reflexive dialogue' (ibid: 852) involving those who read them and my-self/selves, they act as an acknowledgement that 'the ethnographic life is not separable from the self' (Richardson, 2000: 253). And as I perform words and silences I suggest that we are moving towards a future of possibility, one in which we come together again in a post-Covid era.

As narrative inquirer I acknowledge that I am inserted into the text and thus my work presents my own story as well as those of others as I move back and forth from childhood to adulthood, teacher to researcher, colleague to friend. Aware that autoethnographic stories must be artful while pointed towards the workings of history, social structure and culture (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 195), I try to tell and perform stories as I move through the landscape of narrative inquiry, backward and forward in time, acknowledging the irresistible truth of these words of Cixous (1975: 419): 'Write your self. Your body must be heard.'

1.3.2 The landscapes

I offer here a map of the thesis, detailing the different landscapes I travel through in the inquiry.

Landscape 1: A Pilgrim Maps a Research Journey stories my background – familial, cultural and social - as I move towards the academy and research landscape. It reveals the metaphors I use throughout the research and discusses why I have chosen these through which to express my work. Two cameos help to clarify my reasons for wishing to engage in this research and describe how I came to the academy and began to engage in narrative inquiry. The first, *Cameo 1* – A *Setting Out* in which I travel back to the early days in my teaching career and recall the bumping up against society of lives lived differently. In the second cameo, *Before the Beginning: The storied landscape of home*, positioned later in this chapter, I move backward to memories of childhood and forward to a time spent living and working from abroad. In this cameo I reveal how I learned to love words and story-telling and their importance in my life, powerfully connecting me to others.

This chapter offers an outline of the JCSP and the JCSP Library Project, describing why I decided to locate my research in one of the school libraries in this Library Project. As the JCSP libraries are located in designated disadvantaged schools I also consider the term 'disadvantage' in Irish education and its connotations. I reflect on links between JCSP and the Junior Cycle, particularly in the area of the Key Skills and bring forward my wonderings about how some of these Key Skills are developed. I then begin to discuss why I chose a narrative inquiry approach for this research, developing this further in the following chapter.

Landscape 2: A Pilgrim Sets Forth details my initial encounters with the academy as I learn to think deeply about relational obligations and theory as I traverse the research landscape. It reveals some of my thoughts as a 'pilgrim' inquirer, learning about research methodologies and beginning to gain footholds on the narrative inquiry path. The methodology of the inquiry is outlined in this chapter. I also draw forward some Irish and international research into libraries. *Cameo 3 - Summer Meanderings: (Emerging) Researcher as Pilgrim* – is situated in my metaphorical and physical world-travels in Europe at my first year as a PhD student and is a reflection on what entering into the worlds of others has meant to me.

Landscape 3: Entering the Field discusses my attempts at movement into the field as I deal with the intricacies of gaining ethical approval. It describes my arrival in the midst of stories. It also attends to world-stories as Covid begins to beat its destructive path across the world.

Landscape 4: In the Midst is describes movements along the landscape as I reflect on and discuss my visits to the writing club which is part of the library I am researching. From there I move into an intermezzo.

Intermezzo: *Imaginings* is a stop on the narrative inquiry landscape as I reflect on my research and the way in which Covid has interrupted lives. I draw on the world of theatre and music to bring forward imaginings of a post-Covid landscape where students once more take their places in the library, in the world.

Landscape 5: A Leave-taking, the final chapter of my dissertation discusses my movements across the inquiry landscape and what I have learned along the way about myself, my participants and the methodology that I have come to know. In this chapter I also bring forward wonderings about possibilities for further research. Documenting my exit from the research, it contains *Cameo 4: A Pilgrim's Leave-Taking*.

1.3.3 World-travelling

In my pilgrim journeying I frequently use Maria Lugones's (1987, 2003) metaphor of 'world-travelling' as I present my research stories as/from different physical and theoretical landscapes. She uses this metaphor to explain the process of understanding and learning about difference. As I think about what it means to be an inquirer I am conscious of my own position in the world – literate, privileged, of the academy – and the world to which I seek access. So, aware that in narrative inquiry we are coming alongside our participants in a 'three-dimensional inquiry space' I employ Lugones's metaphor of world-travelling to help me to think about the world that is the library – the physical space in which we will meet and the world of learning I hope to find out about. As I try to learn more about this world and how to research in it, I will draw on this metaphor, trying not to be 'an arrogant perceiver' (ibid) but instead trying to understand the world I am entering and to share something of mine. I hope that this will guide me in the composing of field and research

texts as I write about worlds in which social inequalities exist but in which they are resisted in spaces where hope is not foreclosed (Giroux, 2006).

These landscapes that I travelled while learning how to be a narrative inquirer are not smooth, but undulating – and at times seemingly unforgiving – as are physical and emotional landscapes. I will attempt to unfold some of them before you as I invite you into the landscapes of my inquiry. I employ this metaphor of 'world travelling' in several ways – as I visit the school library to gain understanding about others, their culture and community; in documenting my development as a researcher as I 'shift from being one person to being a different person' (Lugones, 2003: 89) as the inquiry writes itself on me; and as I move backward and forward in time to worlds of childhood, the present and future imaginings. Indeed, in narrative inquiry, 'world travelling' is a process that calls us to question who we are and are becoming as people in relation (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Conscious of this, in the research I have endeavoured to attend to the 'web of human relationships' (Arendt, 1958: 181) and return to ethical relationships throughout the dissertation.

Worlds, of course are not just abstract concepts but physical places where people live. As we move physically and figuratively between worlds we acknowledge the social, temporal and spatial conditions we experience in different 'worlds' (Dewart et al, 2019). The reflexive pieces that I have included in this thesis are part of my social, temporal and spatial conditions and in them I draw on memories of the past – people and places – conscious of Lugones's statement that a world may be inhabited by those who are dead. This assertion brings to mind Speedy's (2013) interview between Barbara Myerloff and Chris Speedy, both dead, and I imagine moving back and forth in time, invoking memories of the past which move and inspire me in the present and on into the future. These reflexive pieces are written in the *Lucinda Handwriting* font in a nod to the way in which my reflections, while sometimes typed as I sit at my computer, may also be written in a journal, on scraps of paper, or on the post-its which adorn a picture that hangs above my desk.

I now begin to detail my own connection to, and interest in, the JCSP Library Project. I think myself back into the research, remembering Richardson (2000: 923) who describes writing as a method of inquiry 'a way of finding out about yourself and your topic'. And so let me begin my story with some words about narrative beginnings.

1.4 Narrative beginnings

The story of the JCSP Library Project calls me for several reasons. Much of my career has been spent working at the borders of disadvantage. I know that disadvantage comes in many forms and that, as Todd (2015) points out, the word itself may be interpreted as an acknowledgement or a moral judgement and so I know that I need to be conscious of both. The 1998 Education Act defines educational disadvantage as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education'. Kelleghan (2001: 7) draws on Bourdieu's framework to conceptualise disadvantage in terms of three types of 'capital': the familiar economic, cultural and social, suggesting that the latter related to conditions that foster 'cognitive and scholastic development' and a sense of identity and self-esteem. Situated in a school in a designated disadvantaged area, I was interested to know more about how its participants experienced this and how the JCSP Library Project set out to ameliorate conditions of disadvantage in learning and literacy.

Early in my career I taught students at a centre for juvenile offenders. It was here that my own story bumped up against narratives of disadvantage, loss and hopelessness. The words below were written in February 2017 and are an extract from *On Be(com)ing a Narrative Inquirer: Some musings on world-travelling (Lugones, 1987)* which was a Maynooth University assignment. They capture some of the shock I felt at that time as I encountered disadvantage as a young teacher. They also contain, perhaps, some hints at the narrative inquiry journey I would one day set out upon. Writing reflective memory pieces such as the cameo below – *A Setting Out* – drew me back in time into places where my wonderings about education and disadvantage began to emerge. As I wrote it, I thought again about my own values learned at home and carried with me through life - my belief in the importance of education and its ability to empower us. It also highlighted, however, the stark realities faced by some who cannot participate fully in its promise.

1.4.1 Cameo 1

A Setting Out

On a journey to Dublin as young teacher I contemplate the

beginning of my career. As the dramatic many-hued hills fall away behind me, I try to imagine my future in an unfamiliar setting among unknown others. Images of what might unfold float through my mind.

The following day I walk up a long, winding avenue leading to a building in which young men who had offended society were kept. Set in the lovely grounds of an old castle, the contrast could not have been starker. My classroom was a room with large windows looking out onto the lawn which attracted wistful glances from them - and me. I think we all felt constrained by this place.

Once a week the mobile library arrived and we could all go out to select some books. At first I was pleased that all these young men chose to go out, realising only later that it was often simply a break in the boredom of the day, a chance to steal a few moments to smoke and to exchange stories.

I am not saying that there was no hope here or that the authorities did not mean to do well by these young men. There was a chance for education, to learn how to cook and garden. But despite being an 'open' detention centre it shocked me that several of these youths would have preferred to have been sent to a prison where they could be shut into cells for hours on end, sleeping away the weary days of their sentence. I had never heard stories like this before and I wondered how they would continue to unfold.

Together we worked on maths, talking, sharing some details of

our life experiences but hiding others. I suppose it is always so. Before I came here I had never contemplated a story of a young man who, on being released, would quickly seek out an opportunity to re-offend so he could be returned to the familiarity of that building, that life. Looking back, I know that I listened to these young men but did not attend to their stories of the lives they lived.

One afternoon I stand at an upstairs window and watch the train[7] carrying people north and south. My thoughts turn towards an imminent trip across Europe. I am drawn to travelling. I know that other stories call me. It will be ever thus. One day I will world travel (Lugones, 1987).

The 'school' setting described above was, of course, very different from a traditional school and the stories told – sometimes spoken in a look or in silence – were often stories of tensions, of separation from families and old lives, of boredom with the system, but often too there were stories of hope and of home. Situated in a landscape very different from that of my home and to the urban and desert-city settings in which I would teach in the future, its green lawns and grounds leading down to the water would remain with me. I brought them with me as I moved over time from one physical landscape to another, memories of that time and place working on me and braiding themselves into the intellectual terrains I navigated as I thought about themes of social justice and learned to tell stories as a narrative inquirer.

I now turn to a brief discussion of the Junior Cycle and its Key Skills which form the educational context and curricular frame of my research before moving on to a discussion of the Junior Cycle School Programme and its Library Project.

1.5 The Junior Cycle and Junior Certificate School Programme as contexts in this research

In the following sections I discuss recent developments in junior cycle education. Underpinned by national strategies in literacy, numeracy, attainment and arts in education, they seek to respond to these priorities for education and society. The Library Project librarians work with school management and teachers to support these strategies through creative approaches including the arts-based curriculum that is the focus of this inquiry.

1.5.1 The Junior Cycle

Throughout my career I have witnessed many educational developments, from early childhood education upwards. We saw, for instance, a re-visioning of the junior cycle programme as the Intermediate Certificate was replaced by the Junior Certificate in September 1989. The programme at junior cycle was based on the principles of breadth and balance, quality, equity, relevance, coherence, continuity and progression (NCCA, 2004: 3) and innovative teaching approaches were encouraged. Laudable as this was, a focus on written terminal exams began to be seen as leading to a narrowing of teaching and a disadvantaging of students whose strengths lay outside the formal written context (ibid: 9). Over time, concerns were also raised about levels of oracy, literacy and numeracy. The reform of the junior cycle curriculum was signalled as a key action in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy document (2011). Building on this vision for reform the DES published the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2012)* followed by the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015).* Experiencing these developments either in my role as teacher in the classroom, or as teacher educator in my role in Department of Education and Skills support services, I welcomed their focus on differentiated forms of teaching and assessment and active and collaborative learning. Keenly believing that a 'one size fits all' approach was neither inclusive nor encouraging of many students, I felt that the aspirations of the *Framework* to 'achieve a balance between learning subject knowledge and developing a wide range of skills and thinking abilities' (DES, 2015: 7) might allow for a more creative approach to teaching and learning in our schools. Immersed in education, coming alongside struggling students over many years, my thoughts frequently turn to questions of why and why not. Why do we still accept that sometimes we have hungry children in our classrooms? Why

are some of the families in our communities homeless? Why not demand more vociferously than ever a fairer and more equitable distribution of resources so that those who suffer disadvantage may reject what McLaren (2017: 56) describes as 'a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege'?

Conscious too of the JCSP Library Project, situated in disadvantaged schools and communities, and its work in promoting opportunities for students to engage with the arts, I was interested in finding out more about the knowledge and skills that might be developed as a result. Knowing already something of the activities that took place in the libraries, the range of facilitators who worked there, and the Project's emphasis on librarianship being a profession separate from teaching, I wondered about how the libraries would engage with the Junior Cycle and broader themes of education.

And so I began to think further about researching the Library Project in the context of disadvantage and the Junior Cycle. I elaborate on this further below.

1.5.2 This research and Key Skills of Junior Cycle

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* outlines how 'teaching, learning and assessment practices should evolve to support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that will meet the needs of junior cycle students, both now and in the future' (DES, 2015: 6). It goes on to note that the Junior Cycle programme is underpinned by eight principles, twenty-four statements of learning and eight key skills (DES, 2015: 10). The changes to learning and assessment envisaged in the *Framework* have been designed to support continuity in learning experiences from primary to post-primary school. The eight key skills (*Being literate, Managing myself, Staying well, Managing information and thinking, Being numerate, Being creative, Working with others* and *Communicating*) are interconnected with each other and are 'closely linked to the skills required at senior cycle and those already developed for early childhood and primary education' (ibid, 2015: 14). Wellbeing, one of the principles that underpins junior cycle education, is incorporated within the Key Skills.

While seconded to the Second level Support Service (SLSS) (later the Professional Development Service for Teachers – PDST) I became increasingly aware of the links across these stages of learning and this, along with my knowledge of arts programmes in the JCSP

Project Libraries, led me to think more deeply about how students might acquire such skills. Having spent much time in some of the Project libraries and having worked with several of the librarians, including Senior Project Librarian Kathleen Moran, I knew of their focus on creative arts-based programmes. Frequently I had been invited to libraries to see powerful presentations of students' work. The pride clearly shown by all involved - students, staff and families – was a joy to behold. I knew, too, that such performances did not always come easily to students and believe in the importance of bearing witness to these successes. It seemed to me that I could see the interplay of key skills in moments such as these and I eventually decided to focus on how four in particular - *Being literate*, *Being creative*, *Communicating* and *Staying well* – might be developed in the libraries.

As I began to reflect more deeply about the Library Project, I found myself increasingly thinking about its position within the education system. Designed as a different space it is, of course, aligned with the education system but does not follow any NCCA curriculum. How, for instance, can one write learning outcomes for, or assess, students performing spoken poetry to peers on a stage in the National Library or Trinity College (as they do at the JCSP *WRaPParound*[8] events)? Yet, listening to students using the language of home to tell stories of global concerns such as racism, violence and poverty, I could not help but think that I heard the Key Skills being articulated in the rising and falling notes of the performers and the words echoed by the audience. Increasingly I found myself wondering about how such skills may be developed and how learning from the Library Project, part of the school structure, yet different, may find its way into classrooms. That is not to suggest that learning in the library can be replicated in the classroom, but to wonder whether learning to explore, to think, to perform in the library might find echoes in the way in which students engage with subjects in the classroom.

During the thesis I seek to articulate some of these tensions that exist between the education system itself and the innovative nature of the Project. In coming to understand more about them I found these questions posed by Giroux useful:

> What should education accomplish in a democracy? (2016: 57)
> What knowledge is of most worth? (ibid: 60)

[8] JCSP Library Project written, spoken and performance poetry initiative run in conjunction with Poetry Ireland

Having set the context for my research, I now move into a deeper discussion of my interest in, and links to, the Library Project.

1.5.3 Early thoughts about inquiring into the JCSP Library Project

The urge to do a PhD was not new. In fact, it had burned within me for many years. Having completed a Master's in Education in 2000, I knew I wanted to learn more about education, about myself. At that time, I played around the edges of a PhD but found its early, sharp focus on how to gather quantitative data sat uneasily with me. Having spent many years teaching maths I have no fear of numbers and am warmed by the idea that maths is a language as well as a science. I had particularly enjoyed one of the modules in the Master's in which students in my maths class journalled their learning experiences and I knew then that this was a valuable way of listening to participants in an inquiry. Perhaps that was why when I learned about narrative inquiry it leapt straight into my being.

I put away the dream of a PhD for a while, knowing that one day it would return to me. Several years later on secondment to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) I began to work with the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and its Library Project and was captivated by the engagement and imagination I saw there.

1.5.4 Background to the JCSP

The JCSP is a social inclusion programme aimed at students who are identified as being at risk of being socially or academically isolated or at risk of early school leaving before the Junior Certificate has been achieved. It originated in the early school leavers' programmes initiated by the Curriculum Development Unit and is sponsored by the DES and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

The *JCSP Programme Statement* (NCCA) outlines the development of the JCSP as follows:

> 'The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) originated in a number of projects initiated by the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC) through its Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). The projects were concerned with identifying potential early school leavers and devising a programme suitable to their needs. In September 1996, following a pilot phase, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Department of Education and Science (DES) launched

> the Junior Certificate School Programme. Since its introduction the programme has expanded from 32 schools in 1996 to 240 schools in 2010. The programme has expanded on a phased basis, to all post-primary schools participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative (2010: 5).

The *Statement* goes on to note that each year a small number of students, many of whom are educationally disadvantaged, leave school without qualifications. It points out that the JCSP enables students to re-engage with their learning, aiming to ensure that each student benefits from their time in school and enjoys an experience of success. It does this by offering schools and teachers a more flexible approach to meeting the diverse needs of students, sharing the emphasis placed by the junior cycle on the importance of students experiencing a broad, balanced and coherent programme of study across a wide range of curriculum areas (ibid: 8-9). Giroux (2014: 495) raises important questions such as who controls the conditions for producing knowledge and what knowledge is considered as being of most worth. This makes me wonder why some students are still failed by the education system. This, of course, is a complex question to which no simple answer exists. However, if we believe that we need to develop 'a view of literacy and voice that both demonstrates and affirms the importance of schooling as part of the struggle for expanding human possibilities' (Giroux, 2005: 172), one might also ask why no schools may currently apply to be part of JCSP. The Programme brings with it an allowance of between .25 and .45 of the teaching hours of a whole-time teacher based on the number of students enrolled in it. Might it be that this cost is deemed too high? Alternatively, might one suggest that these hours are not enough? What price do we place on students' engagement in the school system, especially at a time when we know of increasing numbers of families who are losing jobs and homes? Should not other schools be given access to initiatives like the JCSP which aims to provide a curriculum framework that assists schools and teachers in making the Junior Certificate more accessible to young people? That attempts to help young people experience success and develop a positive self-image by providing a curriculum and assessment framework suitable to their needs?
Schools that participate in the programme may also apply to JCSP for funding to run a range of initiatives with students which aim to offer them a range of educational and cultural experiences. These initiatives focus on areas such as literacy, numeracy, wellbeing, the arts, digital technology and the Key Skills of Junior Cycle. A comprehensive list can be accessed on the JCSP website.[9] As a teacher I coordinated the programme for several years

[9] http://jcsp.ie/initiatives.html

in my own school and saw the positive impact such interventions had on many students. I discuss some examples of my experience below.

1.5.5 Background to the JCSP Library Project

As I noted above, the JCSP Demonstration Library Project was launched under the Early Literacy Initiative. Commencing in the summer of 2002, the Project set up high-quality school libraries in eleven schools participating in the JCSP nationally. From the outset, each library was staffed by a full-time professionally qualified librarian. Few schools in Ireland have such libraries and so this was an exciting example of innovation in action.

Under the DEIS Action Plan (2005), the JCSP Demonstration Library Project expanded, with twenty new schools having joined the Project since 2007, bringing the total number of participating schools to thirty. Each of the librarians receives intensive training by the JCSP Support Service in literacy and language development specifically aimed at supporting underachieving disadvantaged teenagers.
In collaboration with teachers, the librarians design and run programmes aimed at improving students' literacy and numeracy skills. The libraries also serve as cultural centres in their schools and regularly host diverse visitors including storytellers, authors, illustrators, film-makers, dancers, musicians and many more.[10] In fact the *JCSP Library Project Charter* (2015: 4) guarantees that it will facilitate a range of cultural experiences for students.

1.5.6 My links to the JCSP Library Project

For several years I co-ordinated the JCSP in my own school until I was seconded to the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) in 2008, later the Professional Development Support Service (PDST). Part of the role of the co-ordinator is to liaise with teachers to gather information about the areas of learning engaged in by the students so I could create a *Profile of Learning*. This information was sent to the JCSP office each spring so that the *Profile*, bound in a purple cover, embellished with the official stamp of the DES, could be sent to schools and presented to students at the end of the school year. This *Profile* is of great significance as it is a record of achievement and readiness to participate in the junior

[10] https://www.pdst.ie/node/1018

cycle exams. It may also contain a personalised letter of congratulations from the principal or JCSP coordinator outlining the successes and strengths of each student. It is frequently presented as part of school awards evenings. For some who may not receive other academic or sporting awards this is a valuable means of recognition in front of school and family communities.

In addition, as JCSP coordinator I applied each year for some of the initiatives funded (and created and evaluated) by the Programme. As I mentioned above, a suite of initiatives is offered in the areas of literacy, reading, numeracy, the arts, STE(A)M, wellbeing and general subjects. Each one is carefully designed to support student learning and success. In an effort to illustrate the benefits of engaging in them, I will tell you a little about our experience of the 'Primary Picture Books' initiative one year. While participating in this initiative, students practised reading story books designed for primary school students. They then visited the primary school to read aloud to small group of junior students. In our school, students read their chosen book to me, our home school liaison teacher, the school chaplain and other teachers. Initially hesitant as struggling readers can be, over a few classes they became more confident and dramatic in their reading. On the morning of the visit there was much excitement in our school and, as we later learned, in the local primary school. The visit was deemed so successful that the primary school requested another visit. This took place in our school and perhaps one of the most moving moments for me was when one of my students – a young man who struggled with reading and had missed the latest practise sessions through illness – turned up on the morning because, as he said,: 'I thought you might need me Miss.' And as I responded that I certainly did, I thought about his generosity and how much we need each other in school, in life. I believe that times such as these must be cherished and I continue to applaud JCSP for the imagination and belief in students that means successes such as these are replicated across schools each year.

Part of my role in the SLSS/PDST was to support schools offering JCSP. This took the form of designing and delivering continuous professional development to co-ordinators, teachers and librarians in DEIS and JCSP schools, visits to schools and evaluating JCSP initiatives. My work in the support services strengthened my interest in, and deepened my knowledge of, JCSP. I also came to know the librarian and principal of my future research school during this time.

When my period of secondment drew to a close in 2015 I returned to my own school. While no longer co-ordinating JCSP in school, in my role as Deputy Principal I continued to engage with it as part of our whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy development. During the time of this research, I was working as an associate advisor in the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) Support Service. While still in the PDST I had worked closely from time to time with members of the JCT, particularly in looking at links between the Junior Cycle Key Skills and the focus JCSP placed on whole-school approaches to literacy, numeracy, assessment and the arts. In my position as associate advisor with JCT I delivered CPD to school staff in areas such as implementing the new Junior Cycle, including the development of the Key Skills and approaches to wellbeing. In this role, I met again the principal and librarian of the school that would become the centre of my research - an urban, co-educational, DEIS school.

In this time of imaginative curricular reform, and aware of the work being undertaken by the JCSP Library Project, I was interested in knowing more about how the Junior Cycle Key Skills might be developed through the Library Project. It was briefed to improve literacy levels, develop a whole school reading culture and enhance the learning experience of students. In fact, the Project has gone beyond this initial vision to reach into homes and the wider community. The *IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto* (1998: 2) states that:

> 'It has been demonstrated that, when librarians and teachers work together, students achieve higher levels of literacy, reading, learning, problem-solving and information and communication technology skills.'

Working closely with the Library Project and beginning to gain a fuller understanding of its work I saw these aspirations being lived out as librarians, teachers and school management worked together to plan for student engagement with the library. The *JCSP Library Project Charter* (2015: 5) outlined these aims of the Project: 'to foster a life-long joy of reading and to give students the tools they need to successively navigate the world as 21st century learners.' As I continued to work with librarians and meet their students I was drawn further into this world. I began to wonder about how students experienced the library and how it fitted with emerging educational policy, specifically the fostering of Key Skills in the Junior Cycle and the focus on arts-based education, wellbeing and creativity being encouraged in schools.

Learning about the Library Project and those involved with it – students, librarians, teachers, artists, dreamers – I thought about inequality and puzzled over the fact that

libraries seemed to be offered to so few students and schools. I wondered why, even in times of prosperity, the development of school libraries did not seem to be a focus of policy as it is in countries such as Australia, for instance, where they are seen as being 'the heart of 21st century learning' (ACT, 2019: 2). Indeed, in Ireland, in the post-primary sector, professionally staffed libraries are found – in the main – in private schools or within the JCSP Library Project schools.

I was attracted by the Library Project *Charter's* (2015: 2) challenge to us to 'Throw away all your preconceived notions of what a library should be' and realised that the desire to undertake a PhD had surfaced again. How after all could I resist trying to learn more about such places, places that author Michael Morpurgo described as follows?

> 'The heart and soul of any school is its library. Libraries are browsing places, dreaming places, finding out places' (*JCSP Library Project Charter*, 2015: 5).

As I think about these words I know that the stories from these 'dreaming places' cannot be separated in my mind from my own stories of my beginnings and my travels across time and landscapes. I move now to a discussion of how they are woven into the fabric of the thesis.

1.5.7 Arts in education and the Library Project

As a teacher of Maths, English and Drama, I am entranced by language – its symbols, many-hued meanings and its performance. I suggest that it can be developed in many ways in schools, among them through arts-based approaches. The Arts Act (2003: 3) defines the arts' as 'any creative or interpretative expression (whether traditional or contemporary) in whatever form, and includes, in particular, visual arts, theatre, literature, music, dance, opera, film, circus and architecture, and includes any medium when used for those purposes'. Kindekens et al. (2013: 1984) suggest that 'arts-infused curriculums and quality arts education are found to be a positive catalyst for engagement, resulting in improved attention, behaviour and attitudes.' In my roles as teacher, JCSP coordinator and advisor seconded to the SLSS/PDST, I frequently witnessed students engaging enthusiastically in arts-based activities and wished to understand more about benefits this might confer. This thesis does not seek to suggest that an arts curriculum may only be found in JCSP Library Project schools. Indeed, there has been a focus on the value of the arts in education in this country for some time. In 1979 the publication of *The Place of the Arts in Irish*

Education (1979) – generally known as the Benson Report – signalled the beginning of the process of incorporating the arts into state-provided education here, stating that the arts must **'**be seen where they belong, as a central concern of education' (1979: 141). Coolahan (2008: 37) noted that education in Ireland had gone through an unprecedented period of reform since the mid-nineties, including curricular reforms that respond, 'to the multiple intelligences of pupils and which encourages greater scope for creative and constructivist learning'. For instance, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009: 16) notes that 'expressing themselves creatively and experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances children's sense of well-being'. One of the related learning goals outlined (ibid: 17) is that children will 'express themselves creatively and experience the arts'. Among the goals listed under the theme of communicating (ibid: 35) are that children 'will respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama' and 'show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively'. The 1999 Primary School Curriculum provides for linkage and integration across the arts, and between the arts for the full curriculum. It is interesting to note that the *Primary School Curriculum Visual Arts: Arts Education* (Government of Ireland, 1999: 2) suggests that '[M]uch of what is finest in society is developed through a variety of art forms which contribute to cultural ethos and to a sense of wellbeing'. The arts also have a central position in the new junior cycle programme. For instance, the Artistic Performance Short Course, which schools may choose to do if they wish, states the following:

> 'Learning about and through the arts is fundamental to an education that aspires to support the development of the whole person. Awareness of, involvement in and appreciation of the arts, enables students to encounter a rich world of creativity, imagination and innovation' (*Arts in Education Charter*, 2012).[11]

The foreword to the *Creative Youth Plan* (2017: 4) notes that:

> 'Putting arts and culture at the centre of education is important not just for developing creative capacities and skills but also for encouraging social responsibility and personal qualities such as resilience, empathy, and a capacity for friendship'.

The *Arts in Education Charter* (2013: 7) notes that the mission of the Department of Education and Skills is 'to enable all learners to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's economic, social and cultural development' and that arts education 'makes an important contribution to this mission and the wider goal of developing creativity in our

[11] https://curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Short-Courses/Artistic-Performance/Rationale-and-Aim/

society and economy'. National and international research suggest the validity of such claims, underlining the importance of the arts and creativity in education.

Smyth (2016: ix) noted that '[a]mong older children, self-directed reading and taking part in structured cultural activities outside school time contribute to cognitive development (in terms of both verbal and numeric skills) as well as to academic self-confidence.' However, she also pointed out that it was students from more advantaged families, particularly girls, who are more likely to engage in these kinds of activities that enhance their within-school learning, 'thus contributing to a social gap in achievement' (ibid: x). I find her comment that while 'schools cannot provide a solution to broader socioeconomic and gender inequalities, they nonetheless represent an important arena for providing all children with at least some access to a variety of cultural activities through the formal curriculum and through the provision of lunchtime and after-school activities' (ibid: 99) extremely interesting in light of the range of activities that take place in my research library, both during and after school.

Ewing (2012 in Smith, 2013: 15) notes that several research reports over more than a decade have underlined that those students who engage in quality art processes and experiences achieve better grades and overall test scores, are less likely to leave school early, rarely report boredom and have a more positive self-concept than those students who do not have such experiences. Fiske (1999) reported that the arts help to level the educational playing field for disadvantaged students. I was struck by Barry et al's (1990 in Kindekens et al, 2013) suggestion that arts education projects provide a safe place for students to experiment, allowing them to take initiative and risks and promoting the constructive acceptance of criticism and wondered if I would see and hear examples of this in my library visits.

So questions about the Library Project and how students engaged with learning there were starting to crystallise in my mind. To help begin to answer some, at least, of them, I began my turn towards Maynooth University.

1.6 Approaching the academy

Earlier in the thesis I articulated some of my thoughts on working with juvenile offenders. My experience of working in this setting found echoes elsewhere in schools I later worked

in. As a young teacher I met students who struggled with learning and who seemed not to have been given many of life's opportunities. During my career I often worked with students who found it difficult to settle in class, to enjoy their work. I began to hear the terms some ascribed to these students - 'reluctant learner'/'reluctant reader' - which I rejected. I became aware of classroom tensions as some students and teachers struggled with a curriculum that sometimes did not seem to meet the needs of those for whom it was designed.

As my career unfolded I met many students and saw and heard more stories – stories of difficulty, but stories of success too, of excitement, of engagement. Many of these stories were told by students (and librarians) in the JCSP Library Project. My thoughts turned to the possibility of writing about the Project and its students and I felt as if I had been waiting to tell such stories from the time I began my first teaching position in a centre for juvenile offenders.

Wishing to research the Library Project and the people who are part of these libraries, I needed to learn more about how to do so. Thus I came to the academy, bringing my own dreams and memories with me. Perhaps I had always been destined to travel back here. In the early summer of 2015, I approached Maynooth University for the first time to discuss the possibility of pursuing a PhD. I walked through the damp and heavy air towards my initial meeting, careful not to stray from the path onto the wet grass. The campus was still, apart from a few students in the distance. I tried to avoid the plump drops of rain falling quietly from the trees as I made my way into Education House. It is an old, tall, austere building and as I made my way cautiously up the stairs dust motes silently performed their eternal dance in the air.

In an office I spoke of the research I was keen to undertake with the Junior Certificate (JCSP) Library Project. The discussion was quiet, thoughtful, enquiring and I felt that I was being taken seriously. We spoke about a myriad of different ways to do research - quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods – and about situating research in a theoretical framework. During the conversation I also heard for the first time the words narrative inquiry and the name Jean Clandinin. I found it interesting that research could be done in this way and in my mind and heart were the early flickerings of a flame. Would such a

methodology reveal more about the Library Project than, perhaps, one of the alternative approaches discussed?

These were, of course, but beginnings. Afterwards as I re-traced my steps, leaving the building behind me, there was nothing in the quietness of the afternoon to suggest that I had just embarked on one of the most exciting journeys of my life.

Later that summer I begin on some reading for my course and in the autumn I make my way to university, an echo of the journey I had taken to another university as a young undergraduate. I can feel vestiges of my distant self in the racing of my pulse as I set out into the unknown. That term we attend lectures and clusters. We speak about theory and positioning, writers and artists, ourselves. I listen as terms such as ontology, epistemology, discourse are laid before us. Names such as Butler, Foucault, Deleuze seem to casually inhabit the air. I'm awestruck at my own audacity in trying to enter into this world and I realise that my intellectual self will need to be fully present if I'm to survive it. I don't yet know that my physical and emotional selves will be called upon too. The readings and discussions are challenging. I glimpse a research landscape that has been criss-crossed by many, that has been the setting for 'paradigm wars' and that has not remained fixed. I am not yet aware of the narrative turn.

Somehow I know that I'm ready for the fray.

It was at the academy that my pre-conceived ideas about research – measuring, analysing – were challenged and I began to think of other ways to research with people. I speak about this awakening in more detail later in the dissertation so for now I will merely begin to depict briefly what narrative inquiry can be and why I thought it would be the approach for this piece of research.
Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that narrative inquirers begin with an interest in experience and that through interactive experience lives are composed and re-composed in relation with others. I am attracted to this way of working with students and others as they engage with the Library Project.

I offer here Connelly and Clandinin's (2006: 477) definition of Narrative Inquiry, based on the view that humans lead storied lives:

> ‘Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study.’

I am drawn to the metaphor of story as a portal into the world and narrative inquiry seems a fitting way to listen to and tell and re-tell stories of mine and my participants’ experience in the world.

I increasingly felt that a narrative inquiry approach would allow me to investigate if the Library Project makes room for participants who might not, in general, have access to public spaces where they can make their voices heard. I wondered about the pedagogy underpinning the Library Project, if it would aid students to read critically the cultural codes of the worlds around them, including those they use to express their own stories.

Clandinin and Connelly draw on Dewey’s theory of experience as being, personal and social, one experience leading to another in continuity. For me this brings forward the focus narrative inquiry places on relational ethics. As researchers we pay attention to the words of Caine et al (2013: 582):

> ‘The narrative nature of experience, viewed from within narrative inquiry, necessitates considerations of relational being and knowing, attention to the artistry of and within experience, and sensitivity to the nested and overlapping stories that bring people together in research relationships.’

From first coming to the academy, through to working on my ethical application and throughout my research work I have tried to hold these words close as I honour my obligations to my participants and their community, the academy and myself – obligations to tell the truth, to share with them what I am writing, to remind them that they can remove themselves from the research if they wish, to acknowledge their impact on me.

1.6.1 Portal as metaphor in the inquiry

As I world-travel across landscapes, I draw on Connelly and Clandinin’s (2006) metaphor of story as a ‘portal’. The notion of story as portal allowing storytellers to give meaning to their lived experiences is attractive to me. If indeed humans are storying creatures (Sikes and Gale, 2006) then their stories are surely inseparable from themselves and thus must be told. Indeed, Bruner (1986, in Sikes and Gale, 2006) argues that storytelling helps us to

understand the world into which we fit. As I try to be an ethical researcher, I am conscious of Foucault's work (1977/1991 in Sikes and Gale, 2006) and his assertion that we must look at stories to see who they might benefit, colonise or marginalise. In secondary schools we are aware of many students who struggle with literacy and numeracy - Key Skills of Junior Cycle and crucial in helping them to access curricula. Thus they are already disadvantaged on arrival in the post-primary system. Having taught many students in this position over the years, I know how this can affect their confidence in their own ability and can lead to a disconnect between some of them and the school. JCSP, with its focus on students experiencing success and on supporting literacy and numeracy development seeks to provide openings for students – a portal into the second-level school system and opportunities beyond, if you will. Indeed, Biesta (2013: 5) puts it rather beautifully when he says of education that it 'is not just about how we can get the world into our children and students; it is also— and perhaps first of all—about how we can help our children and students to engage with, and thus come into, the world.' I hear echoes of what Freire (1972: 56) suggests is the potential for education to be 'the practice of freedom' and think that if I were writing a manifesto for education I would place this aspiration at its centre.

I continue to use this metaphor of a portal as a means of thinking about my entry into the midst of participants' lives and into the possibilities of narrative inquiry. I am conscious that portals may be protective, may swing sharply shut or may be opened in welcome and that as such they must be negotiated. A portal is a two-way navigational object and as such may be a portal for my participants and I to tell and re-tell stories. As I walk alongside them, I too, will move in and out through the portal – as researcher, as teacher, as storyteller, even as participant myself. I am conscious that we are shaped by participating in the inquiry (Caine et al, 2013) and that as well as being shaped myself, in my role as researcher and teacher I *could* shape what participants might tell me. I acknowledge that in passing through the portal of my inquiry I know that I must conduct myself as an ethical subject and inquirer and strive to allow the voices of my participants to be heard through the telling and re-telling of their stories as we co-construct emerging stories.

As I continue to think about my inquiry my thoughts turn once more to Kathleen Moran, Senior Project Librarian. She has been with the Project since the beginning and has been fundamental to its development. Over the course of many years I have had several conversations about libraries and education with Kathleen and I pause here to share with

you some words from her. As I move through the portal into the inquiry space rain falls outside and she composes a tale that is rich with belief in the Project. I begin by asking her to bring me back to the early days.

1.6.1 Conversational space with Kathleen Moran

Kathleen: The Library Project is, of course, part of JCSP and we work closely together. Part of the agreement with schools who are offered a library is that they are located centrally in the school and that students who are engaged in JCSP are entitled to access the library. So although other students are welcome there, it's essential that students who are part of JCSP get priority. From the start the Project had a policy of including students in setting up the library, in choosing books. They were brought into the library space and asked what they'd like. So we have sofas and low tables, magazines, music stands. We saw trust as being a very important part of the relationships we wanted to build and no tags were placed on books. Sometimes books aren't returned but we believe that they have been given to a brother, sister, parent – a book in a household is a good thing.

Me: Why is there a focus on the arts in the libraries?

Kathleen: The libraries offer all sorts of workshops – in Science, History and so on – but the UN Manifesto says that students have the right to access the arts. We believe that the library can provide a window onto a world of experiences that students may not otherwise engage in. We can offer them a safe space in which to experiment, try something new, a place where there is no judgement, no exam.

In a future conversation with one of the students, I will hear this point being made again and think back to Kathleen's insight.

Kathleen: We work closely with organisations such as Poetry Ireland to bring the arts into the schools. And of course our charter pledges that students will access a range of cultural experiences.

Me: You mention relationships. How do they work when you've got teachers, librarians, students in the same space?

Kathleen: Librarianship and teaching are two different professions and it's important to acknowledge that. They each have different skills that they can share. The librarian is integral to the planning of timetabled classes with the teacher. During the workshops they both share the leading of the class. Each has something to offer within the school

library and beyond. For example, in (names research school), after Rachel ran a series of writing workshops, creative writing became a Transition Year module.

I find Kathleen's emphasis on the fact that teaching and librarianship are two different professions interesting. I am aware that in some countries such as the United States roles such as teacher-librarian exist. I discuss the varied titles and roles assigned to school librarians in Landscape 2. For now I wonder if this separation of roles is of significance to students.

Me: Do you think that students see librarians in the same way as they do teachers?

Kathleen: No. Even though the librarian may still be 'Sir' or 'Miss' students are aware that they have different roles. From the way libraries are set up – less formally than a classroom – to the range of activities they experience, students understand that the two are different, though working together.

When I talk with students later I am reminded of this and think of the importance of relationships in schools. And as I come alongside the students in the workshops and *The Writing Club* I hear again Kathleen saying, 'We want to show students we believe in them' and I think that as they tell and paint stories together in companionable spaces this sense of belief permeates the atmosphere. Knowing that narrative inquiry is a relational research methodology I pay attention to sharing social spaces with my participants in their space – the library, school – acknowledging that I am arriving in the midst of stories and will leave this three-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) in the same way. I discuss the commonplaces briefly below.

1.7 Three commonplaces of narrative inquiry

Drawing on pragmatist philosophies, narrative inquiry works from Dewey's theory of experience and his criteria for experience: continuity and interaction (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). These are reflected in Clandinin and Connelly's three commonplaces of narrative inquiry (2006) - temporality, sociality and place. I have drawn on them in this inquiry to help me to give voice to the telling and re-telling of stories, stories that are not fixed, but that may be re-presented with each new telling.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) use the term *temporality* to describe their concern for life experienced not just in the present but as part of a continuum of experience. This allows for a moving backward and forward in thinking about experience – that of our participants

and our own. In considering the concept of temporality I am also mindful of these words of Polkinghorne (1988: 60):

> 'We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meanings of our past actions, anticipating the outcomes of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed.'

Indeed hooks (1997), too, reminds us that people's lives are not linear. As narrative inquirers we need to attend to the temporality of our own and our participants' lives, as well as to the temporality of places, things and events.

The concept of the *sociality* commonplace acknowledges that our stories are composed in cultural, institutional and familial contexts. We all live within these contexts and compose and co-compose stories in them. Thus, it is important to reflect on the inquiry relationship between participants and researcher.

The *place* commonplace acknowledges that 'all events take place someplace' (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). Originally, only describing two commonplaces of narrative inquiry (temporality and sociality) in 1994, it was working with Aboriginal people and people who had left home that made Connelly and Clandinin more attentive to place (Clandinin, 2013). The research site of my inquiry is of course, the school library, but landscapes are also formed of the places my participants and I have inhabited over time. In being mindful of this commonplace I acknowledge that I am in the landscape, not simply viewing it, and that we are shaped by the landscapes we live in.

Thinking with the commonplaces helped me to be attentive to the shifting, changing, personal and social nature of my research puzzle and its participants, myself included (Clandinin, 2013). It also foregrounds that narrative inquiry is relational. I continue to draw on them during the thesis.

1.8 Why an arts-based approach?

I will discuss the emergence of arts-based approaches in the qualitative paradigm more fully in Landscape 2, but let me begin by borrowing from Proust to convey some of its attraction. He described art as a means through which:

> 'instead of seeing a single world, our own, we see it multiply until we have before us as many worlds as there are original artists' (cited in Campbell and Ogden, 1999: 205).

Reflecting on this statement, I think about my world-travels in my research and images and voices flicker at the edge of memory. I think of Connelly and Clandinin (2006: 477) who tell us that, '[A]rguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives'. I am also interested in the way that we represent and reveal – perhaps conceal - ourselves through text and image. Over a series of weeks the students in my research library will co-compose written stories. These will then be transformed into an artistic rendering as, drawing on the discussions about morality and responsibility that take place during the workshops, they create images of themselves as heroic figures. Working together they will create powerful images of a world in danger, a world that needs rescuing. Through discussion they learn to see themselves in the story as people capable of bravery, of moral behaviour. I will elaborate on how these tales unfolded in Landscape 3 where I also bring my wonderings about how they might document 'cultural aspects of social life' (Leavy, 2015: 229), a life in which young people might develop Key Skills such as *Being creative* to make a world where optimism and heroism can triumph.

As my inquiry is based in a school library, I was fortunate to walk alongside students as they engaged in a range of cultural experiences planned by the librarian in conjunction with the author and poet Colm Keegan[12] and visual artist Jole Bartoli[13]. Colm is a writer and poet from Dublin. He co-founded and is a board member of *Lingo*, Ireland's first Spoken Word festival. He also co-founded *The Writing Club*, the writing project based in my research school and about which I will write more in Landscape 4. I first met Colm some years ago when I was on secondment to the Department of Education and knew something of his work in schools. I had heard about artist Jole's inspiring work with students from Rachel and other librarians. Colm and Jole would work with the students on a story incorporating text and art and which would be published on *The Dublin Epic* website, a website that asks us:

What would you do,
if you could do **anything?**
Choose your world...

[12] https://colmkeeganpoetry.com

[13] https://www.arttoheart.ie

I find the invitation irresistible and am excited when they agree to participate in my research and by the idea of attending their workshops in the school library.

I saw and heard students composing written work and pieces of art which they shared with me. Honoured to share in their work and puzzling about how such artistic practices could help students to engage in the key skills of Junior Cycle I came to believe that an arts-based approach could do justice to their work. Leavy (2015: 17) writes that artistic practice and the practice of qualitative research can be viewed as 'crafts' as qualitative researchers 'compose, orchestrate and weave' (ibid). Barone and Eisner (2012: 1) write that arts-based research (ABR) can result in the creation of 'something that is close to a piece of art'. She also reminds us that qualitative research is influenced by the justice movements (Leavy, 2015).

I reflect on this as I think of my participants on stage at *WRaPParound* events, performing their poetic rejections of global inequalities, in the library creating stories together. As I do so I feel drawn to echo their experiences of performance by engaging in creative processes on the page and stage myself. Denzin (2017: 9) reminds us that we are global citizens and as such are we are called to change the world 'in ways that resist injustice while celebrating freedom and full, inclusive, participatory democracy'. As I think about this I wonder if perhaps together my participants and I will enact a call and response, 'a voice that wills itself to be heard, in many spaces, both private and public, whispered (or shouted) into multiple ears' (Pendergast in Spry, 2011: 34) as we compose and are composed. Finlay (2008: 2) reminds us that '[A]t the heart of arts-based inquiry is a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control over the production and dissemination of knowledge' and I feel that an arts-based approach to narrative inquiry will help me and them to tell and re-tell stories to audiences (those multiple ears) – ourselves and others. Poets, artists and writers that they are/becoming, I hope that together we will compose and perform stories on page and on stage that will bear witness (Madison, 2009: 114) and perhaps create new theories that do not 'simply mirror the world but change it' (Gergen, 2001 in Brinkmann, 2010: 84). Malorie Blackman[14] reminds us of the power of libraries to develop in children a love of reading, suggesting that without them, 'literacy may increasingly become the province of the lucky few, rather than the birthright of everyone'. This resonates with me as one of my wonders is why school libraries are not

[14] Children's Laureate 2013-2015 (UK)

offered to more – every – school. Perhaps an arts-based approach may appeal to audiences who might reflect more deeply on such questions. How wonderful if together, my participants and I could compose something that is aesthetically appealing, fostering reflexivity and empathy in the viewer (Dunlop, in Leavy, 2004). How apt if those who are a part of *this* library could provide the spark that created the possibility of more libraries – social justice indeed.

Composed as an arts based inquiry, the thesis will include selections of music, student writing, poetry and photographs. Proust described art as a means through which:

> 'instead of seeing a single world, our own, we see it multiply until we have before us as many worlds as there are original artists' (cited in Campbell and Ogden, 1999: 205).

Reflecting on this statement, I think about my world-travels in my research and images and voices flicker at the edge of memory. I think of Connelly and Clandinin (2006: 477) who tell us that, 'Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives'. The following piece from Julia Pietrusewicz and Katarzyna Radon singing Offenbach's 'Barcarolle' from *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* reminds me of the many ways in which we enter into worlds and makes me think about the power of the arts to reveal these stories and to touch us. I listen to it frequently as I think my way into the research. As I play the music I become immersed in the layering of the instruments of orchestra and the beautiful, young voices and am uplifted by the artistry of words and music. Perhaps you will listen to it here as you accompany me on my journey into the *Belle nuit, ô, nuit d'amour* of narrative inquiry:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-MbbebSQjQ

The opening notes played by the orchestra are a tantalising invitation into this world of music and story. The rich, dark voice of mezzo-soprano Katarzyna and higher notes of soprano Julia soar and fall, one complementing the other as they intersect and I think about how stories may be multi-voiced, surprising, honest, beautiful. I think about my work as a researcher, listening to the voices of others and my own, hearing something new in repeated listenings. As I move through the thesis I draw on such performances in the hope that they will illuminate stories told in the field, mine and others.

1.8.1 Storytelling

As a narrative inquiry this thesis is about not just my story but stories of the students, staff and others who participated in the research. These stories were revealed in my conversations with them and in artefacts they created and so generously shared with me. During the creative writing and visual art workshops students wrote and illustrated stories about a zombie invasion while also telling stories of friendships and events outside school. Later, in *The Writing Club*, poems, fragments and other stories were shared over cups of tea. As I move through the research and physical landscape I listen for stories told in other languages, in gestures, in silences. So I think and compose in stories as perhaps we all do.

My love of storytelling began, I think, when I was very young. I listened to stories in childhood – sometimes even those that I wasn't supposed to hear – and turned them over in my mind again and again, imagining into life characters I did not really know. Learning to read opened even more vistas – stunning, colourful, mixing reality and make-belief in my mind. Coles (1989: 120) writes of 'the moral power of stories' and I know that storytelling is an ethical undertaking. These words of Lopez (1990: 49) strike a particular chord as I think about the importance of stories.

> '… stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves.'

I think of stories I have heard, what they inscribed on me and how I learned to tell and share stories.

The landscape I describe below is one of home, where without realising it, I began my journey as storyteller. It was here that I fell in love with words, even starting my first novel (aged 9 – it was not a success!), the precursor to a later, passionate, love affair with narrative inquiry. As I write it I invite you to walk a little with me in this landscape as I tell you how that love story began. I also use the cameo to reflect on stories of poverty and disadvantage experienced by many unable to benefit as I did from the opportunities offered by the free or grant-aided education system.

1.8.2 Cameo 2

Before the beginning: The storied landscape of home

Our childhood home was a place where education was valued, where books were loved and cherished. We fell in love with books, caressing and smelling them, hugging their secrets, caught up in their spells. They were to be cared for, treated gently, part of the family. On Saturdays we went to the local library where the hushed rooms told tales of respect for books. I remember a room where sunlight streamed through tall, high windows as I took books from shelves, wondering which to choose. So many stories shimmering on the shelves, whispering tantalising invitations, but with borrowing restricted to three books per week, choices had to be made. Fingers were drawn over glossy covers, familiar, companionable names sought out, the first and last paragraph read. Much had to be considered before the final decision was made. Little did I imagine that as an adult, seconded to the Department of Education and Skills, I would work with a library project and learn about its impact on young people and families. As a child I remember my mother and I having a 'tea-party' complete with pink tea-set. It was a winter afternoon. I 'know' that because the fire was lit. My father must have been at work, my older sisters at school, and my younger sister asleep as my mother and I drank milky tea from little pink cups. I did not yet realise that this dark-haired sister and I would walk lovingly side by side through life. Set on little plates were fairy cakes with slivers of cherry on top. I held the sugar icing in my mouth until it melted and I was consumed with its sweetness. I revelled in my mother's warmth as she taught me how to be companionable, how to enjoy life's rituals.

As I write these words I am mindful of Bochner and Ellis (2016)

who remind us that stories of the past are made, not found, and that memory work involves transformation. I know that these memories are part of my own sense-making and remind myself that stories - mine and those of my participants - are personal, political, emotional and relational (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 252). I begin to wonder about ideas of truth. As a narrative inquirer I find myself in tune with Sacks (2015), who posits that the only truth is narrative truth, the stories we tell each other and ourselves.

The years fall away as looking back I think of Le Guin's (1986) description of the mother tongue as a language of emotions and personal experience and know that my mother was loving and teaching me how to love. I imagine I can taste the milkiness of the tea and hear her voice yet. During the many years since then we often lived moments such as these, warmed by tea and love, as we shared life stories. As I write this I look at a photograph of her in a silver frame. Although the photograph is black and white, I see her clearly in colour.

Spending our early years in Britain, like so many Irish people, our parents told us stories of 'home' so that the people who lived in them - grandmothers and grandfathers, relations, local characters - never or rarely seen by us - became part of our family and cultural story. Our home was filled with music - often songs about emigration and loss (institutional, economic stories), but frequently songs of the 60s - The Beatles, Marmalade, Johnny Cash. We were being immersed in cultures that at times were dramatically different from each other, but at others seemed to blend easily. From time to time we travelled to Ireland

across grey seas and met again cousins whose language (English) sounded strange to our ears.

A few years later we moved 'home' to Ireland for good but I have travelled ever since.

It was in our home that I learned to love words, to listen to them, to taste and shape them. Books such as Enid Blyton's 'The Magic Faraway Tree' and 'The Magic Wishing Chair' whispered mysterious possibilities. After all, if you believed that words could make you travel, you could go anywhere. Many years later reading 'The Time Traveler's Wife' (Niffenegger, 2003) I thought of those books and entered willingly into the worlds unfolding before me. I think of Connelly and Clandinin's commonplaces of narrative inquiry and Lugones's metaphor of world-travelling. Perhaps it was this love of words that encouraged me to become a teacher. Education was offered as a way to achieve independence in later life, as something to be aspired to not just for a love of learning, but for security. Going to university was placed before me as not only a possibility but a probability. That faith my parents had in me then gave me the courage to believe throughout my life.

At university in the 80s long-distance phone calls were things to be taken seriously, planned for, timed. Words had to be measured out as the coins flew at alarming speed into the phone-box. Longer exchanges were communicated by letter, page after page describing the campus, the lectures, the city, life at home. Oh the pleasure in seeing my name on an envelope from home.
Some years later, living in the Arabian Gulf with a sister in New

York, letters again became part of the family conversation that held us together across the miles, waited for expectantly. Blue feather-light airmail envelope almost transparent, held caressingly in the hand for a moment longer, as if love could be imprinted onto it, before being sent on its way, a gift for sender and recipient alike. Thousands of miles apart, words drew us close.

It has always been thus for me and others who share stories.

As I read over my words I think about how stories are told and re-told, dimming and brightening over time, details real or imagined superimposed over each other as in a palimpsest. I wonder about the 'truth' of these memories and whether there is such a thing as truth. In fact, the narrative truths of evocative autoethnography are pragmatic truths (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). Perhaps what I am remembering is the significance of this past, remembering now, in the present, to draw on the past looking toward the future (ibid, 2016). These stories remind me of Clandinin's commonplaces of narrative inquiry – temporality, sociality and place - all significant here and helping me, as researcher, to find my footholds on the path to becoming a narrative inquirer. They help me to locate my research beginnings in stories of home and understand why I consider it important to share stories.

Later, as a young teacher working first in a centre for young offenders, I came to see that these young men were not kept there by walls or locks but by something much more powerful – the lack of life choices, of finding it difficult to live in a story made for them by society, by others. What, after all, could they run away to? This much I knew even then.

Neither our family, nor other families that I knew, were affluent, but I had never imagined myself bumping up against stories like these, never imagined myself being in such a place. The shock that I experienced at the evidence of poverty – of abandonment by society - I found in this place has never left me. I had seen poverty in the plastic shoes worn by some school-children in Britain in the 1960s but naively, I had thought that this scourge was being erased, that the free education I had benefitted from myself - was removing barriers

to hope and ambition and access to opportunity. My belief in social justice, first seen in the values of home, began to burn more fiercely and has burned ever since and as I inquire into the JCSP Library Project I continue to wonder why libraries are not made available to all schools.

By remembering the past, I continue in a process of 'writing as inquiry' (Richardson, 2000: 923), keeping the past alive and engaging in meaning making as I sojourn in the land of memory (Hampl, 1999). I know it is not enough for these cameos to be personal stories, important as that is. Rather, through them I try to make clear how the past has worked on me – culturally, socially – awoken me to possibilities not only in myself but in society. Thinking with and through them reminds me of Freire's (1993) warning that education is never neutral but that it either brings about conformity to the system or works for freedom. In conducting this research I am challenged to question terms such as 'disadvantage' and 'educational disadvantage'. Cahill (2015: 313) for instance, suggests that the use of language such as 'impediment', 'disadvantage' and 'prevent' in the Education Act, 1998 'has a disempowering and objectifying effect' contributing to 'the 'disadvantaged' being othered, even vilified. O'Brien (2011: 15) suggests that neo-liberal constructions of the 'disadvantaged' define these groups as 'authors of their own oppression'. Reading these words makes me turn again to Freire (2005: 74) and his assertion that oppressors wish to change 'the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them' so that they can be more easily dominated. Knowing that he believed in the importance of dialogue in the naming and changing of the world, I look forward to seeing how the philosophy and promises of the *JCSP Library Project Charter* unfold in the library as librarian, students, facilitators and teachers dialogue with each other, exploring possibilities and stories of empowerment through an arts-based curriculum.
And as all these stories work on me, I hope that by inviting my audience into them they will work on you too as '[T]hrough the stories we hear who we are' (Silko, 1996: 30).

I turn now to a brief discussion of Clandinin and Caine's (2013) touchstones of narrative inquiry and how I draw on them throughout my research as I think about important 'So what' and 'Who cares' responsibilities of inquiry.

1.9 Afterwords: Some criteria for judging value

Clandinin (2013) points out that while as researchers we co-compose research texts with our participants, we must also speak to the scholarly community. We have to answer the 'So what?' and 'Who cares?' questions. Thus the research should hold a social significance.

Clandinin and Caine (2013) described twelve touchstones that might be considered when reflecting on inquiries. They describe a touchstone as a "quality or example that is used to test… excellence or genuineness" (Clandinin, 2013: 212). They list twelve touchstones while acknowledging that there may be others - that researchers could use to judge the validity and rigour of the study. They are:

> 'recognizing and fulfilling relational responsibilities; being in the midst; having a commitment to understanding lives in motion; negotiating relationships; narrative beginnings; negotiating entry to the field; moving from field to field texts; moving from field texts to interim and final research texts; attending to temporality, sociality, and place; interacting with relational response communities; explaining justifications (personal, practical, and social); and attending to multiple audiences' (Clandinin, 2013: 212).

These touchstones are developed over time, starting from the initial justification for the research – personally (why it matters to us), practically (what difference it might make to practice) and theoretically/socially (what difference it might make to theoretical understandings or how it might make situations more socially just. They are woven through the text and I use them throughout the research as a guide as I move into and out of the field, from field texts to interim texts to research text. I draw them out in the dissertation through writing about my theoretical and conceptual framework and my work with my participants and by including reflexive cameos. A touchstone is defined[15] as:

> **1:** fundamental or quintessential part or feature
> **2:** a test or criterion for determining the quality or genuineness of a thing
> **3:** a black siliceous stone related to flint and formerly used to test the purity of gold and silver by the streak left on the stone when rubbed by the metal

As a narrative inquirer I know that the research has left its mark on me and that I am forever changed by it. This also acts as a reminder that my participants have been touched by it and that my relational obligations to them continue after I have left the field.

Barone and Eisner (2012) hold that for it to be useful arts-based research must succeed both as a piece of art and as research. In an attempt to hold the thesis to this account, I

[15] Merriam-Webster dictionary

have kept in mind questions about the validity and evocative power of research and the importance of its ethical underpinnings. As an arts-based work I hope that the thesis contains both evocation and illumination (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 153) so that the reader/viewer may be motivated to reflect more deeply about the stories told and wonder about possibilities, including possibilities of hearing other stories in other libraries.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) state that the point is not whether autoethnography describes exactly the ways things happened but rather what use to which they may be put. It is my hope that this work may be useful in contributing to conversations about the JCSP Library Project and the students it serves, conversations that may lead to more students being offered the opportunity to engage with the Project.

And as a piece of arts-based research told through storying, my wish for it has already been articulated in these beautiful words of Trinh (1989: 4):

> 'May my story be beautiful and unwind like a long thread ...
> A story that stays inexhaustible within its own limits.'

Landscape 2: A Pilgrim Sets Forth

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will describe my setting out on the path to becoming a researcher. I will trace my journey across landscapes of theoretical and epistemological beginnings as I learn more about how to inquire. I will move across the landscapes of research, following lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986), crossing borders until eventually coming to understand and embrace narrative inquiry. I will expand on my use of the metaphors of story as portal, landscapes and world-travelling. This piece is situated in Clandinin and Connelly's (2006) three commonplaces of narrative inquiry as I navigate my journey as emerging inquirer and move forward and backward in time and space to reveal my journey.
As I do elsewhere in the thesis, I include a cameo in this chapter in an effort to reveal my thoughts as I learned to inquire. As a reflexive piece it is designed to contain traces that drop 'clues to the riddle of my feelings' (Hampl, 1999: 29) as I begin to compose stories of my life as a narrative inquirer ever-mindful that I cannot separate that life from my other lives – past, present, future – lived in social, cultural and familial milieux.

Metaphorical and literal notions of living, of moving across the research landscape, of gaining entry to the field will find expression in my world-travelling (Lugones, 1987) across Europe, tales of which are incorporated into Cameo 3: *Summer Meanderings: Emerging researcher as pilgrim.* As I come more fully to understand what it is to world-travel, I bring forward these words of Judith Butler (2005: 8): 'The ''I'' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation. Thus I will try to make clear how through learning to engage in narrative inquiry I came to think more deeply about ethical questions and responsibilities. Later in this chapter I will discuss my understanding of relational ethics and its importance to narrative inquiry.

In the thesis, I have sought to position the cameos in such a way that they fit into the narrative. As I have mentioned, they are not, however, entirely chronological – perhaps as life lived is truly not - as each employs Connelly and Clandinin's commonplaces to reveal my attempts to position myself on the landscape. They reflect, I hope, the 'ethical necessity

of remaining unsettled' (Wyatt and Gale, 2013: 302) as I seek to engage in research alongside others.

I know that I am part of the research, that I cannot be entirely subtracted from it. Thus I continue to weave autoethnography into the chapter to reveal something of my narrative beginnings and document 'becoming' (Richardson, 2018: 824) and to help me to understand how I, too, am under study (Clandinin, 2013: 83). Such an approach may make visible how I work out what to do and how to live (Bochner and Ellis, 2006: 111) as I begin to engage in ethical research with my participants. Cameo 3 helps me to draw these threads together as I think about my movements on the inquiry path.

As I move through the chapter I will reveal something of my struggles to gain footholds on the path of inquiry and learn to become a narrative inquirer. I will also seek to narrate the reasons for my engagement in an arts based research (ABR) approach and give some insight into how the story of the research – co-composed with my participants – will be told using performative techniques on the page and on 'stage'. I will then move into a discussion of some Irish and international research into school libraries and their benefits, before sharing some examples of good practice. I draw this chapter to a close with a reflexive cameo which discusses some steps on my journey to becoming a narrative inquirer.

2.2 Navigating a research landscape

When I began thinking about my research, I imagined that I would take all, or several, of the thirty schools in the JCSP Library Project and gather data through questionnaires, focus groups and so on. The use of quantitative data and analysis was undaunting to me. Having taken a degree in maths and English at university I saw both as languages full of beauty and expression. For me, maths has always been full of shimmering possibilities. Imagine a subject, traditionally construed as a science, which acknowledges the presence and usefulness of the imaginary. For instance, a complex number is made up of a real and an imaginary component where the square of the imaginary part is equal to minus 1 (-1). It may be written as, for example, 5+3i, and may be represented visually on a graph. Thus maths can hold at one and the same time the world of the real and the world of the imaginary and can express both in, and through, language. Maths is found in the world of music, art, architecture and literature to name but a few. We see its Golden Ratio in the

beauty of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. We find it in the symmetry of the beautiful gardens of the Real Alcázar in Seville. And we only need to listen to the opening moments of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* (0.06 - 7.25) to hear the beauty of the notes grouped into triplets creating the haunting melody:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbTVZMJ9Z2I

So to research using numbers was something I was prepared for. However, as I attend our PhD cluster meetings and discuss my research in more detail I begin to think that using mathematical approaches such as the use of surveys would not capture the stories I hoped to tell about the Library Project. I knew, for instance, that participant voices and arts and written mediums would be very important to the research and I began to wonder about other approaches that might work better. And so I embarked on a journey to learn more about inquiry methods and theories.

2.2.1 Tentative footsteps on a theoretical path

One does not, of course, approach the academy replete, a fully-formed researcher. My fellow-students, tutors and I begin to think and talk earnestly about theory. We tease out Biesta et al's (2011) statement that good research depends on a combination of high quality techniques and high quality theorising. There are many theories from which to choose – constructivist, feminism, socio-cultural, post-structural to name but a few - and I find myself seduced by the attractions of several that are discussed. At this point I am drawn in particular to critical theory with its aim of exposing and transforming hidden power structures. The JCSP Library Project works in schools that are designated disadvantaged, seeking to give students a range of cultural and learning experiences they might not otherwise access, so to research it using a critical theory approach would seem to be a good lens through which to look more closely at its work with students. I realise of course that I cannot simply select a theory and head off to 'do' research. I continue my wanderings across the theoretical landscape as I engage with readings and assignments trying to locate myself in it.

Tracing its philosophical roots to Marxist philosophy (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007: 47), Critical Theory seeks to transform oppressive social conditions. Thinking about the life experiences of some of the students I have met and the communities in which I have worked during my career, I wondered if such an approach would suit my inquiry into experiences of a school-based library project. Would it help me reveal structural injustice

and disadvantage? Would it help me to situate my research as a social justice practice? However, this privileging the examination of the large social conditions that shape lives by Marxist theory can render invisible and powerless ordinary lived experience. I feel uneasy about this as I believe that the students I have taught are aware of the structures that may disadvantage them. Yet I wonder about other cultural and popular structures such as the internet and media that have risen in prominence and the influence they wield on the world. Private news and media corporations can use vast wealth to promote their viewpoint. Who are the beneficiaries of such multi-million dollar industries and how do young people learn to decode the volume of information directed towards them? Whose story, whose point of view is being privileged? It seems to me to be more important than ever that young people are equipped to navigate an increasingly complex world, a world in which they are seen as consumers, a world in which half of children are worried about not being able to spot fake news (Literacy Trust, 2018). Giroux and Pollock's challenge (2010: 59) us to ask 'Who controls the production of culture? Who has access to the meanings produced by the culture industry?' In doing so, I think we must also consider the role education can play in making our students more aware of how we are all positioned in the world – socially, historically, culturally – and how we can learn to challenge such preconceived notions and develop critical thinking.

These tensions are to the forefront of my mind as I move towards researching in the library. As students engage in an arts-based programme, what questions will be posed to them? How will they meet the challenge of navigating them? I find myself turning again to Giroux (1991) who speaks about a border pedagogy which undermines configurations of culture, power and knowledge and offers oppositional practices. I find his suggestion (1991: 510) of a pedagogy that would link education to a political struggle for a radical democratic society exciting and feel that the JCSP Library Project is already engaging in efforts to challenge such structures. I am drawn, too, to his emphasis (2005) on the importance of student voice and schools as places where the struggle for voice is often played out. Thinking about the Library Project, I see it as offering spaces where students are encouraged to question society's structures and protest inequality. Giroux (2013) states that a critical pedagogy should provide students with the knowledge, literacy skills and courage to fight for a just society. I wonder if perhaps then, a critical theory methodology could help me to inquire into such pedagogical practices in the library.

Within the Library Project, students are given opportunities to critique local and global structures. For instance, the Writing, Reading and Performance Poetry (*WraPParound*) initiative has been run since 2013 under the guidance of Senior Project Librarian Kathleen Moran, in conjunction with Poetry Ireland and its Education Officer Jane O'Hanlon. Each year participating schools have been invited to showcase their work at performance events in the National Library, Trinity College, Dublin and University College, Cork, offering them a platform which, perhaps, many may not otherwise have experienced. Encouraged to craft poems based on their own ideas, language and experiences, students find a new way into poetry. The inspiration for their work is often located in stories from their own lives and communities and their poems frequently articulate social justice themes such as inequality and its consequences. Indeed, the JCSP Library Project has extended the initiative in partnership with Trócaire's *Mobilising for Justice Scheme*, to develop a strand in which students write and perform themes of global justice. Through initiatives such as these, the JCSP Library Project locates education within a moral and social context. (Giroux, 1991: 507).

The sound of teenage students embodying themes of social justice, voices calling for respect, equality, honouring others, surely cannot help but move us and give us optimism for the future. We in turn honour them by respecting their right to use language and styles of representation of their choice. Many of the students write and voice their poetry using rap. As their noisy, energetic words tumble from the stage I can hear bell hooks (1994: 167) reminding us that '[L]ike desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries.' It seems to me that perhaps these young students are rupturing the standard placement of words to perform stories of resistance to an unjust world as hooks suggests that Black slaves did in 'a spirit of rebellion' (ibid: 170). Their performances also remind me of the pleasure that some of my own students expressed when I invited a Black American poet to work with them and how they were drawn to his use of language – verbal and physical.

I am not alone in feeling concern about the lack of diversity in teachers and facilitators in Irish classrooms. For instance, Keane and Heinz (2016), drawing on their 2014 research, noted those who identified as being of 'White Irish' ethnicity are significantly over-represented in Irish primary and post-primary Initial Teacher Education programmes relative to both the general Irish population and entrants to Irish universities. Keane et al.

(2018) note that despite increased diversity of population in Ireland, the teaching population has remained predominantly white, female and of majority-group social class and ethnic backgrounds. Later I would hear echoes of this in Rachel's suggestion that 'you can't be what you can't see' and think about how important it is that students have opportunities to imagine possibilities for themselves.

I think of the teachers and facilitators who did not try to limit these students' use of language and feel they may epitomise what hooks (2003: 45) describes as 'the democratic educator' who values 'diversity in language'. And as I am drawn back again to the student voices I wonder about how their experiences of the Library Project may impact on them and help them to develop Key Skills of Junior Cycle such as *Being literate*, *Being creative*, *Communicating* and *Staying well*.

2.2.2 Travelling in the borderlands

As I think about students calling for justice, I am drawn back again and again to Giroux's discussions of a border pedagogy. It seems that I am forever at a border of some sort - growing up partly in Britain and partly in Ireland, standing at the threshold of the research field, visiting the library but not residing there. Perhaps the students, too, are in the borderlands – sharing in some of the privileges of the western world yet highly aware of local, social and global injustices. I wonder if their awareness of this makes them feel more strongly the urge to protest about inequalities.

Living near the border with Northern Ireland, we often crossed borders to visit family or go shopping and later I frequently crossed borders on my way to work in Dublin. At times the crossing was smooth but at others the crackle of tension could be felt in the air, a physical representation of the unintelligible sounds emitting from the security walkie-talkies. Travelling home from Dublin on winter nights, pinpricks of irritation at being stopped rebelled against my skin. I was relieved to make it through, away from young, nervous soldiers, who were bearing a responsibility too great for such young shoulders. Looking in the rear-view mirror as I drove away I understood that this was a war and could feel sympathy for them as they remembered and mourned their dead.

At work in Dublin I came to realise that there was little understanding of living in border areas. How could there be? Some were shocked that we regularly crossed borders, that we loved the others we world-travelled to – people caught up in disrupted daily lives, as we were. When borders are removed, fissures often remain despite ceasefires and peace-making. Grass may smooth their surfaces but they do not conceal. Such borders remain in the landscape – there in the flowers still left at sites of tragedy and horror along roadsides, there in memorials to honour the dead. Yet crossing the border has also brought knowledge and understanding of each other and, for many, acceptance of difference. Anzaldúa (1987: 3) writes of a borderland as being a place of transition, a place 'created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary'. Perhaps borderlands are places where we can engage 'the concept of the Inappropriate/d Other' as 'alternate ways of seeing and being with one another, understanding ourselves in relation to others'.

Like many landscapes, narrative inquiry shares borders and I find that they too are porous, allowing for travel and exchange of ideas. I find myself crossing the border with Marxism and continue to flirt with critical theory. Grounded in ontological commitments as is narrative inquiry, I am drawn to their goal of disrupting oppressive conditions. Laudable as this is, I retreat from their starting point of critiquing ideologies before focusing on individual lived experiences fearing that if 'we treat experience-based narratives as mere ideological artifacts, we reinforce the disempowerment of people who have been excluded from official knowledge production' (Stone-Mediatore, 2003: 2).
And as I continue to travel to the university, I think about my research and the theories that might help me to think more deeply about it. Perhaps I will 'find' a theory – a language – that will help me to ask questions about the experiences my participants and I write in our stories (Holman Jones, 2016).

As the autumn leaves start their annual parade outside the window of the room in which PhD cluster meetings take place we continue to discuss, probe, question, share. I am glad to know that researchers often feel overwhelmed and at a loss as to where and how to start and recognise myself in these words. At times, navigating the landscape seems fraught. In my mind theory seems to have become something to be overcome before 'research' can begin. Yet I draw comfort from the advice of my supervisor to focus on what – who – I hope to research/with. We discuss Bruner's (1986) different ways of knowing – paradigmatic, drawing on logical proof and empirical observation to create unambiguous

objective 'truth' and narrative knowledge, constructed through stories of lived experiences, acknowledging and helping to make sense of the ambiguity of human lives. As a mathematician I value empirical knowledge, statistics, theories and proofs reaching back thousands of years, while I agree with Clough (2002, cited in Sikes and Gale, 2006: 2) who points out that, 'even statistical representations are narratively constructed'. I look at the vista before me, research paths criss-crossing, seemingly receding while coming closer, dark corners illuminated with pools of light and I hesitate, a pilgrim, willing but not yet certain.

I think of my own research which will take place with students, librarians and facilitators and wonder about the kind of data I will collect. I wonder if I will analyse these data through empirical means or if another way might be open to me – and my participants. I am conscious of a desire to 'see people big' and find myself dwelling in Greene's (1995) words that such a vision brings us in close contact with the things that cannot be measured. As I think about what attracted me to this area of research in particular, I think back to the days when my work on secondment to the JCSP Support Service included involvement in the Library Project. I recall seeing students' work when I visited libraries and hearing them speak about it and the issues and ideas that inspired them. Learning to think as a researcher means asking questions – of myself and others - about how my inquiry might be crafted, how I might tell the story of my research involving students who themselves craft stories. It becomes increasingly clear to me that to do so, I need to get even closer – to 'lean in' (Pelias, 2011) and listen closely to those whose voices at spoken poetry events first drew me to the Project. The idea of researching the Library Project using statistical data – valuable as such an approach is – begins to recede as I begin my narrative turn. I feel a slight tremor underfoot as I continue to try to read the map before me. I hope to learn to navigate the terrain, guided by – among other things - the principles of social justice and ethical practice. Perhaps as I learn how to inquire with others I will eventually 'move into [my] own impossibility, where anything might happen – and will' (St. Pierre, 2018: 832).

I turn now to discuss how I came to gain understandings of narrative inquiry and how its focus on relational ethics would be embedded in the research.

2.2.3 A narrative turn

Some of us attend the research module *Fields in the Making* in Maynooth University and I begin to feel a tentative movement in my positioning in the research landscape. We are asked to contemplate where we are on our research journey, who and what influences our approach to research. We are beginning to find our voices, perhaps uncertain still, but finding where in the discussions we can identify nuances of ourselves. We talk about 'truth' and the discussions segue into explorations of postpositivism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, social constructionism. We are challenged to think about our understanding of 'the self' and 'truth'. I think about Kim's description of poststructuralism as attending 'to questions of language, power and desire in ways that emphasise the context in which meaning is produced while challenging all universal truth' (Kim, 2016: 61) and I lay it alongside my hopes for research with participants who write and speak poetry. Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) suggestion that any agreement about what is valid knowledge arises from relationships between members of some stake-holding community makes me think about my research participants and I consider again how my research might unfold. Researching with students and those who work with them, how can I ensure that their voices are heard in the research? I am anxious to listen carefully to what they tell and am aware of the risk that I might shape it for my own ends. I am becoming more conscious of the responsibility that comes with being a researcher and the ethical undertaking that inquiry is. I realise that I cannot research 'at a distance' but that I too will be a participant in the research. At some point in the module we begin to discuss narrative inquiry. Located in the linguistic/narrative/textual/postmodern/reflexive turn as it is, I am lured by its rejection of grand theories and ultimate truths. Such an approach to an inquiry seems to me to be exciting, demanding. It is a relational approach and I know I will have to think deeply about relational ethics as I seek to work with others over time. I discuss the responsibilities of an inquirer, particularly in the context of narrative inquiry, in the next section.

Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) notion of story as portal allowing story-tellers to give meaning to their lived experiences is one that speaks to me and I borrow it to use as one of the metaphors in this research. The portal may be one I travel through to listen to participants' stories and share mine, or it may be one that I move in and out through as I position myself as researcher in theoretical landscapes. It figures in my travels literally and figuratively as my research accompanies me across landscapes and borders, from the present into the future and back to the past in a temporal, social and spatial continuum.

Kearney (2002: 130) points out that, 'There is an abiding recognition that existence is inherently storied' and in my research I will try to weave stories – mine and those of my participants – together. Indeed Lewis (2011: 505) posits that without a story there is no 'identity, no self, no other' and that this story makes life liveable. The telling and re-telling of these stories can, of course, take many forms – poetry, music, portraiture among others – and that possibility for expression, for finding our voices, make this methodology very exciting to me. During the research I hope that participants will share artefacts of their writing and artistic work created through their experiences in the library with me. Such fragments will carry within them stories – of make-believe, of life. The story will determine the vehicle, rather than the other way round. I am conscious, of course, that once told the story cannot be called back and I consider the ethical undertaking that is research.

Considerations about how to present and re-present stories and how to ensure that the voices of my participants are heard, lead to another shift in my position on the inquiry landscape. As I reflect on narrative inquiry, located in a Deweyan conception of experience, with a focus on interaction and continuity, I begin to think about experiences growing out of other experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 2) and look forward to engaging with participants in the field.

In February 2016 I begin to read one of the assigned readings for the module, *Narrative Inquiry: Toward Understanding Life's Artistry* (Clandinin and Huber, 2002). In this article the authors describe how in

> 'returning to field texts of our recent work alongside Darlene, a mother we met on the landscape of an inner-city school context, we show how she was engaged in an artistic and aesthetic composition of her life experience' (Clandinin and Huber, 2002: 161).

Travel with me a little if you will on this snowy landscape as Darlene moves backward and forward in time and across cultural and physical landscapes to share stories of her childhood and her adult journey to her homeland, an Inuit community, where in turn she looks back at the learnings of her people. As Clandinin, Huber and Darlene tell stories in that piece, I am drawn to the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of her life. Words such as 'attending' (to Darlene's story) and the image of silence she evokes when composing stories about her people draw me in to the world she describes. I walk in the hushed snow with her and try to listen to the echoes of lives lived and loved by being remembered. I am

beginning to realise that I will continue to listen for the silences and stories we can't yet fully tell (Adams and Jones, 2011).

As I begin to gain increased understanding of narrative inquiry and its emphasis on relational ethics, I traverse its landscape with Darlene imaging telling and re-telling stories from my participants. I am struck by the relationship of care that exists between researchers and Darlene and think about the importance of ethical understandings. Ellis (2017) tells us that relational ethics are norms and practices of considering and caring for friends, family members, and research participants in our written representations and I know that I will have to consider this in my research. Using autoethnography to help me think and write about my research, I am drawing on memories of my family and others who do not realise they are 'in' the research. Questions of how and when to let them know that they *are* remind me of my moral and ethical obligations to them, to ensure that I avoid hurting them. Michelle Fine's (1998) image of the hyphen is helpful here in illustrating how we are in relation with those we study. Thus using autoethnography is also a way for me to be present to others – to reveal some of myself, my background, my interest in the research. It is a way for me to connect with my participants and to you, dear reader. And, as I share my stories I open myself to vulnerability, which reminds me, in turn, of the vulnerability of others.

It becomes clearer to me that the metaphor of landscape is something to which I will return often in my research as I move from finding footholds on the research landscape into the field and back again moving forward and back in time, tracing my influences, the past and future, moving towards working alongside my participants. The journey is literal and reflexive and I think it will last a lifetime. As I move through the landscape I learn to think deeply about ethical questions and I turn now to the place of relational ethics in narrative inquiry.

2.2.4 Narrative inquiry and relational ethics

The question of ethics is central to research undertakings. Academies, rightly, have stringent criteria which must be met in order to protect participants, researchers and the academy itself. Brody (2002: 177) refers to ethics as 'the world of human activities that have important moral content' and I feel sure that all researchers desire to 'walk in a good

way' (Young, 2005: 179). As I continue my journey across the landscape of narrative inquiry I consider the importance of ethical undertakings. In our cluster meetings and conversations with my supervisor we discuss the role of ethics, preliminaries to engaging with the university ethical application process.

I learn that Caine et al. consider that 'narrative inquiry is first and foremost a relational research methodology and while it is research it is also a transaction between people which makes ethical issues and concerns about living well with others central to the inquiry' (2013: 580). Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 20) define narrative inquiry as 'a collaboration between researcher and participants' while Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) note that narrative inquiry respects ordinary lived experience while also focusing on the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which these experiences are unfolded.

Drawing on Noddings's (1984) ethics of caring, Clandinin and Connelly focus on a research ethics that is appropriate for narrative inquiry. They write that 'fundamental ethical issues come close to the surface throughout the research, from negotiation of entry to the preparation of results' (1998: 273). As I think about the privilege and responsibility of entering other worlds as researcher and my duty of care to participants and the stories they might tell me, I am conscious of Caine et al's (2019: 274) reminder that in narrative inquiry spaces 'we are called to move *with* an ethics of care into what we are calling relational ethics.' (Italics in original.) This focus on the centrality of relationships has implications for relational ethical obligations, placing them at the heart of the inquiry. I am becoming increasingly awake to narrative inquiry as relational and the way that decisions are made not by individuals but by 'the individual as interconnected and intertwined in meaningful relationships with others' (Larkin, de Casterlé and Schotsmans, 2008: 235). Relationships are central to our work (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and I will strive to pay attention to them, encouraged by Caine et al (2007: 139) who posit that engaging in narrative inquiry 'offers us possibilities for engaging in social justice practices that are attentive to lives first, with a knowledge that change, however uncertain, does occur.'

My inquiry in a school library in a designated disadvantaged area involves working with teenage students and adult participants who have agreed to share their stories with me. My obligations to them are elaborated on in Landscape 3 section 3.2.1 and are part of the inquiry from negotiating entry, to being in the field and beyond. I know I will need to think,

for instance, about considerations such as informed consent/assent and power dynamics as I work with young people and adults who are employed by the school or Library Project. As an outsider locating myself temporarily in their workspace, I realise that school staff may feel obliged to take part in the study or be cautious about expressing their opinion in conversation. I will make it clear throughout that participants may decide – without fear of disadvantage - not to participate in the research or to withdraw from it at any point until publication. I draw on these threads throughout the inquiry.

Noddings (1993: 6) wrote that, 'all dialogue is, in the deepest sense, moral because it is an acknowledgement of our existential longing to hear and be heard'. Drawing on this, I think about *my* ethical obligations to them and seek to foreground Caine and Clandinin's (2012) touchstones of narrative inquiry throughout my research. The touchstones are suggestions of criteria that might be used to think about the quality of narrative inquiries. The first of these is *relational responsibilities*, underlining the importance narrative inquiry places on being in relation with others.

In composing field and research texts I am conscious that living is field text, and field texts are co-compositions of lives (Clandinin et al., 2011). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) also drew attention to the importance of not silencing the stories of either participants or researchers in narrative inquiry, Sharing interim research texts with my participants, acknowledges their role in the research and foregrounds that 'narrative inquiry is first and foremost a relational research methodology … a transaction between people which makes ethical issues and concerns about living well with others central to the inquiry' (Caine et al., 2013: 580). Perhaps it can be distilled down to this – we are in relation to each other, all humans on the face of the earth, with feelings, concerns and desires, our words and silences - our lives - entitled to being treated with dignity. I have resolved to keep these ethics in mind as I navigate across borders and landscapes of the inquiry, aware that as a way of life ethics are a process, to be negotiated throughout the inquiry with my participants.

Ellis (2006: 435) notes that '[R]elational ethics also include mindful self-reflection about the researcher's role, motives, and feelings during the research process. I use the cameos in the thesis as reflexive pieces which document my own reasons for carrying out the inquiry and my role and becoming in the research. They are an acknowledgement, too, of my own

narrative privilege, revealing 'who is able write narratives – that is, considering who has the physical ability to write, the mastery of the norms of writing (e.g., grammar, spelling), and appropriate resources such as time, money, and access to technologies that facilitate writing' (Bolen and Adams, 2016: 623). I now move into a discussion of the place of autoethnography in narrative inquiry.

2.2.5 Narrative Inquiry and autoethnography

As I wonder about my own research and look forward and backward along the path to becoming an inquirer, I am aware that I am continually dwelling simultaneously in past, present and future, telling and re-telling stories to myself. Such stories are made and unmade 'in relation to many others – including the story of the narrative inquirer' (Downey and Clandinin, 2010: 387). As I imagine myself into the research field I begin to realise that I cannot separate myself from my participants. I consider that autoethnography may help me understand – and reveal – what it is to be a narrative inquirer in relation with participants.

In my mind and heart their stories are already intermingled with mine. Perhaps it's because I have already dreamed myself into the library, alongside my participants. Perhaps it's because, having already worked with the JCSP Library Project, I carry within myself a belief in the potential of the library to ignite the spark of the eternal flame – mine and others. I conjure images of myself entering the field and think about Tami Spry's suggestion that autoethnography is not about the self, rather that, 'perhaps it is about a wilful embodiment of ''we''' (2018: 628). I realise that entering the field brings with it relational responsibilities and that I must acknowledge that my being there affects others. If I wish to work alongside participants as 'we', I will need to world-travel lovingly to their world, sharing something of mine with them. Such world-travelling may permit me to understand what it is to be them and what it is to be me in their eyes rather than being dimly present to them (Lugones, 1987). As I think about her suggestion that playful world-travelling (ibid) results in being open to surprise I wonder what stories we will unfold in the library and I am humbled. If a portal is a two-way device, storytelling is a narrative that is woven together in the taking of turns, in the shared words and silences. It is participatory and I realise that I am part of the research.

As I weave my stories with those of my participants and with theory, I attempt to reveal myself through evocative and reflexive autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). The cameos capture some essence, I hope, of my journey to become a narrative inquirer, one who sits companionably with others as we compose texts together, mindful of my relational obligations.

Writing myself into my research I realise that coming to life on the pages are memories and stories that seem unconnected to the inquiry. At first I try to dismiss these but eventually come to understand that these lines of flight, these 'writing stories' (Richardson, 2018: 824) are helping me to make sense of the world and share the personal, social and political understandings which are shaping my research puzzle (Clandinin, 2013: 55). In the cameos I place my own early love for words and entry into the magical world of reading alongside memories of my early teaching days. As I do so they help me to make visible my epistemological positioning as I bump up against inequalities that still permeate social and educational systems. Thus these reflexive pieces become, for me, an act of political self-awareness as I consider my justifications for this narrative inquiry.

In fact, autoethnographic stories must also be pointed towards history, social structure and culture (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). I know that I must keep my obligations to my participants to the fore – to attend to their stories, to listen for moments when the key skills of Junior Cycle may reveal themselves, to show them what I have written about them and remind them that they can withdraw from the research if they wish. This is not only my story, but a story created through collaboration. Toyosaki and Pensoneau-Conway (2013: 571) 'find autoethnography fertile ground for social justice projects because autoethnography assumes a stance of incompleteness of the self, of the other and of the relationship, thus allowing for intersubjectivity'. As I criss-cross the landscape of inquiry I will try to live up to this covenant.

The cameos represent my journey but I also use them as a vehicle for travel as I move forward and backward through time. I know that memories are deeply embedded within but that they belong to the future too as we make and unmake them. Perhaps I can step into the light not to see my own face but to feel the length of the shadow cast by the light (Hampl, 1999) as I think back into the past and forward from the present. Perhaps too I 'rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing' (Heaney, *Personal Helicon*).

I also employ the cameos and intermezzo to reveal how my physical and personal presence impacted on the research and it on me – from the refining of research questions, to coming alongside participants to presenting the thesis as an arts-based work. I now consider some possibilities of this type of inquiry.

2.2.6 Possibilities of an arts based approach

I mentioned earlier that in my work with the JCSP Library Project I have attended performances of student work. In my own school we have benefitted from being involved in initiatives dreamt up by the Library Project such as *WraPParound* so I have seen how students tell stories. In my research school students will be engaged in a project in which they will write collective pieces and then represent them through art. How, then, should I convey their words in my own research? And, researching with participants, how do I make my research text interesting to them and others?

Barone and Eisner state that arts based research (ABR) is rooted in aesthetic considerations as it seeks to move beyond the 'limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that would otherwise be ineffable' (2012: 1). Pelias (2004: 11) described arts-based research as 'methodological calls, writings that mark a different space. They collect in the body: an ache, a fist, a soup'. I am at one with Pelias in this. For me the ache that Pelias refers to is manifest both in the desire to write about the Library Project and the hope that the writing and telling about it will resonate with others aesthetically and as a piece of research. I am moved by the words of Alves (1995: 124) who suggests that 'the aim of knowing is to increase our possibilities of tasting life'. Perhaps the Library Project offers students a taste of other lives, other experiences, while acknowledging the exceptional nature of their own lived experiences. Perhaps I, too, will taste life anew.

Leavy (2015) notes that arts-based research unsettles assumptions about what we call research and knowledge. Further, one of the purposes of ABR according to Barone and Eisner (2012) is the creation of a disequilibrium in the way that we – researcher and audience – regard important cultural and social phenomena.

Who could resist such possibilities, such challenges?

I know, however, that to rise to such challenges, to be involved in a conversation about social inclusion and educational equity, my research will need to be useful. The beautiful words of Nowab Jan-Fisher Khan (19th century Afghan noble) that 'The candle is not there to illuminate itself' (cited in Leavy, 2015: 27) cautions me that my work, made possible through the generosity of others, is not mine alone and placing it before participants, readers and the academy I have obligations to all. I am encouraged by the promise offered by the words of Caine et al (2017) that engaging in narrative inquiry permits us to be involved in social justice practices in the knowledge that change, uncertain as it may be, can and does occur.

I begin to wonder about the possibilities of a narrative inquiry to be transformative and I puzzle over why libraries are not part of all schools. I yearn to create arts-based research that is useful and beautiful, that might contribute, even tentatively, to 'the making of art and re-making of culture' (Conquergood, 2002 cited in Spry, 2018: 343), to engage in a critical praxis of beauty 'when a situation of injustice calls on us to create' (Scarry, 1998: 79).

Dare I hope that my research might approach such shimmering promise, that it might shine a light into the life of the JCSP Library Project in one school and perhaps serve as a reminder of the promise to extend the Library Project?

2.2.7 Performative leanings

> *Performance thrills me, theory does not. I would surely lose myself without performance, but I can not live well without theory.*
>
> — D. Soyini Madison (1999: 109)

As an arts-based narrative inquirer I often find myself caught up in the spell of words, music and art. As a drama teacher I enjoy the stage with its play of dark and light, revelation and secrecy – a magic world where make-believe is often reality in disguise. The donning of masks allows us to hide, to dance, to take on the mantle of being other, or to be – even fleetingly – the person we want to be.

I know that I bring my multiple selves to the research – into the field. I cannot leave all of myself out of the story, out of the research text. Thus my Narrative Inquiry will be composed using an arts-based approach and given expression performatively – on the page and on 'stage' as my body 'feels language's lightness and its weight' (Pelias, 2011: 35). Let

me try to convey what I understand by performative and why and how I see my research unfolding in this way.

While I do not consider my work as *performative inquiry* per se, I feel it is important to consider what we may mean by performative inquiry.

Fels and McGiven (2002: 27) suggest that performative inquiry is the exploration of a topic or issue through performance. Further, Reissman (2008) notes that by its nature performative inquiry implicates and requires an active presence of the audience. While I desire that my own work should live up to this, it does not fall into the categories of ethnodrama, readers' theatre or theatre of the oppressed and so forth. I consider that my work, instead, uses *aspects* of performance to tell the story of my inquiry drawing on, and valuing, the stories of my participants and my own story. Using performance, I hope, helps the research become an action 'that incessantly insinuates, interrogates, and antagonizes powerful master discourses' (Bhabha, 1994: 32).

Like the students who have performed so joyously in the library, I will perform the telling of my research. Perhaps like bell hooks (1997: 58) 'I am always performing words' whether they are made visible through writing, speaking, photography or music. Indeed if, as Madison (2006: 323) posits, 'we are subjects in dialogue with others' I willingly enter into the performative possibilities of an arts-based narrative inquiry, whether written on the page or on the stage, to live the relations of the Other and I (Spry, 2018). So as I move in and out of time on my journey across the narrative landscape I think of Pineau (2000: 2) who says that a performance methodology makes clear human sense-making as 'our vulnerable bodies engage critically and reflexively in heightened modes of experience and expression'.

Conversations about the work of participants that I include in the research and the music, photographs and literary pieces I weave into the thesis, become part of the performance. Perhaps as you move into the music spaces in the thesis you find they awaken 'the particular links music has with our feelings and memory' (Allett, 2010: 5 in Butler-Kisber, 2019: 10). The photographs included here have been chosen by me as representing my narrative journey. They help me to mark out the commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place as I engage in the socio-political act of performance (Denzin, 2003). The literary

pieces, I hope, are evocative and allow me to illustrate Searle's (1969) suggestion that all language is a performance.

According to Fels (1999: 30) performance 'is a research methodology that recognises and honours the absences, journey-landscapes, and space-moments of learning realised through performance'. My performances endeavour to illuminate my journey across the personal, social and research landscape – the retreats and the successes as I engage with what it is to be a narrative inquirer, gain ethical approval and then have to disrupt the inquiry twice due to my illness. For me, performance allows me to voice – in movement and speech – the embodied text that is created by my participants and me 'in the liminal spaces between experience and language, between the known and the unknown, between the somatic and semantic. The text and the body that generates it cannot be separated' (Spry, 2001: 726) so I will try to perform – on the page or on the stage, for example, in Sligo at the Irish Narrative Inquiry Conference - evocative and honest stories, tellings and re-tellings, imaginings and re-imaginings.

As I move back and forth along the path of narrative inquiry, becoming researcher, writer, story-teller, I think of Kingsolver (2002: 233) who notes that 'my way of finding a place in this world is to write one' and I resolve to compose a story that will seek to do justice to my participants, the academy and me. I will try to write words that live on and off the page, words that might welcome 'the body into the mind's dwellings' (Kingsolver (2002: 6) and, if I may, borrow these words of Hampl (1999: 12), which might serve to remind us that: 'Books … like us …are born of flesh, and you can feel the blood beat along their pulse'.

Pelias (2019: 48) defines performative writing as:

> 'an embodied qualitative method that borrows from literary and theatrical aesthetics to create on the page possibilities for understanding the phenomenon under investigation.'

And how might such writing make its inky way into the text? Leggo (2009:151) advises us that, '[B]ecause we are composed in languages, because we constantly write ourselves, and rewrite ourselves, and write our relations to others, we need frequent opportunities to explore and experiment with rhetorical possibilities of texts, with the art and science of language use'. And so, it seems that we are free to play with text, perhaps 'to be the throat of these hours' Rukeyser (1968). Such tantalising, terrifying, freedoms!

I alluded earlier to the appearance of poetry in my writing. I have come only lately to poetry yet I find it more and more frequently residing in my work. Somehow it has made its way there, revealing, I hope, 'words and ways to direct readers to what can best be felt or experienced, rather than explained' (Boschee, 2016:12). These words of Neruda (1969: 7) may help to illuminate my surprise at finding poetry insinuating itself into my work:

> *Poetry arrived*
> *in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where*
> *it came from, . . .*
> *I don't know how or when. . .*
> *But…I was summoned. . .*

So as I have composed this thesis I have found myself using poetry and a poetic language of metaphors to reveal my contemplations on life and narrative inquiry and to give voice to stories told by my participants. Perhaps 'I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing' (Heaney, *Personal Helicon*).

Madison (1998: 284) argues that through performance we make opportunities for new possibilities and in so doing invite audiences 'to travel empathetically, while critically examining social, educational, and economic processes.' This is a tantalising prospect and I dare to be uplifted by these words. Perhaps by performing my research on page and on stage I may share my work with audiences who will also wonder why more JCSP libraries cannot be set up in schools.

Having discussed my reasons for engaging in an arts based narrative inquiry and the possibilities it offers, I now move into a discussion of some international and Irish research into school libraries.

2.3 School libraries: Irish and international perspectives

In carrying out this inquiry I engaged with a range of Irish and international research on school libraries. Irish research in the area is limited (O'Dea, 2016) while there is a vast body of research in other jurisdictions including America, Australia, Asia, mainland Europe and Britain. As might be anticipated, my review of the research revealed a range of similarities and differences in areas such as terminology, qualifications, role of librarian, national frameworks and provision of school libraries. I begin by discussing the context of school

libraries and the role of the librarian in the international context first before moving on to a review of the Irish context. I will then draw forward some examples of good practice.

2.3.1 School libraries in an international context

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions in the *IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto* (1999) defines a school librarian as 'the professionally qualified staff member responsible for planning and managing the school library, supported by as adequate staffing as possible, working together with all members of the school community, and liaising with the public library and others.' In this instance a definition of 'professionally qualified' is not provided. The *IFLA School Library Guidelines* (2015: 25) notes that the role of school librarian is known by several other terms including school library media specialist, teacher librarian and professeurs documentalistes, but that *school librarian* is most frequently used. The *Guidelines* also point out that the qualifications of school librarians vary across the world and may include librarians with or without teacher training and librarians with training in other library specialties. For instance, in South Tyrol, Italy, a qualified school librarian must have completed higher education (at least a three-year degree) while in Portugal, the school librarian (professor bibliotecário) is a school teacher who has specialised in librarianship. In Australia, the term used is teacher librarian. The ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association) website[16] describes teacher librarians as being qualified in both education and librarianship. In America, the term used is school librarian (AASL[17], 2010). The qualifications needed to become a school librarian differ among states but the majority first require certification as a teacher in another subject area before the librarian certification can be obtained. However, in Western Australia, Queensland and some other Australian and US states, public schools are not required to employ teacher librarians or school librarians, leading to the position becoming 'a tenuous one' (Lupton, 2016: 57). Indeed, Merga (2019) cites Lance and Kachel's (2018: 14) findings that in the US, over 9,000 school librarian positions were lost between 2009-10 and 2015-16. Further, Ahlfeld (2019) noted that 9% of independent K-12 schools in the US have no library at all.

Iwasaki et al. (2018) note that in Japan two types of library professionals work in schools - teacher librarians and school librarians. The former is a member of the teaching staff

[16] https://asla.org.au/what-is-a-teacher-librarian
[17] American Association of School Librarians

engaged in the school library as an educator while the latter is an administrative staff member engaged in a school library as a librarian. Iwasaki et al (ibid) contend that the roles of school librarians and teacher librarians are not, however, clearly distinguished. Loh et al. (2019) found that in Singapore, it is not the norm to have qualified librarian staff in the library but that a teacher - the 'library coordinator' - is typically assigned to manage the library.

Somewhat closer to home, in Britain, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) indicates that for roles in school librarianship an accredited degree or postgraduate qualification in library and information science is usually required and that for some roles a teaching qualification is *also beneficial*.[18] (Italics mine.) Seefeldt and Syré (2017) point out that in Germany there is no general, educational, political or legal framework of binding regulations around school libraries and that frequently it is part-time teachers and volunteer parents or students who carry out much of the work involved in managing and maintaining school libraries.

In Croatia every school is required to have a school library managed by a professional school librarian with teaching competencies, whether part-time in smaller schools or full-time in larger schools (Čunović and Stropnik, 2018)**.** In contrast, Farmer (2020) notes that while The Education Act of 2010 made the provision of school libraries mandatory in Sweden, there are no regulated national qualifications for school librarians. In Finland, the provision of school libraries is not statutory and they are much less common than in many other countries with schools thus usually working with public libraries (Kurttila-Matero, 2011).

Thus it is clear that in many countries the provision of school libraries is not mandated by legislation and is uneven. A school 'library' may, in fact, range from a few bookshelves in a room, to reading corners, to designated, professionally staffed library-spaces. The educational accreditation required to constitute being a 'professionally qualified' school librarian varies considerably across nations, and furthermore, there may be considerable variation in nomenclature both between and within nations (Merga, 2021a).

[18] https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/SchoolLibrarians

2.3.2 School libraries: Irish context

What then, of the situation in Ireland? The Education Act (1998) makes no reference to school libraries. Indeed, Lawton (2016) notes that the Local Government Act (2001) is the only legislation that includes a provision for school libraries. There is no statutory framework for school libraries or underpinning the definition of school librarian. Public libraries partner with schools to offer a range of services including providing reading and curriculum support materials and access to online resources, facilitating class visits and running a range of programmes during school holiday time. The Department of Education also provides funding to primary and post-primary schools for the purchase of books, audio books and other media. In 2016 the School Library Association, Ireland (SLARI)[19] called on the Department of Education to support research to provide figures for the number of schools that have school libraries in Ireland and details of the nature of any such provision. However, a search for such information on the Department of Education website[20] yields no such data sets. In 2017 the IFLA began collecting aggregated national data for its Library Map of the World.[21] The map details information (including the number of full-time staff, registered users and loans) in all types of libraries – academic, public, school etc - in regions all round the world. Still incomplete – some countries may not have data for each indicator – it is interesting to note that the latest figure given for school libraries in Ireland (thirteen in 2019) is inaccurate. We know, for instance, that there are thirty libraries in the JCSP Library Project, each staffed by a qualified librarian. In addition, many other schools indicate through their websites that they also have libraries staffed by a qualified librarian. In such instances the librarians may be employed directly through the school, whereas JCSP Librarians are employed centrally through the City of Dublin Education and Training Board. It would be useful, indeed, to have up-to-date national data easily accessible. That would, however, surely require some agreement on our understanding of what a school library *is*.

2.3.3 Roles of school librarians

I now turn to a discussion of the various roles of librarians in international and Irish contexts. Merga and Ferguson (2021) note that the role of school librarian can be

[19] SLARI was a branch of the UK School Library Association from 2000 to 2021. SLARI was officially dissolved in June 2021, and the LAI School Libraries Group was formed. Its website is https://schoollibrariesireland.com

[20] https://data.gov.ie/organization/department-of-education-and-skills

[21] https://librarymap.ifla.org/map

extremely diverse and includes areas such as instruction, collaboration and developing literacy and digital skills. I begin by looking at Australia and the US where there is an emphasis on the role of librarian as instructional leader.

The Australian School Library Association (ASLA) noted in its *Statement on Teacher Librarians in Australia* (2016) that the key roles of the teacher librarian are learning and teaching, management, leadership as well as collaboration and community engagement. The ASLA website[22] identifies the following three major roles of teacher librarians: teacher librarians as curriculum leaders, teacher librarians as information specialists and teacher librarians as information services managers.

In America, the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians and School Libraries* (AASL, 2018) notes that school librarians are uniquely positioned to teach students and the school community through traditional, blended, and distance learning. Further, the AASL states that, 'As teacher the school librarian empowers learners to become critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers, skillful researchers and ethical users of information' (ibid: 14). In addition, the *Standards* emphasise the role of school librarians as 'instructors as well as collaborators with fellow educators' (ibid: 223). There is also an expectation that school librarians will integrate technology into learning, create inclusive spaces for learning and promote reading (*School Librarian Interview Matrix*, AASL, 2018).

Noting the lack of a statutory requirement for a school to have a library or librarian in Britain, the School Library Association (SLA) created a *Skills and Expertise Guide* (2018) to aid schools in the recruitment of librarians. The *Guide* describes the role of a qualified school librarian as selecting and purchasing resources to support teaching and learning across the curriculum, budgetary responsibility for the library, working in partnership with teaching staff to develop Schemes of Work, resources, lessons and activities to enhance literacy and research skills, working in partnership with teaching staff to support topic work, delivering sessions on information literacy to students and staff, writing and updating library policies and improvement plans in line with whole school targets.

In Scotland the School Library Strategy National Advisory Group has developed a new strategy for the country's school libraries: *Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools - A National Strategy for School Libraries in Scotland 2018-2023*. The *Strategy* describes the role of

[22] https://www.asla.org.au/what-is-a-teacher-librarian

school librarians as managing a safe, secure and supportive environment for formal and informal learning; curating a range of reading material, resources and activities to support the curriculum; partnering with teachers in supporting delivery of Curriculum for Excellence; engaging students in information seeking, skills development and discussion; developing critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers and ethical use of information and promoting information literacy across the curriculum.

As noted earlier, launched in 2001 as part of the Early Literacy Initiative, the JCSP Library Project was briefed to improve literacy levels, develop a whole-school reading culture and enhance the learning experiences of students. All librarians employed by the Project are professionally qualified and contribute to the goals of their school's DEIS plans and national educational strategies such as the
National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020
the Arts in Education Charter, 2012 and the Junior Cycle. Their role is outlined in the *JCSP Demonstration Library Project Charter* (2015). They help to track student progress in reading through using packages such as Accelerated Reader, gather data on book borrowing and are required to submit monthly reports to the Project. They are not timetabled to take classes as instructional leaders as might be the case elsewhere. Rather they work in partnership with teachers. Indeed Kiely et al (2005) describe the JCSP librarian as having a support role for teachers as well as supporting students in developing literacy and numeracy levels. The Project's emphasis on librarianship as being a distinct profession was alluded to in conversation by Kathleen Moran (Landscape 1). The different skillset that librarians bring is seen as being an important alternative lens through which learning and engagement might be viewed.

It is clear from this review of literature that there is great variation not only in the provision of school libraries internationally, but also in the qualifications and roles of librarians. It is not easy therefore to make direct comparisons between library programmes. Certain similarities do emerge however, including the promotion of a reading culture in schools and librarian support for literacy development. Indeed, supporting the development of students' abilities and attitudes to reading for pleasure are core aspects of the school librarian's role (IFLA, 2015). In a review of job descriptions of librarians in Australia from (2010–2020), Merga (2020) found that literacy and literature education were frequently

identified as aspects of the role of teacher librarians (90% of sample). Further, Merga and Ferguson (2021) found that Australian and US documents expected school librarians to support students' reading for pleasure. They also noted that in the US, there was an emphasis was on proficiency and scores, rather than pleasure. Lupton (2016) notes that the role of school librarian has moved beyond the traditional role of resourcing the curriculum, promoting of reading and developing information literacy and now includes, for example, the development of ICT skills.

Merga (2022) also points out that there is very little acknowledgement in the literature of the pastoral support role that school library professionals play and how this can contribute to student wellbeing. In light of the emphasis placed on relationships and sociability in the library of this inquiry, for instance, I suggest that this is an area for further development. There is, nonetheless, some very good work being carried out in school libraries which seek to support student learning in literacy, reading, collaboration and wellbeing. In the following section I will describe some examples of good practice taking place in school libraries in which such themes are evident.

2.3.4 Illustrations of good practice

I begin this section with a discussion of some findings from research into school libraries which raise pertinent issues for this research. I then share some examples of good practice drawn from Britain and Ireland while indicating where other examples may be found in a range of countries.

A significant body of international research over several years has pointed to the benefits of school libraries. For instance, McPherson (2020) has found that they contribute not only to academic achievement, but also to the development of self-confidence, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem-solving and positive self-perception. Lance and Kachel's (2018) review of several years of research noted consistent findings that in schools with high-quality library programmes and librarians who shared their expertise, levels of student attainment increased. In Australia, Hughes et al. (2013) found that students who had access to qualified library staff experienced literacy gains. Australian and New Zealand School Library Survey (Softlink, 2015) results show a positive correlation between school library budgets and students' National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

results. Further, a British study carried out by Clark and Teravainen-Goff (2018) noted that 73% of children who use their school library have higher literacy engagement scores.

Henefer (2008: 31), in research conducted into the JCSP Library Project, found that 'the presence of a professionally staffed library has had a meaningful impact on the educational experiences of and outcomes for the majority of JCSP students' noting that not only did they develop literacy skills but that the students themselves stated that they were confident about their skills and saw themselves as readers.

Examples of good practice may, of course, be found in many countries around the world. For instance, in Australia, the ALIA Library[23] is an open repository of documents where examples of case studies may be accessed. In New Zealand, the National Library website[24] is home to stories of innovative and successful school library initiatives. Similarly, in Canada, the CSL (Canadian School Libraries) Research Archive[25] makes available a range of practitioner research and case studies. Reading a selection of examples I was struck by a shared focus on collaboration with both school and external communities, the promotion of reading, an engagement with the development of multiliteracies and innovative approaches to engagement during Covid. These themes are also apparent in the examples from Britain and Ireland that I share now.

In Britain, **Great School Libraries** is a three year evidence-based campaign to bring back libraries and access to librarians in every school in the UK. It is a collaboration between CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), CILIPSLG (School Libraries Group) and the SLA (School Library Association)**.** Phase 1 of the campaign ran from 2018 – 2021 while Phase 2 was launched in the spring of 2022 and will run until the summer of 2025. During the campaign, **Great School Libraries** reviewed and conducted school library research and compiled examples of good practice, available on its website.[26] I outline one example below.

Merga (2019) noted that one solution that teacher librarians may employ to improve students' access to books, is the implementation of pop-up/mobile libraries. Interestingly, in Scotland, school librarian at Holyrood Secondary, Fiona Kindness employed this

[23] https://read.alia.org.au/great-school-libraries-case-studies
[24] https://natlib.govt.nz/schools/school-libraries/stories
[25] https://researcharchive.canadianschoollibraries.ca
[26] https://www.greatschoollibraries.org.uk/case-studies

innovative approach during Covid, bringing books to the playground to provide a 'personal shopper' book service outdoors. Becoming aware from the results of a parents' survey that students would like an online space for leisure activities, she used Microsoft Teams so they could engage in activities such as making origami bookmarks, sharing favourite recipes and recommending favourite books. Students also devised activities, such as 'Design Your Own Book Character' for World Book Day. I find this example particularly interesting as it resonates with the practice in JCSP libraries which strove to ensure that students and their families had continued access to librarians, books and resources during Covid. I discuss one such example below. One again, a focus on relationships is evident in library planning and actions.

Some examples of the work undertaken in the JCSP Libraries may be found on the Library Project website.[27] Library initiatives are designed to align with the aims of the school's DEIS plan and the *JCSP Library Charter*. For instance, the *Charter* has a **Rights of Students** section in which the rights outlined include the right to read beautiful books, to develop their reader identity and to experience the joy of reading.

Sarah Purcell, JCSP Librarian, Margaret Aylward C.C. describes a collaborates with the school's Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teacher, the local public library and Children's Books Ireland in running BoB (box of books), a family literacy initiative. The initiative involves Sarah and the HSCL delivering boxes of reading material including books, magazines, cookbooks, travel brochures, catalogues and newspapers to students' families. They also discuss the books with the families, read aloud and invite families into the school to discuss what they have been reading. The initiative continued during Covid, albeit with some tweaks including moving to garden visits. This programme, designed to support the development of home environments conducive to reading for pleasure, is aligned with the school's DEIS policy under Partnership with Parents and Partnership with Others and the Junior Cycle Key Skills of *Staying well* and *Being literate*.

A growing body of research links bibliotherapeutic practices and reading for pleasure to positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes for young people (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018; Harvey, 2010). This includes the JCSP Library Project's 'Read Your Mind' Book

[27] https://jcsplibraries.com

Project[28], a collaboration with the National Centre for Youth Mental Health. Launched in 2019 in all JCSP Library Project Schools, this initiative brings together a collection of books on a range of mental health related topics such as anger, anxiety, autism, bullying, creativity, low mood, mindfulness, parenting and families and social media. The Library Project has committed to making the full collection available in all JCSP Library Project schools and in e-book format via the JCSP Library Project Digital Library. The digital library is free for students and staff in all JCSP/DEIS second-level schools in Ireland.

This selection of examples outlining the work of school libraries and librarians provides some insight into the benefits of their imaginative, planned approaches to student learning and engagement, underpinned by national strategies in literacy, attainment and wellbeing. Such approaches to meeting student needs is also a feature of the library of my inquiry. However, illuminating and welcome as these are, a deeper discussion of the relational, pedagogical spaces these initiatives open up would add to our understanding of the value of school libraries and librarians. My research seeks to advance such a discussion by making visible the democratic pedagogical practices that are central to the JCSP library in this study.

2.4 Storied landscapes

'The writing and telling of story is ancient and essential to our daily human existence. The power of story to make sense of being human is shared between the text creator and those who engage with it' (Sumara, 1995 in Boschee, 2016: 6).

In my research as I seek to go through the portal into the storied world of the participants and their library, I wonder about who and what I will find there. I think about Clandinin and Huber (2002) describing identity as a storied life composition, a story to live by, lived in places – somewhere. The stories may be revealed in actions, in words and in silences (ibid). As I enter into the midst, I bring with me my own stories and silences – familial, cultural, institutional. Alleyne (2015: 102) considers that we 'both live *and* tell our lives as stories' and I think of storytelling as revealing inner hopes and dreams.

[28] https://jcsplibraries.com/tag/read-your-mind/

I did not know it at the time but these stories would be written on me, in me. They would never again be absent. Long before I crossed the threshold, my research began to imprint itself on my body, my mind, my emotions. Perhaps narrative threads were already being woven as I sat beside classmates in Britain whose poverty I was aware of even then. Perhaps the script was being composed while I worked in education settings with juvenile offenders, young men trying to work out their own plotlines, stories in conflict with societal narratives. I realised then that I needed to journey, to seek out some of the many stories in the world and to tell my own. Perhaps I was already searching for, the moments when possibilities for new stories bubble up. Moments when it 'might be possible to shift the course of a story' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995: 161).

As I begin to work with my participants and listen to them discussing and telling stories I am drawn into their world. This is a world of possibilities, of imaginings and I think I will be drawn again and again to these rivers of story (Adams and Jones, 2011). Perhaps the participants and I may 'seize opportunities to compose a story for ourselves that continues to be worth living' (Ellis, 2009: 13
I hope that storytelling may be a powerful way to share participant voices and – perhaps – make a difference in the world. In the following section I will describe the methodology I employed in this inquiry on the storied landscape of the library.

2.4.1 Research methodology

As I noted in section 1.2.3, drawing on case study methodology, one particular library in the Project became the place-holder of this narrative inquiry. I visited the school over the course of two years, meeting the principal and librarian and attending library classes and workshops. The participants in the research are the librarian, a teacher, the principal, the Senior Library Project Librarian Kathleen Moran, two facilitators (Colm Keegan and Jole Bartoli), fifteen Junior Cycle students, one Senior Cycle student (Mia[29]) and two former students (Hope[30] and Ryan[31]) who continue to attend the senior library writing club. The inquiry focuses on a creative writing and visual arts initiative in the library, attended by Junior Cycle students and the library's senior writing club which has been running for several years.

[29] Pseudonym
[30] Pseudonym
[31] Pseudonym

During autumn/winter 2019 and spring 2020 the Junior Cycle students worked together on a project about an alien invasion. Their story was published on the *South Dublin Epic* website,[32] a site where creative story-twines may be found. I attended the series of three writing workshops followed by three art workshops.

Students were invited to participate in conversational spaces with me and six express their interest in doing so. Permission/consent for these meetings had been granted as part of the ethical process. I met with the groups three times over the course of the inquiry. Initially I intended to meet with them again in conversation after the story is published, but interrupted by Covid, that does not happen.

I attend three sessions of *The Writing Club*, the library writing club for students (current and former), attended at times by some of the teaching staff. I meet with Mia (twice) and Ryan (once) in conversational spaces in the library. At *The Writing Club* I meet Hope, Ryan, Mia, Rachel and Colm together. I also meet with one of the teachers, Aisling[33], who has often been involved in library initiatives and Jole Bartoli.

The data gathered during the research are my field notes, recordings and transcriptions of conversations with participants and my reflective journal. Photographs of written and art work created by the participants during workshops - intended for my use during the inquiry, not for publication - were shared with me. During conversations with participants we discussed this work.
I envisage my research as a journey alongside these research participants as I was inquiring into the Library Project and whether it could support student engagement with the Key Skills of Junior Cycle.
As I met with the participants I listened to their stories for what they reveal – or do not reveal. I recorded and transcribed conversations and my own responses after the meetings. These, in turn, would be shared with the participants as we composed research texts. As we learned to know each other I shared some of my own stories and it became yet clearer to me that a narrative inquiry approach was a fitting way to listen to the voices and stories of those participating in my research. I will now move backward in time into Cameo 3 in I

[32] https://epicdublin.com
[33] Pseudonym

which reflect on my first year as a PhD student as my research focus and methodology emerged. I situate it in my world-travels in Europe that summer as I think about what it means to enter into worlds of others and reflect on the privilege it is to research with others and hear their stories.

2.4.2 Cameo 3

Summer Meanderings: (Emerging) Researcher as Pilgrim

Some musings on world travelling (Lugones, 1987)

Summer 2016

Part 1

In a side-street of a pale, beautiful city, I find myself yet again at a portal, a gate. Behind such a gate lives are lived, stories told and untold, prayers linger on lips and in hearts. They are stories that are visible but also hidden (Prosser, 2007).

Image 1: Portal, Krakow, 2016

This gate is strong, protecting those within, yet delicately carved, by whom I do not know. They have left hints of their stories to live by in the intricate carvings. I have heard that the gate may be opened to some. I ask myself how one gains entry through this gate, imagining myself standing on the threshold of the inquiry space I long to enter. Entry should be by invitation, surely.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) remind us that negotiating entry is an ethical process, bringing with it responsibilities. Coles (1997) asks us to consider our obligations not just to ourselves or our readers, but to those who generously participate in our inquiry. Before I can hope to step over this threshold then, I must understand that lives are intertwined, and that I must think deeply about what I do in relation to others (Arendt, 1958, in Park et al., 2016).

Later. A nun smiles a request for help with a golden gate in a tiny church. No words are spoken but they float as delicately and clearly in the air as the echoes of the pealing bell that sits atop the church. I see an image of myself as researcher listening for words, for meanings, for communication. I am mindful of the writings of Clandinin and Connelly (1995) and Connelly and Clandinin (1998, 1999), reminding us that stories live in actions, language, silences.

I know I want to hear and be heard.

Part 2

During the summer I read again **Reflecting on Narrative Inquiry: Toward Understanding Life's Artistry** by Clandinin and Huber and let the words sit with me.

As I turn to these words I hope that they will help me to find firmer footholds on my path toward becoming a narrative inquirer. The path thus far has been strewn with hope, pleasure, excitement, tension and dismay - not all in equal measure. Yet I cannot remove myself from it. The desire to walk that pilgrim's

path that has been there for many years may have been tempered at times yet has not been quelled. I have learned, at least, that while as narrative inquirer I may wonder about some puzzle, part of the puzzle is myself. Who am I as researcher, as human-being? Am I someone who could walk alongside others? Will others walk alongside me? And how have I arrived at this portal and not at others?

As I read, I find myself listening to the sounds of the words - composing, understanding, engaged in, see, attend, travelled. They sing a gentle melody as the authors describe walking alongside Darlene, a mother Clandinin and Huber had met on the landscape of an inner-city school.

Darlene's moving backward and forward from one place to another suggests to me Clandinin and Connelly's (2006) notion of temporality - past, present and future - as her physical movement draws her back into her past and forward again to her future. Her homecoming - up to her knees in snow - makes me think of her journey to find who she was, what her story was. That northern world is silent, yet not silent, making me wonder about what is not said, yet exists. I think of these words of Ralph Pomeroy:

'What should the silence disclaim? What should the silence discant?...
Silence is only itself, different and commodious.
It is like filmed fireworks before talkies were invented.'[34]

[34] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=27231

And I yearn to hear the fireworks.

I'm drawn to Darlene's image of the Inukshuk (a figure, integral to Inuit culture, made of piled stones or boulders constructed to communicate with humans) against the shimmering Northern Lights. Perhaps I too can be guided by an Inukshuk towards the light that seems sometimes near, yet sometimes far. I walk on snow, struggling through its depths, leaving prints behind, scanning for those ahead. They may already have been covered yet their impact on the earth below remains.

Some of my early thoughts about my research are fading, covered by ice crystals (of the reality of the challenge that is research, of what it means to try to be a researcher…) yet their traces remain within me as I try to find my own story to live by. I cannot disown them as they are part of my history, my identity, my struggle. I continue along my path listening for echoes, for silence, for the welcome embrace of the lights.

Part 3

Image 2: Bar, Krakow, June 2016

I think often of the researcher - me - inserting herself into the research. Having gained entry into the inquiry space, how will I truly be present? Who else will be there and what will our

relationship be? Clandinin and Connelly (1995: 4-5) described the professional knowledge landscape as having 'the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships'. The image above, captured on a warm, damp evening in Krakow, created in me imaginings about myself as researcher and those I hope to walk alongside. Two chairs placed side-by-side hint at companionable conversation. Yet now both are empty. The jacket draped over one offers the possibility of a return.

I imagine a story of two young lovers who sat there, telling each other their stories to live by, lit by the warm glow from the low lights. (I think of living in stories as well as by stories.) The silence around their chairs is filled with what might have been said. Words that I don't understand weave around us (older lovers) but there is laughter too. In my imagination I am inserted into their story and want to give these young people voice. They, completely unaware of me, however, feel no such need. I think of Elbow's 'believing game' (in Connelly and Clandinin, 1990) and how entering into someone's thinking is a collaborative process. I contemplate this, the responsibility of entering into someone's story, the privilege it would be to be allowed to enter, the honesty it would require from me.

I remember a classroom from over twenty years ago and the jolt I felt when a student said, 'You and I as foreigners here Miss...' Perhaps for the first time I truly thought of myself as 'other' in this land - a land whose language I could neither read nor understand. It was not they who were strangers, but I. As researcher I realise I will begin as a foreigner, in a different

land with its own vernacular, its own culture. I understand that it will take time to build relationships and that for relationships to be empowering (for participants - for me?) there will have to be a sense of connectedness developed through caring (Hogan, 1998 in Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

As researcher, will I be able to sit companionably with participants, they with me? Will we learn to tell and re-tell our stories?

Part 4

As the summer days dwindle my husband and I make our way to Asturias, Spain to meet some friends. The Camino de Santiago de Compostela runs not too far from where we are staying, disappearing into the mountains. I think of the pilgrims who walked this way, finding footholds on the sometimes precarious path, kept going by a light that burned strongly within. Below, the waves continue throwing themselves against the rocks, indefatigable, honest.

I think of my journey as researcher, only beginning. I think of the plot of my own story, sometimes poorly drawn, often changing, yet joyous because it is mine.
I remember Clandinin and Connelly's (2000: 50) description of the personal-social dimension pointing us inward towards our 'feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions' and outward towards 'existential conditions'. As I write of my meanderings (physical, intellectual, emotional) this summer, I note that I am moving backward and forward in time.
Originally, many of my notes were scribbled down on paper as I

endeavoured to capture or recollect a moment, a feeling. In trying to tell my story, I have re-set it in chronological order thus perhaps intertwining past, present and future (ibid).

I wonder if one day I will be able to world-travel (Lugones, 1987). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) suggest that to do so we attend to stories about and of both researcher and participant. I hope to walk in that storied landscape (ibid).

Continuará

This reflexive cameo stories some steps on my journey to becoming a narrative inquirer. As I compose it I engage in world-travelling in a spirit of imagination, improvisation and playfulness to help me to illustrate the centrality of relational ethics to narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2013). The portal – strong and protective - reminds me that it is not easy to gain access to the field. The metaphor of the empty chairs makes me think of the participants I hoped to work with and is an acknowledgement that I have sought them out – not the other way around. Thus I must keep questions about whom research benefits in mind. These vacant chairs also foreshadow the abrupt emptying of schools as Covid enters uninvited into the midst of lives. I will speak more of this interruption in Landscape 3 and the intermezzo which follows Landscape 4. In the sound of languages swirling around me I am reminded of the power of language, literacy, reading the world – of the power of libraries.

2.5 Afterwords

As I moved back and forth across the terrain in this chapter I have come to realise that I will dwell in narrative inquiry and that in so doing I must engage in a process of relational ethics. In thinking about arts based narrative inquiry I contemplate how stories may be told. In engaging in the research I am guided by Clandinin and Caine's (2012) twelve touchstones (my own Inukshuk perhaps) but for now I will ask myself to begin answering the following questions posed by Richardson (2018: 823) in the context of CAP (Creative Analytical Processes):

1) Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life?
2) Does it have aesthetic merit?
3) Reflexivity: Has my subjectivity been both a producer and a product of the text?
4) Does the piece affect one emotionally or intellectually? Does it generate new questions? Does it move to action?

As I contemplate these questions I tremble before their challenge but I am steadfast. I am, after all, a narrative inquirer – and as inquirer I am dialoguing with others (Madison, 2006) to whom I am honour-bound through relational ethical responsibilities.

Perhaps here I may borrow the words of Anna Deveare Smith (1995: 52) who says that:

> 'The utopian theatre crosses borders. It will walk in the dark, it will bask in the light. It will find breath … it is a theatre of inspiration.'

I hope that as I and my participants perform our lived stories you and others may walk with us into the light of a world where the agora of the library 'opens, opens, opens to us all' (ibid).

2.6 Some concluding thoughts

This chapter discusses my struggle to find footholds on the inquiry path as I navigated epistemological and ontological landscapes and borderlands. In it I reveal how I begin to think about critical theory as a framework in which to situate my narrative inquiry. I also discuss the significance of relational ethics to narrative inquiry. I have employed the metaphors of story as portal and world-travelling in an effort to illuminate – to you and to me - my path through the research with students, librarian, teacher and artists. Having chosen an ABR approach, I have endeavoured to write evocatively and knowing that I am 'in' the narrative inquiry, I have woven my own story into the fabric of this inquiry. The cameo included in this chapter has helped me to articulate my thinking about what it is to inquire, to enter into the midst of lives.

The chapter also provides a discussion of international and Irish research into school libraries and some examples of good practice from those storied landscapes. In Landscape 3 I document movements into my research site and conversations with my participants.

Landscape 3: Entering the Field Closures and Awakenings

3.1 Introduction

I begin writing this chapter while on holiday in Nerja, Spain. As I often do, I find such times conducive to writing, one word after the other slowly finding its way onto the page as languages swirl round and past me. Sitting in the warm light I scatter words across the page, drawing them out from my notebooks and memories. Perhaps it is simply that on holiday, away from the demands of everyday life, there is space for writing, for others (Wyatt, 2019: 17). My intention is to work on a draft of my third chapter. It is to be a chapter in which I write about how I eventually gained entry to the field and then move into a discussion of working with my participants there. In so doing, I will again draw forward Connelly and Clandinin's three commonplaces of narrative inquiry and Lugones's metaphor of world-travelling as I seek to make clear my shifting positions on the inquiry landscape.

However, as I set about my writing, my gaze frequently moving from the page to the glinting waves below, dark stories from the other side of the world are reaching our shores. It is while we are here in Spain that the reality of Covid begins to dawn on us – on the world – as we look helplessly on. And so, I must begin this chapter again, cannot begin it without writing about, and through the fear, that Covid has swiftly brought with it. Perhaps in doing so I may be one of those who will 'use our lived experiences, examined with keen reflexivity, coupled with an ethic of care as the basis for social change' (Pelias, 2015: 610).

And so, in this chapter I reflect on how Covid 19 began to impinge on our consciousness and consider how, among other things, it will impact on my research. I consider the value that research as social justice practice can still have, even in a world altered beyond recognition. Trihn (1991: 188) argues that a responsible, reflexive autoethnographic text 'announces its own politics and evidences a political consciousness. It interrogates the realities it represents' (ibid: 188). I hope that using an autoethnographic approach may add to my research by revealing something of my own leanings and beliefs.

I begin to write from a time and place where Covid 19 has been disrupting stories as it makes its way around the word, unable to imagine how long it will continue to do so. I have not yet learned how its impact will seem to collapse time, as months later we begin to look back at a past that at once seems long ago and yet still unfinished. This is a past that has tilted our understanding of time as we struggle to comprehend what is happening in the world. Connelly and Clandinin's (2006: 479) suggestion that 'events under study are in temporal transition' seem to capture the sense of dissonance I feel as the storm that is Covid shakes the world.

I then move back in time to discuss ethics and my application for ethical approval for my research. The search for ethical approval required much time and clarity of thought and involved defeats along the way yet I am grateful to have been engaged in this struggle as it made me increasingly wakeful to my ethical, relational responsibilities.

Moving forward again on the landscape, I describe how I navigated my way through the portal into the field. Situated in my wonderings about how students engage in library-based activities, whether this will help students develop the Key Skills of *Being literate*, *Being creative*, *Communicating* and *Staying well*, and why all schools do not have professionally-staffed libraries (or at least why the increase in the number of DEIS schools to be awarded such libraries has not yet been seen), I will describe the series of workshops I attend in the library and will share my conversations with participants. I am conscious that narrative inquirers understand data as field texts that are to be experienced as they are lived and told as narrative compositions. I will therefore seek to inquire into my field texts as whole pieces, rather than plucking stories from a research transcript (Caine et al., 2013).

Sameshima explains that understanding is incomplete without multiple perspectives offered in a 'pedagogy of parallax' (Sameshima and Vandermause, 2009: 279) and I hope that my interweaving of voices and writing as I travel across the landscapes, back and forth in time, may help to illuminate stories of the library and all who work together there.

And so, to some words written about Covid, a story of lives interrupted, a pause – such a pause - on the landscape.

3.1.1 World-travelling: A virus wreaks havoc

In December 2019 my husband and I travel again to Nerja in Spain to spend the New Year with friends. The reunion on the first evening is Spanish-style, kisses on the cheek, laughter, friends happy to see each other, mingling for a while and then strolling away to meet with others. We move easily from bar to bar, eating a tapa or two, catching up on news, partaking in the freedoms of our world. We arrange to meet the next day on the beach where we will sit and talk and eat a late lunch. Each year the days have followed the same lazy unfolding.

In the mornings my husband and I sit on the balcony of our apartment, gazing dreamily at the sea, enjoying the blessing of the warmth of the sun on our pale Irish skin and listening to the laughter below. Everywhere is busy with people who have escaped the colder parts of Europe, even if only for a few days. On New Year's Eve we head as usual to the *Balcón* where hundreds gather to celebrate the arrival of the new year with grapes, champagne and dancing.

But in the lull of each evening we watch the news uneasily. Tales of a new, strange virus are coming out of China.

In mid-January we learn that Wuhan – a city of eleven million people - has been locked down. We are stunned at the response to this virus but briefly – selfishly perhaps – we dare to hope that Wuhan's sacrifice may mean the virus will be contained. Soon however we realise that we are only beginning to understand its cruel power. In the weeks that follow, as the days begin their slow lengthening, the lights across Europe are dimmed, homes, schools and businesses are shuttered and borders are closed. As the shadows creep steadily from east to west we await the inevitable, insistent reckoning.

3.1.2 In the borderlands

Incredulously we watch country after country across the world close its doors. Unimaginably, armed police forces and armies patrol borders in Europe and we wonder if the European dream will be able to withstand such an assault. Those who don't get home in time must stay in place, adrift, unsettled. Perhaps they will not be welcome even when borders re-open. In a topsy-turvy world, Mexico shuts its border with America in a reversal

of usual border closure. Huge responsibilities are thrust on politicians, health services and the people and we acquiesce to curbs that would once have been unthinkable in our world.

Anzaldua (1987: 3) posits that borders may define 'the places that are safe and unsafe, [that] distinguish us from them'. Yet as we stand on our side of the border and bear witness to a mass movement of people making the pilgrimage home, at times on foot, penniless and hungry, I wonder if, rather than separating us, we might think instead of a border that 'is not an abyss that will have to save us from threatening otherness, but a place where the so-called otherness yields, becomes us, and therefore comprehensible' (Gomez-Pena cited in Joselit, 1989: 122). I wonder if perhaps, in the eye of the storm that is Covid, humanity's suffering will draw us together. Conquergood (1988: 9) considers that identity is a performance in process rather than a premise and I am mindful of his suggestion that, 'Borders bleed, as much as they contain'. I wonder if our humanity will inevitably make such borders porous as we grieve for, and reach out to, each other.

Clifford (1988: 9) understood identity 'not as an archaic survival but as an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished'. I wonder how those displaced, impoverished – financially, emotionally – will re-imagine their identities in an 'inventive poetics of reality' (Clifford, 1988: 6) and how we will learn to world-travel to each other again and, perhaps, to heal.

I think of the students of my research and wonder at the stories they will now live. Writing of a border pedagogy, Giroux (1991), notes that students must have the opportunity to cross ideological and political borders to develop their understanding of the world in safe and nurturing pedagogical settings. In this chapter I will endeavour to illustrate how the school library acts as such a setting and how students are encouraged to explore questions of heroism and morality as they place themselves in the world.

I, too, linger in borderlands at this point in my research. I know that I need to re-imagine how I will share what I have written about the library with my participants and in particular, with the students, unlikely as it is that I will meet them again in the school in the near future. Perhaps these words of Trinh (1991: 107) might be used to describe how we may live in a new world, a new reality:

> ‘A reality is not a mere crossing from one border to another . . . Reality involves the crossing of an indeterminate number of borderlines, one that remains multiple in its hyphenation.’ (In Spry, 2001: 728.)

3.1.3 Narrative inquiry in a landscape utterly changed

A deathly hush falls across the continent. We look on as poor, beautiful Italy is ravaged while here in Ireland we wait, mesmerised, for what must surely come. In the weeks ahead we will learn a new language and a new fear. On a dark day on which death seems to be insatiable, I stumble across the poem *Violin*. Written some years ago, Sheila Black’s words become for me an almost unbearably moving prayer for the dead and those who love them still. I share them here:

Violin

You must use the body - its curves,
its hollows, the spring of the sound, which
brings back what is absent, what has
been and is now gone, fading. Cat-gut,
fret, the busy machinery of longing,
which takes its strength from the
presence of absence, the body's darkness,
the wood carved out, thinned and
made to flex. There is a pain at the
source of it - so easily broken, this tree
without a heart, the sap dried to amber
patina. Only in the sound can you
hear it move, the veins in the blood of
the body that is no more. The bow pulled
along the taut strings, a pitch that
is all but unbearable.

- Sheila Black

The carved out violin brings to mind the bodies that are absent, ‘now gone’. The silenced music performs a haunting longing for absent loved ones. I think that those lost in this pandemic will be with us for a long time to come, their suffering seared into our collective hearts and memories. I wonder how, long into the future, the bereaved will mourn the loss of loved ones, some of whom are buried in mass graves. Just as during World War 1, when there was ‘the often haunting absence of bodies to mourn’ (Outka, 2015: 938) in countries such as Britain and America, the inability to bear witness to the death or to look one last time at the body of a loved one will surely make grief that much harder.

As all eyes turn to the suffering of Bergamo I think of these words of Pineau (2000: 13): 'When grieving calls down the darkness and no one is present to witness, we confront the limits of language, crossing over to the place of no words.' I know – surely we all know - that we must bear witness over and over again, that lives matter, that names must be remembered. The alternative – the abandoning of loved ones into darkness - is too difficult to contemplate.

For now, the violin music is stilled, the performer no longer united 'with the instrument to produce sound' (Bresler, 2005: 176). If as, Stubley (1995) suggests, audiences don't distinguish between performer and instrument but experience them as one, the silenced violin may act as a metaphor for those hushed by death or grief. Music is '*performed* and *heard*' (Leavy, 2015: 127, italics in original) and perhaps the violin's silence is a performance in itself, a performance stretching from the past into the future, a lyrical memoir embodying life.

The hollows of the violin remind me of the concept of negative space in art, used sometimes as the 'real' subject of an image and I think that perhaps in this space those swept away by the pandemic are not gone, but present yet in the 'stillness sometimes heard in choral music when several voices hold the same note for a moment' (Bhabha, 2009: iv). I think of Trinh (1989: 36) who suggests that 'we are our bodies .... We write-think and feel--(with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts' and as the music finds its echo in our bodies, in waves of recognition of loss and love, I can feel the yearning of the people to be united once more with those they love.

Rage unfolds across communities, perhaps brought to a head by the grief and fury the virus has caused with its apparently uneven meting out of death sentences. Night after night the world seems to burn with a ferocity matched only by Covid 19. As stories of anguish emerge from nursing homes and migrant labour camps, where people cannot shelter from the virus, I think of Neumann (1997) who describes the silences in stories for which no text can exist and wonder how such loss will be imprinted on the world, on us. Discourses about how the pandemic started and how to manage it bump up against each other, the world seemingly fractured as so many lives have been.

I begin to wonder about the 'So what?' of my research. I ask myself if my work can hold any tangible value when placed alongside the catastrophe that is currently sweeping across the world.

And yet, and yet …

Night after night we hear music from balconies as many come from behind closed doors to share hope and love in the darkest of times. Achingly beautiful, the notes from voice and instrument pay homage to courage – of those who have died and those who remain to stand against death. I am humbled by their spirit and generosity, encouraged by their strength.

3.1.4 Arts based research: A political inquiry?

Surely research is never needed more than at times like this when social and economic inequality are so starkly highlighted? The virus continues to sweep through communities who are stunned by its rapaciousness. Those who work in 'essential services' and are lauded as heroes, but whose salary and conditions may not live up to this accolade, face daily dangers. The virus casts aside the elderly and weak with particular viciousness and the differentials between rich and poor, those with ready access to medical services and those who must wait, those who are sheltering in comfortable homes and those who must share poor accommodation, are thrown into sharp focus.

Perhaps now, more than ever, it is the time to become an 'agent of danger' (Madison, 2009: 189) and 'perpetrators of danger to that which is dangerous to our universal well-being' (ibid). Might we answer her call to 'not only to speak truth to power but also to put power in peril, in jeopardy, to endanger it' (Madison, 2009: 190)? Giroux (2020) posits that the coronavirus is not only a medical crisis but a political and ideological crisis, inseparable from the crisis of massive inequalities in wealth, income and power and the crisis that is educational and environmental destruction. Across the world, as families mourn the dead who must wait to be buried, as people are confined behind the walls of their homes, the calls for an end to inequality, a new approach to society, economy and environment become louder.

I think again about what it means to do research. I contemplate the words of Denzin that, 'The pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm challenges prevailing forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression, and injustice. This paradigm is firmly rooted in a human rights agenda' (2016: 8). If then, as Turner (1993: 501) posits, 'rights arise from the fact that human beings are ontologically frail and that social institutions are precarious', the acknowledging of these rights and the joining in the fight for equality is indeed timely – perhaps morally inescapable? Even if I do not think that my research will change the world, if I think that it might create even the slightest of tremors, must I not join with Giroux (2006: 255) and 'refuse to live in an era of foreclosed hope'?

I began this inquiry puzzling over why the remaining libraries promised under DEIS have not yet been delivered and this puzzle still calls me. Interestingly, the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (DES, 2011) makes no reference to school librarians. While the *DEIS Action Plan 2005* (2005: 11) states that, 'School library and librarian support will be extended, on a phased basis, to the 50 second-level schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage' and later (ibid: 39) that on 'the basis of positive evaluation findings, the JCSP Demonstration Library Project will be extended on a phased basis … and will support the implementation of whole-school literacy and numeracy strategies in the schools concerned', these libraries have not yet been delivered. Strikingly, the *DEIS Action Plan 2017* does not refer to these promises. Meanwhile, the recent ERC Beyond Achievement Study found that '[A] considerably higher percentage of students in DEIS schools (25%), compared to non-DEIS schools (10%), reported having between 0 and 10 books at home' (ERC, 2021: 11). I – and others – continue to ask why the provision of school libraries seems to be the focus of such little attention. It is not enough to point to the recession of the earlier part of this century, particularly when Ireland was deemed to have recovered so well. If the political will was there, it would seem that surely we would do as many other countries have done and work to develop school libraries across the country. Perhaps, in a post-Covid world, those in disadvantaged communities may need educational supports such as school libraries more than ever.

Ellis (2007: 26) points out that, 'As human beings we long to live meaningful lives that seek the good … As researchers, we long to do ethical research that makes a difference'. I hope that I will be able to do both. In my ethical agreement with my participants I committed to re-presenting their stories composed in their library. It is my hope that by doing so I can

contribute to a conversation about the delivery of the next twenty libraries in DEIS schools – and questions about why school libraries are not more widespread in Ireland. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) note that 'experience is the fundamental ontological category from which all inquiry – narrative or otherwise – proceeds' and I know that I will continue to work with my participants somehow, inquiring into their experiences and sharing mine. I will endeavour to fulfil the social contract we made when they allowed me to enter into the midst of their lives by re-presenting the stories they told me honestly and only after they have seen what I have written. It may be that we will together traverse a path towards the 'democracy to come' (Derrida, 1993/1994: 64).

Perhaps these words of Tom Spanbauer (1992: 190) resonate now more than ever:

> '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'.

I resolve to continue telling stories. Part of the story of an inquiry is the quest for ethical approval which I describe here before moving into a discussion of the methodology of this inquiry. From there I share stories from the field with you.

3.2 Approaching the field: The quest for ethical approval

Ethics is defined as 'Moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity.'[35] Ellis (2007: 4) reminds us that relational ethics asks us as researchers 'to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversation'. As I begin the process of applying for ethical approval for my research I think deeply about this.

The *Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy* (revised and approved by Academic Council December 13th 2019) states the following:

> 'In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Maynooth University Policy for Child Welfare, the best interests of the child must be central to any research conducted. Young people should be given the right to informed consent in a manner suited to their age, maturity and competence. Researchers should seek the consent and collaboration of guardians or responsible others involved in their care to support young people's participation in the research. A young person's right to refuse to participate or to discontinue participation should be respected even if parents or responsible others have given consent. Researchers should give due consideration to the limits of confidentiality

[35] Oxford Dictionary

> and to the appropriate communication of such limits both to parents/guardians and to the children themselves' (2019: 15).

These words have been central to my application for ethical approval for my research and in carrying out this inquiry. I understand that it is a privilege to be permitted to enter the field and that responsibilities to participants last long after the research has been completed. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) note that narrative inquirers live in relation with participants and that ethical considerations permeate narrative inquiries from start to finish.

As I began the process of gaining ethical approval, I did not realise that it would initially defeat me. The academy is undeniably demanding when considering the awarding of ethical approval to researchers, seeking to protect not only itself and those using its name but prospective participants. The questions posed on the form require thoughtfulness and honesty and this would-be researcher also needed the resilience to face its challenges. Indeed, Richardson's powerful assertion that 'narrativizing, like all intentional behavior … is a site of moral responsibility' (1990: 131) becomes a guiding metaphor here as I tussle with the answers.

I know that wishing to work with students as well as adults carries responsibilities and I contemplate the intricacies of gaining entry. I need to seek permission from the academy, the Board of Management, participants and parents/guardians of students, each consent form needs to be crafted and approved and I need to look closely within myself to ensure that I honour my ethical promises. Munhall (1989) notes that consent to participate in research is not a one-time agreement but rather a negotiated, ongoing process between researcher and participant and I consider what is involved here as I engage in this evolving contract with my participants.

The first responsibility of narrative inquirers is to our participants (Caine et al., 2013) and I know I must consider what I am doing in relation to others (Arendt, 1958). What I do not at first realise is how fierce and consuming engagement with the ethics process will be. It will require me to think deeply about what it means to be a narrative inquirer and work with others, our lives intertwining in social, temporal places (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

The application process involves much self-facing as I am forced to ask myself why I wish to engage in this inquiry and why a narrative inquiry approach is my chosen approach. I come to realise that successfully completing the process will demand that I think deeply about my theoretical, political and social leanings. The ethics committee ask me, for instance, to develop further the area on the ethical commitments associated with key elements of the methodology such as 'relational responsibility' (Huber and Clandinin, 2002). This gives me pause for thought and I contemplate anew what it means to be a narrative inquirer. Caine and Estefan (2011: 565) point out that '[T]he two starting points for narrative inquiry remain a cornerstone throughout the research: listening to individuals tell their stories and living alongside participants in the field.' I ask myself what this means in terms of ethics and my obligations to my participants. As I think about this, I read again and again the questions posed to me by the ethics committee - questions about the exact number of students, how they will be selected for the research, how ongoing consent can be negotiated and how I might handle the impact of power dynamics on participants' capacity to withdraw their consent to participation. I begin to think that in addressing these questions I am coming to understand ethical obligations more fully and see the application form as a teaching instrument in itself – a challenge to think deeply and carefully about the responsibility of becoming a researcher. In applying for ethical approval there is nowhere to hide, no downy comfort of blurred edges as I pare back the layers to the essence of myself to ask who I am and who I am becoming in the research. Approval granted, I start out for the light, for the school where I hope to base my research in the belief that we have honoured 'the sacredness of our participants' humanity' (Munro Hendry, 2007: 496).

3.2.1 Through the portal: Entering the field

As the mellow days of autumn compose themselves into a golden harvest across the landscape, it is time to go back to my research school. I noted in section 1.5.6 that this designated disadvantaged school is situated in a large urban area. I have deliberately chosen not to give further detail as the school, part of a group of thirty Library Project schools, serving a particular cohort of students, would be easily identifiable. I do, however, describe the library itself in section 3.3 and the Writing Club in section 4.2, again being careful to protect the anonymity of school and participants.

On arrival I am asked to take a seat in an ante-room and I settle myself in a patch of yellow sunlight. I take out my notebook and I feel my nerves tingling as I wait for the principal.

Fingers of unease – old companions now – grasp me and I question my right to enter this 'site of moral responsibility' (Richardson, 1990: 131). I wonder about my own arrogance in presuming to research lives. Who am I to choose who and what shall be researched? For whose good will this be? Certainly, I will gain, but what of others? My mind will not settle as I fear that I have intruded, that I shall be turned away. Questions and admonishments tumble through my mind as I await the opening of the door that will seal my fate.

The principal enters with a warm smile and my heart-beat steadies. We go through the open door together, exchanging greetings. We enter a small room where Rachel the librarian is waiting for us and the talk turns to the research, the students and how this research can celebrate their successes. We sit and talk of lives unfolding, sharing memories of summer and plans for the coming year. There is a sense of care in the room and I feel that they value their students. I rejoice that they feel this research can be a source of good. I hope that I will honour their belief in me. My pulse quickens as I consider what I am about to do, excitement and tension flooding me in equal parts. And so, once more, I step through the portal of the JCSP library.

I have mentioned elsewhere that I worked with Rachel before and have been in her library several times as part my work with the Department of Education Support Services but, as I return to the school for a planning meeting, this is a new beginning. I feel excited and nervous as I stand on the threshold of – what? I'm aware of her generosity and openness in letting me be part of this world and am grateful to her, the participants and the school. We have wondered together about the research so many times and now as we approach this beginning we are excited as Rachel speaks about her plans for the coming year. The students will engage in a series of workshops with poet Colm Keegan and artist Jole Bartoli and I am invited to attend. I contemplate the workshops and I think about Key Skills of Junior Cycle.

As Rachel and I weave words together I am conscious that I need to justify my research. Clandinin (2013: 35) points out that there are at least three ways in which to do so – personally, practically and socially or theoretically. Personal justification seems easy – I have loved libraries for an age and worked with this project for some years. I've seen up close the work that takes place in the libraries which make up the JCSP Library Project – labours of love. But I know, too, that I have been *in* the parade (Geertz) and thus have been

affected by it. Can I, then, be an honest researcher? Perhaps the answer lies, in part, in conversations with students and others yet to be unfolded. As I think about this I hear an echo of these words of St. Pierre (1995: 114): 'In the end you must take me at my word, and whether and how you do that is undoubtedly beyond my control'. I think that I shall not be so courageous!

I ask myself how I shall justify my research practically. I want to understand the impact the library has on student learning and engagement. Might I be able to share this knowledge - practice - with others?

I wonder, too, about how my work might make a difference socially. Can I hope to answer the 'So what?' questions that may be asked about the library project? This library is one of thirty libraries set up as part of a DEIS strategy aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. In more optimistic days fifty libraries had been promised. As austerity began to tighten its grip on the country, the possibility of another twenty libraries being set up faded. However, we have held on to hope and continued to try to keep the flame alive. Perhaps my research may make a difference here, no matter how small.

At this time, no class is scheduled to be in the library, but nonetheless a number of students call in. Rachel's low voice continues to honour her students as she comes alongside them, identifying their needs through conversations with them. They talk about books, about school, about family, about dreams. I ask her what the key is to understanding her students. She replies that when thinking about her students she continually asks herself, 'Where will I bring him (*sic*) next?' I think of Dewey (1938: 28) who believed that experience only promotes growth when it moves us forward on the 'experiential continuum' and admire her wisdom. She talks about how a strength of the library is that her work with students can be responsive. I think about her use of the word 'responsive' as I observe Rachel and the students interact together. hooks (2010) reminds us that it is essential that teachers and students get to know each other and I sense the existence of strong relationships here. Such relationships evolve over time of course and as Rachel and the students exchange stories I am struck by a sense of warmth, a sense that they are genuinely interested in each other. Dewey (1992) reminds us that we must respect the knowledge and understanding of the world that others bring with them. It seems that

in these conversations in this library I hear traces of a democratic education in which respectful relationships develop and learning can flourish. And how can such trusting environments emerge? Perhaps, the answer lies in these words of Freire written in 1971: 'To be a good liberating educator you need above all to have faith in human beings.' (In Shor, 1992: 24.) As I continue to visit Rachel and her students in the library in the months ahead, I think that the strength of the library may lie in her. I feel that she must truly think with the stories of her students to understand the lives they live (Downey and Clandinin, 2010) and hope that I might do the same.

As she moves away to attend to a student, I am drawn to the books on the shelves. I cannot resist the call of their many-hued spines, their smell. They whisper mysteries that once unlocked can never again be re-called and sealed within their pages. Somewhere I had come across the words of Sarah J. Maas who noted that libraries were full of ideas, which she considered perhaps the most dangerous and powerful of all weapons. This seems to fit with the metaphor of the library as agora, which I have used frequently in my research. The word agora is defined as follows in *The Ancient History Encyclopaedia*:

> 'Greek for 'open place of assembly' and, early in the history of Greece, designated the area in the city where free-born citizens could gather to hear civic announcements, muster for military campaigns or discuss politics.[36]

Shouldn't every citizen – every student – have access to such a place?

We continue our conversation over more tea in this professional landscape (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995), Rachel speaking of starting with the students (not the curriculum?) and holding a mirror up to what they have done so they can see themselves reflected in it. Listening to her makes me think about Dewey's (1938: 35) principle of continuity of experience and his suggestion that all experiences take something from the past and influence future experiences. I think that her interest in student lives is respectful, their conversation a democratic engagement, rather than one-way. I think I am witnessing here what hooks (2010: 19) describes as an engaged pedagogy that 'begins with the assumption that we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between student and teacher'. Freire (1970: 50) also commented on the importance of relations noting that the world and human beings 'exist in constant interaction'. My years of teaching have shown me how important relationships are - the acknowledgement of our shared humanity, of lives lived beyond the walls of the classroom helping to create a sense of trust and warmth that can

[36] https://www.ancient.eu/agora/

contribute to learning. It seems to me that Rachel in paying attention to the knowledge that students bring to school is living out Giroux's (2005: 159) suggestion that, '[T]he production of knowledge, as mentioned earlier, is a relational act.' Indeed, Freire (2014) reminds us that we cannot, in fact, understand education without first trying to understand human beings. Wonderings about future visits tumble through my mind – my body – as I listen carefully to Rachel's words of care and belief.

I think about these students, who they are and who they might become. It seems that in this place they can imagine themselves into being whoever they want to be. The *Arts in Education Charter* (DES, 2012: 3-4) states that 'We believe that creativity must be placed at the heart of our future as a society and a country'. This aspiration surely resonates here in this library. Rachel speaks about the careful planning that goes into bringing facilitators in to work with her students, the belief that they have in the students and their commitment to the Library Project and the way students respond to them. I think this carefully thought-out approach and belief in the centrality of student voice to learning, resonates with Giroux's (2005: 165) suggestion that, 'teachers must promote pedagogical conditions in their classrooms that provide spaces for different student voices'.

I am thrilled by her words and look forward to walking alongside students and facilitators as they embark on a creative-writing and visual arts project. I think of Greene (2000: 123) who says that art can enable us 'to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies' and I applaud Rachel for the gift that she is giving her students – and, perhaps, to me. We arrange that I will begin my visits a few weeks later and that she will remind the students about who I am and my research. She will remind them also of their freedom to change their minds about participating and tell them that I am looking forward to meeting them.

As I make my way home that afternoon I am excited about my research journey. I think about Ivan Brady's (2002) piece, *A Gift of the Journey* in which he states (speaking about Stonehenge) that we want to touch the mystery of this place. In the library I felt the tingle of anticipation as I contemplated stories told and untold, hidden, mysterious. Oh, how I longed to hear those stories. Brady's concluding words hold within them a tantalising promise:

'Magic, it seems, is a gift of the journey.'

As I take my first tentative steps on my journey into the research field my heart sings.

3.3.1 The JCSP Library Project: An arts in education focus

Preparing myself for working in the field with participants I reflect again on the work of the JCSP Library Project and its focus on, among other things, the arts in education. The Library *Charter* pledges to support the *Arts in Education Charter* (2021) in its aim to 'place creativity at the heart of our future as a society and as a country'. The libraries provide access to the creative arts through engagement with authors, storytellers, artists, poets and other members of the arts community and publish and display student work. It seems to me that they live out the aspiration of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) that:

> 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.'

I am eager to see how this engagement in cultural life will unfold during my library visits as students work with poet and author Colm Keegan and visual artist Jole Bartoli. Will their experiences help them to develop the Key Skills of Junior Cycle? The *Arts in Education Charter* (2012: 10) notes that: 'Arts-in-education practice enriches the lives of all involved, particularly in nurturing the developing minds and imaginations of the pupils.'

Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor (2013) suggest that through engaging in arts processes students develop complementary social practices, learning how to envision, persist and explore. I think of the rich tapestry of experiences available to students in the library and look forward to the possibilities of weaving stories with my participants.

Being privileged to walk alongside the participants in my research study is exhilarating while at the same time being a great responsibility. I am conscious that I have arrived in the midst of lives and that I will leave in the midst of lives. I believe that I will witness students creating and telling stories and hope that as we co-compose together we will perform our words. Denzin (2003: 189) notes that 'A performance text can take several forms: dramatic texts such as a poem or a play; natural texts or transcriptions of everyday conversations; … dramatic, staged and improvised readings' and I wonder how I will re-present narratives witnessed in the library.

Pelias (2004: 9) reminds us that:

> 'Science is the act of looking at a tree and seeing lumber. Poetry is the act of looking at a tree and seeing a tree.
> The alchemy that separates the head from the heart finds no gold.'

So I know that while working in the field and beyond I must use my head as well as my heart. My participants deserve no less. I bring with me to the workshops my wonderings about how students will learn through engaging in library activities. And as I come alongside the participants I continue to think about the possibility of having more JCSP libraries in schools.

3.3.2 In the field: Arriving in the midst of lives

I will now tell you a little more about the library and its story-telling people. Writing this piece reminds me again that as a narrative inquirer, ethical considerations are negotiated with my participants (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and and are far broader than the formal granting of ethical approval by the academy. Pelias (2014: 2) reminds us to 'use our lived experiences, examined with keen reflexivity, coupled with an ethic of care as the basis for social change'. As I walk alongside my participants and compose research texts I endeavour to be mindful of my relational obligations as narrative inquirer.

Come, let me invite you to live in our story, even if for just a short while. I hope that you will find a sprinkling of fairy dust there.

It is early autumn and outside grey rain drops chase each other to the ground. I am glad to reach the foyer where I wait between two sets of glass doors. I am reminded of my quest for ethical approval, the attention to detail that is required before gaining entry. Just as careful, the school too builds protective structures around its people.

On my first visits I am accompanied to the library by one of the school staff. We exchange pleasantries and she greets students and staff warmly as we move through criss-crossing corridors. The walls are adorned with art, poetry, photographs – stories of a school and community. Off the corridors are social spaces and classrooms, full of life, visible through open doors. Behind other closed doors I imagine the quiet, incessant work of school taking place. There will be files and folders, no doubt, lists, minutes of meetings, data – plenty of data.

I make a final turn and the library is there before me. On the threshold I pause, suddenly uncertain as I prepare to step into a space where a 'pedagogy of possibility' (Giroux, 1988) may be waiting. The portal here is not large or forbidding; rather it is decorated with words of welcome. Inserted into the door are some panes of glass through which light shines. Above the thumping of my heart I can hear voices intermingling. The sound of laughter reassures me and I enter into the midst of a writing workshop. I am immediately struck by how engrossed everyone is in the discussion that is flowing through the room. There is noise, laughter, sounds of companionship. As I listen I think of Madison (2018: 206) who says that '[E]thnographers visit locations and see, hear, smell, taste, feel what is there. We cannot limit ourselves to reading, writing and talking about locations; we must enter through our senses' and resolve to be awake to the experience of being here. I let the conversation seep through me, into my bones and my heart.

The voices still for a moment and expectant faces turn towards me, this 'researcher' they had met not long before, but did not know. Hellos are exchanged and, as I take a seat, it seems that I am quickly forgotten as they re-enter the story they are imagining.

Madison also (2018) notes that the purpose of description is to make us understand the importance of the particular object and the objects around it and the social life and political implications of these objects. I will endeavour now to describe this library visit so that you may imagine the scene and context.

The library is l-shaped with windows along three sides overlooking a garden. There is a small room off the library. I know that tea and biscuits reside here – and I suspect that the students do too. Stairs lead up to a mezzanine area in which there is a table, sofa and comfortable chairs, lit by tall windows. There is a librarian's desk, behind which you will sometimes find Rachel. I have learned, however, that she is often to be found in the middle of a group of students or serenely moving between them. Low shelves on wheels are home to books and magazines of varied shapes and sizes. Many face out towards us, beckoning us. In one corner is a fish tank – more of that later – and on some pillars hang sets of headphones. Located beside some of the windows which overlook a garden are some computers. During the workshops students will move freely to these if they need to research. At these desks, swivel chairs allow for easy sociability.

The students sit companionably on sofas, facing towards Colm, while their teacher Aisling sits nearby. Feeling the energy in the room communicate itself to me, I remember Spry (2001: 706) who calls 'on the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy'. As I taste her words again, I wonder about how I can honour the voices in the room, how my performed words – written or spoken – may communicate the beauty and spirit I feel in that room.

I sit a little way back from the group on this first visit with students and feel the firmness of the chair against my back. I cling onto its solidity, glad to be fastened to the ground, almost light-headed as I feel the rapid pulsing of my heart. I am conscious of the light from the windows as it plays along the floor, walls and bodies and I listen, listen. I think of where the library is positioned within the school, the community and education and I hear my blood rush in a cacophony of excitement and nerves.
As researcher I am part of the story and know that I am already changed by it. Might my work one day contribute, in some small way, to a change in policy as the other long-promised libraries are delivered to DEIS schools? If so, those schools will surely be indebted to the participants in this research who believe in the power of storytelling.

I survey the scene. We are in the midst of a stream of conversation that has begun long before now. Colm challenges the students to think not only in terms of the actor/character they are developing but in terms of the writer too. They willingly and confidently engage with the challenge. I am impressed when they begin to take control of the story.

The story they are composing is about an alien invasion. They have already agreed on the items they would like to have if there is to be any hope of survival. The story will be represented visually when they work with artist Jole Bartoli and will then be placed on the 'South Dublin Epic' website – a site where creative story-twines reside. I reflect on the Key Skills of Junior Cycle that this research will consider– *Being creative, Being literate, Staying well* and *Communicating* - and think that they are being developed here, now.

But perhaps what interests me even more is the way in which, as Colm tells them they must take responsibility for changing the path of the story, they begin to discuss moral choices. This is serious work for young minds but they enter willingly into this space of debate.

I think of Giroux's view of schools as venues of hope (2004) - places of resistance – and this resonates with my concept of the JCSP Library as agora where 'citizens' can gather and mutually educate each other (Alstad and Curry, 2003). I consider their statement that the traditional goal of the public library was 'a commitment to advancing democracy through an informed citizenry'(ibid) and wonder if weaving morality into a tale of zombies is, in fact, a way of encouraging student questioning about society and the world.

In the weeks ahead I will visit with the students again as they move around the room composing their stories. One day I will enter the library to see the students on the floor creating human-size figures representing their characters.

As I move into the library space that first day, I can feel the atmosphere of companionship that permeates the room. Clustered around Colm, the students speak easily with him, responding to his questions, voicing opinions. There is an air of familiarity in this – a group of people who know each other and whose voices intermingle easily.

The previous week they had begun writing their story based on surviving a zombie invasion and they are discussing how to continue their story. As I settle into the inquiry space, Colm guides the conversation by asking the students to pose questions about the development of the plot to each other. He would like them to think in terms of the actor/character in their story and also the writer. I find this juxtaposition of roles interesting and wonder how the conversation will unfold. Colm asks the students to consider their responsibilities - as actor/character *and* writer - to the story, to themselves and to the audience and I am initially a little surprised by the complexity of such demands so early in the workshop. Yet as voices quickly begin to respond, posing questions about how they will work out their responsibilities, I am reminded again that I have entered into the midst. It appears that these students are accustomed to being set challenges and to willingly participating in passionate, yet respectful, debate.

Later in this chapter I will share the reflections of some of the students on questions such as these as I try to illuminate their development as story-tellers but for now I will continue to describe the workshops.

As I listen, I think that I am hearing resonances of the Key Skills *Being literate*, *Being creative*, *Staying well* and *Communicating*. I know, for instance, that the NCCA has identified two aspects of *Being creative* as imagining and exploring options and alternatives and I consider that I may be witnessing what hooks (2010: 43) describes as the role of teachers, the bringing of 'our students on the adventure of critical thinking' as Colm and the students journey into a landscape of imagination and ethical undertakings.

The students break into small groups, settling into different corners of the library, and they continue to compose their story. I think of Clandinin's concept of sociality and look on as they sit on the floor, sofas, chairs – wherever they choose – and work together. I am not yet sure enough to sit with them but I make notes about what I see and as their voices rise and fall I note Rachel moving quietly among them, pausing here and there, speaking with them in a low voice, but most of all, I think, listening, acknowledging. Perhaps her movements help to change 'an order of inequality into a structure of interconnection' (Gilligan, 1982:3 in Park et al., 2016). I realise that Colm, still present, allows the students to take control of their stories and I admire his bravery in letting the story find itself. At times he continues with his own writing, answering questions about what he is working on, modelling for students what it is to engage in a writing life. He also moves easily from group to group, gentle banter revealing a relationship of care and acting as vehicle through which to discuss student ideas and writing. As he does so I am mindful of hooks reminding us how much knowledge comes to us in conversation, an act which is 'awesomely democratic' (2010: 44) and I think how skilfully he works with and encourages students.

The school bell calls the students away and as they depart they seem to leave a sense of themselves in the room as we taste what we have heard of their story fragments. As I walk to my car I am already imagining the next workshop and I look forward to returning the following week. At home I read about story-telling and savour these words of Pelias (2015: 609):

> 'The story, told through an assortment of dramatic, narrative, and lyric arrangements, makes its compelling case by creating space for productive consideration and potential action. In short, the story allows our lives to take form.'

I look back at the workshop and think about the space that Colm and Rachel have made for emerging stories and, pulled forward by future imaginings, I wonder how the students will continue to weave their tales together with them and Jole in the weeks to come.

I arrive for the next workshop at the same time as the students. They wait to be invited to enter and then come in talking and laughing. It strikes me that the library is their natural habitat. As they take their seats I notice that two students – part of a different group – are working quietly in the background. It appears that this is quite customary as the work of each group continues smoothly.

I listen as Colm again draws the students into story-worlds. Wordsmith that he is, he speaks easily, spinning a web of what might be. He mentions that 'Writing and dreaming are very connected' and the students' voices still as he begins to tell stories of the American Civil War. I had not anticipated such stories but I am entranced as he moves seamlessly from these tales to the story the students are composing – a story of zombies, of the fight for survival.

The discussion turns to what items they would need to survive. Guns are mentioned, food, water and I think of communities across the world caught up in fierce struggles to live. I wonder if the students make such connections. They move on to questions about what we would do to survive and the option of killing is considered. Rachel reminds them of their discussion about writing with responsibility and the morality of killing an enemy is argued back and forth. Colm suggests that they ask themselves why, as an author, they would kill a character and whether they could put such a character to better use in the story. I am beginning to realise that the workshops are composed to pose questions, to challenge assumptions and to inspire thoughtfulness. And I hear echoes of the Key Skill *Being creative* being played out here as students are encouraged in 'exploring options and alternatives' (NCCA, 2015).

As Colm assures them that, 'You can dream your way out of bad situations. Writing is like that' I think again that stories are co-compositions, partial, embodied (Clandinin et al., in Trahar, 2011: 37). He encourages them to take responsibility for the story, for changing its path and I think how empowering his faith in the students is. The NCCA (2015: 5) notes that the way students view learning - whether they have a fixed view or a growth mind-set view – influences how they will respond when meeting new challenges. As I listen to Colm gently releasing responsibility – acknowledging students as creators of their own story – I think about how this might help students to develop the Key Skill of *Staying well* – being confident, being positive about learning (NCCA, 2015).

The story is put up on the screen and they eagerly take turns to read their creation aloud. They contribute suggestions, changes to some of the phrases, adding in humour. As I attend to what they are saying I am beginning to hear multi-voiced creations. As they move away from the sofas Colm tells them that, 'You are writing about your possible futures. I want you to think about yourselves as heroes.'

This time I mingle with them, not yet ready to sit at the table or on the floor with them, but tentatively building connections. They are generous in letting me see their work and chat to me about how they think the story is going. I learn some new words – flicker (a type of scooter) and floss (a dance from the online game Fortnite) which one of the students demonstrates to much good-natured laughter. I admire her confidence, her intuitive response to my puzzlement about what the word floss means and I think of Saldaña (2008) who suggests that performance is innate and part of our social interactions.

I am sorry when they move on to the next class. Today I have surely seen, heard – and felt – students imagining and learning creatively. It seems to me that they are being freed to use their 'poetic imagination and literary license' (Bochner, 2017: 364) and I am moved by their sense of aliveness to the work. I leave the library that afternoon aware that I entered in the midst and am leaving in the midst. We all continue to live in our stories, traces of the school day etched on our bodies, minds and hearts.

I will now move forward to the art workshops. On a November afternoon I find myself again in the library, now transformed into a space where students are on the floor, blank sheets of paper spread out before them. It is a noisy, boisterous space and at first I cannot quite make out what is happening. I move towards the students, some of whom acknowledge me, before returning to their work. The others seem unaware – or unconcerned – by my presence.

Boschee (2016) points us to the New London Group (1996) who suggest that seeing the artist in ourselves and encouraging students to do likewise contributes to an expanded landscape of literacies. One of the students – Karen[37] – will say 'I am going to do art at home' and her confidence and self-belief will remind me of the Key Skill Staying well.

[37] Pseudonym

Conversations spin around me and I feel de-stabilised, uncertain. I find myself wondering how I will be able to use this workshop in my inquiry and then ask myself if such wondering is ethical. A flush of redness flames across my cheeks – admonishment surely for putting thoughts of my research first rather than focusing on the students. Later, when I play back my recording of today, it will crackle with noise and energy, and it will be hard to distinguish individual voices, so I will be glad of my notebook.

Yet it becomes clearer to me that the students do not share my discomfort. Jole is quietly asking them to think about their story and what the world will look like after the zombie invasion. Her calmness draws the conversations back to questions of what it takes to survive, to be a hero.

Loud voices flow across the sheets of paper, opinions freely exchanged, and I see that the students are settled in their story-writing groups. They begin to draw their worlds – worlds full of strong colours, noise, danger – worlds in which zombies might roam and in which their characters will have to fight for survival. Boschee (2016: 16) draws on Zammit (2011) and López-Gopar (2007), telling us that 'When we limit language arts to wordsmithing, we restrict the scope of who may receive a message and, as educators, we exclude a range of students from expressing themselves'. As I move among the students I think about the Key Skill *Being creative* and wonder if this group would agree that they are busy *imagining* and *learning creatively* (NCCA, 2015). I listen to the ebb and flow of their conversations and one of the students - Jade[38] - asserts that, 'I'm not dying unless you are.' I'm reminded of Colm who asked them to take control of their story and I silently applaud Jade's authorship of her character's destiny.

They wonder if they have to draw the faces and I am drawn back to my own primary-school struggles with art and the drawing of humans. Picasso stated that, 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up' (cited in Cameron, 1992: 20). Alas, I fear I was never an artist – at least not with brush - and thus am impressed by these students' lack of fear of the medium.

The sheets of paper on the floor are beginning to resemble a fiery map, flames leaping from buildings and dark shadows flinging themselves across the pages. This is a world where anything might happen and possibly already has.

[38] Pseudonym

I'm struck by the flashes of red and black – dangerous, flame-filled – which are emerging from the work of one of the groups. Jole is sitting with them and they are discussing the name of their group, *Rosso e Negro*. I ask what time of year it is and Jade responds that it is 'Winter, because the dark comes quicker'. I think about how Shakespearean this metaphor of weather is, his words, *For never-resting time leads summer on/To hideous winter and confounds him there* (Shakespeare, *Sonnet 5*) coming to mind. Another hideous winter lies waiting in our future and when it comes I will think about this map and remember the violent unleashing it depicted wonder at such innocent fore-shadowing of a conflagration which will burn across Italy.

Moving around the map, I feel myself being lured by its confident splashes of colour and I mention to another student, Maria,[39] that I like what she's drawing. She responds, 'I'm alright at it. I'm not the best.' Later, in one of the conversational groups this idea of being skilled at art will emerge again in an interesting way. The students comment on each other's work and pass materials over and back. There is a generous sociability here, a sense that they are working together on their vision for the story. There is a freedom too, a freedom to make mistakes in this gentle atmosphere created by Jole and Rachel, to pause, to get side-tracked for a little while into conversations which have nothing to do with the story at hand before being gently drawn back by Rachel.

As I listen to the voices and cautiously insert myself into the groups, I feel my heart-beat responding to the noise and colours swirling around me. Conquergood (1991: 180) reminds us that, 'Ethnography is an … intensely sensuous way of knowing' and as I taste the vibrant colours tumbling across the sheets and the heat of the room I feel soothed and excited at the same time.

During the course of the workshop I accidentally bump my knee against a leg of the table and for the next few days whenever I touch my leg I will be able to feel the imprint of the story-world I entered that afternoon. Perhaps I always will. O'Toole and Becket (2010: 49) state that 'we know through our body' and I am aware that my research is increasingly becoming part of me.

I notice, too, that while Aisling is busily engaging with the group, it is Rachel and Jole who are leading the session. I wonder about how this is negotiated.

[39] Pseudonym

Entering the library on another occasion I notice students again on the floor, this time drawing full-sized versions of their characters. This involves placing themselves on a large sheet of paper and allowing themselves to be drawn around before they assume control once more and decree what they/their character will look like. There is laughter here and a freedom in their rendering as they, perhaps, paint themselves as imagined through their own eyes. I am drawn to these words of Saldaña (2008: 196):

> 'Performance is innate to humans and ubiquitous in our social interactions. Humans are socialized from childhood … to imitate, to pretend, to role play, to ritualize and to story tell. It is thus a simple transition to act on our performative impulses by developing artistically rendered work that reflects our dramatic nature.'

I wonder what stories these life-size images are telling, what mysteries they hold. And I think that we all visualise ourselves in many ways but paint only that part of our stories we wish to reveal.

3.3.1 World travelling to conversational spaces with students

As the weeks move onward, I have arranged with Rachel to enter into a conversational space with students. She asks the group if any of them would like to meet me. Six express their interest and I meet them in groups of three to facilitate all voices being heard. Applebaum (2002) reminds us that marginalised voices can shed light on social issues and I think who better to tell stories of the library than the students and others who reside there. Yet I am conscious that as researcher I am in a position of power and know that I must attend to questions about whose story is being privileged and who will benefit from my research. In sharing our conversations I blend the words of both groups to help protect the students' anonymity. I use the pseudonyms Jade, Maria and Tony throughout.

While I am excited about the idea, I am nervous about this, my first conversational space. I try to imagine what it might be like and am anxious on several fronts. What if it doesn't go well? What if the students change their minds? If they are absent?

I draw again on Lugones's (1987) metaphor of world-travelling and loving perception as I go through the portal into this space with students. I realise that when I world-travel to this place I must enter with loving perception so that I may see with their eyes, so that I may try

to see not just the students, but myself, as they might see us. I wonder if I will be able to silence myself 'and those timeworn narratives that hold us fast, to listen' (Fels, 2010: 2). I hope, too, that I may bring with me a sense of playfulness (Lugones, 1987) - an openness to surprise at what I learn about my participants or myself – as I come alongside the students in conversational spaces. I will remind myself to embrace a sense of wide-awakeness (Greene, 1978).

I am mindful that, 'In the literature, the word voice often connotes the capacity or right to speak; its meaning is political (Hertz, 1997, Motzafi-Haller, 1997 in Wyatt, 2006: 813) and I am conscious of their vulnerability - and mine. I know that in drawing forward my research text I will listen and re-listen to the recordings of interviews as I 'discover and construct meaning in those texts' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 130) and I feel the tension in my body as I contemplate the importance of honouring the students' voices and 'of making spaces for telling and listening to stories as well as the responsibilities for sustaining each other' (Clandinin, 2013: 28) while composing a text that will respond to 'questions of meaning and significance' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 131). I will draw on critical theory as I listen and re-listen to these voices.

I know that stories are less than an actual life – selective, partial – yet simultaneously more than an actual life – re-seeing and imagining ourselves in the stories of others (Richardson, 1999) and I tremble at the power of stories once told that cannot be called back. As I prepare to sit with students in a conversational group I carefully contemplate these words of Bochner (2017: 363):

> 'Our work is couched in a vocabulary that emphasizes horizons of human meaning, relational being, moral reflection, subjectivity, embodiment, compassion, empathy, and social justice.'

As 'tentative relationships amongst all of our stories and us begin to inter-lap' (Sweetland, Huber and Keats Whelan 2004, in Clandinin et al, 2011: 40) I remind myself that I am a narrative inquirer, finding footholds and composing stories.

3.3.2 Conversational spaces: Jade, Maria, Tony (pseudonyms)

It is December and it is bitterly cold outside. I hurry towards the library and am glad of its warm embrace. The light coming through the windows illuminates spaces while casting shadows. A lamp is lit and on the coffee-table is the heartening sight of a tea-pot, ready for

conversations. Connelly and Clandinin (2006: 480) define place as 'the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or places where the inquiry and events take place'. As I let the landscape of the library work on me I think that place is also composed of feelings and emotions.

I have brought my wonderings about how students learn in the library and how they and my other participants engage together in library activities. As I wait for the students I feel at once eager and nervous. I think of Pelias's description of speech as asserting 'a presence, a time and place … an "I" tilting toward another' (2011: 26) and my pulse quickens as I contemplate anew the responsibility I have to these young people. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000: 172) reminder that '.. we need to consult our consciences about our responsibilities as narrative inquirers in a participatory relationship' is to the forefront of my mind and I feel the weight of this undertaking in my body.

Three of the students have agreed to sit and talk with me about their experiences in the library. They arrive, in the midst of story-telling to each other, bringing with them energy and laughter. I feel the tingle of nerves as I greet them in this conversational space – their space. We chit-chat about the approaching holidays - close yet achingly distant. Rachel offers us tea and biscuits and we settle into 'the temporal unfolding of lives' (Clandinin, 2013: 45). As I sit with my participants in the three-dimensional inquiry space, I know that I am also studying myself in relation. And as I attend to their words my mind will move backward to scenes in the library where words and art co-mingled and flourished and forward to this conversation where young people tell stories.
The students look expectantly at me and as Rachel moves quietly to her desk I take a deep breath and begin. I interweave their words below with my thoughts and reflections as we work together to compose stories about life, school and the library.

Me: So I just asked Miss if it'd be okay if you could just chat about what you've been doing. Because you know when it's so busy, it's quite hard for me get to chat to people.
Honouring my relational responsibilities to my participants, I remind them that I will use pseudonyms and we begin to settle into the conversation. As I attend to their words my mind will move backward to scenes in the library where words and art co-mingled and flourished and forward to this conversation where young people tell stories.

Me: Tell me about the project anyway. So, back to the beginning when Colm was doing it with you. What was it like the very first day?

Jade: Well we didn't start the story the very first day. He told us real stories about himself and all and then we did these things where you have to write …

Maria: Two truths and a lie …

Jade: And then you have to guess and all that. We wrote down funny stuff.

Me: So can you remember an example of two truths and a lie?

Jade: (Laughs) **Well they're kind of funny and horrible.**

Maria: There was one about a dog.

Tony: I wrote ... Ah, you wouldn't say them out.

Me: So why did he get you to do that?

Jade: Probably to get to know each other as well because some of them are true but then halfway through we just started writing.

Maria: We just started writing the randomest things.

Me: So did it work?

Maria: Yeah … made me think.

Me: And then which groups and the story are you in?

Maria: In the bus group.

Jade: I'm in the chipper group and he's in the hospital group. Then at the end our classes mingle.

Me: So what's it like being a writer?

Tony: It's better than the classroom. It's fun. He's very …

Jade: I think with Colm it's really good. I enjoy that. It's fun… When you're with Colm, you're still working but it's fun.

Tony: Because all the teachers, they can just …

Jade: I'm not being mean but …. they don't know. They don't know all of our language.

Tony: They don't have the same sense of us. They don't really have the best laughs with us.

Me: In what way? Because I remember you saying that before about Colm.

Tony: He's from around here and we're all from around here.

Maria: He understands what you're saying more.

Me: Like, your sense of humour? Because he's funny too.

Jade: Yeah, like knows how we pronounce stuff. Some people say *hey*, well we say *yup*. He knows 'cos he's from around here.

Me: So when you get on well with him is it easier to write with him?

All: Yeah.

As I listen to stories of relationships, I think about Craft (2008, in McLaren, 2012: 90) who identifies the primary site for creativity as social engagement, requiring peer to peer equality. The library is set up as a social space. The sofas around a low table have not been put there by accident. Rather, they are part of a carefully considered design process creating a space that is made for conversations, a physical acknowledgement of the importance that this library, this school, place on relationships. I see this in the respect that is shown between students, Rachel, Aisling, Colm and Jole as they listen to each other and co-compose together. Across conversations, the centrality of Rachel to the library is emphasised by students and staff. Hughes et al. (2001) also note that successful school librarians develop positive relationships with students. It is in this context, this intentionally different learning space that students feel free to imagine, discuss, explore options. In doing so they engage with the Key Skills of Junior Cycle. This sense of freedom is taken up here by Maria.

Maria: You feel you're not being judged. Not that you're not being judged but that he *knows* more.

Tony: It's easier to open up to him. You're not under pressure.

Maria: Yeah, you're not being judged. Like you can write what you want and say what you want and he won't care.

Tony: No, it's not that he doesn't care …

Maria: It's not like he doesn't care, it's like he doesn't *mind*, if you get what I mean. It's not like he doesn't care.

Tony: He just understands how all of us …

Maria: Yeah, he just understands more than like the way teachers would.

Over the course of my visits I am struck by the importance students place on the fact that Colm is from an area similar to their own. They can, I think, hear themselves in the sound of his voice, his turn of phrase. In section 2.2.1 I commented on the lack of diversity in the teaching profession in Ireland (Keane and Heinz , 2016; Keane et al, 2018) and it is evident that this is significant for these students too. It is clear that Colm's background is important to them as they work together in the relational cultural space of this library. At one point, one of the students apologetically mentioned that 'he is not a culchie – no offence' and I am reminded of Rachel's assertion that 'you cannot be what you cannot see'. Shor (1992: 24) suggests that in Freire's liberating classroom, 'teachers pose problems derived from

student life, social issues, and academic subjects, in a mutually created dialogue.' It seems to me that the students' belief that Colm understands them, that he shares, perhaps some of their life-experiences, has contributed to the promotion of a democratised pedagogy in which themes of social justice can be discussed.

Jade: And in here, like even in normal classes, you are with all your friends but you are working. When you're in here you're doing loads of group-work and all. I'd rather do group-work.

Me: And why do you like that better?

Jade: You get to know more people as well and it's funnier.

Tony: I don't learn being by myself.

Me: But do you learn from others though?

Tony: I'd say I learn more being in groups and all than sitting there by myself.

Me: Why does that make you learn? …. But do you not find it hard to concentrate in a group?

Tony: No. I think you learn better.

Me: So when you're writing the story then …

Tony: You get it done faster.

Me: And, but then, you know, if you're in a group and everybody's coming up with ideas, how do you decide?

Jade: Well you're just have to kind of pick the best one or you have to try to make room for all of the ideas and split them.

Maria: That's what he did with the story. He split us into smaller groups. And we all came up with our own ideas. And then they all like kind of tied in with each other.

Tony: But the story wouldn't have came together if it wasn't for all of us.

Jade: Yeah, I know. Like a while back we did this rap and we all had our own parts to add in and all and it all came together at the end. It all made sense and everything.

Etherington (2007: 600) suggests that stories are 'a form of knowledge creation and inquiry … produced and created within social relationships and between storytellers and their audiences' and as I listen to these young storytellers, I think of the relationships that are woven into the fabric of this library. In *Key Skills of Junior Cycle* the NCCA (2015) points out that a number of studies have found that group work is positively related to achievement when group interaction is respectful and inclusive. Coming alongside the students during the workshops and in this conversational space I feel the respect pulsing through their voices and laughter. I hear some of the characteristics attributed to the Key Skill *Staying*

well in Tony's words 'I think you learn better' and the students' attentiveness to each other. Later, I will listen again to their conversation and will think about how respect for the other and self has been embodied in that room.

Me: So do you think this story will come together? Because in the beginning I was wondering how this was going to work.

Maria: But yeah, but like, he made it in a way he put out the map. This is where yous are … This is where the zombies are.

I reflect on Eisner (2002: 11) who suggests that we use maps 'because they display, by a structural analogue, relationships in space that provide a useful image of the world we wish to navigate'. Interestingly, he goes on to warn us that while maps simplify, they offer us only a partial view. I consider these words in the light of the questions about choice and morality Colm has been posing to the students – and remind myself that my view as researcher is partial too.

Jade: We all picked where we wanted to be. It just came together.

Maria: We all typed together. And we ended up in the Square.

Jade: Yeah we all ended up in Tallaght.

Me: I remember that … And how did that happen?

Jade: So many groups were already up there. And then like my group we just went on a scooter up there.

Me: Jade a few minutes ago did you say you make room for all the ideas or you can't make room for them?

Jade: You *can* like. Yeah because …

Maria: And I think because … we're like a close class.

Tony: We're all the same.

Me: You treat each other the same?

Maria: We get along. We treat each other the same… We like each other.

Jade: We actually do get along.

Maria: Like we have like the few scraps here and there but … like me and her … we do have the scraps but like we'd have the mess in most cases.

Laughter

Tony: Yeah, yeah.

Jade: We know it's only a mess … It's funny.

Me: What then about the art?

Tony: Oh the art, it's the best.

Maria: The art's really good. What we were doing for the past few weeks like drawing ideas, what we wanted for our own outfits and that.

Jade: And we're not deadly at art. But the way we do it it's fun.

The others agree and as I attend to their words I remember how engrossed they were in their art work – on the floor, at the table, moving about the room. I think of how companionable the process was and the sound of their laughter during the workshops is echoed in our present conversation. Pahl and Rowsell (2011) suggest that valuing the creation of art and giving a place and time for stories to be honoured grows self-awareness and confidence and as I listen to these students speak enthusiastically about their work I hear their self-belief in their easy conversation.

Tony: I despise normal work. I'd love to be in here all day.

His words bring me back to Jole's workshops as she gently moved through a seemingly chaotic world where students were strewn across the floor. Their splashes of colour were vibrant stories rippling across the rolls of paper depicting a world on fire, at war, but one where they would reveal what it means to be a hero.

Maria: Yeah. Good. Because it's like more creative.

Puzzling over what it means to be creative, I have looked for definitions and descriptions. Runco (2007, in McLaren, 2012: 90) suggests that creativity is a way of thinking and being, of finding or establishing new relationships between ideas or things, or of having new ideas. Ken Robinson offered this: 'I see it is the process of having original ideas that have value.'[40] I think of the library holding students in its warm embrace and fostering students' creativity.

Jade: Yeah, I think when you're in the library it's more fun. And you think you can ….

When I listen to this recording later I wonder how this sentence would have ended. What possibilities were here that I missed? Frank (1995:3) reminds us that stories are told or written to someone, 'whether that other person is immediately present or not' and I wish that I could return to the moment and catch these unspoken, elusive words, regretful that they are lost to me.

Maria: It's more calm.

Me: So when I came in last week… remember you were on the floor?

Jade: Yeah, on the floor. We couldn't decide what to draw.

Me: When everybody's at the table, what's going on?

Tony: Yeah. We're just working together.

[40] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlBpDggX3iE

Me: But do you not find the art hard?

Tony: Not everyone is good at art but eventually … it's more encouraging.

Jade: It's not like, a competition… Like if it's bad you get over it.

Maria: It doesn't matter if it's bad … it's good in a way.

Jade: If you get something wrong doesn't really matter. Yeah, like it's not a competition for an hour to kind of have to get things right. Because for the exams, yeah.

Me: But if you make a mistake here, say on the on the picture you're doing for your group?

Tony: It doesn't matter.

Maria: It doesn't matter.

Jade: We made a big mistake on ours … we're just going to fix it.

Me: What mistake did you make?

Maria: I was trying to draw water things but they didn't look good so we turned them into smoke pipes.

Me: And they look brilliant actually.

This confident attitude to the making of mistakes resonates with the findings of The TALE project which investigated arts education in secondary schools in England from 2016-2018. It found that students like the fact that there is no right or wrong in the arts. These words of a Year 11 student strike a familiar chord: 'In tests you get the marks back and you got it wrong and you think ''Oh I knew that'', but under pressure you got it wrong. Art is not like that. You can always go back.'

I think how wonderful it is for students to participate in an arts-based education here in the library and to be able to acknowledge that mistakes can be 'good in a way' (Maria). The Key Skill *Staying well* identifies being confident and being positive about learning as indicators of learners' overall wellbeing. Jole and I had discussed questions of confidence and skill and her response was an echo of this. She emphasises with students that she does not expect anything specific from them. In her words, 'The act of doing is enough.' I find these words powerful and when I ask her if everybody can be creative I am met with a resounding 'Yes!' In my visits to the art workshops I have entered into noisy, fluid spaces. When I ask her about this she tells me that movement and sociability are essential in art and that 'Communication is creative.'

And as I listen and re-listen to these conversation with students and Jole I think about the creative opportunities and responses I have seen in this library. It seems to me that the right of every student to have access to a range of arts and cultural experience

acknowledged in the JCSP Library Project *Charter* is being lived out on this landscape as students develop creative skills and grow in confidence, perhaps 'allowing some part of the self to emerge and wave at the world' (McLaren, 2012: 89).

Me: But then you need imagination, don't you, to fix it?

They nod their agreement.

Me: So how is your story going to end?

Jade: I don't know.

Maria: We don't know. We have to meet Colm to finish it.

Me: And you have to show him the art first?

There is discussion and agreement on this.

Jade: Well I better not be dying in this.

Me: You don't deserve to die!

Laughter.

Jade: Cos I think our group comes with Tony's in the end.

Me: So who decides if you die or not?

Tony: Me.

Maria: Well we all kind of decide who dies… Yeah, 'cos he's kind of like, the boss.

Me: How come?

Jade: At the start we all voted for a leader …

Maria: … And Tony won but then he went onto the bad side.

Me: Well could you unvote for him then?

Jade: No he shaved all of our heads. It's kind of symbols.

Maria: It's like they're minions.

Me: So what's your plan for them? How's it going to end? You know, if you're in charge of the story, if you wanted to you, couldn't you write a bit … so he's bald?

Jade: Yeah, he doesn't want that.

Tony: I could just leave the story.

Me: Oh yeah, you could leave the story … What did Colm say before at the beginning … you're writing as your character, but you're writing as the author as well?

Maria: Yeah.

Me: What do you think he meant then?

Maria: That you're writing for ourselves but you're also writing for people to read … for people to understand so it's not just for you it's for everyone.

Me: And what difference does that make to your story if you're writing for other people?

Maria: You need to know where the barriers are with some things… If you're writing for yourself you can write anything 'cos it's for yourself but if you're writing it as an author you need to know what you can say and what you can't say.

Jade: And what's appropriate and inappropriate.

Maria: That's literally what I mean by a barrier.

Tony: Yeah. But with Colm there's some barriers we can break.

Maria: Yeah, there's *some*.

Tony: That's what we like.

Me: If you're going to print it or publish it, I suppose?

Maria: You have to step back.

Me: Because Colm set barriers.

Maria: Yeah, some. It depends. Some things. Like offensive things.

Jade: We're not allowed to say some things - mean things - because it will be going on the internet and all. You're not allowed to talk about other people or mention anyone else's name.

Maria: You're not allowed to put anything bad or racist in it.

Me: So he has his boundaries too.

Maria: Yeah.

Me: Wasn't he talking one day about morality and being moral when you're writing means not hurting people? So that ties in with what you're saying Maria.

There is agreement on this and then, for a few moments, companionable chit-chat about home.

Tony: We actually didn't write it, we actually just said it.

Jade: Miss and Colm did all the writing but we made up all the stuff.

Maria: Yeah like we were able to see what was happening because they wrote it up on the board.

The conversation moves to the previous year when they participated in *WraPParound* (a spoken poetry event sponsored by Trócaire and Poetry Ireland) in Trinity College and they laughingly talk of Snapchatting boys. I am reminded again of the layers upon layers that compose a life, a life that continues to unfold when I am not there.

Me: What was creating the story like? Because for example, you are the leader ... So how does that work in the story? Do you have, do you have more control of what happens or ..?

Tony: I'd say so yeah.

Jade: He gets to shave heads!

Laughter.

Me: Was it horrifying getting your heads shaved?

Jade: Yeah it was. Me and Anna got our heads shaved. We just woke up in a room with a blindfold on us. We took it off and we were surrounded by mirrors…

Me: Where did you get that idea from?

Jade: It just came to us … from my head.

Me: That bit's kind of terrifying though isn't it? … The mirrors …

Maria: And no teeth and no eyebrows.

Tony: And how are you supposed to know how to get out?

Jade: We need mirrors, like a few mirrors to see. We wouldn't just wake up and know that our heads are shaved.

Tony: If you were in a box with mirrors up, down, all around you're gonna get all mad confused … It's going to hurt your head … You'd be floating.

Jade: But you wouldn't know where to go.

Me: So you have one more week of art. And then you put it all together. Is it? Is that right?

All: Yeah.

Me: How are you able to resolve your story?

Maria: I think the hospital group is going to try to take over The Square … The last thing I remember was the hospital group was trying to take over The Square because all the other groups had gone to The Square and they barricaded up.

Jade: The last thing as well we turned out …

Tony: Put it this way, my group is going to win.

Maria and Jade: No.

Jade: I'm just telling you now, I'm not dying.

Me: You could be the character that refuses to die.

Jade: Or else I could Just be someone that like dies and comes back to life …

Me: Do you read horror stories?

Tony: No.

Me: I think the life-size drawings are fantastic.

These were drawings the students had created one day on the floor. Drawing around each other they made life-size drawings of each other to represent their characters in the story.

There was much laughter as they did so, helped by Rachel and Aisling, Jole a calm presence in their midst. The conversation moves to a discussion of the after-life.

Rachel: You know, there's a book I read, I was about the same age as you and it's full of stories of people who've been in car accidents and died in the hospital and then came back to life. It's all their stories of like, what happened to them when they died, you know?

Jade: How did they know what it felt like if they were dead?

Rachel: Because they could remember stuff.

Jade: Do you have an afterlife?

Rachel: Well none of us know, do we? We don't really know what's happening to those people, but what they *believe* was happening was real to them. So we don't know if it's like a dream or whether it really does happen.

Me: Like your story … did it *really* happen?

My ear attunes to a brief exchange in the centre of the library.

> **Rachel: Okay, did you get that email I sent on from Colm?**
>
> **Mia[41]: I didn't check yet. Thank you. See you.**

This brief interlude holds more significance for me than I yet know. Mia is one of the students who attends *The Writing Club* whom I will be privileged to meet several times in the coming months. I will re-present my meetings and conversations with this group in *Landscape 4* but for now I turn again to the story-telling of the three students I am sitting with.

The conversation moves on to a discussion of Transition Year and after-school careers. I am reminded yet again that I am in the midst of lives.

Me: Thanks for staying back because it's really interesting to hear you talking about writing. You do this all the time, I don't …

As they move away and tidy up the library before the next class they become engrossed in other stories – of life in its many unfoldings.

My thoughts move back in time as I recall Cummins (2009: 243-244) who posits that a multiliteracies pedagogy expands the opportunities for children to express themselves—their intelligence, imagination and linguistic and artistic talents – and come to see themselves as intelligent, imaginative and talented and I feel privileged to have been

[41] Pseudonym

permitted to come alongside these students as they made space for me to witness these talents at play.

I will now move forward along the temporal landscape to another conversational space with the students as we pick up some threads of our earlier meetings.

We speak about the many activities that take place in the library and the students list project work, art, storytelling, poetry and science for fun and Friends against Bullying. I ask why there are so many activities and Maria suggests that Rachel organises them for 'fun' and 'education'. The conversation begins to flow as we talk about the creative workshops with Colm and Jole and I share it here, first as segments of their talk and then through some lines of found poetry drawn from their words, my wonderings and the literature.

I have chosen to experiment with found poetry in part as an homage to the artistic library-world in which I have been immersed. Conscious of my participants who have been performing their work and thoughts, it is also an attempt to acknowledge that I too need to take some risks as an author and tap further into my creative self. I am also mindful of Madison (2008) who uses a performance lens to capture the expressiveness of the human voice and body in the act of telling, poetic transcription revealing what is said and how it is spoken in gesture and tone.

In the poem, the students' words will be written in bold italics to the left of the page while I will use indentation to mark my own thoughts. Words taken from the literature will be indented further right. I hope that the words will sit companionably on the page, akin to the warp and weft of a tapestry, one supporting the other, a bricolage if you will. I play back their words again, pausing as they say:

Jade: It's about how to make stories in your mind.
Maria: Writing helps people our age with their creativity. At first we said we can't … Typical teenagers … We were negative at first. But we came up with stuff quickly together.
Tony: Colm helped us imagine stories. He gives us inspiration.

And I think back to one of the writing workshops, hearing anew Colm's words that:

You can dream your way out of bad situations. Writing is like that.

Inspired, I think that writing can be like this too – a composition where student voices are mingled with my musings and words borrowed from the literature. The words of the students are placed on the left in Calibri font, mine are centred and written in Bradley Hand LTC and the others are written on the right in Candara font.

3.3.3 A found poem: Versed in the library

What do we do in the library?
Well lots of things – read of course,
Science for fun and story-telling
Projects and art work and learning
About other people and
We have Friends against Bullying
We get to walk and talk
I think it's team-building
And we feed the fish

I wonder why there's a fish-tank in a library

For interest and if your head is wrecked you can't learn
Fish are calm even when we're noisy
Miss was helping us to get used to the library

Vecchi (2010) has demonstrated the importance of sensory qualities in learning environments – light, colour, sound, micro-climate – and how these influence children's and young people's perceptions of how creative they are able to be within them.

Why so many activities?

Miss organises things so we can try them out

(I remember Rachel saying you can't be what you can't see)

We learn to make stories in our heads

At first we say we can't .. typical teenagers, negative at first

Are we more literate?
Yes, I got a lot louder, give my opinion now
And I got a bit louder
I can relax and think 'Yes, I can get this done'

> Generative ideas emerge from joint thinking, from significant conversations, and from sustained, shared struggles to achieve new insights by partners in thought.' (John-Steiner, 2006: 3.)

I think Miss loves our class
She's always planning – giving and receiving
Miss said we have to write with responsibility
And Colm says we have to think of ourselves as being heroes
Being a hero means being good

I think of a violin waiting to be played
The world lost in its shadowed hollows
Notes suspended in the air, waiting
I wonder if these young people
Will be the ones to draw the bow across its strings
Noisy, welcome harmonies vibrating into the future

If we were speaking to the Minister for Education?
We'd say we love our library
We'd be lost without our library – and Miss
Everyone needs a library
To make them smarter and more creative
To think more and use their imagination

> 'With the aid of culture we learn how to create ourselves' (Eisner, 2000: 2).

I'd say, 'The library was my saving grace … My haven'.

3.4 Afterwords

As I reflect on the time I have spent in the library, listening, observing, feeling and talking, I wonder again about the learning taking place in the library. I think about the architectural landscape – a room that looks different from other rooms in the school, a room with couches, tea and a fish-tank, a room where students might be seen moving around from group to group, or lying on the floor drawing. Hamza and Griffith (2006: 14-15) suggest that 'Those classroom climates that promoted creative thinking and problem solving were open, comfortable, relaxed, challenging, safe, supportive, trusting, humorous, energized and collaborative. Such climates rewarded creative behaviour and encouraged thinking and exploring processes: students were free to voice opinions through non-threatening, entertaining and enjoyable methods'. It seems to me that this library – intentionally *not* a classroom - is just such a space, an environment in which students are surely demonstrating what it is to be literate, to communicate creatively and to be positive about learning, articulating, in fact, several aspects of the Key Skills *Being creative*, *Being literate*, *Communicating* and *Staying well*.

In this chapter I documented some research into the benefits of school libraries. I draw on this research a little further here. Such benefits extend across a range of skills. Teravainen and Clark (2017: 18), for instance, note that school libraries have been found to have an impact on 'skills such as wider learning skills (including information-handling competencies and information-seeking skills), history, mathematics and science'. Lance and Schwarz (2012) found that nearly 8% more students scored *Advanced* on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment in schools with full-time professional librarians than those without. Interestingly, these scores were consistently higher for all grade levels in the schools with librarians, with students in at-risk groups tending to benefit more than all students combined. Lance and Hofschire (2011) also note that the loss of librarians is associated with declines or poorer gains in reading scores, while increasing the number of librarians is

associated with improved scores. In students' descriptions of the library and their acknowledgement of Rachel's impact here, I am reminded of Willis et al. (2019) who found that students drew on themes of connectedness and peacefulness when describing their ideal school libraries, linked to their desire for spaces in which to recharge, relax and escape into quiet and safe spaces. To create relational spaces in which such learning may happen requires not just imagination but bravery and my visits here make me believe that this library has both.

I think of the focus that is placed on arts-education in this landscape and remember laughter, problem-solving, sharing. Gibson and Ewing (2011: 1) argue that 'an Arts-led curriculum for children… is imperative if today's students are to develop a sense of their own identity within their social and cultural worlds together with the creative and flexible thinking skills needed for coping with living in the twenty-first century'. I remember the students mapping a world in which fires burned scorching hot but in which heroes prevailed. McLaren (2012: 99) suggests that teachers who foster creativity in their students work 'on the edge' of social change by equipping students to critique their world and imagine something better and different. May I suggest that perhaps I witnessed students and adults alike in the library workshops doing just this?

I place here the final words of the tale composed in the library, a story in which heroism eventually prevails:

'You lost.' Arrow says, getting soaked wet by the waterjet. But then the girl stands, she points her hands towards Arrow, directing all her energy at him, the water turns to ice again and Arrow is frozen solid from the tiny droplets of sweat on his skin to the smallest molecule inside his body. Anna rises behind him and kicks him over. He falls to the ground and shatters into tiny pieces. The survivors roar in victory.
'We've won!'
Sniper is almost dead. Anna goes over to thank him.
'You saved us all.
'I'm going to become a zombie soon,' he says, barely able to speak.
'Let me make sure that doesn't happen.'
'No,' Sniper says. 'Give me a gun and let me go outside. I'll see how many I can save before I'm done.'

I remember Colm encouraging the students to think of themselves as heroes and I think that they have done so.

Continuing to wonder about how the library may help students to develop the Key Skills of Junior Cycle, I think of Eisner (2002: 84-85) who notes that the arts are about 'how they make you feel in their presence—when you know how to read their form. The arts, when experienced in the fullness of our emotional life, are about becoming alive'. The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2019) suggests that creativity flourishes where critical thinking is encouraged and that it is also associated with concentration and tenacity. Further, Ings et al (2010) posit that there is mounting evidence that creativity and the arts can make a significant difference to people's health and wellbeing. I contemplate some of the ways to support student wellbeing in schools put forward in Key Skills for Junior Cycle Staying well (NCCA, 2012) such as:

- A positive school climate that celebrates the success and involvement of all
- Positive day-to-day interactions with and among students
- A shared belief that everyone can grow in ability and achievement with effort

It seems to me that these words describe the world I have been witnessing in the library – a library that places high value on an arts-based education, an education that is carefully planned for and that puts student wellbeing at its heart.

I think back to conversations with students and others involved in this JCSP library where we attended to each other, listening and co-composing stories. I remind myself that, 'We do not not speak while only humbly listening to the Other speak. Listening does not mean not speaking; it means paying attention to when it is the right time to speak' (Pollock, 1999: 247).

Perhaps now is the time for a narrative inquirer to sit with stories from a library and to wonder out loud why more DEIS schools have not yet received their promised libraries.

3.6 Some concluding thoughts

In this chapter I have reflected on the arrival of Covid and some of the questions it posed for the world and for me as researcher. I have revealed some movements on the path to becoming a narrative inquirer as I dealt with the challenges posed in gaining ethical

approval for my research. I then discussed my experiences of being in the field and my thoughts on the conversations my participants engaged in.

In composing an arts based inquiry I have employed found poetry in an effort to create a bricolage of voices and imagery from the library, my readings and my wonderings about the research. Denzin and Lincoln (2018: 12) describe a bricolage as being 'like a quilt, a performance text, or a sequence of representations connecting the parts to a whole' and it seems to me a fitting way of inquiring into texts as a whole (Clandinin, 2000).

Landscape 4: In the Midst

In the midst of winter, I found within me an invincible summer

- Albert Camus

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, drawing again on Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) three commonplaces of narrative inquiry and Lugones's (1987) metaphor of world-travelling I move backward and forward along the landscape to reflect on and discuss my visits to the writing club which is part of the library I am researching. The last of these visits took place in March 2020. I did not then realise it but that visit would mark the beginning of a dramatic battle across the world.

Only a few days later the doors are closed, the stage silent, the world barely daring to breathe. Shadows darken the tilted earth as it leans away from the sun and behind closed doors we wait. Eventually we will learn to live with the enemy, to move tentatively into the world again, standing 'at the dangerous shores of moving forward and looking back' (Alexander, 2011: 106).

As my thoughts move back to the library visits I am mindful of Bell et al (2014: 96) who caution us that 'Landscapes are not just physical or geographical; they are external and internal, immediate and remembered or imagined' and I turn to my transcriptions and notes, laying them alongside my memories. As I hear again the voices of my participants, images of the library flit across my mind, like film frames upon which the light is trained - slides 'in a magic lantern' (Gorell Barnes, 2014: 250) - and I imagine myself back there, listening to stories in conversational spaces. I think anew about the privilege it is to be an inquirer and my obligations to my participants. As I compose my thoughts and ready myself to write, I have the audacity to linger over these words of Gale (2014) and hope that perhaps, even in some tiny way, 'this piece works with the wispiness of thought dreams to offer a sense of embodiment that emerged from these collaborations' (Gale and Gallant, 2014: 164).

I begin to write this chapter on the morning of St. Stephen's Day. It is quiet outside, too early yet for the neighbourhood children to start racing along the road on shiny new bicycles and scooters, presents that arrived mysteriously in the night. But today we will receive another gift, a precious gift from the cold East. Carried on its bed of ice, the long-

awaited vaccine – modern day Frankincense and Myrrh - brings hope on its snowy breath. Just like the determined tulip-stalks in our garden breaking through the dark winter earth, this cargo promises that spring will return to the world. All we need to do is believe.
In a time when borders have again been closed, when death is still not done, hope begins to burn more strongly. As the days start their lengthening, step by tiny step, we begin to dream again. Finally we can dare to speak aloud these words of Derek Mahon:

> *The sun rises in spite of everything*
> *and the far cities are beautiful and bright*
>
> - From *Everything is Going to be All Right*
> -

And as I think about the time I spent researching in my library school and its writing club, as I remember young voices telling stories of what it is to be heroic, I know that one day we will again travel lovingly (Lugones, 1987) across borders.

I will move through this chapter weaving conversations with participants and my wonderings and theoretical musings together in a bricolage continuing to draw on a critical theory framework. Doing so helps me to consider how a discourse of possibility might be developed in this creative writing space, a discourse that may 'connect reading the word with reading the world, and doing so in ways that enhance the capacities of young people as critical agents and engaged citizens' (Giroux, 2016: 29). It also serves to remind me that knowledge is socially-constructed, sited in culture and I look forward to learning how – if – my participants will work together to read and co-construct the word and the world.

I start with my first visit to the writing club which takes place after I have spent some months visiting the library writing and visual workshops. I sit in on three writing club sessions and return to meet some of the participants in conversational spaces. When I come alongside my participants in library spaces and when I write about my visits I am conscious of my presence in the story. Bound to acknowledge this, I try not to impinge too much, attempting to craft a work in which perhaps 'lyric language allows us to hear the music of the other' (Neilsen, 2008: 4).

As I move towards the space that is the library writing club, I bring with me my questions about what we want education to work for (Biesta, 2010) and my wonderings about what it means to be creative, to be literate, how we communicate with each other and how education can contribute to students' sense of wellbeing. As I engage with my participants

there and sit with them in conversation, I will listen for traces of responses to these puzzles. Lynch and Baker (2005) suggest that students engage with schooling not just intellectually but emotionally and I am keen to learn more about how content and relationships are negotiated in this writing club. My visits to the creative writing and visual arts workshops revealed a focus on co-operation and dialogue rather than strictly hierarchical structures (Freire, 1970) and through my conversations with Rachel I imagined that a similar atmosphere would be created here.

West (2018: 34-35) talks about a transformative education that has at its heart a social space in which people 'in relationship, come to think and feel about themselves in new, life enhancing as well as critically aware ways'. I wonder if, in the social space of the library, I will see and hear how an 'engaged pedagogy establishes a mutual relationship between teacher and students that nurtures the growth of both parties' (hooks, 2010: 22). I think about how the Junior Cycle Key Skills are not proposed as separate entities but that one folds into the other and I look forward to climbing the stairs to talk about writing and listen for voices enjoying words and language, imagining, debating and being social (NCCA, 2015). As I prepare myself to do so, it seems reasonable to me to echo VanderWeele (2017: 8149, cited in Lee et al. 2020: 199) who asks, 'To what extent does education promote flourishing—or "complete well-being" —for individuals, communities, and the world as a whole?'

The sessions take place after school and are attended variously by students, former students and teachers. Present at the one which opens the next section of this chapter are Mia, Ryan, Hope, Rachel and Colm. As I approach it I hear whispering in my mind these words of Fels (2003: 180) and my pulse quickens:

> *we cannot know what country will*
> *emerge in the moment of our meeting*
> *as yet unmapped*

4.2 The library writing club: A visit

I call this writing club, based in the school library, simply *The Writing Club*. An integral part of the life of the school, it beckons us into its lofty space at the top of the library stairs. But this is no ivory tower. This is a place where hot tea and buttery toast are necessary props in the composing of stories, where one may sit easily at the table or on the sofa, where laughter floats up to the tall windows. It is a place where companionable banter takes place along with the serious work of crafting stories to live by (Clandinin and Huber, 2002). Freire (2014: 22) reminds us that it is important to recognise 'the right and the duty of teachers and also of students to have dreams and to struggle for their dreams.' I look forward to witnessing an unfolding of dreams over the next few weeks as I listen to stories being composed and shared.

While attending library workshops I had been able to catch glimpses of *The Writing Club* through the railings on the mezzanine but as I climbed the stairs for the first time I was not certain what to expect.

There is a slight turn at the bottom of the stairs and as I begin to walk upwards I realise that several of the steps seem to have taken on the characteristics of shelving, bearing as they do a collection of posters, books and pages of writing. Perhaps words are so much a part of life here that they belong everywhere, enticing us to follow their wordy trail upward. As I reach the top of the stairs I see more books – published works of the young authors who have passed this way. Long windows on either side of the room throw down light as puffs of clouds mark time across the sky.

On the counter-top that runs along one wall are a steaming kettle, a toaster, bread, butter and some packets of biscuits. The bread-wrapper has already been torn open and the smell of warm toast is a gentle reminder of home. In the centre is a long table at which Colm and three students who have agreed to participate in the research sit, chatting companionably. Mia is currently a student in the school and the others, Ryan and Hope, former students, remain members of the writing club. Scattered across the table are cups and plates, symbols of domestic rituals and welcome. Ryan offers me tea as the conversation continues to flow, undisturbed by my presence. And as I compose myself on the edges of that room, as I listen to warmth of those voices, it seems that

I hear the low murmur of the waves,

water gliding in to caress the shore

\- Alexandra Fidyk (2009)

Looking back along the landscape as I write this I remember Rachel saying that 'the room had to be what the students wanted it to be. So if that was different from the classroom then that's how it had to go' (Conversation April 6th 2019). Thinking about these words, I feel again the sense of ease in that room – that space she created - as we wait for Rachel to finish her work downstairs and join us. I am reminded of Sarbin (2005: 205) who posits that 'the built and natural environments provide a multiplicity of stages upon which people engage each other in dramatic interactions. Such engagements are the raw materials for building life-narratives from which identities are formed' and I think of my participants sharing tea and conversation as they grow into the world. And I think too of my own growth as researcher, nurtured on the landscape of the library, home, the academy.
The Writing Club has been in existence for several years now, growing out of a series of workshops that took place in the summer of 2011. Colm Keegan is writer-in-residence, he and Rachel at the heart of the club. I bring my wonderings about the Junior Cycle Key Skills *Being literate*, *Being creative*, *Staying well* and *Communicating* with me to the club along with my imaginings about what will unfold here.

As I prepare to attend to stories here, I return to my critical theory framework to help me think about knowledge and how it is socially constructed, depending on culture and context (McLaren, 2017). And as I wonder what I may witness here, I think of hooks (1994: 13) who suggested that 'our work is … to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students'.

Earlier in the thesis I have written about the engagement with the arts I witnessed during my library visits and now, as I enter the promise of this space, I contemplate Eisner's (2002: 3) suggestion that:

> 'Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture.'

And I wonder what – and who – will be created here. Perhaps these words of Spry (2010: 236) might illuminate the tingling sensation I feel dancing up my spine, catching in my throat as I:

> ‘stay on the edge of my seat, on the edge of that circle, on the edge of performance, performance always on the edge of what is always and already about to happen; a revelation, a recuperation, a practice, a promise.’

And I lean in (Pelias, 2011).

As they settle companionably into the session, stories of school and college life, of library projects and Colm’s work, are shared along with biscuits and tea. The conversation turns to the work of *The Writing Club* itself. They begin to discuss a piece that Mia had written, in which two types of Ireland were held up to each other. Colm notes the traces of racism that bubbled under the storyline and applauds the incorporation of some words in the Irish language in a twist at the end of the story.

I share some snippets from the conversation now as they discuss the possibility of translating the entire story into Irish before moving on to explore what writing means to them. I interweave my own reflections throughout as I come alongside them in this generously shared space and resolve to attend to this advice from Mairs (1989: 60):

> *Try to listen to how it feels.*
> *Just try and listen to how it feels.*
> *How it silently tugs and strains at you*.

4.3 A conversational space in *The Writing Club*

Rachel: Who would translate the story?

Mia: We could do it ourselves. We could re-write the story together.

Colm: Wait! What’s all this about ‘we’? This is my story now!

There is much laughter as they banter over ownership and I am impressed by the respect I feel in the room.

Colm: It would provide a great opportunity for us all to work collaboratively on translating. Trying to hold on to story and plot and trying to hold meaning in a story is different. New opportunities would present themselves if you translate it and everything is at risk of being lost. So that’s something we could do. And I was thinking… what if we talk about you all bringing a new strand next year, something you take responsibility for? Let’s think about what you want for next year … What could be beneficial for everybody?

Mia: I’d like to learn more about writing in general, some theory. Probably bringing more work in. We could have projects to do. I think that would be good for everyone.

Colm: So does that mean doing more work, more writing outside *The Writing Club*?

I admire the way that writing is considered as *work* and group's ready acquiescence to take on further demands.

Rachel: We've always had this pull between projects that we're doing together when we're in here and writing that people are doing outside the *Writing Club* that they're bringing in and we're listening to and critiquing. There's always been a real … It veers one way and then the other. I suppose we just try and blend the two.

Mia: Yeah, we create a project and then we go home and think about it and then you write about it and come in with a piece.

Rachel: That sometimes happens quite organically in the junior club, doesn't it? We might be on a project and then someone comes in and says, 'I've written a poem'. They turn up with work to read quite readily.

Colm: With seniors it's more about how do you maintain a writing life… You've all come up through the ranks.

Me: I was wondering if writing is hard work. You're here every week. Is it hard work as well?

Ryan: It depends. At college it was hard to find a mix between writing academic things and creative writing at the same time.

Mia: I think it's hard work when you edit. When you're just writing it's not really hard. Then you re-read it and you think what was that?

Colm: That's why it's really important to come back with work, isn't it? If you get published, it's the editor. You could be going through those changes for a year. And that's you growing as a professional writer in the way that most people in the absence of an editor will be giving it to a group.

As I let the conversation seep into me, I think of Freire (2014: 16) who speaks about the process of becoming, suggesting that:

> 'as historical beings we are engaged in the constant process of creating and re-creating our own nature. Because of that we really are not, we are becoming. That is, in order for us as human beings to be, we need to become. We need not to be—if we just are, we stop being. We are precisely because we are becoming.'

I think of the opportunities for growth being offered to these writers as they take on the responsibility for offering their work to be critiqued and for creating learning opportunities for others. Perhaps together they are taking part in an 'endless dance of co-emergence' (Waldrop, 1992: 12) working together, supporting each other, 'creatively engaged in processes of identity formation and transformation by attending to stories' (Leggo, 2008: 3). In this space with the tall windows and conversation it seems that, in the words of

Eisner (2002: 74) 'life in the arts does not usually resemble life in academic classrooms. In the choral setting, students are collectively engaged in a common enterprise.' I think about the structures that have been put in place here, from the visible – the architectural design of the room, tea and toast – and the invisible – the support and guidance offered by Rachel and Colm through conversation and silences – and I feel privileged to be present in this space of learning. I listen closely.

Colm guides the conversation gently back towards what they might like to see happen in the writing club the following year and moves into the intricacies of writing. I find myself settling and beginning to participate in the discussion.

Colm: So what could anyone take responsibility for? Ryan, you've been out there – what could you bring? Could you create a two-week module for the group?

Ryan: Yeah, I think I could. A lot of my stuff has a short story focus. I guess I could do something on that. It would be interesting – I did a module on creative writing. You get a week to write it and then you get feedback. The end thing is you have a portfolio, you pick five pieces and work on the feedback.

Colm: Like stamping your passport.

Ryan: So in the module, I'd give them a go at different types of writing – short stories, screenplay, poetry. So you're not restricted to one format.

This negotiation of how *The Writing Club* will continue to evolve illuminates the library as a democratic space to me. Such drawing on the life experiences and interests of the participants suggests respect for the cultural context in which the library is situated. O'Brien (2008) posits that self-fulfilment relates strongly with well-being and that relationships are important to students. The respectful ebb and flow of the conversation, the teasing out of the skills each would be willing to share, seems not only to underpin their strengths as emerging writers and their insight into writing in its many forms, but to acknowledge the power they have to contribute to the learning of others. Their sustenance of each other continues to play out as I pose a question to the group.

Me: Do you think that everybody can write in all the formats?

Ryan: Now that's the thing because I usually stick to short stories but I've always wanted to break out of that.

Me: Because I can't write a poem for the life of me.

Colm: Hold on a minute!

Ryan: Even I find it hard myself writing certain things but you have to just dig your heels in and get going.

Colm: Kavanagh wrote a novel and Joyce wrote songs. So like everybody … Sylvia Plath is a good example of a poet that wrote everything as well. So my thing is – like *The Simpsons'*[45] writer said – if you want to write for television, don't just watch television. So you have to practise. So this morning we took a paragraph from a short story and turned it into a poem. So they're recognisable forms of literature but what about other stuff? Story-twines, video games, posters?

I am drawn back to Gale's (2016) discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) work in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* in which he suggests that when they talk about 'stuttering' in the language, they are not referring to difficulties with speech or pronunciation but rather describing a way of speaking and writing in the language that is always emergent, hesitant, and taking new forms. Mindful of Leggo's (2008: 13) assertion that 'A story can be a series of postcards or letters, or a documentary, or a braid. A story can be a hypertext with numerous paths' I wonder how the group will respond to this challenge about what can be deemed literature. They move smoothly into the terrain, accepting the possibility of writing in a new way as a group and extending that support to me, willing each other on, perhaps, to follow Freire (1997: 31) in producing 'forms of knowledge that do not exist yet'.

Mia: And we could write twines as a group.

I have written before about how I engage in 'writing as inquiry' (Richardson, 2000) and it seems to me that my participants, through a process of conversation *and* writing as inquiry, are learning what writing in all its many hues can be. Perhaps they are learning to write themselves into the world, realising that 'Literature is a communal exercise' (Le Guin, 2004: 277). Over tea and toast they too lean in (Pelias, 2011), caring for the work and for each other, pursuing a 'truth in the company of friends' (Palmer, 1998: 90).

Rachel: I can't get over – why do you think you can't write a poem?

Colm: Is it because you don't think it's good? But you wrote it – it's still a poem.

Me: So, I could write six lines here now, but is that a poem? Is that valid? Or is writing something you'd like to share with others? So you work at it and you polish it ….

Hope: I think as long as you're expressing yourself it's valid, it's writing, yeah. It's your expression.

Colm: Yeah, we'll look at your poem some day.

[45] American TV series

I'm struck by their generous words, the way in which they make space for me here, stranger travelling in their midst. As the conversation flows gently on I think that wisdom and sharing seem to be part of the heartbeat of this group. Their acknowledgement of my possibility as a writer reminds me that, 'the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected' (Greene, 1995: 28). There is no door at the top of these stairs, no lock to open and the flow of words is not constrained by brick walls or criticism. In supportive places such as these I wonder what 'not-yet-known stories will we perform?' (Fels, 2002: 181).

I re-orient myself to the conversation as they continue to consider what offering each might bring to the club.

Hope: Maybe I could get people writing about attributes of the world .. I could bring some writing.

Colm: So you could all do workshops on the different writing.

Rachel: And I'm just thinking Colm about when you and I are planning – back to what Mia was saying about theory – I think that's a really nice balance. So the foundation in the junior club and then taking it to the next level – that's really comprehensive.

Colm: And Ryan's been to college so he could show us what he learned.

Ryan: Academic writing is so different from creative writing. For lots of students, when they go to college, it's hard, with all the research and so on. So maybe I could do that with 6th years. I did some mentoring in local schools – students need to be prepared.

Me: Did you find that being in *The Writing Club* helped?

Ryan: Yeah, sitting down and physically writing was easier .. although research is demanding.

Me: Would any of you say that here in the group you are challenged to be a better or different writer?

Hope: Yes. When we are given prompts that are out of left field, we kind of just have to run with it.

Mia: And we wrote poetry where one person would start and then the other had to write the next line and so on. It makes you think. You have to step up.

Rachel: I wanted to ask Ryan – and I know I can – but why do you keep coming back?

There is warm laughter from the group and I feel again the sense of friendship and generosity that is here in this space.

Ryan: Definitely not the biscuits! It's a community thing I think. When I couldn't come I missed it. I can't shake it. I don't think I'll ever stop coming back because of what it's meant to me personally and as a writer.

Colm: I think what's interesting is that you're all readers and writers but what kind of writer would you be if you didn't come to *The Writing Club*? Because writing is no good to you for most of your lives. It's no good if you want to catch a bus or pay your bills.

Ryan: I don't know if I'd be one to be honest if that didn't happen.

Hope: I definitely wouldn't be as developed as I am now.

Ryan: *The Writing Club* literally drew creativity out of me, you know?

Colm: Well you've all inspired me. Hope, you spoke at the *Lingo Festival*. And you were in *The Tivoli*[46]. Would you have done that without *The Writing Club*?

Hope: No, definitely not. I wouldn't have had the confidence. The first time I performed was because you made me do it. My first performance poem. You just said you're performing it now.

Me: So there has to be a trust as well?

Hope: There's a very strong sense of cohesion here. We all pull each other along.

Ryan: There's a definite confidence thing here. We did a showcase at the end of the first summer school. And then we did a magazine. And Mia won the poetry slam.

The *Lingo Festival* is a spoken word festival celebrating words and living language. Such festivals and poetry slams - combining performance, writing, speaking – suggest a break from past images of poetry as an elitist art form. Thinking about Eisner (2002: 3) who said that 'Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture.' I think how wonderful it is that this library opens such vistas to students.

I consider Madison's (2010: 199) description of performance that, '[S]he is a staged spectacle of lyrics let loose above ground. Oh lord, she is in the sky burning' and envisage Hope and Mia taking to the stage, speaking eloquent words into a vibrant room, confidence honed in *The Writing Club*. And I think of Pelias (2010: 173) who describes performance as a 'deconstruction of the discursive system, be it artistic, linguistic or social, that offers possibilities'. I applaud the imagination of people like Rachel and Colm who create opportunities to 'paint the future' (ibid: 174) and the young authors and story-makers who bring their performative selves and culture to text and stage. How wonderful that they are

[46] Dublin theatre

perhaps being awoken to 'the possibility that lives in being absorbed in the simple poetry of line, light, shade, colour and tone' (Gale in Gale and Gallant, 2014: 164) here in this library.

Colm: And you were in the local theatre group as well Mia.

Mia: Yeah, I probably wouldn't have known what I wanted to get out of it if it wasn't for *The Writing Club*. Because getting your writing critiqued here you start to grow as a writer and then you start to know what you want out of writing.

As I think of Levi-Strauss (1995: 298) saying that 'Writing is a strange invention', and as I listen again to my recording, I re-enter that space that this group made for each other – a space in which they could tease out questions about what it means to tell stories and what they could give to others. Their conversation illuminates the seriousness with which they approach their craft – their desire, perhaps, to use a 'highly selective camera, aimed carefully to capture the most arresting angles' (Pelias, 2005: 418).

I read again the characteristics of the Key Skill *Being literate* including writing for different purposes, expressing ideas clearly and accurately, exploring and creating a variety of texts, including multi-modal texts and place it alongside the Key Skill *Being Creative* – imagining, exploring options and alternatives, learning creatively. I think that in this library, in this writing club, space has been created so that writing stands 'against interiority, by giving an author a possibility of becoming more than his or her nominal self' (Polan, in Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: xxxiii). And so I turn back to the conversation of that day – in turn serious and laughter-filled, a conversation of respect and friendship.

Rachel: For anybody, is *The Writing Club* what you thought it would be when you first came through the doors?

Hope: I was afraid that it was going to be structured like a class, you know what I mean? I didn't want that at all. Because that's what I was trying to escape. It wasn't necessarily chaotic but … loose. It was much easier to relax.

Ryan: I thought it might have been similar to English class. But more focused on writing. But it was pretty chilled. And it grew and grew to this big family.

Me: And for you – has it been what you thought?

Rachel: I'd been building the library for about nine years. And I already had the point of view that the room had to be what the students needed it to be. So if that was different from the classroom then that was how it had to go. And so I knew it was going to be that kind of thing and Colm had already done a couple of workshops so I knew what sort of activities we'd be doing. But I wasn't prepared for the amount of emotional support it

gave people. And I don't think people who came through the doors were either. I don't think they realised how there's this … You can make yourself very vulnerable through writing but through vulnerability there's sometimes the quickest way you can build trust as well. (Sounds of agreement.) **So that was going on like a web all the time that people were opening up and the trust built really quickly. And then that gave the support in school during any difficulties.**

Me: A type of resilience as well, from each other?

There is assent here in the murmur of voices and nodding of heads.

Rachel: In *The Writing Club* we're equal, we're all contributing.

Me: There's a very nice flow to the conversation. People weave in and out as they want.

Hope: Because we know we're not going to have to fight for time to speak. Well, sometimes.

Craft (2008) reminds us of the importance of peer to peer equality in ensuring that social engagement is productive for all participants and it seems that this space is one where the 'taking of a toast and tea' (Eliot, 1911) marks a meeting of equals. I think of the Junior Cycle Key Skill *Staying well* and some of the attributes attached to it including being social, being confident and being positive about learning (NCCA, 2015) and it appears to me that they are found here in the thoughtful rise and fall of voices, in the laughter and in the quiet pauses those 'small spaces of silence/in between borrowed breaths' (Carney Hulme, 2005). I am recalled to the conversation by the challenge of Rachel's next question.

Rachel: Do you think it (*The Writing Club*) makes you a good listener?

Hope: I think so. I think it is because you always encourage us to give each other space. It just kind of happens naturally then because the group remember to give each other space as well. And then it dribbles into everyday life.

I think of Goldberg (2005: 58) who proposes that to write well we must listen well and admire that awareness of each other, here and in other landscapes, that the group is fostering. It seems to me that the spirit of resilience alluded to earlier is nourished by this awareness of, and connection, to others. Much of the literature on well-being emphasises the importance of relationships and I am moved by Hope's words and the assenting nods of the others.

Ryan: I think it's made me more observant of things going around. Even the tiniest thing.

Rachel: I think that's a great quality of writers and the more you encourage it the better because it's a form of mindfulness where you're observing the world but also the other

side of self-development that's so important is reflection. And you've got the two of them there. You're processing everything.

Me: And do you look at yourself in the world as well?

Hope: I think that's a challenge as a writer. You need to not just take your own perspective. You need to see yourself in situations also, rather than see the situation from your perspective.

Ryan: It's kind of empathy almost.

Hope: It's completely abstract to the point where you don't have an opinion on it – you're just viewing it happen from someone else's perspective.

Mia: Yeah, as a writer it's good to see two sides of the story but at the same time I think a writer should have some type of moral compass in a way. You have some level of judgment.

Hope: You have something to base your opinions on.

Colm: Do you think this level changes moral judgment? Do you think *The Writing Club* has a role in that?

Mia: Yeah because most writers I notice are very progressive. They have liberal opinions and that because you read and you have more knowledge of the world. When you're surrounded by people who have opinions like that it does affect you.

Colm: It's like that thing where they say readers can try on different lives, so they're good at paying attention, they're patient. They don't have to get what they want. They'll read a whole book even if it's … I think *The Writing Club* is a place where yous grow into yourselves. For me it was a kayaking club. Different schools value different things and this school set out to value literature … The combination of a good principal and the library has led to a space for writers that doesn't really exist in this way. I've not seen it any other schools. I've seen attempts at it but not in this kind of rolling process, you know where you have UCD graduates who grew up in a writing group.

Me: It's amazing. And I was sitting here just thinking … You know I mentioned at the beginning the Key Skills of Junior Cycle and one is *Being literate* and that could mean something narrow like being able to punctuate and write sentences but here what I'm listening to is people who are so literate because you have words, you have emotions, you have trust among each other… I think *that's* being literate.

Colm: That's why I loved English in school. It showed you all humanity, like when you read *King Lear*. That makes me think about the developed moral compass Mia was talking about.

As I wonder about what it means to be literate there are murmurs of agreement. I pause in my writing and listen again to my recording from that day - to the words, the tones, the silences. Davies et al (2013) posit that where children and young people are given some control over their learning and supported to take risks with the right balance between structure and freedom, their creativity is enhanced and developed.

I remember Colm talking about the moral responsibility of an author during the writing workshops I wrote about in *Landscape 3* and think of the challenge this poses to writers, to us all, as we compose stories about our lives. Indeed Hutchinson (1999 in Leggo, 2007: 28) reminds us that, 'Story is relational and reciprocal and, as such, entails moral responsibilities. As we tell stories and listen to stories, we stand in a moral relation to one another.'

I am mindful of Giroux (2013: 157) who speaks of a critical pedagogy that 'opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens … a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert one's convictions is made central to the purpose of public schooling and higher education, if not democracy itself'. Such challenge, such optimism.

Perhaps in this library, this 'field of wild flowers, the seeds of student empowerment are sown' (Fels, 2002: 1) as together with Rachel and Colm young authors negotiate curriculum through shared words and creativity, making it 'a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope' (Pinar et. al, 1995: 848). Such a transaction needs trust, courage, respect, but nested in the web of relationships I am glimpsing here, the stories co-composed here, the testimonies 'continually told and retold in good faith' might perhaps 'lead us to the future' (Pelias, 2004: 58). As I play back the conversation of today and place it beside the stories from the writing and visual workshops, I think again that all students should have such spaces open to them.

And I am again drawn back by story-telling voices, listening to my own wonderings.

Me: Has *The Writing Club* changed you as a writer Colm?

Colm: Yeah. It's enabled me as a writer. It's because when I came in here there were people who were fellow tribe members. I even wrote my play here. It's a lovely symbiotic relationship – I grow, we grow.

His honesty and insight remind me of Freire's (2014: 19) suggestion that 'the fact that the teacher supposedly knows and the student supposedly does not know, does not prevent the teacher from learning during the process of teaching, and the student from teaching, in the process of learning'. The acknowledgement of shared growth speaks perhaps to the

depth of trust developed through the critiquing of each other's work and co-composing of stories over the years. I feel that I may be witnessing 'the essence of democratic education' (ibid: 20).

Rachel: This is where you've piloted things and that's transferred out and all the skills we've spoken about … They're picking them up all the time and trying them out.

Colm: At the heart of it all is what a library is – fostering citizenship and self-directed learning and that you can be whatever you want to be. Like when I walked into a library when I was a kid, I could take the books down off the shelf and I could be the people in the books.

Me: Could *The Writing Club* have come into being without this library?

Ryan: I don't think so. It's a different space to a classroom.

Hope: It's the people as well.

Colm: It's the resources – the kettle, the toaster.

Rachel: He's not joking – it is, isn't it? It's all the little things that subliminally tell your brain that this isn't a classroom.

Hope: We've made it like this. Over the years.

Colm: It's nice to reflect on what we have here - it's pretty cool. And the way we work, we might be working on a project or towards a competition. If we weren't, a prompt might come from what one of us is writing about. Or we might be writing about local issues.

Me: So it's organic?

Colm: Spontaneity is important.

Me: So somebody else could bring in a prompt? (Agreement from the group.) **So it could go anywhere?**

Ryan: It's different every week!

As I wonder if these story-tellers are learning 'not simply to make their way in the world, but to remake the world' (Levinson, 2001: 18–19) I receive an invitation that I will be powerless to resist.

Rachel: You might like to come back and listen to some of the writing.

Colm: Consider yourself an honorary member. You can bring your poem!

On this note of generous sociability the conversation draws to a close for today, but I am aware that I am leaving in the midst. The threads of the conversation will be gathered up again soon, perhaps partly unpicked, newly-patterned, stitched into a vibrant story of lives.

I feel already a sense of absence – mine and theirs. As we gather up our belongings and walk out of the school there is chatter and waved good-byes. I turn on the car engine, heading for home, thoughts of *The Writing Club* rushing through my mind, the clicking of the car's indicator an echo of the beating of my heart. In the coming days I will play and re-play my recording from today and I will be back in the library space, 'an empty space that sings of traces' (Fels, 2003: 183), traces that linger in my mind and heart, calling on me to:

> *Listen again*
> *Do you hear the voice speaking in between your heartbeats?*
>
> - From *Heart witnessing*, Kadi Purru[47]

And I hear the voices still.

4.4 *The Writing Club*: Afterthoughts on a visit

On my way home, alone in my car, I compose a story and speak it out loud to myself. It is a simple story, unvarnished, that reveals my response to what I have been witnessing. As I speak my thoughts out into the air their flight is caught forever on my phone and listening to them later I can hear my excitement fill the car and I enter again 'into a river of story' (Adams and Holman Jones, 2011: 108).

As I strive to be an ethical inquirer, I share my response to *The Writing Club* visit here, aware that I 'have an ethical, political, aesthetic and scientific obligation to be reflexive and self-critical' (Ruby, 1977: 3). Madison (2011: 129) writes that 'the ethnographer not only contemplates his or her actions and meanings in the field (reflective) but also she or he turns inward to contemplate how she or he is contemplating actions and meaning'. As I attempt to reveal my responses to being in the midst I acknowledge that, '[T]he self that readers meet in your autoethnographic piece is the one you have devised on the page' (Pelias, 2019: 31) yet I will endeavour to unfurl my innermost thoughts before you.

I play the recording of the conversation from *The Writing Club* once more, reading my transcription alongside it, one layered upon the other. Listening to my thoughts on the car journey I hear myself say:

[47] http://einsights.ogpr.educ.ubc.ca/v13n03/articles/purru/index.html

> *This was an amazing experience. I absolutely loved it. They were so generous with their time. I'm almost speechless because I'm excited. They are so articulate! The level of trust that was in that room was incredible*.

I think of Pathak (2010: 4) who reminds us that to 'know is to fully engage an experience with one's mind, body, and heart' and I feel again my heart-beat quicken in response to the memory of that day.

I am back in the library, back in my car, experiences unfolding and then folding in on each other, my voice announcing that I am *in* the research. Madison (2005: 19) notes that '[T]he experiences in your life, both past and present, and who you are as a unique individual will lead you to certain questions about the world and certain problems related to why things are the way they are.' Hearing myself on the car-journey home say:

> *I felt I arrived rather empty-handed. I should have brought chocolates. I almost arrived empty-worded because they are used to sharing their written work and their thoughts with each other. So being a researcher, a narrative arts researcher, being surrounded by words and by tones and by gentle movements – if I could do this for the rest of my life …*

I contemplate what has brought me to this point and what it means to me to be a narrative inquirer. I must acknowledge that *I gain* …. but I believe that the impetus was born and nurtured in my childhood home where education was valued, in my career where I learned that not all schools have libraries and in my personal relationships and learning.

In his foreword to *Pedagogy of Solidarity* (2014: 10) Giroux suggests that

> 'Hope for Freire is a practice of witnessing, an act of moral imagination... Hope demands an anchoring in transformative practices, and one of the tasks of the progressive educator is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be'.

And as I think back to what I have seen and heard at *The Writing Club* – the atmosphere of respect, of sharing of work, of learning to critique the work of others and having one's own critiqued in turn, the nurturing of self-belief and belief in possibilities - I hope that my research is indeed a witnessing – of the value of an arts-based education in a school library, of the creativity of those who may reside there and of a promise to place such libraries in fifty DEIS schools that has not yet been fulfilled.

Yet of course a library is more than a building no matter how beautiful. I think back to my own early days visiting libraries and remember warm spaces full of enticing books. And I wonder about the role of a librarian, a role not visible in many Irish schools. It seems to me that what I have seen and heard in this library is Rachel working with others to cultivate learning conditions in which interests and life experiences of students – and indeed, adults – are drawn upon in social spaces so they can explore and develop new ideas together. Directly involved in the design of the library in its physical and social dimensions – a place intentionally far removed from the traditional classroom - she creates relational spaces in which she attends to her students (past and present), to make the sharing of ideas and future dreams in this communal practice possible (Dewey, 1938). Frequently during my research participants have reiterated that this would not be possible without Rachel, without this library space. In essence, her work here seems to me to be an example of the way relationships and democratic social spaces work towards transformative education (Brookfield, 2003). Such transformation also finds itself in the way she and facilitators such as Colm and Jole encourage students to bring their own culture and identities to this learning space (Giroux, 2005). I have seen and heard this happening through the creative writing and visual arts workshops, in *The Writing Club* and in conversations with my participants. As students move through experiences such as these and others such as the *WraPParound* spoken poetry event I have mentioned earlier, as adults and students collaborate together to make meaningful learning moments I believe that they are engaging in a culturally relevant pedagogy that uses 'the student's culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualise knowledge' (Ladson-Billings, 1992: 314). I would suggest that the adults too – myself included – have been embraced and changed by such interactions.

As I engage anew with the thoughts about the importance of librarians and librarianship, I am mindful of Stone (2004: 23) and attempt to write 'without power'. I offer instead tentative musings while drawing forward participant voices and voices from research into libraries. Later in a conversation I had with one of the teachers – Aisling - she describes Rachel as 'the heart of the library' and not being able to imagine what it would be like if the library wasn't there. I think of the importance of acknowledging librarianship as a profession, with unique skills and perspectives. The librarians who work in the JCSP Library Project are highly qualified in their field and engage in a programme of Continuous Professional Development. The *JCSP Library Project Charter* (2015: 4) underpins this

commitment to librarianship in its commitment to ensure 'that each JCSP library is staffed by a full-time professional library'. Research commissioned by the Library Project, 'More than a Room for Reading JCSP Demonstration Library Project' (2007) found that:

> 'It is clear from the data that the presence of a professionally staffed library has had a meaningful impact on the educational experiences of and outcomes for the majority of JCSP students' (Henefer: 31).

Such findings are supported by research carried out by the National Centre for Literacy Education (NCLE, 2016, cited in Teravainen and Clark, 2017) which suggests that:

> 'school librarians are highly involved leaders who play a critical role in their schools through consistent and sustained collaboration with other educators … School librarians are highly involved leaders in their professional learning communities inside and outside of school.'

I think back to the relationships woven in the library during the writing and visual arts workshops and in *The Writing Club*, the discourses spun from one to the other as Rachel, Colm, Aisling, Jole and the students considered ways to tell stories. During an early visit I asked Rachel how she starts planning classes and workshops for students. She responded that she observes and engages them in conversation, notes what they are borrowing and talks to class teachers. The New York Comprehensive Centre's publication 'Informational Brief: Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement Executive Summary' (2011: 4) notes that: 'An increase of librarians in school libraries tends to correlate with higher school assessment results.' And I feel that I am beginning to understand why this is so.

However, while it acknowledges the contribution of librarians, the literature does not capture fully the deeply relational and sociable aspect of their role which my research seeks to demonstrate is key in the transformative possibilities and democratic learning environments created. For instance, while Merga (2021a) concurs that students identify library staff as a key factor in their enjoyment of, and safety in the library, she also points to the lack of research into their pastoral support role and how this can contribute to student wellbeing (2021b). I suggest that part of the contribution of my research lies in highlighting this relational and interpersonal aspect of the role.

Perhaps a space such as this where relationships and culture and literacy in its many forms seem to be as much part of the library as the books on the shelves - Michael Murpugo's 'dreaming places' (*JCSP Library Charter*, 2015: 5) - makes room for belief in success in whatever form it may take. I borrow the words of author and illustrator Jarrett J. Krosoczka

who makes the point - rather well I suggest - when he says: 'It is an awfully sad misconception that librarians simply check books in and out. The library is the heart of a school, and without a librarian, it is but an empty shell.'[48]

Bochner (2013: 53) suggests that 'Autoethnography focuses on the fullness of living and, accordingly, autoethnographers want to ask, how can we make life better?' And the beating of my heart taps out again the long-held promise of more JCSP libraries and librarians in DEIS schools.

I move now into a conversational space with Ryan. We will be joined for a while by Rachel and they both move easily in and out of discussion with each other.

4.5 Conversational spaces: Ryan and Rachel

Ryan has been a member of *The Writing Club* for several years having joined when he was in first year and continuing to participate during his university years and beyond. One afternoon we sit upstairs and talk about the library and what it has meant to him. There is tea of course and, true to the sociability of the library, as we settle in to the conversation, Rachel drops by and sits easily with us for a while. I begin by asking Ryan about when he first started to come to the library.

Ryan: It was in 1st year. We came for library classes and the teacher was reading the *Vampire* series with us. I remember thinking I need to find out what happens next. The first time in *The Writing Club* was summer camp. That was *the* first *Writing Club*. I'm one of the originals ... Kept me going during the year. A little space where you don't have to be worrying about anything.

Me: What was it like as a twelve year old coming into the library?

Ryan: I used to go to a mobile library but I'd never really gone into a *proper* library, that had the space to be quiet and read and write. In primary school there was a shelf at the back of the room. (He laughs gently.) **I really liked it** [the library]**. I suppose in 1st year I didn't really understand why I liked it but … I realised that it was a really nice place to be. I mean it's just a place you can come to chill out. I guess there's teachers here but there's**

[48] https://www.librarianshipstudies.com/2018/05/quotes-libraries-librarians-library-information-science.html

no one hounding you to do this or that. You just sit, you read, do whatever you want. And physically it's just a nice place to come into, you know?

Me: You can do what you want? That just sounds so loose.

Ryan: Yeah. (Laughs.) **You could take a book and read or pull out a music CD – you couldn't do that in a class … You could sit with your thoughts. It had a big effect on me. Reading became a thing for me. The summer after the first *Writing Club* my writing matured. I've always been reading since then.**

Me: So what do you think is the purpose of the library?

Ryan: I'd say it's a great space for getting books that you can just pick up and read. But the computers are really important as well – we're in the age of technology. Research. Anyone could come in and find something they want. It's just great for everyone.

Me: But from what you are saying could this library not be great without having a librarian?

Ryan: If Rachel wasn't here, the library wouldn't be here. Because I think she gives off this lovely vibe of being such a nice person. Without her the library wouldn't be the same … I think she's just different. She'll talk to you, she'll sit with you.

Me: Do qualified librarians have skills that they bring that a teacher wouldn't?

Ryan: I suppose it's because it's less of a classroom environment and it's more of an open social space where you can come in and just chat to Rachel. She's separate from teachers but still part of the school.

Me: So do you think relationships are really important?

Ryan: Yeah. A hundred percent. Like I come in here and she knows this person, this person and I'm like how do you know all these people? Or someone walks out and she's like this person's really lovely and so nice. It's a lot of relationship building. If we need anything we go to her and she'll help in as many ways as she can. And from seeing other people's work and what they are coming out with when you're writing you might write certain things … We went to the *Great Rope of Tallaght* … So that's helped me write more poetry.

The Great Paper Rope of Tallaght was a project created by participants drawn from various local communities weaving visual images, stories and memories together with personal artefacts to create a paper rope that started in Tallaght Village and wound 1.5km to the Civic Theatre. The project began in 2018 and the rope was exhibited in Tallaght from June 13th to 15th the following year. I think about Ryan writing and performing poetry at the event, honing his skills and confidence and I admire him for it. I applaud him for working so

hard at his craft and situating himself in his culture and contributing to it through performance. I think of hooks (1994) who suggested that the classroom 'remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy' and I wonder if the JCSP library in which Ryan has spent so many hours is in fact such a space. I picture those who attend its writing club immersing themselves in language, performing it to each other calling forth its power.

Me: So if you were never a member of *The Writing Club* could you ever imagine yourself doing that?

Ryan: No not really because the club helped improve my public speaking because I would have been a bit shy in 1st or 2nd year. After being in *The Writing Club* my confidence came up and then at a few school events I read my work out in a hall full of students and teachers and that was really good. Some of my writing is in the magazines we have here and my science teacher at the time said, 'Can I have your autograph in case you become famous?' I did my graduation speech with my friend. Without being in *The Writing Club* none of that would have happened. Even in college it would have helped. I would have been the student in the back of class with a thought but who doesn't want to raise his hand but in college in tutor rooms I'd have no problem talking in front of other people. Or I wouldn't have any problem visiting other schools and telling them about college.

Me: Do you think that *The Writing Club* challenges you – in a good way?

Ryan: I guess so. Like sometimes it would take me out of my comfort zone. I wouldn't have been a poetry writer and sometimes I'm given a challenge to write pieces. If there's a piece I have that I'm not sure how to go about it … If you can overcome that it can only help you… Being part of a group helps you .. If they can do it, I'll be able to overcome it. Challenge is good. So I think being in *The Writing Club* has made me a better writer. Because one of the first stories I wrote was funny but now my writing would deal with certain issues … capitalism, drugs etc. I'd say my writing is a bit darker now… Sharing work here is a help. When I'm writing, I'll write it all down and then they'll say there are things to work on. It's constructive criticism. I like getting feedback and then editing so I can make it the best it can be.

Me: So when you bring a piece and they give constructive criticism and you work on it and bring back a polished one, you read that again to them?

Ryan: Yeah, that's what I did with the piece yesterday. So it's better but still other bits to work on. So I worked on that last night and I sent it to Rachel and Colm.

Me: So when you polish it and bring it back and they are responding to this piece of improved work, how does that feel for you?

Ryan: Colm said yesterday he liked how much more it was edited and polished but it could still use a bit more work. It's not the same story it was so that helps … The positive feedback is really, really good. I wrote a story as a WhatsApp conversation. It's a constant story that happens. There's no hiding anything in it. I suppose different language can come across in different ways.

Or perhaps, in the words of Leggo (2016) we might ask ourselves:

> is the glamour in grammar
> a magical evocation
> of hopeful possibilities?
>
> - From *Fragments or Fractals*

Rachel comes alongside us and joins in the conversation. It seems such a natural movement that there is scarcely a pause as she picks up the threads of what Ryan has been saying.

Rachel: I don't know if you'd reflect on this because you're in the thick of it but he's levelled up to the point where his work gets picked to shreds, doesn't it?

Ryan: Yeah.

Rachel: Because that's where we're at. It's the same kind of response that somebody would get if they were handing their work into an editor. And today, one of the other teachers was making us laugh because she was listening so hard to the feedback that you were getting from Colm because she was learning so much. I was trying to speak to her and she was just like, 'Mmm, yeah, yeah ...'

The response is warm and gentle laughter and I think of the resilience that writers need to cloak themselves in as they learn their craft.

Rachel: So that's where you're at but it takes a long time to develop. Yeah it really takes that professional level.

Ryan: I was saying that the first year we had it in the summer and after I came back you said my work had matured.

Me: And obviously it's continuing that maturation process.

Ryan: Yeah – I've levelled up! (Laughs.)

Rachel: And Mia would be at a similar kind of level where nothing is being sugar-coated. It's very probing.

Me: I suppose a writer needs that rigorous challenge.

Rachel: Yeah. It's like lifting the biggest weights in the gym. It's very intense, isn't it?

Ryan: Yeah. Yesterday when I got the feedback I worked on it straight away and sent it on to yous. So when I get feedback I work on it as much as I can.

Rachel: But I don't think you'd get that intensity of input in any other setting. Because it has to build up over years as well.

Me: But then there has to be trust …

Ryan: I think if it was anyone outside the club I'd be a bit hesitant to share. It's like an extension of me showing myself, you know?

I warm to the sense of collaboration here as writers of all ages, more and less experienced, acknowledge the importance of working together in support, developing an 'imagination that explores the nature and value of our relationships to each other, of taking risks. This imagination demands courage' (Dunlop, 2002: 12). I think that it cannot be easy to have work critiqued but during my visits I have seen how respectfully they engage in the process. Discussing why people do or do not write, Cixous and Calle-Gruber (1997: 12) suggest:

> 'This may be why so many people do not write: because it's terrifying. And conversely, it is what makes certain people write: because it's intoxicating. Language is all powerful. You can say everything, do everything, that has not yet been said, not yet been done.'

And in my mind's eye I see students in a library space working together, speaking stories to each other as the seasons outside the tall windows turn. I think about the work that goes into creating such spaces, some of it visible only through the trust and ease evident in the relationships forged here as Rachel, Colm and Jole work skilfully together, creating engagements for, and with, students in this democratic and productive space. I think of the tea and toast that are part of this library, their warmth – literal and metaphorical – and recall Wenger (1998: 3) suggesting that learning is 'a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing'. Davies et al (2013) remind us that that there is strong evidence to suggest that student creativity is related to the existence of both supportive relationships with their teachers and opportunities for working collaboratively with their peers. I think about how intricate the web of relationships here is – librarian, facilitators, teachers, students – the quiet planning that has gone into the creation of this physical and social space and the arts-based curriculum. The collaborations I have seen here bring to mind Freire's (1998) suggestion that while teaching and learning are serious acts, they are also acts that generate happiness. In conversations and laughter over cups of tea, in creative writing acts and in bodies on a library floor engaging in artistic representation, I have witnessed my participants creating co-intentional educational experiences (Freire, 1970), being respectfully together in the world.

I reflect again on the importance the Library Project has always placed on the fact that the libraries are staffed by professional librarians. And I draw forward once more my wonderings about why the other libraries promised to DEIS schools have not yet been delivered. Rachel's gentle tones bring me back to the conversation which continues to unfold easily.

Rachel: When we started *The Writing Club* the first year was spent building relationships. We were very aware of that.

Me: I guess that you're exposing yourself …

Rachel: Yeah and your weaknesses as well when you're inviting criticism. You have to believe that the person giving it to you has your best interests at heart. You can't just walk in on week one and have that trust.

I think back to Calkins (1986: 119) who urges us to draw close to students … 'to be a person not just a teacher. It is to enjoy, to care and to respond. We cry, nod, laugh and respond' and I feel the strength of relationships developed in this space. Here in this library, in this writing club it seems that people are present to each other, where in the words of Vanier (in Sumarah et al., 1991: 12) they 'give value to people by the way we look at them, by the way we listen to them, by the way we touch them, and care for them … by the way we are present to them.'

And I sense that some of the qualities of the Key Skill *Staying well* such as being confident, being positive about learning are being lived out here.

Ryan: We're writing a piece together in the club … and Rachel and I are flying along. Some of us are writing in the first person, some in the third. Each page is almost a different style. So it's going to be interesting doing the editing!

Rachel acquiesces and moves away to get ready for class as Ryan and I continue to talk.

Me: Can you see any of *The Writing Club* in yourself?

Ryan: I guess so because I think I've become a lot more of an observer as I've become a writer. I've been on nights out .. and I've been like that's really interesting. I take notes on my phone and turn it into a piece ... A lot of these happen in bars because people can be different in bars … like you can picture them in different situations. I see certain characters and I think I need to give them a back story and see what's going on with this situation. So as a writer, it's made me look at things in a certain way and maybe empathise with them … I've been an observer ever since being here I think. I just find it interesting to give these people stories.

Ryan has shared some of his writing with me and I know that he experiments in various genres. Being an observer of human nature – surely an important part of the writing life – is something he has spoken about before and I am impressed by how awake he is to the world. I have already mentioned that, in *The Writing Club* and in the library workshops and activities, there is a focus on lived experiences, an acknowledgement of the importance of one's culture. Indeed, Giroux (2005: 142) speaks of the necessity for the development of a pedagogy 'that is attentive to the histories, dreams and experiences that such students bring to schools.' In paying attention to these factors and in creating relational spaces where work may be critiqued and ideas shared, I believe that Rachel and facilitators such as Colm and Jole have empowered students to believe in the importance of their voices in the world. Creating dialogic places in which the culture and language of students are valued, they make space for a social, liberating education (Shor and Freire, 1987). Here students learn that they can be artists, writers, teachers, problem-solvers. It is a space in which they can experiment without being judged (Maria) and where if you make a mistake it doesn't matter (Tony). In this social space of tea and toast, where students and staff may work together at a table or on the floor, making moral choices, I offer that we are witnessing the making 'possible an alternative construction of ourselves' (Shor, 2017: 10). To borrow from Freire again, I suggest that this library – this librarian – have been developing a literacy that is preparing students for a self-managed life

Davies (1999: 182) writes that:

> 'We enter into the novel as another form of living in the world through imagining the lives of others as we bring them to life on the page... We find certainty there in the already known. But we may also find the unexpected, the thrilling, the element that unsettles, that makes undecidable the controlled, the rational, and the already decided.'

As Ryan brings his characters to life, as he journeys with them and re-imagines him, perhaps he and his audience will experience the thrill of the yet unknown. I think of the nurturing audience that is *The Writing Club* and we continue our conversation.

Me: Do you bring those stories back to *The Writing Club*?

Ryan: Yeah I brought the one about the two best friends. Colm said there was something else going on in the story that needed to be explored more so I brought it home and worked on it. So that strengthened the story, made it a better story. Colm and *The Writing Club* challenged me to be a better writer.

I am grateful to Ryan and Rachel for spending this time with me, sharing insights into what it takes to become a writer. Leggo (2008: 7) reminds us that 'researchers need to be more attentive to their writing as craft and art' and as I walk through the school on my way home I think about my own work and the skill and patience I will need to compose something worthy of my participants. As I weave their words into my own and those of others I realise that:

> 'Stories … are one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves […] we become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell' (Andrews, 2007: 77–78).

I know that I want to continue co-composing stories here.

4.6 Conversational spaces: Mia

I move forward along the landscape now into the winter of 2019 and spring of 2020. I meet with Mia twice during those months and bring both conversations together here. I have read some of her work and on our last visit – just before Covid makes its terrifying demands that we close down much of the country – she reads one of her poems. To protect her anonymity I cannot write it down here but so stunned am I by the power of her poetry that I think perhaps Leggo's (2016: 351) words 'I live in language, and language lives in me' could have been written for her. We begin by talking about when she first started to come to the library.

Mia: I came in first year, the first year I came in to secondary school. So I've been here for four or five years. I think I was in the library trying to get a book. And then Miss asked me if I liked reading. I said yeah. And she asked do I like writing as well. And I said, yeah. And so she's like, 'Oh, there's is a club.' And she says, 'You can come over.' I said, ok why not. And I brought one of my stories that I was working on. I just read it out and everyone was really nice. Yeah, it was instant click.

Me: So you were a writer. Why did you like to write?

Mia: I like to write and read. And I suppose I love to read. So obviously, naturally, that just led me into writing what I was just reading a book - I think it was *BFG*.[49] And I was like, 'Oh, my God, this is really cool.' I thought can't I just make my own story. And so I started doing that. And, yeah, it was just my love for reading.

[49] 'The BFG' by Roald Dahl (1982)

Me: So then you came to *The Writing Club*? And you enjoyed it from day one. And what did you like about it?

Mia: I suppose it was, from the very first day I came in, and it was just clear that this was a place that I could grow my writing. And it was … I knew I would get constructive criticism. But also it'd be really nice to develop my writing.

Me: Did you find the constructive criticism hard at first?

Mia: Yeah. I mean, at first … I think that's a good thing. Because I think I learned from the club. You know… constructive criticism isn't to say your work is really bad. It's to say, this is the bits that you can fix. And I think that's where I learned that kind of attitude of welcoming constructive criticism is not taken as like a personal insult, you know. So yeah, it was a bit hard at first because when you're connected to your work in a way like that, if someone says, 'Oh, this bit, I didn't like it' you kind of feel they're essentially saying, 'Oh, I don't like this about you.' But it's not about you. l learned that.

Me: That's really good. Can you remember what you wrote first? What was the first piece you brought?

Mia: I don't have it anymore. But it was a piece about this … I think it was a fantasy story. And … oh I forget.

Colm: I remember it. It was about some person getting ready for a battle.

I had been so engrossed in the conversation that I had forgotten that Colm was in the room.

Mia: Oh, yeah, yeah they were getting ready for a battle and then this girl was … So basically her dad had gone off to battle. And he died so it was going to be about her finding out who killed her father and kind of just becoming the hero that she saw in her da.

Me: So obviously, it made an impression on Colm because he remembered it. (Mia laughs.) **So you brought it and you read it. And do people give you the feedback immediately? Or do they take it away and read it as well?**

Mia: No, yeah, they give it immediately. It's kind of why I like it. Because everyone has something to say. And it's always something nice, but it's also something that will build. And … you can take it and you can leave it but, you know, that's always gonna be there. So when I read it, everyone's like, 'Oh my God, are you sure you didn't steal it?' I said, no way. Yeah.

Me: And then when you bring a piece of work and you take it away again, do you rewrite it?

Mia: Yes. Sometimes I'll rewrite it but if it's something I've finished I might leave it … the criticism they've given me on that one, I'll take it and put it in a different work. So it's always building.

Me: So do you think then the club has helped you grow as a writer and so you've got the constructive criticism?

Mia: So yeah, that's right. I think as a writer it has, because sometimes I read some of the work that I did when I was twelve. And I think, oh, it's so bad. But then, you know, I'm always reading back on the stuff I used to do, my own work. And I always notice things I've changed and different lessons I've learned. And it's always … It's sometimes to do with character development and sometimes has to do with, you know, context, descriptive writing and things like that and just always developing those skills as a writer. And then there's also the kind of moral code to it as well, you know, as writers. I think it's really important that when you're a writer you need to see both sides of their story and you need to understand different perspectives. I think that's really important as a person as well.

Me: And how do you learn that?

Mia: Just to put in yourself, because when you're writing, you're putting yourself in a different character. And you're, you know, you might have them in a situation that you've never been in. I think it develops empathy that way, because then you'll have to see the world through that character's eyes and like, okay, what choices would they make? What choices would *I* make if I was this character in this situation?

I think back to the writing workshops I attended in the library and remember Colm asking the students to consider their responsibilities - as actor, character and writer - to the story, to themselves and to the audience and how echoes of this discussion found their way into my conversations with the students afterwards.

Me: And that's really, really interesting. It sounds like great maturity on the behalf of a writer. So at *The Writing Club* would you discuss things like that?

Mia: Oh, yeah (spoken with emphasis; laughs)**. Definitely. We have conversations around different things, we'll talk about one thing and the conversation will just bring into philosophy and moral code and theories. And so yeah, we do have those conversations a lot.**

Me: And would you ever disagree about the morality of something?

Mia: Yeah. There's always … well not always … disagreements, but even if there is it's more of a discussion.

Me: And can you see that kind of morality developing in yourself and in your writing?
Mia: Yeah, yeah.
Me: If you hadn't come to the club what kind of writer do you think you'd be?
Mia: I probably wouldn't be as open to share work. But I can't really think can't imagine myself not coming to *The Writing Club*.
Me: And, at the club, because obviously, I met Ryan and yourself before and there are other regulars, so do you all bring writing?
Mia: Sometimes and sometimes not. At least one or two people who have stuff to share and we comment and go back and forth.
Me: So does it build your resilience then?
Mia: Yeah, I suppose like anything in life, when you experience it like it there's always something you can take away from it, *The Writing Club*.
Me I suppose, in the life of a writer, that's probably important, is it because you're always exposing your work to an audience?
Mia: Yeah, it's … I think, because I read something that when a writer has good relationship with their work, they welcome criticism more often. And being with *The Writing Club* you get that. I think it helps build a healthy relationship with work because then if like if someone says, 'Oh, that could change', you know, you're like, okay, yeah, I can look at that. Like, instead of just thinking oh, no, that person said something really mean to me or whatever. And I'm more open to sharing my work and it kind of challenges me a bit as well. And kind of do more and try and experiment with different things. Like screenwriting, playwrighting, short stories.
Me: Do you have a favourite genre?
Mia: Not yet actually. I'm doing different ones. But I suppose I like contemporary. Now anyway. I went through a phase where like sci-fi, and then there was history and then now it's contemporary. So I haven't… I don't have a staple favourite.
As I listen to Mia's tales of experimentation in her craft I think back to my conversation with Ryan and my visits to *The Writing Club* where the conversation meandered across the terrain and where they discussed what literature might be. It seems to me that as these young authors write and perform they have immersed themselves in the possibilities that unfolded in the club as they embrace writing in its many forms.
Me: That's probably a good thing as a young writer, because it makes you more open to trying things. And, you know, you talk about your relationship with your own writing. Does *The Writing Club* help you *like* your own writing?

Mia: Yeah, it does. I mean, you can always take something from someone else's work. There's a lot of inspiration that goes around. So yeah, yeah.

Me: And as you said, like a lot of positive criticism. So that must make you think sometimes ... What do you enjoy about writing?

Mia: I can never say just one thing. There's always different things. And it's just … that part of my brain is just always on. I could be doing maths and that part of my brain is just on overdrive. So it's just … I just do write.

Me: So do you write every day?

Mia: Yeah but then there's days if I'm doing a project, I probably won't write anything about that project. I'll probably start a new one. So I have a thousand different documents on Google Docs.

Me: And, and you said at the moment, you're doing the contemporary piece on climate change?

Mia: Yeah, I am doing one on climate change. And it's, I suppose you could call it contemporary. But yeah, it's in progress. It's based in this timeframe. Yeah. But it's kind of like elements are very different. It's kind like a lot of use of symbolism.

Me: You sound like a very mature writer.

She laughs and thanks me.

Me: You wouldn't bring that piece to *The Writing Club* yet, would you? At what stage would you bring a piece?

Mia: I honestly just bring it in when I'm … when it's in draft. So once I've written it, and it's in a draft, I'll bring it along and just get a taste of what people think of the story itself and then I'll take it away and then maybe work on it, maybe not.

Me: So supposing you read something out and people said… no. Would you still have the courage to think, well actually, I still think it's really good?

Mia: Yeah. Because I never get that from here. So no one's never said no, that's not good story.

Me: If that day ever came do you think you could step back and say no, actually, this is really good?

Mia: Yeah. I'd say so yeah.

Me: So just to go back to the beginning, so you came to the club. What did you expect, or did you even expect anything?

Mia: I didn't have any expectations. Yes. But … when I came, it was really full. It was like, loads of people. And, well, yeah, I didn't really have any expectations. But I did want it to

be a really nice place, especially if I was going to read out my work. I didn't want anyone you know … but I didn't have any negative emotions. I was kind of excited.

Me: And so what makes it a nice place?

Mia: I guess it's just the people, at the club's core. I think it's just the people here are eager to learn about writing and also eager to hear other people's writing and there's just this, like interest and inspiration and writing and open mindedness that makes it great. Open minded to each other.

Me: Can you remember the first time you heard somebody else read a piece?

Mia: I think it was a poem. It was one of the senior girls who's gone now. I just remember going oh my God I want to write like that.

Me: I suppose that's great because that makes it inspiring. And that probably makes you come back.

Mia: Yeah.

Me: So now you *can* write like that. (She agrees laughingly.) **So do you get a sense of your writing evolving while you're in *The Writing Club*?**

Mia: Yeah, definitely. I've gone through different phases, as I said, with genres and writing styles and not and writing, like, formats. So … short stories, and there's novels I've tried to write and then this, now it's playwriting and it's screenwriting. So you know what - I'll definitely alternate between different ones. So in regards to my writing changing in *The Writing Club*, it has changed so much.

Me So gives you the courage to change?

Mia: Yeah.

Me. If somebody else read a piece and you were critiquing it? So you're giving *them* something. But do you learn from your own critiquing as well?

Mia: Yeah. I mean, there's times when I think, oh, that's very good advice that I gave them. I'll use that. So yeah, and also the advice that I give that I've been given before myself. And sometimes I go home and I read different articles. And because I'm very serious about writing I like to learn things from *The Writing Club* as well but I'll go home and watch a video on character and how to develop a theme and different things from articles, YouTube videos.

Me: So you take it very seriously. And would you ever kind of bring any of that back to the group?

Mia: Yeah, I do it with advice kind of. So if someone's doing a story, they've read it out, like, oh, this is something I've learned, and I'll share it.

Chappell et al (2013: 247) remind us that when 'students engage in arts processes, they develop distinct and complementary social practices: developing craft, engaging and persisting, envisioning, expressing, observing, reflecting, stretching and exploring, and understanding art worlds.' It seems to me that Mia, participating in an arts curriculum in the library and exploring ways to further develop as a writer, is refining her skills as she moves into such worlds. Her focus on her work and her desire to constantly improve her art reminds me of Leggo's (2004: 41) statement that: 'I linger with words, literally and literately, confident that in language I can find the way, or at least an inviting way.'
I have read some of her work and have, indeed, enjoyed lingering there in that inviting place.

Me: Because that goes back to where you were saying that you needed to be in a place where you could be open. So in the group, the working relationships are important. So it's important that this is a kind of a place where people can work together? Because you're sharing your own work, which is really important. Is it the atmosphere is important? Maybe that's a better way to put it?

Mia: Yeah, the atmosphere has always been great. So I think that … you need to have a place where you feel comfortable with people, especially if we're going to …

Me: How is that created?

Mia: I couldn't really put a finger on it. I just think that anyone who walks through the door and is interested in *The Writing Club* is automatically just a nice person. There's never been a person who's when I'm reading is laughing or snickering. I've never had that experience before.

Me: It's just attracting people who are really keen to write and I suppose support each other?

Mia: Yeah.

Me: So is there any one main thing you've learned? Or two major things if you look back over the years?

Mia: I've learned to be a better listener. It's very easy. When I sit around a table and everyone has so many different ideas … sometimes it's hard to hear other people. Or because you're excited just to share your idea. So it's really taught me how to be a better listener. And that makes me a better writer because you're paying attention to different things around you and different conversations. And you say, oh that's really interesting. I'll put that in my work.

Me: That's clever. So, what would you say is Miss's role? Because she's been here since the beginning.

Mia: Oh Miss is just brilliant. She's like, the backbone of *The Writing Club*, I think. I mean, I think Miss and Colm are just really important parts of the club. You couldn't have *The Writing Club* without the two of them. It would just be a bunch of teenagers sitting in a library shouting at each other. (She laughs.) **So yeah, it's just the support and the welcomeness. Like, I could go on for days. I can't really - she's just all-around brilliant.**

How wonderful that such words have been used again and again when Rachel's name is mentioned. I think of the work she engaged in to create a welcoming physical landscape with sofas and tea – even fish – a space that does not look like a classroom. But this tea is not just tea, we might say. Rather it is a metaphor for the welcome that awaits, a drink that may assuage a thirst, that may lubricate conversation. It seems that Mia knows this too.

Me: But if she wasn't here?

Mia: It would be boring! She is … like she's kind of … sometimes she'll give like advice as well. Everyone gives advice and she'll make sure everyone's in. And you know, there's always just banter and she's just lovely. And she also like organises the biscuits and stuff for *The Writing Club* in general. So like, we wouldn't have biscuits, if it was not for her.

Me: And are biscuits important?

Mia: Her biscuits are very important. (Laughs.)

Me: Why Mia?

Mia: You couldn't have a club meeting without biscuits, it's just impossible. Or without toast.

Me: So that goes back to atmosphere does it?

Mia: Yeah, I think she creates the atmosphere along with Colm. They're really an integral part of the whole system.

Me: That's lovely. As, I think, are the writers who come here.

Mia: Yeah, true. (Laughs.)

The library publishes student work regularly and Mia is a regular contributor, often writing about issues that are of concern or interest to her age group. I have read several of her poems and am thrilled when she reads one to me. Her youthful voice speaks words that are rich in metaphor and many-hued. I am stunned at the skill and power that shimmer through her use of language and think that, to borrow from Fels (2010: 3), here in this library, 'I dwell in performative moments, embodied moments of recognition that are stops, that shake me awake, that demand my response.'

I am almost breathless and resolve to take, 'One stroke at a time, one breath, one self-bestowed permission, then the next' (Hoogland, 2003: 22) as we move gently back into conversation.

We talk about her work as a poet and the poem she has just read which deals with the lives of teenagers. And I think how important it is that young people are encouraged to see themselves as talented, with important words to speak to audiences.

Me: It's even more powerful when you read it yourself. The words and concepts you chose … How did you come to write this piece?

Mia: I was coming out of Religion class and thinking of ways to write down the teenage experience through poetry. But I didn't want it to be very angsty and very dark and deep because I think that a lot of times when people think about teenagers it's what they think of which isn't true but isn't necessarily wrong either. I kind of wanted to see if I could get different angles and aspects like with drugs and the kind of antics you get up to as teenagers and try to see it through some aspects of religion.

Me: There's a line about purgatory. What's purgatory for a teenager?

Mia: It's kind of feeling like you're not completely allowed to be an adult but you're not completely allowed to be a child at the same time. So you're caught in two different worlds. That concept, for me, is very explanatory of what it's like to be a teenager. So I did really want to get that line in and then also the concept of religion and faith. It's something that is questioned. Like, I was just coming out of Religion and we were talking about faith in teenagers and how we're at this point when we're questioning faith.

I am impressed by the way she draws on her own wonderings about life as a teenager. Perhaps as Leggo (2016: 29) suggests, 'Poetry offers significant ways for learning and practising our living in the world' and that:

> *The poem is important,*
> *as the want of it*
> *proves. It is the stewardship*
> *of its own possibility.*
>
> – Berry (1994: 21)

Me: And you said before in a limbo?

Mia: Yeah, trapped between two worlds.

Me: I found that the language is so powerful … 'the sea of unsuspecting adults'. How did you think of that?

Mia: One time I was going out with my friends and some people were talking about going fishing – trying to get adults to buy drink. So when I was writing this poem I thought I'll use that.

Me: So bring your own experiences into the poem. Do you think that's part of you evolving as a writer?

Mia: I think that's the best thing about being a writer – you can use your own experiences and build off of them. Kind of bring it to the world.

Me: I think your writing is really polished.

Mia: I kind of wondered whether to *use* more curse words in it because cursing is really a big part of being a teenager … At the same time it is a *poem* and I like to think of poems as these … They kind of speak for people but they're not exactly using the same words so I didn't want to have it be very vulgar. But at the same time kind of maybe use like a *tipping* point … like a *little* word. I wanted to take the way we speak but translate it into a medium that would, you know, be better to read.

I imagine her choosing and discarding words, working at her craft. I remember Colm reading his own work to the students and saying that being in *The Writing Club* – where he had found his own tribe – had helped him to be a better writer. As she refers to being a teenager, I think that perhaps she is using the creation of poetry to understand more about the world and her connection to it. Lindemann (1985: 161) suggests that 'Good writing is most effective when we tell the truth about who we are' and I admire her thoughtful approach to articulating her experiences and the way she is in command of how she will do so.

In the piece below she highlights the importance of *The Writing Club* in her life and I recall again conversations in the sociable space at the top of the library stairs. There, over the years, warmed by tea and toast and their care for each other, I think that this group of people learned that engaging in the process of writing means leaning on language as they attend to life (Leggo, 2012: 12).

Me: And it *is* really good to read.

Mia: I feel like I've been at *The Writing Club* for so long I can't really imagine my life without it. I'd like to think I'd still be writing but …. Having Colm here who is a poet himself and saying you could say this better. Being here … because I write it's hard for me not to go to the club in a way.

Me: You look at this as a poet and you'd still go back to it.

Mia: Yeah, definitely. I'd polish it more and get things across more smoothly.

I imagine her working at her poetry one word at a time admire her for the patience and strength this requires. Earlier in our conversation I noted her response to critique of her work – that sometimes she would make the changes suggested and sometimes she would simply take them and employ them elsewhere. It strikes me that this is a maturity honed over years of writing in this creative and democratic space. She has a quiet confidence in the way she speaks about her work, revealing a resilience in her commitment to refining her skills. And I think that perhaps during her sojourns in the library she has, indeed, met with 'consciously progressive educator(s)' (Freire, 1993: 50) who work together 'to stimulate doubt, criticism, curiosity, questioning, a taste for risk taking, the adventure of creating' (ibid). I think about Freire's questions about what learning and teaching are and what type of relationship exists between the two and in my mind's eye I see the relational space that is the library – not a classroom - at its centre Rachel – not a 'teacher' like others in the school but an educator nonetheless – and I cannot help my wonderings about why all students do not have access to such libraries coming yet again to the fore of my mind.
As we gather our things to go to *The Writing Club* I tell her that I can't wait to read more of her writing. Gale and Wyatt (2016: 356) articulate my sense of wonder better than I can myself when they say that:

> 'This is where our interest lies, where the fire is sparked and where we work at wonder, not just to think, ponder, or to ask questions but to be taken aback and to share the sense of always becoming able to be surprised.'

As I move through the library to join the others I know that one day I will reluctantly leave the field but that I will carry these experiences with me always, etched on my mind and heart, finding solace in Barad's (2007: ix) reminder that, 'The past is never finished. It cannot be wrapped up like a package, or a scrapbook…; we never leave it and it never leaves us behind.'

4.7 Musings on visits to *The Writing Club*

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

- From *Four Quartets,* TS Eliot

As I approach the conclusion of this chapter, the winter landscape is an icy reflection of the weather on the day I wrote the opening words. The sun challenges us with its hard

brightness but the melting icing-sugar snow promises us that spring is tantalisingly close. As I sit with my thoughts and memories of my visits to *The Writing Club* and my conversations with those who reside there I feel acutely aware of the privilege of having been there. I know too that I arrived in the midst and leave in the midst. Yet we have composed stories together and these will never leave me. Listening to their words over and over again, basking in memories of library visits and conversational spaces, I think that perhaps while I was there:

> *I stood under the catalpa tree that sang white blossoms onto my hair and through my fingers and I was home*
>
> - From *Stop-Time* by Rishma Dunlop

I am there still.

Heaney (1995: 11) wrote that he 'had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world. This in turn became a journey into the wideness of language, a journey where each point of arrival— whether in one's poetry or one's life—turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination.' Perhaps I might say the same for my travels to the world of *The Writing Club*. Met there with graciousness I listened as conversations flowed and writers polished words together. The words that I have written here could not have been summoned without the alchemy practised there. In the 'awesome peace and clarity of early morning hours' (Barad, 2007: x) I cover the pages before me with their voices. In their absence they are yet present as we co-compose together, our writing 'not orderly but a blizzard, our words meeting each other loose and free, our skin softening as the imagined clear, sharp delineations between me/you/us fade' (Gale and Wyatt, 2012: 471).
So you see, I cannot extract myself from the story any more than I could erase my participants. In bringing forward the *autoethnographic I*, however, it is not my wish to move into centre-stage. Rather, I hope that an:

> 'autoethnographic scholarship is an opening into the complex negotiations of meaning making with others for the purpose of adding alternatives to the single story; all personal experience is in concert with the political' (Spry, 2011: 124).

I began my research journey with wonderings about how students engage in learning through the library. As I moved through time and space, visiting the library over several months, participating at the edges of creative writing and visual arts workshops and lingering in conversations and memories, I – to borrow the words of Jonathan Wyatt (2018: 5) – have tussled, danced and breathed with theory. In my case, this has meant using a

critical theory framework to help me probe questions about what learning in the library – such a different space than a classroom - might look like.

During my research I thought about McLaren's (2017) suggestion that critical theory can help us see schools not just as sites of instruction or indoctrination, but cultural landscapes that promote student empowerment. As I visited the library for workshops and moved upstairs to *The Writing Club* I heard my participants engage in conversations about morality and responsibility, about the world. And I believe that I was witnessing in this respectful and joyful co-construction of knowledge, in this space where dialogue was welcome, 'a powerful sense of oneness amidst difference' (Darder, 2017: 99). Perhaps, in the stories and the laughter they were speaking their right to express their love to the world (Freire, 1998) and their right to have their place in it.

Critical theory also helped me think through my wonderings about whether I would see or hear traces of the Key Skills of *Being literate*, *Being creative*, *Staying well* and *Communicating* through student engagement in library activities. Reflecting on Giroux's assertion (2017) that illiteracy is a form of political oppression that prevents people from acting with critical agency, made me more attentive to how learning experiences in the library unfolded. I observed my participants engaging in critical exchange and in experiences through which learning was expressed visually, orally and in the written word. I became aware that this is a space where the centrality of relationships is made visible – a place where, it seems, the emotional climate is attended to in order that wellbeing can be affirmed (hooks, 2003). Here, in conversations and stories, an engaged pedagogy in which everyone, has a valuable contribution to make to the learning process revealed itself. The traditional script of the classroom may silence students (Shor and Freire, 1987). However, here such a script is purposefully interrupted as students and staff debate thought-provoking questions about morality and writing for others. As students discuss and compose poetry about social, political and global issues, I think of Biesta (2013: 4) and begin to see here in the library 'a concern for those we educate to be subjects of their own actions.' Here, as students engage in a spirit of critique and project of possibility (Giroux, 2005), I think that they are surely preparing to become transformers of the world (Freire, 1970).

As conversations with my participants in *The Writing Club* unfolded I began to hear stories about an environment constructed 'not as an escape from the heart, but as a heartscape — an expansive and energetic and enthusiastic space where people can connect heartfully in writing truth' (Leggo, 2007: 36). I thrill to such stories and find their echo in the stories told to me during my visits during the writing and visual arts sessions. I think that in such a 'heartscape' Key Skills such as these will surely find flight.
Leggo (2008) reminds us that '[W]e always bring our cultural, social, economic, political, and spiritual views and experiences to bear on every reading of verbal and visual texts' and acknowledging Pelias's (2019: 33) reminder that we should share 'honestly your perspective, presenting aspects of yourself for others' consideration' I attend closely to the words and silences of others.

My participants bring forward stories of writing and performing, critiquing and sharing, engaging in an arts-based curriculum that opens possibilities. Eisner (2002: 82) suggests that 'One important feature of the arts is that they provide not only permission but also encouragement to use one's imagination as a source of content'. Hutchinson (1999 in Leggo, 2007: 27) suggests that:

> 'Two things schooling can do are, first, to reflect the narrative nature of the self as it develops and, second, to provide a place for students to come to know many different stories as well as articulate their own stories.'

The gentle and respectful banter that I have witnessed in the library space, mingling with discussions about morality and responsibility suggest to me that these aspirations are being lived out in the architecture of the library and the stories that are composed there.

Although Colm invited me to bring a poem to *The Writing Club* I never did so. I place it here, not as an example of good poetic writing but rather in response to these words of Denzin (1997: 212): 'Poetry, and the personal narrative, become tools for reflexive knowledge'. I imagine myself bringing my poem to *The Writing Club* and steadying myself for their critique. And I realise, perhaps for the first time, how much courage that must take. Leggo (2004: 29) writes that. 'I write poetry as a way of learning to be settled, a way of artistic practice that holds me firmly in positions where rhythm, hope, and creativity intersect' yet first there must be such an opening, a revealing of oneself to others. I admire my participants for having that spirit of openness and generosity to each other and I think again that a library is so much more than a building. Memories of Mia saying that Rachel is the 'backbone' of the club and 'all-round brilliant' wash over me and I think of the

painstaking work that goes into making such a place where: '[T]o begin a story, someone in some way must break a particular silence' (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998: 3).

My poem, *Spring Dusk*, was written on a stormy night in April 2019 while I was waiting for my husband to return from a trip to England. I had turned to my research for company and had spent some hours reading. I thought about my participants who shared words with me and I began to compose.

Spring Dusk

Spring dusk drops quietly
Outside our kitchen window
Grey light licking damp stone.
Inside, the comfort of lamps.
As I sit and read Pelias
Storm Hannah arrives on cold, callous winds
Arrogantly toppling trees in her way
Ripping fragile cherry blossoms
From their branches
Before malevolently tossing them around
And depositing them on the ground below
Pale pink tears seeping into the grass
A reminder that we are merely borrowers -
The stories ours to honour for just a while
We do not own them –
But they possess us

As I read these words again I think of Fels (2020: 18) reminding us that:

> 'The arts invite us to perform ourselves into presence through a communal journey of inquiry, curiosity, resistance, (com)promise, and creativity. Performance calls attention to what or who is absent in the scripts that perform our lives.'

My poem is but a frail thing, destined to fade from the page as the petals disappear into the earth. Yet leaves replenish the soil just as the stories we perform for each other nourish us. Leggo (2016: 360) gently suggests that:

> 'To engage with poetry is to live in the heart's way, to acknowledge the truthfulness of emotion and experience as significant teachers. We read and write poetry because poetry weaves language in texts that speak to us and move us and tantalize us.'

In composing words of poetry I listen to the voices of my participants and read the words of others. Perhaps as we compose together we will raise our voices in an 'extended

conversational turn in the hope that readers will enter into the created world, generate a dialogue, and make positive cultural changes' (Pelias, 2019: 33).

4.8 Afterwords

As I draw this chapter to a close I recall Maxine Greene's discussion of teaching as possibility, as illumination and her suggestion that a curriculum in the making is a community in the making (2017). I consider these words as I think again about the library and its writing club, its sociability and the way in which those who reside there treat each other and their work with respect. In the light reflecting from the tall windows I think it is possible to see those who love education, the arts, people, joining together to illuminate the lives and dreams unfolding there. Perhaps here we can see that 'The Possible's slow fuse is lit/By the Imagination' (Dickinson, 1960: 688-689) – the imagination of those who first dreamed of the JCSP Library Project, of those who have worked in its libraries and those who still call on those who can, to deliver the promise of the remaining libraries. And while we wait, while we continue to look 'through the windows of the actual towards alternative realities' (Greene, 1997: 495) I recall my participants and I hope that one day others will benefit from engagement in activities designed and developed in democratic library spaces such as the one which I had the privilege to research in.

On my last visit to the writing club, I had the audacity to pose a question to Colm about his own writing skills. I share some snippets from that last day here.

Me: Has Colm become a better writer by being here?

To the sounds of laughter Colm acknowledges that he has.

Rachel: I would imagine that it's one of the few groups where you get honest feedback.

Colm: Yeah, I'd show my work here but I'd always be aware of the context.

Rachel: And that people are *learning* to be critics here.

Colm: But I always feel it's not about me … I do it as a means to help people .. to show them what I'm doing. But it's actually vulnerable for me to do that as well. Because your opinions matter.

And I think, how wonderful to be in a space where successful poets will open their work before others, revealing the vulnerability that is part of the writer's life – part of human life – in the hope that it will serve some purpose. It seems that this group, in a JCSP library space are truly present to each other, coming alongside to support – to lean in. It seems

that they are living in Leggo's (2014: 32) 'curriculum of joy' which is 'always connected to experiences of the body, heart, imagination, and mind'. The following words by Lyn Fels[50] may perhaps describe the questions that are being posed and answered here:

> Who are we
> in the presence of each other
> as we co-create and re-create new possible worlds
> laying down a path in walking?

As I turn to leave this landscape – to pause for a while – I come across the poem 'Snow' by Carl Leggo (2004). I share his beautiful words here as a reflection on my time in the field. Returning to my 'old life' I hope that I have left gentle traces behind, knowing that those I came alongside have truly left traces on me. Perhaps together, looking out through tall library windows, we will compose 'a long story' written on the page and in memories of frosty days bright with sunshine, as

> *in this place where we dwell*
> *for a year before resuming our old lives,*
> *we leave a swathe pressed by snowshoes*
> *but our tracks fill up almost as fast*
> *as we walk, we will leave few traces*
> *while the gulls write a long story*
> *with their wings like quills*
> *filled with India ink and hoarfrost*

Perhaps we will walk towards that invincible summer together.

4.9 Some concluding thoughts

In this chapter I have moved into the space of *The Writing Club* and continued to draw on my critical framework to help me engage with questions about how students engage in learning in library spaces. Through critical theory and conversations with my participants I explore ideas around what it means to be creative and literate, how education can contribute to students' sense of wellbeing and how we come to read the world (Freire). In coming alongside my participants I learn more about the importance of the design of the library – its gentle, sociable spaces in which tea warms body and soul, its difference. This is a place where people come to learn to write, with all that involves – encouragement, critique, rigour, understanding and courage. It is where they learn to perform themselves,

[50] Performative Inquiry: http://performativeinquiry.ca/index.html

engaging in WraPParound or the Lingo Festival or in words written for the theatre or conversations that have flowed through the years.

I now move into an intermezzo, a stop on the landscape (Appelbaum, 1995) as I reflect on my research and how when Covid interrupted lives the doors of the library closed, its voices temporarily silenced. As I draw the intermezzo to a close, inspired by thoughts of my participants, I also look forward to a world in which we will learn to live alongside Covid, and where doors will be opened to the light again. Perhaps in such a world we will need school libraries more than ever.

Intermezzo: Imaginings

Intermezzo:
1: a short light entr'acte
2a: a movement coming between the major sections of an extended musical work (such as an opera)

b: a short independent instrumental composition

3: a usually brief interlude or diversion[51]

i Introduction

I pause here on the narrative inquiry landscape to reflect on my research. These reflections are composed as a performative piece as I spend a while in ‘’other’’ worlds embodied in play and reflection’ (Fels and McGiven, 2002: 32). In doing so I insert myself simultaneously into past, present and future, juxtaposing ‘fragments from widely dispersed places and times’ (Ulmer 1989: 112) as I experience and re-experience moments from my world-travels (Lugones, 1987). I use the metaphor of the stage to represent my research library and invoke theatrical references to speak of loss and of hope for a future time when students will again come in to the library. I hope that this will be a time of new beginnings, of social and cultural re-connections, of optimism as we move together into a future shaped by the past and full of possibility.

I weave some of the conversations I had with Rachel the librarian and poet and facilitator Colm Keegan into this piece. In situating this conversation here, I draw on my memories of a performance by Simon Schama that my husband and I attended a couple of years ago. I can see his stage now – a couple of lamps, an armchair, a table on which stood a glass – of whiskey? – and some books and a piano. We sat entranced as he spun his stories accompanied by evocative music. At the end of the evening we surprised ourselves by joining a line of people waiting for him to sign his book ‘Wordy’. As we thanked him for his stories we were enthralled by his response: ‘What else is there?’ For a narrative inquirer this was a fitting end to the night. I often whisper his words to myself as I sit at my desk composing stories and in my imagination I borrow here from his performance that night. A

[51] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intermezzo

willing storyteller, I incorporate elements of fantasy into the conversational piece as I draw forward some of my theoretical leanings, echoing these words of Lockford (2012: 311):

'Words come. The whispers of scholars whose work inspires flutter full from my lips.'

As a teacher of drama I have been accustomed to stepping onto the stage – in the classroom or elsewhere – and the taking on and off of roles. As researcher I have played another role and been privileged to come alongside other actors as they told and performed their stories. I have written a script with them, creating found poetry in Landscape 3 'to re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses' (Richardson, 1994: 521). It seems inevitable somehow that I am lured back to the stage, to its dusty mysteries, to perform my narrative signature as I seek to convey a sense of the enchanting world that was revealed in the library.

I know the importance of an audience and in this piece, I think of an audience that in one sense is absent, yet also present through the reading of these words. I too, am of the audience, listening and observing myself as I perform stories of my research. Burke (1969 in Denzin, 2003: 189) reminds us that as 'an interpretive event, a performance involves actors, purposes, scripts, stories, stages and interactions'. In this *intermezzo* I engage with writing and performing as aesthetic inquiry as I create a space where we might play for a while in the 'realm of the possible' (Boal, 1995: 21). Here, together we might think about – feel - the darkness of this stage, my research library (and those that were promised but still not realised) and the world – yet listen to the notes of optimism at the threshold of our imagination. In its challenge to 'the scholarly article as the preferred form of presentation' (Denzin, 2003: 192), I hope that this performative offering will 'seduce us into its presence' (Madison, 2018: 46) as I seek to convey the complexity of the 'storied experiences' of my participants and myself (Clandinin and Murphy, 2009: 601). Braiding together material from my research in this way - the tangible, ephemeral and subconscious - (Hussey, 2018: 101) helps me to create meaning and invite you, dear audience, into conversation about it.

Perhaps in the interplay of shadows and light on the stage we may even co-compose together knowing that my 'text is flawed not when it is ambiguous or even contradictory, but only when it leaves you no room for stories of your own' (Mairs, 1994: 74).

The spoken word, of course, may disappear once uttered. Perhaps, though, it may linger in memory or find its imprint on the page. And as performance 'drifts between present and

past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory' (Diamond, 2000: 66) I find it a powerful means through which to evoke a sense of a world shaken by Covid, a world where time and lives have been disrupted beyond belief, a world where we look to creativity as escape, literal and metaphorical. Perhaps here together, we 'may connect more fully with the complexities of our past and the possibility of a better future' (Dolan, 2005: 5).
And residing in the gift of words, I again turn to music and poetry as I move backward and forward on the storied landscape of life and research, looking forward to arriving in a future in which hope will prevail.

ii Waiting

It is February and spring has finally arrived. We cling on to the idea that this is a time of birth and renewal, even on days when rain-filled skies seem to collude with Covid to obscure the light. Darkness comes early into our garden and few people venture outside. The world is seething and squabbles over vaccines and borders erupt daily. People are weary and like many others, I have not met some of my family for over a year. Social bonds are ruptured, window-visits replace the closeness of hugs and time seems somehow to have lost the ability to move forward. Or perhaps we are simply caught up in a restless dance of what Cobley (2001) describes as objective and subjective temporality – time itself moving with the sun and stars, in spite of our sense that it has stalled.
As the seemingly endless waiting continues I think back to my research library. It is quiet now, the books sitting tidily on their shelves, their stories folded inside. The lights have been dimmed, the stage is bare, the actors absent. The chairs and sofas are empty as if waiting for someone.

Tuder (2010, in Pineau 2012) reminds us that in the world of theatre a light is always left on – a ghost light. The tradition of burning ghost lights has experienced a renewal during the Covid pandemic as theatres use them as a metaphor for the possibility of future performances. Some say that the light is left burning so that the ghosts can dance when everyone else has gone. I think of Powell and Stephenson-Shaffer (2009) who suggest that as ghosts always return it is our responsibility to wait for them.

So we wait.

And from somewhere in the wings I can surely hear a distant murmuring. Hope flickers and I imagine that I hear the tantalising notes of an orchestra striking up. First there is the elegant sound of a bow kissing the strings of a violin. Such a long, slow kiss. This is a kiss filled with desire, a desire that will be released slowly as the face caresses the smooth curve of the violin. Next, as lips close around the clarinet, performer and instrument join together at last as the breath of one pulses life into the body of the other, exhaling pent-up longing as one haunting voice.

If we listen carefully we might hear Josh Groban and the orchestra tell the story of Galileo, a young scientist who wondered:

> Who puts the rainbow in the sky?
> Who lights the stars at night?
> Who dreamt up someone so divine?
> Someone like you and made them mine?
>
> From 'Galileo', Declan O'Rourke[52]

As the melody floats upwards, I can see Jole Bartoli painting a back drop of light and hope across a starry Italian sky. I bask in these words of the song and I wonder if perhaps the music is a sign. Galileo, after all, was a scientist and we have placed such hope in science to light our way home. Yet he was a dreamer too and now, perhaps more than ever, we need the magic of dreams. I think about Galileo, the mathematician and lover, who lived for some time in Florence and wonder if he too walked across the Ponte Vecchio as I clearly see my past self doing. It was the 1980s and I was at the beginning of world-travels, of adult life. Enthralled by the people, the atmosphere and the jewellery shops along the bridge I bought myself a gold ring with a pretty garnet set in its centre. In years to come, each time I looked at it I remembered those carefree times when we moved easily from city to city, country to country. Even border controls brought with them a hint of excitement as we handed green passports to officials, certain of our freedom to travel.

As usual, memories draw me in and as I listen to the music I am reminded of another journey, another country – another life perhaps. This time I am at the ballet, enjoying excerpts of 'Swan Lake' and 'The Nutcracker'. The stage has been built on the beach of the Hilton Hotel and as the performances unfold, the Gulf night is filled with Tchaikovsky's compositions. I hear them still, carried along the moist scented air, back to the Russia of

[52] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erqa51r217Y

the nineteenth century and into the present. Perhaps we are listening to 'a playful singing in the midst of life' (Aoki, 2005: 282).

iii Conversations on a library

As the last notes of the music fade away, a pool of light shimmers across the stage revealing two actors – Colm and me. I wonder if we were there all along. We are in in the midst of a conversation, sharing our thoughts about what it means to be creative. Come, let us lean in together (Pelias, 2011) and share wonderings.

Colm: Humans are innately creative. The construction of a sentence is a creative act. Students are playful – we teach them how to play by playing with them and they mimic what they see. And as they explore there's cross-pollination. And even where there's a hierarchy of ability in a genre there's no rejection. Young people are sometimes corralled by their peers. They have to fit in. But the library is a holding space – a safe space – where they can be themselves. They're allowed to be where they are at – and surprise us by writing way beyond what's expected of them.

I recall coming alongside students in the library workshops and at *The Writing Club* and witnessing them weaving and drawing stories. Lockford (2012: 311) reminds us that the 'creation process is mystery; it is alchemy' and I ask Colm if he thinks that creativity can be taught.

Colm: Creativity is always there. Story is an expression of our natural selves and the library is a space to be your emotional self. In the library Rachel and I work to create space for them to try things and we all respond to each other with supportive critique. They learn that art is about being vulnerable. You know, making tea and toast, that's about encouraging kindness. We enter into a collective consciousness.

As he speaks these words, I am sure I can hear Go´mez-Pena and Sifuentes (2011:3) reminding us that for 'performance to be a successful form of radical democracy performance artists needed to learn to hear others and teach others to hear.' Over there Hirshfield (1997) is nodding in agreement, reminding us to welcome surprise. And Hussey (2018: 90) is telling us that in a pedagogy of surprise we can 'embrace not knowing' and welcome the unexpected as a source of learning, a source of revelation about ourselves in the world. I find myself in agreement, remembering the many times I sat down to write only to find that my words took flight across the page, finding their own direction, revealing intensities I had not expected – surprising me, telling their own story (Murray, 2004).

And of course Ron Pelias (2014: 3) wants to have his say and asks us to '[A]ssume everyone can play … Let there be voices. Let those who can be heard begin the game, open the field.' Who could reject such appeals?

As we continue our conversation I can feel Colm's passion spill across the stage as he talks about libraries and the books they hold within them, books that are shared with the community – books that saunter into kitchens and across streets, eventually making their way back to the library only to start their *passeggiata* once more.

Colm: You know, libraries are one of last sanctuaries of the spirit. They are wells of stability. Librarians exist in a different way from teachers and they meet students at their learning desires. Very privileged schools have libraries. They're understood as being very valuable so parents pay for them. So more schools – including DEIS schools - should have libraries too! Libraries are not based on the idea that students *won't* do what they are supposed to do. Libraries are the quietest phenomenon in the country making huge differences to families. And I think that books confront something in our lives. They're powerful, they make us. Their stories can be passed on to someone else to use. They offer us a galactical array of possibilities.

My thoughts move back to Galileo again and as I look up at the stars above Colm walks upstage and reads a poem to us. He wrote it for the opening of the Lexicon Library in Dún Laoghaire. I have told him in the past that it reminds me of my research library and he has given me the gift of placing it here.

iv Reading the wor(l)d: Beyond this

Beyond Spanish granite, beyond hanging lights,
Beyond thirteen concrete V-beams, beyond panoramic views,
beyond this interplay of people, stone, and silence,
I'm thinking of one thing, when I think of this place.

Above us in space, the Perseids,
Trailing in the wake of the Swift-Tuttle comet, ejected particles, celestial debris,
Arrive here yearly, in our Summer season.

I'm thinking, do those meteors impact on us

Or does our Earth move towards them, and scoop them up?

And in the way we can't really call south the bottom
Or in the way we can't really call north the top,
Beyond our mapping of this cosmic choreography,
We don't know what draws what to what.

I'm thinking, that's the way we go through books,
That's the way books move through us.

And if the readers are made up of all that they borrow
and a book is the sum of all its writer's read words
then what this library stores beyond its many-thousand covers
is as great as all we make and hold inside of us.

The gift of this place transcends time, and distance.
Its gift is our potential, and potentially infinite.

Listening to him perform I am reminded of my travels along the narrative inquiry path, at times not knowing whether I was heading north or south, navigating by the stars and caught up in the 'cosmic choreography' that is the inquiry mapping itself onto the body that maps itself onto the past, present and future and that in turn map back onto the body.

The audience exhale pent-up breath slowly as he stops speaking. As he steps back into the shadows the sound of his voice seems to linger in the space above the stage, tantalising. Oh, to be able to describe the world in poetry. I think perhaps that Colm, like di Prima (2001: 77) knows well 'the liquid structure language is, like liquid crystal, the depth and possibility of that'. And over the air come the sweet words of Fels (2020: 18) telling us that '[W]e perform our presence in the presence of others, and in so doing, invite new possible worlds into being. Performance is an offering.'
And if the gift of a library is 'potentially infinite', I ask why more DEIS schools have not yet received the promised libraries.

I think back to a trip to Cambridge my husband and I took in 2019. So long ago it seems! The university city has welcomed students since medieval times and we learn that there are over one hundred libraries in the University. What wondering and learning must have taken place here over the centuries.

We stop often to admire the beauty of the buildings and my husband composes photographs. The one below makes my thoughts turn yet again to my last library visit. The soft night sky throws a protective veil over the college as voices float over the walls as so often in the past. But these walls are high and strong and I know that universities and libraries are also places of privilege.

Image 3: Cambridge, April 2019

Let us not dwell on such things. Rather, may we be drawn through the portal by the light within which seems to invite us into this world of possibilities.

vi A return to optimism

So immersed in the words of Colm Keegan and in my memories am I that I am startled to hear Tami Spry (2001: 706) call 'on the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy'. And as Judith Butler intersects the stage she reminds us (in Butler-Kisber, 2017: 4) that performativity is 'inscribed on the body from which we create our identities'. And I feel that 'I am floating in these images under a shared full moon. I feel I need to perform them, dance them even, working toward a fully embodied and visceral sense of them' (Gale and Lamm Pineau, 2011: 320).

As I look down at my body I feel the traces of my research scripted along it. I hold close Kenny's (2015: 460) offering that 'Once we find our power, we are free to fly' and I think of students in my research school discussing morality and heroism and composing powerful stories. How privileged I am to have walked alongside them for a while.

The ghost light burns still and we wait. And the waiting is long. And the longing is deep.
In this I am not alone and Keefer (1998: 163) agrees that he too is 'at the border between story and history, personal desire and a shared reality over which I have no more power than I do over my dreams.' And in such a dream I find myself once more in São Bento Train Station in Porto. On the walls beautiful blue tiles depict stories of Portuguese history. Conversations swirl around us – Portuguese, Italian, English.
I look around the dreamscape of the stage and suddenly I am jolted into 'wideawakeness' (Greene, 1978: 42) and I hear music. At first it is but a gentle melody coming from the wings. It gets louder as slowly more musicians join in and I know, I just know, in every thump of my heart, in the pulse that flickers at my throat … I know.

The actors are on the way back, gathering, strolling out onto the stage, reclaiming their place. I think of Rheingold (1993: 53) who tells us that, 'A core of people must believe in the possibility of community and keep coming back to that amid the emotional storms in order for the whole loosely coupled group to hold together at all' and as my participants move into the library and take up their stories I believe - in future possibilities, in dreams. I believe that:

the body's knowledge
is the gift
a curriculum of hope
where we are revealed
in the mystery

- From 'We are bodies,' Celeste Snowber

If you look carefully you might see them here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qHClLZVc6k (3.00-10.45). (Flash mob, Bolero Ravel, São Bento Train Station, Porto, March 6th 2018.)
As I immerse myself in the music these beautiful words of Tagore (in Snowber, 2012: 122) come to mind:

'The first flower that blossomed on this earth was an invitation to the unborn song.'

And as the scented music builds to a crescendo let us step into the performance of this ode to the future.

Landscape 5: A Leave-Taking

5.1 Introduction

This thesis is an arts-based narrative inquiry into an arts curriculum in one of the Junior Cycle School Programme (JCSP) Library Project school libraries. Set in a critical theory framework, I drew on the work of Freire, Giroux and hooks, in particular, to help me answer questions about who and what education is for (Biesta, 2013).

Throughout the research I have used Clandinin and Caine's (2012) twelve touchstones for narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013: 212) to guide me and I continue to draw on them here. In using a narrative inquiry approach I have employed autoethnography to reveal my narrative beginnings, interest in my research area and my movements across the inquiry landscape. I discuss what I have learned along the way about myself, my participants and the methodology that I have come to know and love.

I begin this chapter by world-travelling (Lugones, 1987) back across the physical, temporal and social landscape, thinking about the importance of relationships and telling stories as I contemplate the writing of this final chapter. In this piece I recall how I became immersed in story-telling and how I came to be drawn to narrative inquiry. I discuss how I came to research in this JCSP library and how I drew on critical theory to help me answer my research wonderings. Conscious throughout the research that recognising and fulfilling relational responsibilities is one of Clandinin and Caine's (2013: 212) twelve touchstones I discuss ethical obligations in conjunction with methodology. I then move into a discussion of what I learned in the library, implications for research and future possibilities before bidding adieu to the research. I close the thesis with Cameo 4: *A Pilgrim's Leave-taking.*

Throughout the thesis, I have drawn forward my understandings of what it is to engage in research and the emergence of the performative/performed/embodied self in the inquiry and perhaps I may now borrow from Leggo's poem, 'Glossolalia' (2018: 16), as I gently ask this of you as you read my words, the words of a narrative inquirer:

don't read my words only
read the margins where

the words begin and end
read the spaces in the words
where the unwritten is written
read beyond my words
to scribbled words
of others almost hidden
in my words

5.2 Storied beginnings

Snow

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it …

There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses

- Louis MacNeice

I seem to be forever composing in snow. As I sit at my desk, thinking about how to write the final stages of my thesis, hesitant white flakes float down from the sky. Directly across from the window is a pair of glass doors through which I can see, not roses, but lilies flushed with pink in a tall white vase. As I read these lines of 'Snow' - a poem given to me by my father – I see again through the bay window of my childhood home the river across from our house. I say childhood, yet I returned to that home often throughout my adult life, spending weeks at a time there. I return to it still in my thoughts even though others now sit at that window. Beyond the bend the river meanders through woods. I remember my mother bringing my two sisters and me there on summer days for a picnic. Although we were dressed for swimming we did not stay in its embrace for long, the chill of an Irish summer making its presence felt against our pale skin. Yet the memories are warm and I think of Lorna Crozier (2010) who says that:

'Water is a form of braille,
your whole body reading'

And the river read us well, carrying echoes of laughter along its surface with the stones we skimmed across it. Can sound carry up-river, back towards our home, or does that happen only in memory?

I know of course that memory is mercurial, that what we call memories may rather be imaginings that we link with other events. Barad (2017: 73) reminds us that the past is never finished and these stories of home – perhaps the pattern of one day woven into another until they become indivisible in the plain and purl of life – stalk me, support me as a stalk would a leaf or flower. Perhaps we reinvent some of our yesterdays (Bruner, 2002) as we make sense of life, and I go back into memory's embrace when I need to. Sometimes I visit there so that I can, as Kirschner (2018) suggests, share this space with others physically there or present in the stories that we tell. And if 'time isn't what it used to be' (Barad, 2017: 57), perhaps I can re-live those memories in the present while performing future memories of myself/selves, moving the body off the page (Gale et al. 2012: 5) as I move backward and forward along the landscape.

During a 'site-seeing' trip back from Britain my mother bought a plot of land because of the beauty of the river and my parents built our home there. It is inextricably bound up with memories and sounds of home, family and becoming. I think that Anzaldúa (2009: 166) conveys what it represents when she says:

> 'Identity is a river, a process.
> Contained within the river is its identity,
> and it needs to flow, to change to stay a river.'

Perhaps humans too need to give themselves up to movement as we are woven, unpicked and re-shaped, moving across the landscape, created by it, changing it. And as I look back along the narrative inquiry landscape I know that it has written itself on me, setting my heart racing so that what is within me is fluttering (Snowber, 2012: 59) with possibility.

In our home we learned to love books, music and words. We loved to listen to my grandfather telling stories of days – and nights - gone by, of times when people would go 'raking' – playing cards and telling tales. He was a good storyteller and knew his audience well. Later I thought the twinkle in his dark eyes probably hinted at stories untold. I know now that although there were stories of 'The Troubles', of leaving home, of border-crossing, there were also stories of finding home again, of sociability, of love. We heard too, stories of hardship, of new-born babies wrapped in flour sacks and we were aware, even at a young age, that poverty was still close by. I think that it was then, during childhood, that the seeds of my interest in social justice issues were sown.

This morning my cousin texted me from Alberta, Canada, telling me that in recent days the temperature has dropped to -42°C. I have a photograph of him out on the ice, fishing on the snowy landscape. I remember him on his world-travels as a young boy with his family, on their way from Sri Lanka – or Ceylon as we knew it then - to Canada. That long, hot summer we too were on our travels – home for good from Britain – and for a few months we all wandered in and out of each other's houses and stories. Thinking of him going to work in the snow at the University of Alberta – one of life's little coincidences - brings Jean Clandinin to mind and I am immediately transported back to Clandinin and Huber's beautiful piece, *Narrative Inquiry: Toward Understanding Life's Artistry* (2002).
When I brought my wonderings to the academy I initially thought I might engage in quantitative research. Loving the magic of numbers and their ability to spin stories I considered that I could gather some reading data to investigate, for instance, literacy development. I knew that the Library Project collected data in a number of areas as part of its monitoring and evaluation processes and I thought that this could be an interesting way of looking at the development of Key Skills.

I have mentioned elsewhere that being assigned *Narrative Inquiry: Toward Understanding Life's Artistry* (Clandinin and Huber, 2002) as a reading for a cluster meeting was transformative in my journey as inquirer and beyond. This article was an unexpected gift in my early days at the academy at a time when we were considering theoretical underpinnings and positionings. I can feel still the sensation of the snow in that beautiful piece and the image of the stone Inukshuk, that guide for Inuit travellers, sits quietly in my mind. It has accompanied me on my research landscape and I have used it as my own Inukshuk guiding me along the landscape. You may know by now that I was immediately entranced by this article. From the beckoning of the word 'Artistry' in its title, to the quiet snow Clandinin and Huber describe Darlene (one of the parents at their research school) walking through as she goes home to her Inuit beginnings, this piece sang to me.

In my reading of their piece, I began to wonder if this might be a way to write about the library project and if, indeed, I might focus on *one* library. Thrilled to learn of such a possibility and re-positioning myself on the research landscape meant the outline of my inquiry was beginning to be shaded in.

And as I hold Clandinin and Huber's piece in my hands again, attending to the melody of its words, I think back to my research and the *once upon a time* of my narrative beginnings.

5.3 Research wonderings

In conversations over some years with Senior Project Librarian, Kathleen Moran, I learned about the focus on an arts-based curriculum in which a range of cultural experiences were made available to students. Inspired by the passion for a different approach to education shared by the Junior Certificate School Programme and the Library Project, I set out on my inquiry journey. Taking to heart the advice of the *JCSP Library Charter* (2015: 2) to 'throw away all [your] preconceived notions of what a library should be' I immersed myself in the welcoming space of this school library.

Each time I visited one of the libraries I found that I wanted to learn and understand more. You might say that I wished to linger just a little in these book-filled sociable spaces, eavesdropping, perhaps as many inquirers do. And as I did so, it seemed to me that I was seeing spaces such as those described by hooks (2013: 41) who tells us that '[T]eachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalised classroom.' I consider that although JCSP sees these professional roles as being different from each other, the word 'teachers' here may be replaced by 'librarians'.

In the present time of significant reform in the Irish second level curriculum, there is much emphasis on creativity in education, as evidenced for example by developments at junior and senior cycle levels and initiatives such as Creative Schools and BLAST 2021. Against this background I began to wonder how students might engage in learning through arts-based programmes in the JCSP Library Project. I was conscious, too, of tensions implicit here in that Freire's banking model may still be witnessed as schools participate in a range of national and international assessments such as PISA, TIMMS and literacy and numeracy testing. Drawing on a critical theory framework helped me to inquire into learning in one project school-library, to consider a pedagogy of hope and possibility was unfolding there and whether, indeed, Dewey's vision of schools as democratic spaces might be in evidence.

Contemplating and carrying out research is a complex process and long before I entered the field the academy and I engaged in a rigorous process of examination and discussion as

each became acquainted with the other. Having engaged in research before, I knew of course, the importance of ethics. However, in choosing a narrative approach to the inquiry, I came to realise that I would now need to gain an understanding of relational ethics. Such understandings impacted on my learnings in and from the research - and on my learnings about myself. How after all, could they not? Conscious throughout the research that participants and researchers are all part of 'the web of human relationships' (Arendt, 1958: 181) – such a delicate composition, easily damaged - I situated the research in a framework of ethical relationships. I place here a discussion of how an understanding of the relational obligations of a narrative inquirer guided me in the research. I then move on to considerations of the methodology used in this inquiry before moving into a discussion of what I learned about student engagement with an arts-based curriculum in the library.

5.4 Relational responsibilities

Caine and Estefan (2011) remind us that the two cornerstones of narrative inquiry are listening to individuals tell their stories and living alongside participants in the field. Throughout the research I was guided by Clandinin and Caine's 2012 twelve touchstones for narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013: 212) in which the concept of relational responsibilities is foregrounded. I echo here, as I did earlier in the thesis, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000: 189) suggestion that: 'Relationship is key to what it is that narrative inquirers do.' Conscious that stories can sometimes be silenced – and drawing on critical theory to remind me that as an adult and outsider I could be in a position of power – I knew the importance of attending to a qualitative research that advances human rights and affirms human dignity through its proper conduct during the process of inquiry by 'treating research subjects honourably … affirming human dignity and fostering social justice' (Erickson, 2010: 114). I continued to draw on my critical theory framework as I considered questions of power in the classroom and society.

Indeed, engaging in narrative inquiry means acknowledging that consent to participate in the inquiry is part of an ongoing agreement, open to re-negotiation as 'participants cannot be expected to give informed consent prior to knowing what they are agreeing to' (Etherington, 2007: 601). Fisher (2004, in Etherington, 2007: 614) tells us that, 'Relational ethics conceives personhood and autonomy as social constructions which can best be respected through mutual understanding and dialogue'. Accepting that participation can end at any time and is part of ongoing negotiation is quite a daunting prospect for

emerging inquirers, but a necessary part of our evolution. Thus my commitment to research as relational, impacted indelibly on the unfolding of the inquiry long before entry into the field from negotiating ethical approval to foregrounding reflexive musings on what I was learning and thinking in my writing and in my conversations with participants. It meant that I reminded participants throughout the research that they could change their minds at any time. Additionally, interim texts were shared with them as agreed at the outset of the inquiry.

As I entered and exited the field in the midst of the storied lives of staff and students, I wished to make transparent my own narrative beginning and leanings through an autoethnographic approach. Situating the research in Clandinin and Connelly's (2000: 50) metaphorical 'three-dimensional narrative inquiry space' made it possible for me to move forward and backward on the landscape, bringing forward wonderings about the inquiry and myself within the inquiry, while attending to relational responsibilities to my participants and to the school. I believe too that it opened me to a sense of 'constitutive unknowingness' (Lather, 2009 in Erickson, 2010: 121), a willingness to acknowledge my own limits and vulnerabilities. I hoped that revealing my reflexive self and my vulnerability as researcher - as human – would impact on the research by making the work more transparent, more accessible and by allowing me some insight, perhaps, into the vulnerability of participants in the research. Engaging with participants in conversational spaces, rather than in structured interviews, meant an openness to changes in the direction of the conversation willed by participants as we spoke and co-composed together.

Conscious that final research texts do not have 'final answers' (Clandinin, 2013: 51), I discuss next what I learned through engaging with narrative inquiry in the academy, in library activities and in conversational spaces. All of this contributed to my own becoming as researcher including coming to understand that my research would be embodied as well as performative.

From there I move into a discussion of my learnings from the library and new wonderings about future possibilities.

5.5 A methodology of my heart (Pelias, 2004)

'I want a scholarship that fosters connections, opens spaces for dialogue, heals. I want to rein in power like one might a runaway horse. I need to write from the heart' (2004: 2).

Ah Ron my dear friend, don't we all?

In the library and in *The Writing Club* I witnessed students perform stories through writing, art, conversation and social rituals such as the sharing of tea and toast. I was moved to be invited into spaces where I could see and hear narratives fold and unfold as they were drawn on a map or curled up on sofas. As I began to think deeply about research, Clandinin (2013: 51) reminded me that:

> 'Our hope is to create research texts that allow audiences to engage in resonant remembering as they lay their experiences alongside the inquiry experiences to wonder alongside participants and researchers who were part of the inquiry.'

I thought deeply about how I might invite such attention to the work of my participants as they compose together and 'reclaim the long past and dream poetic possibilities for the future' (Leggo, 2004: 36). And I found the shimmering allure of arts-based inquiry wrapped itself around me. The suggestion that my text - composed in literary allusions, metaphor and images - might 'have an illuminating effect on its readers' (Barone and Eisner, 2006: 102) was, perhaps, an invitation to a 'phosphorescent becoming' (Gale, 2014: 999) and impossible to resist. And, listening to words flashing like colours in the library, feeling them seep into me, I thought about language and how we live in its transient lure. I imagine language winding its melodic way across temporal and physical landscapes, carried on the shoulders of wanderers criss-crossing the ages and I see in my mind's eye the pilgrim's way in Asturias. I think that I will criss-cross such landscapes forever, knowing that there cannot be 'a final story. Each story of experience opens into new stories to be lived and told' (Clandinin, 2013: 203).

Seeking footholds on the path to becoming an arts-based narrative inquirer I was conscious of the need to move gently and to attend fully to my participants as we co-composed stories. Snowber (2012: 53), speaking about dance, reminded me that:

> 'In movement my mind slows down enough to truly listen—listen to the bold proclamations and the gentle whispers, the ones within and the whispers without.'

I resolved to sit with participants' words in quiet spaces, waiting for what would unfold. Called by Lynn Fels (2010: 10) to 'wideawakeness' I wrote myself – at times achingly slowly – into the research (Richardson and St. Pierre), understanding that 'writing truthfully is the only way to discover what we know about ourselves and our world' (Lindemann, 1985: 161, in Leggo, 2007). And as I met with participants and composed notes and research texts I learned that perhaps the story 'is the only possible habitation for the burden of our witnessing' (Hampl, 1999: 18).

Somewhere on my narrative inquiry journey I was enticed into poetry, perhaps in part by the way in which 'poets use words to convey what lies beyond words' (Ackerman, 1999: 127). What magic this would be. Searching for words to do my participants justice I entered into 'a long lingering with the senses' (Wiebe and Snowber, 2011: 106), eager to compose texts that would honour them, the academy - and me. Poetry called me to 'be still, to remember to breathe, to hear and see and know with the heart' Leggo, 2005: 185). And as I spoke words out loud to taste their sound, I knew I was entering into, 'a lifetime of practise and artistry' (Snowber, 2012: 54). How else could I come sincerely to narrative inquiry?

In the library there were silences too and I learned not to fill these spaces but to let them sit suspended in the air, understanding silence as the other side of telling (Blix et al., 2021). And in these silences I listened for moments that, like the gap between the words of a haiku and its larger story, 'provides both an absence and presence of connection' (Kocher, 2009: 6). And as I listened and wove stories of my research into my own reflexive story, perhaps I was also expressing my own 'desire for presence' (MacLure, 2003: 166) – in the library, in the research, in the academy, in life. Leggo (2002: 4) of course expresses it more beautifully than I can:

In my poetry I seek
to dispel absence
by disclosing
possibilities for presence

I cannot claim to be a poet, but perhaps my musings and my sprinkling of music and photographs may have composed themselves into a poetic offering. Wiebe and Snowber (2011: 109) suggest that:

> 'The call to the poetic beckons us as creatures in this world to listen to all of life as a place for the echoes, silences, yawns and sighs to be a sacred space to embrace the curriculum of life.'

Perhaps I may add that an arts based narrative inquiry answers such a call.

5.6 Embodied knowing

I was aware that Pelias (2019: 50) suggested that 'Performative writing enters the body before becoming the body. It knows how the nervous system works.' And Dolan (2001: 17) reminds us that:

> 'We could use our positions as teachers and scholars to put the body back into thought, to think of pleasures like desire not as a space of absence that language can't lead us to, but as a space of social possibility to which our bodies lead us.'

I had wondered about these words, tried them on if you will, feeling the pulse of my inquiry coursing through my veins. I had not, however, expected that I would experience such an emotional response to the inquiry and - even though it accompanies me everywhere – I was not prepared for my body to be so involved in it. I did not imagine at the beginning of my research journey that I would perform part of my research – perform part of myself – in public. Yet now, I cannot imagine the research without it. As students performed their work for me and others, with all the risks of vulnerability that holds, I open myself, my research to them and you. And so an embodied, arts-based narrative inquiry has unfolded in me, perhaps like the *Borromean* rings we find in maths – three interlinked closed curves that cannot be separated, but that break apart if one of them is cut or removed. It is an inquiry process that I hope serves well my participants who engage so joyously in an arts-based curriculum. And, as they used their bodies to map their identities in the visual arts workshops, so I think of Freire's suggestion (1993: 87) that 'the body moves … rememorises … remakes the world' and hope that my embodied research may help to shape thinking about the JCSP libraries.

Looking back across the inquiry landscape, it seems like a long time ago since I first heard about narrative inquiry as a research methodology. Yet the jolt I felt when it first came to me – as Darlene walked towards her Inukshuk in the snow - runs through my body still. In the years since then I have learned more about what it is to research, more about myself as pilgrim becoming inquirer, more about living in the world. Imagine learning to 'listen to light'! (Leggo 2006: 79.) And as I entered into the space of imagination – into narrative inquiry - and as it impacted on me, I think – I hope – that it helped me to do my research justice as I tell and perform it. I find myself immersed in language, in melodies, in love and

as I compose I think that, in the words of Leggo, 'This is the kind of writing that I want to pursue—a meditation that involves the wholeness of my attending.'

Setting my thesis in landscapes and employing Clandinin's commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place has allowed me to draw forward my narrative beginnings and my social justice leanings, learned in the stories of home and other communities. In my world-travels – in imaginary, literary and physical places - I have witnessed the lives of others in my journeys of 'writing-stories' (Richardson, 2018: 824). Perhaps my work with marginalised young people has intensified my awareness of power relations and inequality and drawn me to arts-based research. If I may, I will join with Lockford (2012: 236) who suggests that 'I somehow remain in love with words and remain lulled by the belief that words can make change in the world.' Thus in drawing on the many-hued worlds of literature and the arts I hoped to create a work that might be of interest to others and 'persuade readers of the work (including the artist herself) to revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it through fresh eyes, and thereby calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view' (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 16) that we might wonder anew about the learnings that libraries and arts-based approaches offer education.

In speaking of writing St. Pierre (2018: 829) notes that 'Thought happened in the writing.' In suggesting that for me it also happened in the performing on page and stage, I am conscious that 'all personal experience is in concert with the political' (Spry, 2011: 124) and that the purpose of my performance is to engage in 'creative, critical and cultural negotiations of meaning with others' (ibid: 122). Thus, the privilege of being given access to the inquiry space brings with it responsibility – the desire to create words that can transform does not always come gently. Sometimes they are a battle to be won in the late quiet hours, the taut body poised to carve them on the page. But as they finally make themselves visible I know that:

> 'Only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human sod be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body-flesh and bone-and from the Earth's body-stone, sky, liquid, soil' (AnzaIdúa, 1987: 75).

Indeed, as I step into the inquiry space, onto the page and stage, I hear Caine et al (2022: 51) reminding me that 'our bodies shape who we are'. I cannot seem to leave mine behind.

It is my sincere hope that my words – my efforts - might speak to others and do justice to my research and my participants. In the evocative words of Pelias (2004: 77), 'To survive in this dry landscape demands watering from the sweat of the brow, watering again and again, until the land the poet stands upon is ready for seed.' Perhaps in this ground of my work other libraries and arts-based initiatives may flourish. In order to support this, the next section presents a discussion of key learning from this library research project.

5.7 Discussion

Coming alongside my participants during the library's creative writing and visual-arts workshops and then in *The Writing Club*, I wondered what types of learning might be made visible there. Observing activities and taking part in conversations I drew on a critical theory framework as I listened for traces of the interlinked Key Skills *Being literate*, *Being creative*, *Communicating* and *Staying well*. Two questions, in particular, were helpful here. Giroux (2014: 495) asks 'What knowledge is of most worth?' while Biesta (2013) asks us to think about what education is for.

Schools, of course, do not operate independently but are tasked with supporting and delivering national requirements including curricular reform, DEIS planning, School Self Evaluation and regular standardised testing. Further, school policy in Ireland is informed by international indicators such as those from assessments such as TIMMS and PISA. Notwithstanding the importance of accountability, it is no surprise perhaps that, as Aronowitz (2004) reminds us, for many students school is something to be endured rather than a place where self and society may be explored.

If the educational experience of young people is reflected in their future life trajectories (Smyth 2016), what then of the arts-based education that is the focus of this inquiry? The arts are deemed to be social, inclusive, humanising and thereby significant for human development in society (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007; Canatella, 2015). The Key Skills of Junior Cycle are, naturally, interlinked – literacy, communicating and being creative woven through each other as students experience an education that may contribute to their sense of staying well. Drawing on case study methodology, this inquiry explores how these unfold in one library in a DEIS school.

Developing arts programmes requires an understanding of the learners involved, including the social context of their lives and communities. Shor (2017) notes that in the Freirean mould of learning, the teacher gets to know the students and their worlds before dialogically teaching alongside with them. This marks a crucial shift in relations to a more democratic mode of learning together. It is premised in a respect for people's lived experiences and a collaborative approach to learning. In my visits to the library, attention to respectful dialogue between students and library staff was evident. In this storied landscape, space was made for voices, Hope reminding us that 'we know we're not going to have to fight for time to speak.'

Library spaces are, of course, rich in words – and sometimes silences. hooks (1987: 123) tells us of women from home who 'spoke in a language so rich, so poetic, that it felt to me like being shut off from life, smothered to death if one was not allowed to participate.' What I witnessed here was a democratic space in which students embraced words – written and spoken and, at times, represented in art. Crucially this language was theirs, from their own experiences and communities rather than being a 'school' language that was not theirs. MacRuairc (2009) reminds us of the importance of validating students' linguistic and cultural worlds – validation that is frequently absent in the prescribed curricula and high-stakes testing of the school environment. The library arts programme, providing a space free from such restrictions, is a place of dialogue where the culture and language of students and their communities are embraced as valid vehicles for learning (Nieto, 1992). Fecho and Botzakis (2007: 552), discussing classrooms in which multiple perspectives are part of the teacher-student dialogue suggested that they can encourage student movement from the position that language belongs to nobody, to the position that language belongs to others, to their claiming language as their own. This is also emphasised within critical education theories, where the lack of recognition of aspects of one's background, whether class, race, gender, disability or other intersectional elements, is often endemic and misrecognised in curricula and pedagogy. As I entered into the midst, into conversations about being heroic, about the morality involved in being a writer, about setting the story in their own locality, it seemed to me that students were, indeed developing their own voice. Engaging in listening and responding, they revealed an awareness of audience, perhaps leading to what Elbow (2000: 159) describes as the best writing - 'an invitation to the audience to respond, or even seeming to be a reply to what the audience had earlier thought or said'. Indeed, the library, Colm reminds us 'is a space to

be your emotional self'. Writing together, creating art on the floor or critiquing each other's work, students and staff were entering into projects of possibility (Giroux, 2015). The library space – unlike any other in the school in design and curriculum – provides a breathing space, if you will, somewhere it's not necessary to engage in 'a competition for an hour to have to get things right' (Jade). Reminding us of the importance of connection, sociability, conversation, Tony perhaps articulates what many students feel when he says that he doesn't learn 'being by myself'. The focus on relationships and social connection in the library makes room for dialogue – a prerequisite for true education (Freire, 2005) where there is freedom to 'experiment with different things' (Mia).

Awareness of audience is articulated during the writing workshops when Maria comments that they were writing not just for themselves but for others so 'you need to know where the barriers are.' I hear echoes of this later when Mia says, 'there's also a kind of moral code to it as well'. It seems to me that through sharing their work with each other, learning how to prepare it for public consumption, they are coming into the world (Biesta, 2013). They are doing so in through a politicised and dialogic process of conscientisation (Freire (2005); Shor and Freire, (1987)) becoming aware and agentic about the structural nature of their experiences of the world. This is clearly expressed in the importance they place on Colm being from their own area as others (teachers) 'don't know all of our language' (Jade). Their acknowledgement of Colm as being 'from around here' (Tony) and having experiences like their own, different from their teachers, found expression in the stories they constructed together with him – spoken and written – articulating local and global issues, naming their world and recognising their own culture and language. McLaren (2017) suggests that students gain self-empowerment when their own history, language and cultural traditions are acknowledged. The Library Project has found a way of doing this through its creative pedagogies. By developing the curriculum in this way, here in the library pedagogy is democratised (Shor, 1992).

Their discussion of having previously been involved in *WRaPPAround* (a JCSP Library Project performance poetry initiative run in conjunction with Poetry Ireland) revealed students learning to perform their stories – themselves – on stage. That participants were empowered to bring their voices to stage and page is a celebration of the power of relationships in this democratic and transformative library space. Here they tell me that Colm inspired them and as they engaged with complex questions about morality, authorial

obligations and future possibilities, it seems to me that they were developing politicised and creative selves in the warm spirit of this library.

In commenting on their engagement Aisling, one of their teachers, pointed out that they were initially surprised that a poem can be written in many ways. Admiring their courage in getting up on stage in Trinity College she spoke of how the library was their safe place - a deeply creative, supportive and happy place where they are encouraged to believe they can succeed. I was reminded again of the importance placed on relationships throughout this inquiry by students and adults alike – a relational responsibility to each other that has deep moral codes and political significance. While research frequently points to the emphasis librarians place on developing positive relationships with students (Hughes et al., 2001; Newberry, 2010), this does not often highlight the depth and resonance of these relationships for learning, creativity and knowledge formation. It seems to me that such spaces could not exist without the focus on relationships that was a recurring motif in this inquiry. Respectful relationships were evident in the words and tones of the principal, Rachel, the students, teachers and facilitators in what Barthes (in Elbow, 2000: 152) describes as: 'ephemeral speech which is indelible … Speech is irreversible: a [spoken] word cannot be retracted.'

Writing about poetry slam events, Somers-Willet (2009: 17) comments that 'slam poets may appear to improvise or spontaneously recite their work, but in actuality most of their performances are the product of painstaking hours of composition, memorisation, choreography, and rehearsal**.'** As I moved into *The Writing Club* space I witnessed these processes being lived out in the sharing and critiquing of each other's work. Opening themselves to such vulnerabilities, my participants spoke of growth and development as writers and performers, Ryan welcoming the challenge of the *Club*, developing his writing which can now be 'a bit darker.'

Willing to perform themselves in theatres and at slam events, it seemed to me that they embodied the 'liberated voice' (hooks, 1987: 128). Smith et al (2004: 1) define a poetry slam as 'a festival, carnival act, interactive class, town meeting and poetic boxing match all rolled into one' and I, at least, applaud their courage and resilience in presenting themselves to the public in this way – and, as I listened to conversations meandering through the afternoon hours - the library for creating a space in which they were encouraged to believe they could do so. Somers-Willet (2009) suggest that performance poetry – a poetry of democracy, equality and diversity - has the potential to recognise

transformative possibilities as participants perform themselves. As these young people engage in the curriculum offered by the library I suggest that in their developing as story-tellers, poets, actors they are being creative, learning to communicate, being literate - developing and performing the Key Skills of Junior Cycle. I think of Hope noting that they wouldn't have had the confidence to perform spoken poetry without *The Writing Club* and Mia speaking about hearing everyone's writing and their open mindedness to each other. During the discussion Ryan states that '*The Writing Club* literally drew creativity out of me' and I hear in these young voices pedagogical efforts to empower youth as creators of culture and transformative participants in the world (Darder et al., 2017). It seems that here in the library, a discourse of both critique and possibility is being developed (Giroux, 2016). What is education for? Perhaps this.

I imagine that inquiry often reveals surprises and as the students make their way in the world – a world in which they are heroes – performing and mapping themselves onto large sheets of paper on the floor, I was intrigued to see Aisling, their teacher, join them there. In conversation with her later she tells me that she cannot believe it herself, but cannot resist it. In *The Writing Club* I witnessed teachers sharing their writing and opening their work to critique as Rachel did herself. These are, I think, courageous acts in which students and adults participate in a democratic, respectful experience of education which are facilitated by the pedagogical and relational spaces created in the library project. Invited to bring forward a poem of my own, I began to understand in the beating of my heart just how brave they all are. It seems to me that such performative acts could only take place in a culture and space – emotional and physical – built on understandings and co-composings. In such places I suggest that they could fulfil these aspirations of Leggo (2009: 151):

> 'Because we are composed in languages, because we constantly write ourselves, and rewrite ourselves, and write our relations to others, we need frequent opportunities to explore and experiment with rhetorical possibilities of texts, with the art and science of language use.'

This is a collaborative place in which Jade told me that 'you're gonna have to make room for all the ideas', a place where students acknowledge each other's work, Tony telling me that 'the story wouldn't have came together if it wasn't for all of us.' Significantly, there is to be no exam or terminal assessment at the end of this series of workshops. In this space, 'it doesn't matter if it's bad … it's good in a way' (Maria) because as Jade points out, 'it's not a competition for an hour to kind of have to get things right… for the exams.' In the context of increasing research suggesting that high stakes exams impact on young people's

emotional well-being (Banks and Smyth, 2015) this freedom from assessment and judgement is significant.

Participants welcomed the idea that although they might not be 'good' at art, chiming with Jole's assertion that it is not about being 'good' – it's about being imaginative in these workshops which are not traditional art classes. She tells me that here, students who are confident in their art have space to show what they can do and will draw freely, often helping others. For some, just to paint with the brush is enough. In her quiet words of encouragement to them to take part, to move about, to involve their bodies in the act of painting, I am reminded of Haraway's (1991) suggestion that our bodies maps our power and our identity. This is echoed in Lawrence (2008, in Blackburn Miller, 2020: 342) who posits that learning is cognitive, somatic and spiritual and that the arts engage us in all of these domains. I cannot imagine, however, such engagement of the physical taking place even in the most creative of classrooms bound as they are by curriculum, space and the pressure of exams.

In discussions about exams, about the freedom to take risks, I hear an echo of an earlier conversation with Senior Project Librarian Kathleen Moran who noted that in the library students are offered 'a safe space in which to experiment, try something new, a place where there is no judgement, no exam.' In contrast, Giroux (2015) reminds us that the current language of accountability in education places restrictions on how subjects may be taught, grounding pedagogy in what is measurable. Indeed Lipman (2017) posits that accountability can become totalising, permeating all aspects of school life. The library is in the privileged position of being a different pedagogical space, not limited by such constraints. Thus, in responding to Apple's (2013: 23) questions 'Whose knowledge is it? Who selected it?' we might recall participants of *The Writing Club* being asked what they could teach others and students in the creative writing and art workshops being asked to consider questions about morality. In essence, in Colm's words, in the library they 'enter into a collective consciousness.'

It seems to me that in the fabric of the relationships that is woven here in this library, in the social and architectural spaces created by Rachel, I see an unpicking of traditional hierarchies in which adults and younger people frequently exist. Rachel has purposefully developed a sense of community that permeates this library, upholding the guarantee made in the *JCSP Library Project Charter* (2015) to set up warm, welcoming and attractive

library spaces in Project schools. In *The Writing Club* my participants spoke laughingly about the importance of tea and toast, even going so far as to say that the *Club* would not be possible without them.

Rachel returns again to the idea of the library being a different space, pointing out that 'It's all the little things that subliminally tell your brain that this isn't a classroom.' The importance of this should not be underestimated. O'Brien (2008) points to the relationship between student wellbeing and the physical environment of the school and the Library Project pays particular attention to the design of these alternative spaces. Further, Imms et al (2020) note that furnishings can influence student learning by enhancing the learning environment. Hope's affirmation that 'We've made it like this. Over the years' speaks to the emphasis placed on collaboration and sociability in this democratic space. And indeed, despite the laughter about tea and biscuits, I suggest that it is in the warmth – literal and metaphorical – that items such as these bestow on the library, suggesting relationships of care, that creativity flourishes. The gentle atmosphere of this space, perhaps, creates what Lee et al (2020: 204) describe as 'a liminal context that exists between student and teacher roles and provides them with forms of support that enable free exploration and creativity.' This unfolded in the conversations in *The Writing Club* as my participants shared their work, trusting the others to critique it in a spirit of friendship and growth. It was there too in the creative writing and visual arts workshops where it was deemed 'ok' to make mistakes and where questions of moral responsibility could be teased out and students and staff engaged together in new ways of knowing through the arts. I am reminded of Blackburn Miller (2020: 342) who suggests that 'bringing the arts into the classroom allows a multidimensional form of literacy and knowledge to emerge.' As my participants work together and speak about writing for different purposes, developing their language, imagining, exploring options, learning creatively, as they perform their work to each other – sometimes over tea and toast – I hear the Key Skills *Being literate, being creative, Communicating* and *Staying well* being articulated. I think that 'Perhaps wisdom sits in such places' (Basso, 1996).

Of course, many teachers engage with the curriculum in creative ways to make it interesting and relevant for their students. Teachers, too, are highly qualified in their field but they are naturally restricted by the demands of the curriculum and the exam system. One can imagine school leaders and parents looking askance at bodies on the floor or

conversations being conducted over tea and toast. The education system itself would struggle to examine learning in the library. Even recent developments such as the Junior Cycle – which does have a welcome focus on the arts – cannot not, I believe, fully capture 'evidence' of what takes place there. The Junior Cycle short course 'Artistic Performance', for instance, defines four levels of achievement - *Exceptional*, *Above expectations*, *In line with expectations*, and *Yet to meet expectations*. I suggest that such categorisation does not fit the organic approach of the library and would restrict, rather than encourage, openness to taking on risks. And after all, surely education should always involve a risk? (Biesta, 2013: 1.) Furthermore, there is a tension between the encouragement of expression and critique in a safe, companionable space such as the library and deciding that students had not yet met expectations.

In coming alongside my participants as they map stories, recount tales of learning to take to the stage and offer one's work to one's peers for critique, I believe that I'm witnessing the development of the skills of creativity, literacy, communication and staying well. These Key Skills, features of the Junior Cycle curriculum, emerge through the cultivation of positive relationships in this democratic space as my participants share tea and conversation, as they move among each other or even, perhaps, in moments of silence. They are visible in the splashes of art, in the making of mistakes, in the challenge of important discussions about society and morality and in the gentle laughter which they share as gestures of friendship.

Yet this happens in the library because of difference. The Project libraries are not intended to replicate classrooms, they are not bound by the same curricular demands. Instead, they celebrate their difference and through engagement in arts education, provide a safe place in which the constructive acceptance of criticism can be developed and in which students can take risks (Barry, 1990). In doing so, they also work closely with school management, without whose insight and interest the libraries would be much diminished. The principal of this school is a regular and welcome visitor to this library, contributing to its well-regarded position in the school.

It is clear that the learning that takes place in the library and its physical and social characteristics cannot be replicated in a classroom. There is, for example, the fact that two different professions, each with its own approach to learning, exist here. The JCSP Library

Project is firm in its promise that libraries will be staffed with professional librarians (*JCSP Library Project Charter*, 2015). Indeed, many studies show that it is not just a 'school librarian' who has a positive impact on students but a qualified librarian (National Literacy Trust, 2017).

There is, I suggest, scope for further positive engagement between librarians and teachers as learning in one fosters learning in the other. Further, Aisling pointed out engaging in library activities could spark something in the imagination that can be brought back to the classroom. Such synergies can only benefit students and those who work with them.

Harland et al (2000) suggest that engagement in an arts-based curriculum can provide both teachers and students with a sense of pleasure and in my visits to the library their enjoyment – of the work, of each other's company - was evident. In the JCSP Library Project, the notion of difference is important. The librarians bring a different vision, different skills and are seen by students through a different lens. And is such difference not to be lauded? It seems to me that students have much to gain through being able to access the expertise both librarians and teachers can provide. And why, should students in DEIS schools be denied such opportunity?

Shor (2017) reminds us that when we negotiate a meaningful curriculum with students, the social relations of discourse change in the classroom and we make possible an alternative construction of ourselves.

Could it be that this is what education is for?

5.7.1 Richardson's criteria for evaluating ethnography

In composing this narrative inquiry, I set myself the challenge of placing it alongside Richardson's (2018: 282) criteria for evaluating ethnography. They have informed every aspect of this inquiry and as a final bookend I now discuss my response to her questions:

1) Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life?
2) Does it have aesthetic merit?
3) Reflexivity: Has my subjectivity been both a producer and a product of the text?
4) Does the piece affect one emotionally or intellectually? Does it generate new questions? Does it move to action?

5) Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience? Does it seem 'true'—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual or communal sense of the 'real'?

It strikes me as strange that I didn't include question 5 when I originally considered her questions in Landscape 1. However, I did not, in those early days, realise that the research would demand so powerfully – insistently - embodiment and performance from me and so I put it to one side. I include it now, acknowledging that the inquiry has worked on me, produced me as I have it, if you will.

Clandinin (2007) reminds us that narrative inquiry requires us to be attentive to social, cultural and familial stories – our own and those of our participants. In coming alongside my participants and composing stories with them about their experiences in a library, I have described a social life unfolding over tea and toast. It is a life in which respectful relationships flourish and one where strong familial and community ties are foregrounded. It is a setting in which experiences of an arts-based curriculum foster the imagination. Here, answers to Biesta's (2013: 2) question 'What do we want education *for*?' (italics in original) may be heard as participants work together to script stories of heroism and morality. Responses may be witnessed as students negotiate art forms and acknowledge that it doesn't matter if you make a mistake. Here, the banking model of education (Freire, 2005) is interrupted as students critique and perform work with, and for, each other. In this library, relationships and imagination open up spaces for 'stories for otherwise' (Caine et al. 2022: 140) and enable processes of conscientisation and transformation (Freire, 2005).

Barone and Eisner (2012: 153) remind us that what makes a work significant is 'its focus on issues that make a sizeable difference in the lives of people within a society' and the raising of important questions. Using an arts-based inquiry approach has helped me to describe the social landscape of the library and provide an insight into one of the very few such spaces to be found in Irish schools. Barone and Eisner (ibid: 167) suggest that such a research approach may enable readers to see aspects of the social world that they may otherwise not have been aware of. The library, of course, is also set in a political landscape and the thesis thus serves as a reminder that other designated disadvantaged schools have not yet been granted one of the libraries promised under DEIS. Perhaps viewing schools – indeed libraries - as part of the struggle for expanding the struggle for voice and for human possibilities (Giroux, 2005), we can ask when that promise will finally be kept.

In composing a narrative inquiry about student experiences of an arts-based curriculum in the library, I have been conscious of the power of aesthetically pleasing work to elicit empathy in viewer and researcher (Dunlop, 2004). As I sat in conversation with participants, as I heard about and witnessed their performances on page and stage, it became ever clearer to me that my inquiry would also be composed in an arts-based form. Thus, I have drawn on art forms including literature, music and photography, to help illuminate the work that takes place in the library. Richardson (1997) suggests that the representation of data in poetic form can help audiences receive data differently. Thus I have experimented with found poetry in re-presenting some of the conversations I had with students as another means through which to reach audiences. It is also an acknowledgement of the creative processes that take place in the library. Coming alongside participants who cherish stories and performance, I have tried to enter into a world of shimmering words to tell a tale that would do justice to them.

In weaving narrative, data and theory together throughout the thesis I have striven to bring beauty and politics together and move audiences to imagine themselves in the world of the research (Madison, 2018). Perhaps these art forms may act as stops on the landscape (Applebaum, 1995) that allow researcher and reader to 'experience' the world of the library and wonder 'What if?' As the music fades away, as poetic cadences linger in our minds, might the silences that follow allow for the presence of possibility (Fivush, 2010)?

I mentioned earlier that the Junior Cycle which was introduced into schools in 2015 brought with it several welcome innovations. Yet even the imaginative approach of the development of short courses such as *Artistic Performance* brings with it a focus on assessment and tiered levels of achievement. Carrying out my inquiry has revealed to me how engaging in an arts-based curriculum helps students to think about their own learning and achievements in ways that cannot, I suggest, be measured through such means. Indeed, Giroux (2014) suggests that standardisation and high-stakes testing have nothing to do with an education for empowerment. The library is one space where such conformity can be thrown off. What if there were others?

In the *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement*, awarded to students at the end of third year, there is an area in which teachers can comment on student achievement in 'Other Areas of Learning'. Imaginative as this is, let us contemplate how powerful it would be if students

could take even one short course that is not assessed, or at least assessed in more creative ways. What if, students themselves were asked to think about, for instance, which Key Skills they had developed through engaging in the particular course and write a reflection on their learning which could form part of the *Profile*? After all, one of the characteristics of the Key Skill *Managing Myself* is 'Being able to reflect on my own learning' and this might be an interesting way to disrupt the focus on measurement which Is still so central to our education system. Perhaps by encouraging a sense of agency in our students in such ways we might together enter into 'schooling as a democratic public sphere' (Giroux, 2017: 22). At least, together, let us continue to ask provocative questions of education. Let us wonder out loud whether we desire from education, not results and league tables, but its 'possibility of going beyond itself' (Freire, 2014: 22).

Shor (2017: 85) contends that quality, is not neutral, but rather 'is a regime of truth' which rewards the already-privileged. I hear echoes of this in Colm's words that in very privileged schools, libraries are 'understood as being very valuable so parents pay for them.' So, in a spirit of delivering equality, in a country deemed wealthy and where much is spoken about the value of education, should we not ask: What if more DEIS schools had libraries and librarians such as these, such as those that were promised?

In my inquiry I have been drawn to autoethnography to help me make my own positioning as narrative inquirer on the social and political landscapes visible. The cameos allowed me to convey how familial and institutional stories worked on me and shaped my political and social justice leanings. Designed as reflexive pieces they helped me to reveal my development as narrative inquirer as I thought through questions about education and disadvantage. More recently I have become aware of discussions around the limitations of reflexivity in making the self visible, in particular the work of Haraway and Barad on diffraction. A fuller understanding of diffraction as a way of being attentive to difference was beyond the scope of the current inquiry, but I acknowledge the value of such discussions as inquirers seek honestly to gain increased understanding of the world and themselves in relation. I might - oh so tentatively - suggest, following Barad's (2014) assertion that there is light in dark and dark in light, that reflexivity and diffraction are not opposites, but entangled together, just as we are in the world.
I mentioned earlier in the thesis that 'I am forever on my way' and it is thus still as I grapple with emerging theories and methodologies of research.

As I attended to stories, it reminded me that our lives are scribed by others (Caine et al., 2022) and helped me to convey how learning from home made its way into my research. Listening to the stories of others and sharing mine, I brought forward my wonderings about how we might make life better (Bochner, 2013) and invited others to do the same. In Landscape 1 I mentioned that in approaching Maynooth University to discuss the possibility of doing a PhD, I did not realise that I was beginning a journey that would change my life. Through engaging in narrative inquiry I have been privileged to enter new worlds and walk alongside my participants, members of the academy and the world beyond. I have been stunned by these worlds, by the people I have met in both physical and virtual landscapes. Conferences such as the *Irish Narrative Inquiry Conference* and the *International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative* are windows to these worlds and will, I hope, continue to foreground and promote, the value of such inquiry. Perhaps we can continue to harness the power of the virtual world to help us to do so.

Writing and performing my research, drawing on the world of the arts and imagination, the past, present and future, allowed me to reveal how the research was working on me. Leavy (2015) reminds us that for arts-based research to be useful, the quality of the work is important and that arts-based works may be judged in terms of their truthfulness or trustworthiness. Thus it is my hope that this thesis resonates with the reader, that I have captured some of the essence of the library through the voices herein. The discussion of my movements along the research landscape, the sharing of conversations, the poetic musings, the positioning of this arts-based inquiry in a critical theory framework are designed to depict a social world and to emotionally connect with my readers. Barad (2003: 802) reminds us 'performativity is … a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real' and so I have included musical and fantastical interludes as pauses where the imagination may reside. Attending to my own and others' lives, perhaps together we can hear 'different words and music' (Greene, 1994: 140).

And as I continue to reflect on Richardson's questions, it is my hope that this work has been composed in an aesthetic way, contributing to our shared understanding of social life. Designed to speak to others intellectually and imaginatively, perhaps it may encourage us to 'summon up alternative possibilities for living' (ibid: 140).

5.8 Implications for future research

In thinking through some implications for future research, I turn again to my critical theory framework. Freire (2014) posited that as educators our main responsibilities are for changes in education and I hope that by layering theory and story throughout this thesis I 'might move readers beyond the fixed and finished response' (Holman Jones, 2016: 231) to the story of this library, onward to questions about the role of the arts in education and why the other JCSP libraries have not yet been delivered.

There is currently a dearth of research into school libraries in Ireland (Lawton, 2015; O'Dea, 2016). This is of concern in the light of the absence of reference to school libraries in recent Department of Education policy documents. School libraries are mentioned only fleetingly in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life National Strategy 2011-2020* (DES, 2011: 21). Library services are acknowledged in the DEIS Plan 2017 as having 'a central role to play in supporting family literacy, providing a space where parents and children access free literacy and numeracy resources' (DES, 2017: 39) and it 'identifies more than 100 actions in support of the goals [we] have identified' (2017: 10). Yet, somewhat alarmingly, there is no reference to the JCSP Library Project or to the delivery of the remaining twenty libraries.

In contrast, there is much international research that points to the benefits of school libraries. I have discussed some of these research findings earlier in this thesis, but it is worth emphasising them again here. For instance, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education (UK) report into overcoming barriers to literacy noted their concern that 'students without school libraries will not have access to a wide range of learning and reading resources to support their learning. A good library and, crucially, a good librarian, can be a real benefit to a school and attainment' (2011: 12). The National Literacy Trust (2018) found that school libraries are best positioned to assist with embedding critical literacy across the curriculum to combat fake news sources. Research in the Unites States found that 'the one key factor distinguishing high-performing high-poverty schools from low-performing high-poverty schools is a quality library program' (Coker, 2015: 25).

In a research report here, Darmody et al (2020) noted that 46% of those in households with dependent children were extremely or very concerned about the pandemic's interruption of education with levels of extreme concern more than twice as high among those living in the most disadvantaged areas. And yet little seems to have been written about the JCSP

Library Project's efforts to engage their communities during school closure from sharing online reading, teaching and learning resources, to virtual lunchtime and homework clubs, to poetry workshops to running creative competitions such as the Space Art Challenge[53]. Further research into this aspect of the Library Project's work would be valuable and timely.

A significant body of international research into school libraries is available, including research on their impact on student achievement (Lance and Kachel, 2018; Biagini, 2012 and student engagement with reading (Merga, 2019). Merga (2020) notes that while both reading for pleasure and bibliotherapeutic practices can have a positive impact on student wellbeing, the role of libraries in facilitating such benefits has not been foregrounded in much of the research. It would be useful and interesting to develop Irish research in these areas, in particular from a qualitative, critical theory perspective to help reveal the power of these democratising spaces.

There is also scope for further research into collaboration between librarians and other staff in the Library Project schools. In the library Rachel collaborated with Colm, Jole and Aisling in planning the arts curriculum. Kenny (2017) notes that teachers and artists bring complementary knowledge and skills to arts in education work. It would be of some value to explore this further in the context of the Project Libraries and beyond.

Additionally, I suggest also that there are possibilities for compelling synergies between the BLAST (Bringing Live Arts to Students and Teachers) initiative and the work that is currently being done in the JCSP Library Project. The BLAST proposal of creating up to four hundred new arts in education residencies in schools each year is very exciting and much could be gained by dissemination of research and into arts-based initiatives in the library schools. Much expertise has been gained in these libraries over years of developing the Project – expertise of which, despite the best efforts of those involved in the Project, the wider world of education is not always aware. Further research into the Project's creative approaches to the arts in education would, I suggest, benefit other schools and add to a corpus of knowledge about the value of arts in education.

[53] https://padlet.com/JCSPLibraryDemonstrationProject/2ow3cl6aab6t887v

The lack of research into this Project may, I suggest, be a significant factor in the failure to deliver the other libraries. There is, it seems, little knowledge of the work that is carried out in the Library Project and the impact of its services beyond the schools it serves.

Thus, there is much scope to conduct such research into these school libraries, the programmes they run and the impact that they have.

5.8.1 Future imaginings

In a time when we are called upon to witness so much sorrow and despair, when once more borders close and life is more difficult for many than we can perhaps imagine, can we yet call back hope? Perhaps it is possible that we will take heed of Freire's (2014: 17) assertion that 'precisely because human beings are historical beings, education is also a historical event. This means that education changes in time and space.' Might we then aim for a socially just society in which 'full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs' (Bell, 1997: 3) is foregrounded? This is a world where according to Giroux and Filippakou (2020):

> 'resurrecting the social imagination in order to arm a politics of hope becomes a central political and moral practice in the fight to revive civic literacy, civic culture, and a notion of shared citizenship.'

Giroux (2005: 155) reminds us that 'pedagogy is a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy.'

How can we who live in the world, perhaps particularly now, resist such challenges?
I found it interesting that during the research, the fact that Rachel is not a teacher was spoken of frequently by students and others. Kathleen Moran, Senior Project librarian, identified professional librarianship as an important aspect of the development of the library project. In fact, the *JCSP Library Charter* (2015: 4) guarantees to schools that each library will be 'staffed by a full-time professional librarian'. As I listened to my participants and observed Rachel and others in the library I began to notice different ways of working together emerging. It seemed to me that drawing skills from different professions together in the library contributed positively to student learning and created in me further

wonderings about whether if more schools had libraries such synergies might blossom and benefit students.

Hackman (2005: 103) writes that 'social justice education encourages students to take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments'. It seems to me that such practices are what I witnessed in my inquiry into how students engage in learning in a JCSP school library. I believe that such practices would not have been developed without the commitment to each other, to a joyful curriculum and to respectful relationships that I observed in this library, in this school, from the moment of my first meeting with the principal and Rachel. This I echo these words of Merga (2022: 9): 'Much has been written about the vulnerability of school libraries and their staff to funding cuts. Given the wellbeing challenges we are currently facing, we need to invest in the school library as a wellbeing-supportive resource. Now more than ever we need to recognise, protect, and promote this resource.'

As my participants and I travelled and co-composed together, as we told and performed and dreamed stories, surely they and I were engaged in the type of education described so eloquently by Freire (2014: 25):

> 'There is no education without ethics; and precisely because ethics walks constantly very close to aesthetics, because there is a certain intimacy between beauty and purity, education is also an aesthetic event.'

And in my imaginings about such an education and social justice, I hope that perhaps my inquiry will help to hasten the day when more of the libraries promised to DEIS schools will open their doors.

Conscious of responsibilities attached to being in the field I brought forward in the research this reminder from Clandinin and Connelly (1995: 4-5) that the professional knowledge landscape has:

> 'a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships. . .. Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relationships among people, places, and things, we see it both as an intellectual and a moral landscape.'

In a moral landscape, aware of my responsibilities, I undertook to live a respectful 'ethics of life' Charon and Montello (2002: ix). As one who desires to be a progressive educator,

perhaps I have been able to reveal 'opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be. After all, without hope there is little we can do' (Freire, 2002: 9).

I hope that using a narrative arts-based approach has helped me to do my participants justice. They permitted me to walk alongside them as they composed in poetry, fiction, art and conversation and it seems to me that on such a storied landscape a narrative approach finds foothold. Drawing on the world of the arts helped me to convey – in part at least – the magic of some of the moments we shared, the stories they told and performed. I hope that you can hear their voices. In the words of Snowber (2014: 2): 'Engagement in arts-based practices beckons the researcher, artist, scholar and educator to live in the garden of hospitality.' I hope you were able to join us there.

5.9 An adieu

As I prepare to leave my research, I look back along the landscape to my narrative beginnings. One of the first stories I can 'remember' is that tea-party with my mother where we drank tea out of tiny pink cups. That context of home is important for many reasons of course, but particularly in the context of this research because it was in my childhood home that I first learned about the value of education and the importance of social justice. This is knowledge that I have carried with me into my personal and professional life and which brought me eventually to my research library. Returning to stories of home continues to shape how I interact in the present (Caine et al. 2022) and attend to unfolding lives.

In using the metaphors of landscapes, world-travelling, the three commonplaces and portal as story I have been able to move backward and forward in time and place situating and storying my research. From the landscape of home I moved across landscapes – imaginary and literal - on world-travels, composing with others. In Asturias, Spain, the pilgrim path winds its way above the cliff-tops, just beyond the reach of the majestic waves. I first saw it at the beginning of my research and I felt myself a pilgrim on the inquiry path – and hoped that my chosen path would not be quite so precarious. Finding footholds took time but I believe that this inquiry path will continue to draw me forward into further wonderings.

In carrying out my research I was privileged to walk alongside my participants as they generously shared their library and their work with me. How I cherished that time. They may not realise it, but they gave me many gifts. Through researching with them, through the academy, I entered the world of narrative inquiry. I may have left the field - but I will never leave narrative inquiry. It holds me still in its embrace – it has entered my body, my emotions, my intellect. Perhaps, I and other inquirers may answer Leggo's (2018: 82) call and:

let our scholarship sing in new voices
call out with enthusiasm
for the possibilities
of language literacy knowing

In my research I have been open to beauty – of social interaction and composing, of living a storied life, of engaging in narrative inquiry. Perhaps through living in the world this way we are given the invitation to 'become present - present to our lived bodies and lived desire and to possibly create a sky into which to live those dreams into being' (Snowber, 1981: 79).

As I prepare to bid adieu to the stage I close my eyes and let the notes of Debussy's *Claire de Lune* seep into my body. I hope that perhaps you may join me here in the moonlight of the imagination: https://www.youtube.com/watch/Yri2JNhyG4k. And perhaps, just perhaps, as I think of storied landscapes of home and research, my gift of autobiography and narrative 'invites you into the house of my past, and the threshold you cross leads you into your own' (Mair, 1989: 11).

5.9.1 Cameo 4

A Pilgrim's Leave-Taking

As the time approaches for me to draw the inquiry to a close, I think about the lives and stories I have shared and wonder if it is ever possible to fully leave our research behind. It seems to me that as I leave lives in the midst, I will carry their traces with me,

folded into other stories composed in a mingling of past, present and future.

As I look back across the landscape - of inquiry, of narrative, of life - I am once more called back to memories of other times and distant lands.

It is the weekend and we are at our club in Abu Dhabi. We sit in the shade gazing at the golden light, feeling it enter our bodies, memorising it. Laughter in a multitude of languages floats through the air and our friends switch from one to the other in easy conversation.

Suddenly the evening breeze sweeps under parasol-brims, making them tremble as it sends paper napkins scattering across tables and warm sand. There is a flurry of movement as towels and damp, sandy children are gathered up, to be readied for home. As the day sinks into the sea, dusk announces itself and carried across the centuries come the beautiful notes of the call to prayer. These memories are from years ago - or yesterday - but so clear are they that they could be happening today, here, now. As I think of those velvet night skies, I wonder if, as Leggo (2004: 22) suggests, 'there is no present, except as an illusion constructed in the past like stars long extinguished even when we see their light.' And as the future and past intertwine I follow their threads into my story-telling present.

I imagine Arabs navigating desert lands, moving back and forth along the spice route, crossing into Spain, leaving traces of their language, art and music behind on the landscape. Listen

carefully and we might hear echoes of Arabic language and music reflected in our own, look closely and we might see Kufic Arabic and Egyptian hieroglyphics inscribed on the Ogham Stone. Oh such world-travelling, such stories. I can hear them now, told round a fire in the desert night, passed lovingly from generation to generation, shared companionably with strangers. Thinking of such wanderings brings me back to memories of the pilgrims' path in Asturias, Spain and the early days of my research journey. I look for traces of myself in sun-filled images captured in moments of conversation. I think I still hear Spanish, English and Italian voices sweetening the air and I think again about how much I am in love with words. And as I move photographs across the screen, I know that the stories my participants and I co-composed in the library will remain written on me forever, carried forward into a future of possibilities. For, as Snowber (1998, in Wiebe and Snowber, 2011: 106) reminds us,

'we are in transit, and in transit we are offered the opportunity for the senses to split open and illuminate ways of being which cultivate awe. This is the erotics of the everyday, the engagement with sensuous knowledge.'

Through the stories we hear who we are.

- Silko (1996: 30)

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