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## **Examining the role of Philosophical Inquiry on Critical Thinking in Irish Post-Primary Classrooms**

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# **Examining the role of Philosophical Inquiry on Critical Thinking in Irish Post-Primary Classrooms**

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the award  
of Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary

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30/05/2024

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## Abstract

The following study aims to investigate the role of philosophical inquiry (PI) on critical thinking skills upon students in the post-primary environment. It enquires as to the potential benefits that may be uprooted from implementing PI and Philosophy as an optional or mandatory subject in the post-primary Junior cycle (JC) and Senior cycle (SC) environment. This study uses qualitative methods; primarily semi-structured interviews (N=5). The data is examined using thematic analysis. Examination of the qualitative results revealed extremely positive student outcomes and classroom experiences using PI. However, limitations also appear in the context of Philosophy as a difficult subject to assess at SC level and an overall decline in critical thinking and student autonomy in the post-primary environment. Finally, recommendations are made to educational policymakers to recognise the value of PI in fostering cognitive development in the Irish education system.

## Acronyms

|      |  |
|------|--|
| PI   | Philosophical Inquiry                          |
| RIA  | Royal Irish Academy                            |
| NCCA | National Council for Curriculum and assessment |
| P4C  | Philosophy for Children                        |
| SC   | Senior Cycle                                   |
| JC   | Junior Cycle                                   |

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This research investigates the impact of PI on critical thinking through the lens of teacher perspectives in the post-primary environment. Throughout this chapter, an outline for data collection and a dissertation structure are outlined. Research will be presented on the association between PI and cognitive development to make evident to educational policymakers in Ireland and general researchers in this field the various academic and interpersonal developments that PI provides.

### **1.2 Origin of this Thesis**

The genesis of this dissertation lies in the researcher's long-standing interest in both philosophy and education and the commitment to understanding the transformative potential of these fields when merged. The researcher's personal academic journey has been shaped by probing questions, critical analyses, and spirited debates, often benefiting from the critical thinking skills honed through PI. This personal engagement has inspired the researcher to explore whether the skills they have found to be invaluable could be systematically cultivated in the post-primary educational environment.

The researcher's motivation also stems from their professional experiences. Working in educational settings, a significant gap in the promotion and nurturing of critical thinking skills among students was found by the researcher. Despite the clear necessity of these skills, traditional curricula often fail to explicitly address them effectively. This has led to question as to whether a more structured inclusion of PI in the post-primary classroom could bridge this gap or not.

### **1.3 Background to Study**

“All schooling aims to bring about cognitive growth. However, few schools teach thinking as a demonstrably discrete element of the curriculum” (Millett, 2012 p.8). Being educated involves developing our minds, since it is part of being human. To this view, education is primarily responsible for teaching children how to think critically, creatively, and effectively (Fisher, 2013). Based upon this idea, this research explores whether through PI students can become more critical thinkers. It also further explores the proposal of implementing philosophy as either an optional or mandatory subject in the Senior Cycle (SC) curriculum which was first proposed to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) in 2016. After all, it is in the national interest of the Irish education system to value critical thinking as an essential skill for student development and

success (NCCA, 2009). Ultimately, this research demonstrates the powerful, positive influence that the inclusion of philosophy and its associated inquiry can have upon students in the post-primary environment. It also further strengthens the proposal made by the RIA to implement philosophy as a SC subject.

#### **1.4 Rationale**

Since creative and critical thinking skills are to be considered as essential skills in the post primary environment, there is more and more emphasis being placed on the need to develop and nurture these skills in students from the get-go in schools. Students are encouraged by the NCCA to become independent thinkers through inquiry-based educational approaches. Therefore, the need for more critical thinking education and critical pedagogy becomes more evident as they evolve together. Similar empirical research studies have investigated the effects of philosophical inquiry on critical thinking skills in primary classroom settings such as Lipman's Philosophy for children (P4C) (Isiklar, 2022). However, there has been no significant research carried out on the potential effects of philosophy and its associated inquiry in the post-primary environment in Ireland. The implementation of philosophy as a mandatory subject has been effectively implemented in a variety of educational settings worldwide at post-primary level. The educational benefits that may arise for students from such curricular decisions are renown so we must ask ourselves at a national level why can't it be the same on a post-primary level (O'Connor, 2012).

#### **1.5 Research aims**

This research aims to explore the impact PI has on critical thinking skills by examining the role of the teacher in facilitating PI in the post-primary classroom. It seeks to validate the importance of philosophy as an individual subject to further strengthen the proposal of implementing philosophy at SC level. Finally, the dissertation aims to ascertain the Irish and global standpoint of having philosophy appear in the post-primary education system.

## **1.6 Dissertation layout**

The dissertation comprises five chapters. Chapter One presents the background and rationale to the research; the methods employed, and the layout of the dissertation. Chapter Two explores existing literature on: PI and its impact on student critical thinking and cognitive development.; theoretical models concerning teaching and learning and their application in developing children’s critical thinking and interpersonal skills, and standpoints to effective curricular interventions based on a comparative analysis of PI in other educational systems around the world. Chapter Three discusses methodology describing the qualitative data collection method used. Chapter Four presents the main findings based on the themes that emerged during the qualitative analysis phase. The final chapter gives an evaluation of the main findings in relation to the research questions and literature presented in Chapter Two.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

Conducting research about the impact of philosophy in schools is valued to improve student outcomes for students in Ireland in an education system that is considered to be “highly industrial” in which everyone learns the same way, with the same kinds of methods, and with the same style (O’Brian, 2024). Gaining the perspectives of teachers that engage with PI in post-primary schools can inform curriculum designers and policymakers about the merits of integrating philosophy into the post-primary curriculum, leading to the development of more robust and comprehensive educational programs that encourage lifelong learning. This single case study will also serve as an authoritative source that helps shape policies promoting critical thinking and PI in schools which can help improve the overall quality of educational research and practice in Ireland.

## **Chapter two: Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The literature review will present research focusing on the association between PI and the development of critical thinking skills within students in the post-primary classroom. To do this, it is necessary to analyse the impact of PI on critical thinking as well as teacher and student perspectives that involve PI in the classroom. Cross-curricular subjects which contain philosophy modules within teaching and learning are also to be explored to further analyse their application in developing student's critical thinking skills. The aim of this research study is to investigate the effects of PI on critical thinking in the post primary environment to further strengthen the proposal for philosophy as a SC subject. Finally, Ireland's standpoint on philosophy in education will be reviewed in order to better understand the nations perception of the subject being presented in the post-primary environment.

### **2.2. PI and critical thinking**

Philosophy derives from the Greek words Philo and Sophia, meaning a lover of wisdom (Gerry, 2017, p.5). PI therefore explores nature of reality, knowledge, values, and existence through asking and exploring deep and fundamental questions. As outlined in the philosophy curriculum for the JC, the aim of PI is to gain a better understanding of topics such as philosophy of sport, art, knowledge, religion and education. Topics of social and political philosophy are also explored as the subject aims to improve careful listening, critical thinking, careful analysis, logic, argumentation, collaborative problem-solving, and reflection (Curriculum online, 2023).

PI engages students in a manner that improves reflection, critical thinking, creativity and literacy (Coombs and Daniels 1991). These are key skills which the NCCA outlines as fruitful curricular development in both the JC and SC framework (NCCA, 2009 & 2014). When philosophy is taught correctly, students will acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for asking philosophical questions, analysing concepts, and finding deep meaning in philosophical ideas (Murriss, 2000). Research has proved that engaging with PI helps students to understand questions about the world and our place within it. As part of the process, students contemplate ethical and moral dilemmas that build on their cognitive development and interpersonal skills. For students in the post-primary environment, philosophy can act as a tool for rational analysis which allows students to back up claims which they make. As a result, they may challenge established beliefs, provoke critical thinking, and stimulate intellectual engagement, whether they are speculative, tentative, or even controversial (Lewis & Chandley, 2014).

### **2.3 The effect of PI on critical thinking in education**

To understand the potential impact of PI in Irish classrooms, it is necessary to analyse the effect of the already existing critical thinking programmes which exist in primary and secondary level education. One of the most renowned courses in this field for students can be merited to Matthews Lipman and Ann Sharp's philosophy for children (P4C). In this renowned pedagogical approach, Socratic methods are used to discuss topics in discussion groups with the teacher as the mediator. In one particular mixed methods research study by Pala (2022), the activities of philosophy education for children were proven to enable high-level thinking. In the qualitative data findings, a large volume of students stated that the practices of P4C improved their critical thinking skills. By engaging in philosophical discussions, the students noticed significant improvements in their ability to evaluate arguments, question assumptions, and apply reasoning skills. It may be suggested that similar effects would occur if this same study was carried out on a post-primary level.

In a similar study, Erfani et al. (2014) examined the effect of philosophy instruction on secondary school students' problem-solving skills and creativity. Based on the results, PI can be considered to facilitate the development of students' problem-solving and creative abilities. Students who are categorized as low achievers based on examination results are given more of an opportunity to voice out their opinions in dialogic pedagogy. Using PI, students considered on this low achiever scale can better formulate higher order thinking questions and use evidence and examples to elaborate and support opinions (Yusoff, 2018). This information can be used to support educational policymakers in Ireland to consider mandating philosophy in the JC and SC cycle curriculum to promote critical thinking skills and student autonomy.

### **2.4 Enhancing Independent thinking through PI: Evidence from Educational Studies**

An analysis of 18 studies by Garcia-Moriyon, Robello and Colom concluded that 'the implementation of P4C led to an improvement in students' reasoning skills of more than half a standard deviation' (Burgh, 2018, p. 19). Related studies also concluded that the practice of collaborative philosophical inquiry (CPI) produced increases in measured IQ, sustained cognitive benefits, and clear performance gains in other school studies. This demonstrates CPI's ability to improve students' reading, writing, arithmetic, science, and problem-solving abilities in the post-primary environment. Furthermore, according to the research of Millett and Tapper (2012), the effects of PI largely relate to improving students' autonomy as independent thinkers in the classroom.

When gathering students' perception on English debating club activities for their critical thinking, the

interviews conducted by Maharani (2021) reinforce this concept of richer dialogue. Students noted improvements in communication skills and critical thinking. One particular student said that ‘The benefit that I have really felt is seeing things from multiple perspectives rather than one perspective’ ( p.40). Therefore, various student perspectives have confirmed that PI improved both their independent thinking and communication skills. Extracting independent thinking and improving communicative skills is a huge element of the curriculum aims and goals for both the JC and SC curriculum. Therefore, there is an undeniable link that PI hugely complements the NCCA’s vision for promoting these skills in the overall post-primary curriculum.

## **2.5 Should philosophy be a mandatory subject in post-primary curriculum?**

The RIA’s submission to the NCCA in 2012 provides a strong case towards the necessity of implementing philosophy in the Irish curriculum. The document sets out the case for implementing the subject in the SC curriculum by associating the impact of PI with the SC overall vision for learning. For example, the correlation amongst philosophical pedagogy to the NCCA’s vision of the SC’s official learning outcomes is evident in the following passage of the proposal;

*‘In striking ways, a committed student of philosophy is intellectually resourceful in those ways that the NCCA identifies (Towards Learning, p. 12) as achievable outcome for students who have completed the Senior Cycle: they are – they must be – curious, enquiring, open-minded, reflective, synthesizers of ideas, innovative, problem-solving and conceptually creative’ (O’Connor, 2012, p.4).*

This proposal gives a good standpoint of the Irish perspective regarding PI, particularly with those involved in educational policymaking and curriculum building. Higgins (2016) gives us a further insight into the Irish perspective of PI when he portrayed the beneficial educational and societal impact which exposure to philosophy can provide. In his speech at the *Áras an Uachtaráin*, he stated that if we are to prepare our students for their journey into the world, they must acquire the right tools for this journey. Ireland’s own president views philosophy as the compass to assist the students in making wiser decisions on their journey. He believes that the skills acquired from PI strongly develop young people into becoming independent thinkers and adequately prepare them for what is to come after school (Higgins, 2016) .

## **2.6 Challenges and concerns in Implementing philosophy in Irish education**

However, before such a strong emphasis was placed on the development of philosophy in Irish education, there were doubts leading up to the implementation of philosophy in the JC curriculum. Humphreys (2015) raises some of these doubts in the Irish Times when discussing the arrival of philosophy as part of the JC and the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI). Questions were raised in regard to how assessment can be measured if philosophy was implemented in Irish schools as it is challenging to assess social intelligence especially with traditional assessment methods. The clash between philosophical ideas and cultural or religious beliefs was also a concern for some people. Others still, maintain that it is a luxury that educational systems can't afford (Dunne, 2017, p.6). Burbules (2002) contributes to the topic of the limits of dialogue when analysing the power dynamics and cognitive complexity involved in critical dialogue. During the discussion, he mentions that some participants in philosophical discussions may overpower marginalized voices and limit diverse perspectives.

It is also important to remember that not everyone has the same cognitive capabilities, and some individuals may have trouble contributing meaningfully to the dialogue or comprehending complex ideas. That being said, there have been many counterclaims made in relation to some of these critiques such as peer assessment where students are able to collaboratively evaluate each other's reasoning (Humphreys, 2015). As a whole, these perceptions suggest limitations about the practicality, assessment, teacher readiness, and curriculum load of the project. Nevertheless, the proponents of philosophy highlight its potential benefits in the Irish education system, such as fostering critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and stimulating intellectual development.

## **2.7 A comparative analysis of PI in other educational systems or countries**

There are many European Union (EU) countries where philosophy is mandated at the post-primary level. For example, philosophy is a mandatory curriculum subject in both Italy and France and required to be completed for university admission. Then in other countries such as France, philosophy is taught as a compulsory subject in the final year of the Lycée (17-19 years old) (RIA, 2012). A philosophy curriculum is incorporated into the national curriculum from an early age in the Netherlands also. It promotes PI as a method of stimulating critical thinking skills and encouraging students to develop their own philosophies (Velema, no date).

With a better understanding of Philosophy's appearance in other educational systems, a question can be raised regarding Ireland's standpoint with Philosophy in education. Compared to other countries,

Philosophy is relatively underrepresented in the Irish post-primary education since it is not a mandatory subject in the post-primary curriculum. However, the benefits of PI within the Irish education system have not gone unnoticed. Ireland recognizes the importance of philosophy in education through various initiatives and frameworks. For example, P4C can be found primarily in educational settings in Ireland such as primary schools and community organizations (creativetogether, 2023). Then there is the optional JC philosophy short course which can be taken in particular schools in Ireland (Curriculum online 2023).

## **2.8 The role of philosophy in addressing contemporary challenges in Irish education and society**

Philosophy could facilitate the kind of change Ireland needs today in public affairs. There are several issues challenging traditional norms, including a wealth economy struggling with social problems, population growth, and an ethnically diverse society. Through social media, the Irish society has been bombarded with unreliable, unresearched, and randomly generated information and opinions (Carmel, 2023). Therefore, from a political and social point of view, it can be argued that there hasn't been a more important time to practice critical thinking in Ireland and the rest of the world. From an educational perspective Ornstein, (1990) points out the relevance which philosophy provides to educators and curriculum decision makers. He refers to educational researchers such as John Goodlad who emphasised that philosophy is the beginning point in curriculum decision making and is the basis for all subsequent decisions regarding curriculum. Classical statements from Thomas Hopkins are also expressed to show the importance of philosophy in determining curriculum decisions across educational systems. He mentions: "There is rarely a moment in a school day when a teacher is not confronted with occasions where philosophy is a vital part of action" (Ornstein 1990 p.1)

When transforming pedagogy through PI, Scholl et al. (2014) found that elements of philosophy were transferable across the curriculum. Philosophy's integration into cross-curricular subjects such as English and Religion allows for interdisciplinary learning. It demonstrates the interconnectedness of different subjects and provides both students and teachers with a broader perspective of problematising and co-constructing knowledge across the curriculum. As a result, post-primary students can better draw connections between different disciplines. This may help students to be more adequately prepared for the workforce when they finish school as they can see how knowledge may be transferred amongst different disciplines.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

Across educational systems and countries, there is empirical evidence that PI enhances critical thinking skills. PI encourages students to analyse problems, think critically, and think independently. Many countries have mandated PI as part of their curriculum because of this. In spite of the many advantages which PI provides, there is little research supporting the cognitive benefits in which PI can provide in the post-primary environment. Investigating this area may further strengthen the movement towards having philosophy as a mandatory subject in Irish curriculum. As there is so much research supporting the cognitive and educational benefits of PI in primary and post-primary schools around the world, it is surprising that the subject is only considered as an optional subject in the JC curriculum. It is this gap in research that inspired the researcher to further explore the effect of PI on critical thinking skills in the post-primary environment. Could the implementation of philosophy as an optional or mandatory in the SC curriculum benefit student's critical thinking and encourage lifelong learning? The researcher will therefore explore the effect of PI on students' critical thinking skills in the post-primary environment.

## **Chapter three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two indicates that there is a lack of credibility on the idea of implementing philosophy as a mandatory subject in the post-primary curriculum. In addition, it is clear that there is little research on how PI affects critical thinking in the post-primary environment. The qualitative research methodology used to gather the data will be described in this chapter, along with the requirements that had to be met before any data could be gathered. Selecting methods that would be effective within the given timeframe was vital, given the constraints of a small-scale self-study. The chapter begins with the research paradigm, followed by the theoretical framework of the study. Next, a justification of the methods used, before the limitations, sample and data-analysis are presented. Finally, the ethical considerations are included.

### **3.2 Research paradigm**

The term paradigm in educational research describes the 'worldview' of a researcher. In this worldview, the meaning or interpretation of research data is influenced by one's perspective, thinking, or school of thought (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Therefore, the interpretivist paradigms of inquiry were selected for this study. In the case of exploring critical thinking in the post-primary environment, this approach allows the researcher to gain contextual understanding of the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of teachers regarding PI within the Irish curriculum. Additionally, the interpretivist paradigm acknowledges the importance of the researcher's own subjectivity and perspective. The researcher's interpretation of the interviewees' data through thematic analysis provides more enriching interpretation of the findings as the researcher aims to identify patterns and themes within the data to capture the richness of participants' viewpoints and experiences.

### **3.3 Selection of methods and research Instrumentation**

A qualitative approach was chosen by the researcher for this study. Qualitative data was collected through the conduction of five face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Quantitative research, according to Patton (1985), aims to understand situations in their distinctiveness as part of a given setting and the interactions within that setting. Analysing how participants experience the setting as well as how they perceive the setting from multiple perspectives is imperative to achieving a deeper understanding of philosophical inquiry. It is also the philosophical orientation of the chosen qualitative approach that

distinguishes one qualitative design from the other for the researcher such as ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory.

With a small-scale study as such (with sample sizes <10), a phenomenologist approach which uses a qualitative design has been chosen to view the lens and lived experiences of individuals that determine their subjective reality to specific events such as teaching. This Phenomenology is based on the idea that humans are integrated with the environment; therefore, reality is a subjective experience unique to each individual and everyone has a meaningful and unique perspective to bring to the discussion (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004). A participant's unique and specialised perspective in an interview, however, can make qualitative data analysis more vulnerable to researcher bias, as Hepburn and Potter (2004) warn. Further consideration of these limitations will be provided in chapter four during the analysis of the research findings.

### **3.4 Sample and participants**

This study was carried out in the researcher's second level mixed school. Convenience sampling was carried out during this study whereby research participants consisted of qualified teaching staff that had numerous years of experience with teaching elements and modules of philosophy. There was an effort to sample a balanced group of male and female teachers as well as teachers with varying levels of experience and departments. Religion, English and History teachers that have profound knowledge of PI were therefore selected to determine their understanding of the effects of philosophy on critical thinking. Teachers who had experience in policy development were also selected due to their knowledge of policy development in the Irish education system. The participating school was a mixed school in a rural Irish town and consisted of approximately 1000 students and over 80 teaching staff.

Due to the size of the school, the researcher had access to five teacher participants in the specified teaching subjects for the qualitative study. This is also why convenience sampling was selected as there were members of the target population who were easily accessible, geographically close to the location, available at a particular time, or willing to participate suited for a small-scale study as such (Etikan et al. 2016). Students were excluded from this study, based on the exclusion criteria, as the aim of this research is to portray the effects of PI from the educator's perspective. Student teachers were also not selected as the principal aim is to analyse teachers that are highly experienced in their position. Therefore, a variety of factors influenced the selection of interviewees which included subject knowledge, experience with policies and the extent of experience in the matter. The purpose of this selection is to gain a more expansive understanding of the study's title.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

Victoria and Virginia (2017) state that an important part of qualitative research is the use of thematic analysis in order to identify patterns within and across data in accordance with participants' lived experience, views and perceptions. The purpose of experiential research is to grasp the thoughts, feelings, and actions of participants. Furthermore, thematic analysis can be used as part of a 'critical' framework to interrogate patterns within personal and social meanings around a topic. The semi-structured interview questions in Appendix 4 assisted the researcher with gaining a deeper understanding of the effects of PI from the teacher perspective. To get familiar with the content, the researcher will listen to and transcribe the interviews.

A coding and analysis method is chosen to identify any recurring themes or emergent topics that addressed the three research questions. Braun & Clarke's (2017) strategy of thematic analysis consists of six phases. During phase one, the data need to be thoroughly analysed Phase two involved coding, isolating the important features of the data. The third phase involved searching for themes, while phase four involved refining and combining those themes. Themes were then carefully named in phase five, focusing on the key message of the theme, and finally phase six was completed with the writing up of the analysis, which wove together the analytic narrative and vivid data extracts to provide a coherent and persuasive story about the data, while linking it to existing literature (Braun & Clark, 2006).

### **3.6 Rigour**

Using Braun & Clarke's (2017) strategy in the semi structured interview's aims to ensure credibility of the chosen thematic analysis. This strategy relies upon the researcher recording interviews, taking detailed field notes, and transcribing interviews verbatim. Through this process, the researcher can capture participants' nuances and richness of experiences, gaining a thorough understanding of their perspectives. A verbatim transcription is also important for accuracy in analysis. To improve dependability of convenience sampling using the chosen strategy, the researcher used the guidelines set by Stratton (2021) where a balance of input was employed using positive, neutral and negative questions in the interviews. In keeping with these guidelines, the researcher ensured that the questions targeted the objectives of the study in an appropriate manner and were clear, unbiased, and appropriate.

The researcher also used a form of triangulation known as multiple methodologies to enhance credibility of the data. The findings are validated by using multiple sources of data or different perspectives such as interviews, observations and documents. The identified themes from the interviews are therefore made more reliable since the data is produced by comparing findings from a

variety of sources (Natow, 2020). Using reflective journals in the qualitative research process also helped the researcher to engage with the notion of creating transparency in the research process. This was carried out through critical self-reflection where thoughts, assumptions and biases were deeply analysed (Ortlipp, 2008).

### **3.7 Limitations**

The disadvantages of semi-structured interviews as a research method are to be acknowledged also. They don't necessarily require a huge investment in time and personnel, their sample sizes tend not to be large enough to yield the same precision as quantitative research, for instance. Findings may not be generalizable for a large population as a result (Adams, 2015). Consequently, researchers may also inadvertently select participants who have similar characteristics or perspectives since the sample isn't representative of the broader population. This may lead to bias. In addition, the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews can lead to the temptation to ask leading questions, leading to observer bias. It is also possible for respondents to give the researcher the answers they think they want to hear, resulting in social desirability bias (George, 2022). Therefore, it is important for the researcher to delve into questions phrased in a neutral and unbiased perspective. With thematic analysis, identifying and analysing recurring themes in the interviews is subjective, and different researchers may produce different outcomes based on the interpretation of the data with this type of qualitative research (Joffe and Yardley, 2003). The researcher must take all of this into consideration.

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

An Ethics application form was completed by the researcher and submitted to Hibernia College's Ethics Committee for approval. The principles of the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) have been applied to ensure that this study adheres to all relevant ethical standards. The written consent and support of the school principal was sought prior to approaching potential participants for the study as identified in Appendix 2 and 3. Participation in the study was voluntary. All interview participants were informed of the purpose and methods of the research including reassurance around confidentiality in advance of data collection and were treated with respect and sensitivity. Interview participants were informed that they could freely withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice (see appendix). Data from the research was used in line with the Data Protection Act 1998. Any personal identifiers were removed and replaced with pseudonyms. Given the small sample size this study also ensured there was no possibility of deductive disclosure. Data has been

stored securely in accordance with Hibernia College guidelines and will not be used for any purpose outside this study.

### **3.9 Final note**

A qualitative approach was used in this study to ensure the benefits for both the participants and the researcher within the interpretivist paradigm. Efforts were made to ensure personal bias did not influence the results of this study. This was achieved through the anonymous nature within interviews, triangulation of data, literature and findings and the researcher's own continual awareness of bias. The findings and a discussion are presented in Chapter Four.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the findings of the qualitative research methodologies will be presented. Qualitative data was collected through 5 semi-structured interviews. We will discuss the responses of the participants under four themes arising from thematic analysis of the data. Since all of the data cannot be presented, the researcher has prioritized presenting those findings that are relevant to the research questions. Afterwards the data will be analysed, attempting to determine what can be learned from them. Finally, the findings of the research will be correlated with the research questions.

### **4.2 Emergent themes**

#### **4.2.1 Cognitive development**

The impact that philosophy has on student's critical thinking skills in various classes is reviewed in this theme. A few participating teachers reported that when they mentioned a philosophical concept or question in their subject, students had a visible change in their ability to reflect and ask questions. When looking at the beginning of philosophy in SC Religion, one teacher commented that:

*"Students have been able to draw comparisons between these Sophists who claim that "justice is simply the interest of the stronger", and powerful figures in the world today who make decisions on behalf of others, convincing them of justice too".*

*"They then grow to see the power and value of critical thinking, and the search for truth and wisdom."*

Every participant had at least one comment to make about the positive impact of PI upon students' willingness to reflect critically in their class. For example, one participant was discussing a novel called *"The outsiders"* with her English class that deals with moral dilemmas and commented that:

*"Using elements of philosophy students were able to analyse the characters actions and motivation."*

*"This led to lively discussions with many different perspectives forcing them to think beyond the surface level of the novel."*

According to another participant, students are required to think critically in one of her philosophy clubs. She stated that;

*"The difference in capacity over the three years of their involvement in my philosophy club is quite*

marked.”

*“They research better, they make connections better, they write better and maybe most importantly of all, they see connections to their own lives more easily. They’re also much more self-aware.”*

In addition, teachers found that benefits of PI can transmit to other subjects such as Religion and English. One participant teaches both English and Religion for the SC where ancient philosophers and English poets need to be analysed in a high level of critical thought. The participant commented that:

*“It is not enough to read, learn and understand the plot of ‘Hamlet’, to score highly in a SC English exam, you have to be able to think critically about the character of Hamlet, his motivations and the consequences of his actions.”*

*“Thus, Philosophy offers students an opportunity to develop their own views, attitudes and ideas in light of studying the philosophy of others.”*

Students that inquire in philosophy therefore have educational benefits that can be transmitted to various academic fields such as Religion, History, English. This cross-curricular approach enhances cognitive development as the participant observed a change in her student's ability to communicate and write through a wider lens. By being able to expand on discussions and reflect through various lenses, students are also given the opportunity to become critical thinkers and critical writers.

#### **4.2.2 Empowerment and personal development**

This theme focuses on how PI empowers individuals to navigate the complexities of life, make informed decisions, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. This is reflected in one participant's statement where the “unexamined life is not worth living” as she portrays an idea that there has never been more of a time where critical thinking is as important for students. She observed that:

*“There is a sense that young people live very ‘distracted lives’; this phenomenon of distractibility has to be explored and challenged so young people can be freed up to ask the questions and seek the answers that will give their lives meaning.”*

Another participant observed in his SC English class that the biggest problem in his classes is that many students are not willing to think outside the box. He commented how students tend to learn off a response from a book of notes written by some professor from Cambridge, and that it is evident that the language is not their own when it's compared with their essay. He commented that:

*"We need to build in a resilience, I think, for students to be more critical in their thinking and to stand on their own two feet."*

It is clear from this teacher's comment that there is a lack of critical thinking in his class for students' to appropriately answer the questions in their opinion pieces and storytelling. This is an important part of English studies that caters for the higher side of the marking scheme in the written production area of the exam. An observation can be made that post-primary students are also heavily relying on online Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools since their produced work appears to be written from a professor from Cambridge. From the interview discussion with this teacher, there is a sense for the need of more student autonomy in their learning. PI may improve this aspect of their learning as the same participant suggests that:

*"The capacities of philosophy can definitely help in regard to some of the attributes that it can bring to students."*

Another teacher commented about the importance of reflective writing in her SC Religion classes and how the same critical thinking benefits that PI provides may be transmitted to her subject:

*"Reflective writing is used in every one of my lessons so philosophical methodologies help stimulate this process effectively."*

It is evident that when provided philosophical methodologies, students are effectively integrated into critical thinking and personal development in the classroom. Therefore, both teachers and students can benefit from these philosophical methodologies.

### **4.2.3 Assessment**

This theme expresses the suitability of assessment with implementing philosophy as a mandatory subject into the SC curriculum. Teachers were asked for their opinions as to whether philosophy should be a mandatory subject in the SC or not. One participant voiced their concern:

*"I don't think you can specifically attribute a number of marks like you would for language or for the mechanics in English to actual philosophy and critical thinking."*

Numerous participants voiced a similar opinion when it came to the topic of assessing philosophy. There is a sense of difficulty arising on the topic of assessing individual opinions. Another teacher mentioned that it is a niche subject:

*"I think it would be more a niche subject. If you teach a course correctly, critical thinking will be part*

*of it. For example, how can you do the poetry of W. B. Yeats without dealing with philosophy?"*

The same participant stated that philosophical concepts and inquiry may oftentimes appear to be cross curricular as "it's just there" in subjects such as English and Religion. This portrays uncertainty with the subject's overall relevance in the curriculum. For example, another English teacher observed that:

*"SC English covers a set course of Comprehension, Composition and Literature, yet truthfully none of this can be completed without a high level of critical thought."*

From the interviews, it became clear that there is a pre-conceived notion that there would not be either enough students or teachers available to take up the subject because of the complexity and uniqueness of the subject. Another participant noted that:

*"Because the system remains so heavily influenced by the CAO points race, it's very hard to see how the Irish education system can be changed to capitalise on philosophy and critical thinking skills for the good of students and society."*

It became clear that there is a tendency in the current education system to prioritize memorizing facts and rote learning. The use of this method does not encourage deep critical thinking, but rather superficial understanding of the subject matter. As a result, teachers often teach to the test instead of cultivating critical thinking and inquiry throughout the school semester.

However, three of the five participants agreed that there should be a place for philosophy in the curriculum. One participant commented that:

*"Many students arrive at third level with no prior experience of questioning sources, validity and credibility of material. For a student of philosophy these things become second nature."*

Just as much as PI and critical thinking are unavoidable in subjects such as English, Religion and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), we can see that various subject experts deem to find the cognitive development attributes provided by PI to be unquestionable. Therefore, there are two sides to the story which may be portrayed towards the subject's irrelevance in the Irish curriculum. PI can provide both positives and negatives on a cross-curricular perspective. A participant who engages in weekly philosophy club discussions had a similar outlook of the cross-curricular significance of PI during our discussion:

*"The learning students could engage with in philosophy would help them not only in their other subjects but also, obviously throughout their lives."*

It is clear from this remark that skills developed by PI are not only transferrable to subjects such as English and Religion but also transferable to aspects of social and personal development in a post-

primary student's life.

#### **4.2.4 Fear of student decline in autonomy and critical thinking**

This theme portrays various teachers fears of student decline in autonomy and critical thinking over the years. This theme encapsulates how critical thinking has never been more important than it is now in an ever-evolving society. The most experienced interviewee of all the participants expressed numerous examples of a decline in student autonomy and critical thinking over his 35 years of experience in the school. In one particular example they stated that:

*“They have more opportunities than ever, but they seem to be totally incapable, when they're coming in now, of being independent on their own.”*

From speaking to this participant, modern post-primary students appear to be oftentimes lacking the ability to perform basic tasks such as discussing with others or thinking for themselves. The participant could not pinpoint what has led to this decline in student autonomy and critical thinking which he has observed over the years. The same participant voiced another concern amongst basic interpersonal skills which some students seem to be lacking:

*“and I had an example of a girl only yesterday, in second year, who wouldn't go into business studies because her friend wasn't in the class. She couldn't cope because she didn't talk to the other girls. And when I named them, oh yeah, she knew them all and they were nice, but she just doesn't talk to them.”*

There's a noted observation of lethargy, low motivation, and an attitude of "what's the minimum required" among many young people. Another participant who teaches SC Religion shared a similar observation when teaching philosophical elements in her Religion modules:

*“the best I can sometimes hope for is opening the door to a sense that ‘okay, maybe there's another way of thinking about things’, or ‘that's interesting, that's something I haven't thought about before.’”*

Here, students are observed to be incapable of thinking critically or else not interested enough in the subject to get traction in terms of student engagement for this particular subject. The same participant highlights that many students in her non-exam Religion classes students lack curiosity to benefit from the cognitive development effects that PI provides. Therefore, an argument may be made regarding interest levels for taking PI or Philosophy as a subject further into the curriculum at post-primary level.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

The findings of this research have been presented in this chapter and they have been discussed in relation to the aims of this research project. Four major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the data under which the responses will be discussed. The interviews revealed that students can highly benefit from PI with their cognitive development but also in various aspects of their social and personal development. The teachers also made evident students' reluctance and disinterest in critical thinking for various subjects when implementing PI in the classroom. This is related to an observation into the decline of student autonomy and critical thinking over the years. There were some concerns in the subject's suitability for assessment in the post-primary curriculum. However, similar to the research, the interviewees also highlighted the various positive educational benefits which students can benefit from if philosophy was implemented into the curriculum. The following chapter will draw final conclusions and offer recommendations.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the outcomes of the findings from the previous chapter which are based on the qualitative data collected through the five semi-structured interviews. This chapter will also establish links between this study and research carried out in this field. Recommendations will be based on the findings and how these could impact future practice in schools with the implementation of philosophy as a subject.

### **5.2 Emerging themes**

#### **5.2.1 The effect of PI on critical thinking in the post-primary environment**

The researcher embarked on this dissertation study with the aim of addressing two research questions. The first queried the effects of PI on critical thinking in the post primary environment.

All evidence, within the parameters of this study, demonstrated that PI positively effects students' cognitive development. The cognitive skills developed can range from reasoning skills, reflection skills, communicative skills and written skills. PI has been shown to serve as a unifying frame for learning on a cross-curricular perspective but also on a personal development scale which values student empowerment. Studies on critical thinking development that engaged students with philosophy showed similar outcomes with cognitive development, such as significant improvements in their ability to evaluate arguments, question assumptions, and apply reasoning skills (Pala, 2022). Each teachers' observations on their students' abilities to improve their critical thinking abilities through PI correlates to the positive effect Higgins et al. (2012) observed in their concluding analysis on 'thinking skill programs' of which individual and collaborative PI is effective at improving pupils' performance on cognitive and curriculum tests as it stimulates critical thinking in young minds.

In the proposal for philosophy as a mandatory SC subject, O'Connor (2012) highlighted the need of these critical thinking skills in the post-primary curriculum which directly align with the NCCA's vision as set out in *Towards Learning: An Overview of Senior Cycle Education* (2009). Kronenberg (2007) shares a similar view of the need for personal development and empowerment of the critical consciousness upon students. He states: "Critical thinking and self-efficacy are vital components of one's sociopolitical development" (p.130). This aligns with the existing literature on the topic as well as the qualitative data in this research, which suggests that engagement with philosophy and inquiry-based learning can lead to improvements in critical thinking abilities. The broader implications of these

findings for educational policy and practice are substantial. Firstly, they highlight the importance of incorporating PI into the Irish post-primary as a means of promoting critical thinking skills among students. Then, by recognizing the value of PI in fostering cognitive development, educational policymakers may consider allocating more resources and support for PI programmes such as philosophy clubs within schools as well as implementing philosophy as a mandatory or optional SC subject.

### **5.2.2 PI's effect on a cross-curricular level**

The participants of the research study also highlighted the significant impact that philosophy and its associated inquiry had on cross curricular development. The teacher's noticed improvements in students' reflective skills, speaking skills and written skills which can be transferred to other subjects such as English, Religion, History and CSPE. Hence the claim that an education in philosophy can enable students to integrate and make more overall sense of their learning experiences is made evident (O'Connor, 2012). Leng (2020) confirms this engagement in cross curricular learning where her students of PI internalise good reasoning skills that help students think for themselves by expanding on discussions and reflecting from various lenses. This viewpoint was also confirmed by the teachers in the interviews where they noticed the various cross-curricular benefits which can be uprooted through PI.

Teachers provided numerous individual student examples of improved academic performance within PI and the ability of these students to use PI to reflect on a critical level in other academic subjects such as PI improved ability to reflect, ask questions, analyse characters in literature, to better research and writing skills. PI was also seen as empowering for students to navigate life's complexities, make informed decisions, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world. Participants emphasized the need for critical thinking skills in today's distracted society and the importance of fostering student autonomy in learning. This provides a clear insight into the Irish perspective of philosophy appearing in the post-primary environment. It also provides a further insight into the need of more student autonomy, individual empowerment and student critical thinking in our current education system as outlined in the literature review of this study (Higgins, 2016).

Afterall, most classroom instruction in the post-primary environment is geared to the teaching and learning of information and facts, much memorization in examinations and a generally low level of thinking. Students have been taught what to think, but rarely on how to think. Similar to the teacher observations, Yu (1999) believes that the central objective of education should be to create

communities of inquiry, through which children learn to value independent and autonomous thinking rather than just helping children to acquire the knowledge that adults possess. Therefore, a direct link can be made between the need of more student autonomy and independent thinking in the modern post-primary environment.

### **5.2.3 What is causing a decline in autonomy and critical thinking in the post-primary environment?**

This data also correlates to the theme of a fear of decline in autonomy and critical thinking which is already presented in the findings chapter. There's a shared concern among teachers about a perceived decline in student autonomy and critical thinking skills over the years. This decline may be attributed to factors such as increased distractibility (perhaps with technological advancements), lack of student curiosity, and a reliance on memorization rather than deep understanding. What cannot be overlooked is the fact that student's emotional resilience has changed dramatically in Ireland over the past decade and a half (O'Brien, 2024). This was confirmed by three of the five teacher participants in this study who provided various examples of lethargy, low motivation and a decline in student autonomy over the past three decades. The literature review of this study also provides empirical evidence of PI and CPI strategies that are effective in improving the decline in emotional resilience and critical thinking. Therefore, the effect that these philosophical methodologies can have on students in the post-primary environment is substantial.

The current educational policy of the government reflects the secularization process. Due to ongoing social transformation, critical, reflective, and deliberative capacities are now in great demand in the country (O'Connor, 2012). Friedman et al. (2023) analysed whether or not higher education provides to necessary skills and competencies to succeed in the job market and life. In this study, he states that: "The push towards diversity in education rarely includes a diversity of ideas and thus runs counter to critical thinking. Courses that should encourage independent thought often serve to indoctrinate students to conform to the instructor's opinions and ideas" (p.5). Therefore, if critical thinking is valued as much as it is as portrayed in *Towards Learning: An Overview of Senior Cycle Education* (2009), a further proposal can be made to the NCCA of implementing philosophy as either an optional or mandatory SC subject. As the results of this study are drawn from teacher observations, a further study involving the students could ascertain the level of cognitive development and personal development which are attained from philosophy or PI, while highlighting the difficulties faced by students.

#### **5.2.4 Ireland's standpoint with philosophy in education**

Having suggested the potential implementation of philosophy as a SC subject, this leads to the discussion of the second research aim which analyses philosophy from an Irish standpoint and in the Irish post-primary environment. To better understand the nations perception of the subject being presented in the post-primary environment, an analysis of the qualitative data in this study and relevant academic research is synthesised to provide clarity on the topic.

To begin with, some teachers expressed concerns about assessing philosophical concepts and critical thinking skills, noting difficulties in assigning marks and assessing individual opinions. This highlights the subjective nature of philosophical understanding and the limitations of traditional assessment methods. Burgh (2018) also states that existing curriculums based on core subjects, provide what philosophy claims to provide; therefore, incorporating it into the existing curriculum might not be feasible. This relates to the concerns teachers had about philosophy already existing in the post-primary curriculum, as already mentioned in the discussion chapter. Then, there is an opposing stance which argues that philosophical knowledge and skills can enhance students' ability to exercise competent autonomy as future citizens, making philosophy unique in its ability to do so (Burgh, 2018). This viewpoint of Burgh's is strongly backed up by both the academic research as well as participant remarks throughout Chapters one to five.

The challenges in assessing philosophy underscore the need for flexible assessment methods in the SC that accommodate the subjective nature of PI. Traditional assessment methods may not adequately capture the depth of understanding and critical thinking skills developed through PI. Therefore, educational policymakers in Ireland may consider more alternative assessment approaches that focus on evaluating critical thinking skills and depth of understanding if the subject was implemented in the SC. Internationally renowned Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills and special adviser on education policy to the secretary general at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), shares this viewpoint of flexible assessment methods when he states the important reasons as to why he favours assessments that showcase learners applying knowledge more dynamically in Ireland.

As previously mentioned, teachers also believe that PI is inherently cross-curricular and already evident in core subjects such as Religion and English where certain teachers have provided examples of analysing Greek philosophers in SC Religion and critically reflecting on the motives and personalities of characters in English literature. Therefore, certain teachers expressed that there is little relevancy of placing it as a whole subject in the post-primary curriculum as it would be considered a 'niche' subject. In modern society, philosophy is often considered irrelevant, so its inclusion in the education agenda

has been overlooked. A decidedly anti-intellectual political climate has led to philosophy gaining an undeserved reputation as a secluded and abstract discipline for a small minority of academically minded adults (Burgh, 2018).

### **5.2.5 Considerations regarding Ireland's standpoint with philosophy in education**

From the interviews, it became clear that there is a tendency in the current post-primary system to prioritize memorizing facts and rote learning especially in the SC. This has placed a concern on philosophy's relevance in the post-primary curriculum as a mandatory subject in both the JC and SC. However, if we do not encourage PI and its associated critical thinking, space is created for what is called 'stuck schools'. In educational academic research this term refers to educational institutions that keep facing difficulties in academic performance, student outcomes, and overall improvement despite numerous attempts to implement change. These schools are often characterized by a pattern of underachievement or stagnation over an extended period (Lee, 2010).

PI can counteract this idea of stuck schools by providing critical thinking skills, inquiry-based learning, ethical reflection and the cultivation of autonomy as identified in Chapter two and five. Moreover, the positive impact of PI on cross-curricular development suggests that it can serve as a unifying frame for learning across different subjects. This interdisciplinary approach to education aligns with broader educational goals of promoting holistic student development and fostering connections between different areas of knowledge.

O'Connor's (2012) Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) study in association with the RIA demonstrate low satisfaction ratings of school leavers with schooling in Ireland as far as values are concerned as well as the preparation to take part in society. Therefore, it can be further suggested that a philosophical education at SC can, equip students to meet the intellectual deficits outlined in the ESRI study. Afterall, the qualitative data and academic literature within this research on the effects of PI align with the RIA's suggested implications of philosophy within their proposal document which sets out the case for philosophy as a school subject in the SC curriculum. This further strengthens the proposal of having the Subject at SC level. A further qualitative study on exploring students' perspectives on the value of philosophy or PI in developing their critical thinking abilities in the post-primary environment would solidify the case set out by the RIA and by this research. This would gather insights into students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to engaging with philosophy as a subject.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

Data revealed that students may positively benefit from PI on two different scales: the development of their cognitive abilities and interpersonal skills. It also highlighted teachers concerns regarding a lack of critical thinking skills in the post primary environment as well as methods to assess PI when it comes to examination in the JC and SC. This underscores the importance of prioritizing PI within educational policy and practice to support students' overall academic success and personal growth. The following chapter will draw final conclusions and offer recommendations.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This concluding chapter synthesizes the main insights derived from the research on the effects of PI on critical thinking skills in the post-primary educational environment. It explores the critical implications of the findings, discusses the limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for educational practice and policy grounded in the research outcomes.

### **6.2 Main Findings**

The study aimed to explore the impact of PI on students' cognitive development and critical thinking abilities within the post-primary educational setting. The second aim explored to ascertain the Irish and global standpoint of having philosophy appear in the post-primary education system. Since the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews highlight four central themes, the conclusions will arise based on both the research aims and the associated themes that derived from investigating the research aims.

#### **6.2.1 Cognitive Development**

The findings indicate that PI positively influences students' cognitive abilities, particularly within the age gap of students in the post primary environment. Subjects that are evident in the post-primary curriculum such as classical studies do not merely provide students with as many fundamental skills identified in *Towards learning* as philosophy would. Afterall, the primary purpose of this document created by the NCCA was to outline a vision and objectives for SC education in Ireland. This document sets out to promote critical thinking, holistic development, inclusive education, and unique curriculum innovation to prepare students for further education, employment, and active citizenship (NCCA, 2009). All of these specified expected outcomes can be fostered by PI.

#### **6.2.2 Empowerment and Personal Development**

Incorporating PI within the curriculum empowered students to navigate complex life situations, make informed decisions, and develop deeper self-awareness in the post-primary classroom. Five participants from the five interviewed reported opportunities for development in autonomy and empowerment for their students that delve into PI.

### **6.2.3 Assessment Challenges**

Teachers expressed concerns about assessing philosophical concepts and critical thinking, highlighting the subjective nature of such evaluations. This challenge underscores the need for more flexible and appropriate assessment methods to capture students' depth of understanding and critical thinking abilities. Research indicates that traditional assessments, such as standardized tests and final year exams, are deeply embedded in educational systems due to their long-standing history and perceived objectivity (Gibbs, 2006). As a result of this institutional inertia, change is difficult without compelling evidence. After all, it was argued by Stiggins (2002) that high stakes testing often restricts curriculum, classroom practices, and student learning to what can be easily measured. Three of the five participants in this study agreed to this statement made by Stiggins.

### **6.2.4 Decline in Student Autonomy and Critical Thinking:**

Teachers noted a perceived decline in student autonomy and critical thinking skills, potentially due to increased reliance on rote learning and memorization as well as our fast-evolving society. This concern emphasizes the importance of fostering environments that promote independent and autonomous thinking, as advocated by Yu (1999). Irish educational policymakers should therefore use assessments that show students how to apply information in more creative and dynamic ways.

### **6.3 Limitations of the Study**

The study faced several limitations, including a limited sample size of teachers, which may not represent the broader population of educators. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative data from teacher observations rather than direct student feedback offers only a partial view of the impact of PI. Future research should consider incorporating student perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of philosophy's effects in the post-primary environment.

## **6.4 Recommendations**

Based on the findings, two primary recommendations can be proposed to enhance educational practices and policies:

### **6.5 Policy-Based Recommendation**

Policymakers should consider incorporating PI into the post-primary curriculum, either as an optional or mandatory subject, to foster critical thinking skills and cognitive development. Recognizing PI's value in promoting holistic student growth, resources and support should be allocated for implementing philosophy programs, such as philosophy clubs or dedicated philosophy classes (Fleming, 2019)

### **6.6 Methodological Recommendation**

Future research should expand to include student perspectives on the impact of PI in the post-primary classroom, exploring how engagement with PI enhances their cognitive and personal development. Such studies could employ mixed methods approaches, combining qualitative interviews and quantitative measures to capture a more nuanced understanding of PI's effects.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated the significant impact of PI on critical thinking skills and cognitive development within the post-primary environment. As a result, the proposal of implementing philosophy as a SC subject has been further strengthened. By integrating philosophy into the curriculum, post-primary schools in Ireland can benefit from this study's findings to understand the potential effects of PI. The Irish standpoint on philosophy has been identified to be positive and necessary in an education system that focuses on rote learning. Therefore, an education in philosophy can help combat some of the flaws which have been discussed in this study. Future research, incorporating direct student feedback, will further validate and refine these findings, ultimately contributing to the advancement of educational practices and policies aimed at nurturing critical thinkers for the future. Implementing the recommendations of the study will help build a more reflective, autonomous, and critically engaged student body, well-equipped to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

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## Appendix 1 - Research Information sheet:

**Researcher:**

**Organisation:**

**Title of study:** The exploration of the role of philosophical inquiry (PI) on critical thinking skills in the post-primary environment

**Outline of the research study:**

The goal of all education is to help students grow cognitively. The study of thinking is, however, rarely taught as a primary curriculum component in schools (Millett and Tapper 2012). Being educated involves developing our minds, since it is part of being human. To this view, education is primarily responsible for teaching children how to think critically, creatively, and effectively (Fisher, 2013). The impact of PE on critical thinking and literacy skills is widely renowned. This research will contribute to our understanding of the cognitive benefits which PE allows for especially if implemented in the post primary environment. The subject of Philosophy is deemed as an optional short course for the Junior cycle. However, there are opportunities for cognitive growth which align with the NCCA'S vision of Irish education which can be uprooted from the subject being mandatory in post-primary curriculum (RIA, 2012).

**Objectives of the study:**

Further strengthen the proposal for Philosophy as a mandatory subject in curriculum and further strengthen the value of PE in the post-primary environment. Other objectives are to Identify literacy and critical thinking values which can be obtained from PE through cross curricular subjects such as Religion and history which include philosophical components in the curriculum. Explore the challenges and benefits of implementing PI into the teacher's pedagogy.

**What would I need you to do?**

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you agree to participate, you will participate in a short semi-structured interview with the researcher. Any information you provide about your own identity or that of the school will be anonymous and confidential. Quotes from the interview may be used and may also be published in the research however your name and the name of the school will not be published. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript will be made available to you on request. This research will be used in a publication of a thesis for Hibernia College Dublin. It may also be used in conference proceedings or used in academic articles. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participation in the study is voluntary. Interviewees may refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time. No school, teacher or student will be identified specifically in any publication of the work.

**What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of the research is to complete small-scale study which forms part of the final year of the Professional Master of Education (Primary) with Hibernia College Dublin.

## Appendix 2 – Consent form

### Consent Form Exemplar #2

I, XXXXX have read and understood the Letter of Information provided to me by XXXXXXXX, agree that in order to conduct research about philosophical Inquiry in my school, he may request an interview with five teachers and upon receipt of their consent may conduct interviews on school premises at times convenient for the teachers and the school. I understand that participation is voluntary and that there are no physical or psychological risks associated with the study. I know that all answers provided during the interview will be used for the purposes of the study only and that all responses will identify no individual or the school itself.

Signed: Date: 01/12/23

### Appendix 3 – Principal’s letter

XXXXXXX,

Dear Principal,

As part of my Professional Masters in (Primary/Post-Primary) Education with Hibernia College, I am analysing the role of philosophical inquiry (PE) in the post primary environment and its effect on critical thinking skills.

Teachers and chaplains that delve into Religion and English are key stakeholders in identifying the impact of philosophical inquiry which enhance student learning and literacy. This letter aims to provide you with an introduction to the research project and to seek consent from you for the project to move forward in order to inform my future professional practice as a teacher.

With your permission, I would like to interview three to five classroom teachers. The staff will be asked to partake in semi-structured interviews to gain an insight into the aims of the project. Please find enclosed for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be purposely selected to take part in the study. Any data gathering will strictly be underpinned by the school's ethical code of conduct. No students will be interviewed. Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity.

The school's name will not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and the data will be securely held under Hibernia College Research Ethics guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication.

I would appreciate your cooperation in providing access to the staff at the school over the coming weeks. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Researcher:

Mobile:

Email:

This research study has received Ethics approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: School of Education, Hibernia College. Tel (01) 6610168

Yours sincerely,

## Appendix 4 – Interview questions

Can you please introduce yourself and provide details about your role in the post-primary education sector?

Do you think critical thinking skills are important in today's education system and why?

In what ways do you believe philosophy and philosophical inquiry can impact critical thinking skills in post-primary students?

How have you seen philosophy being integrated into your subject and what outcomes have you observed in terms of critical thinking development?

What is your opinion on making philosophy a senior cycle subject in Ireland?

Have you observed any improvements in critical thinking skills among students who engage in philosophical inquiry? If yes, please share some examples?

Based on your experience and knowledge, do you think that the capacities that Philosophy enables and develops are much needed in Irish society?

Do you think an education in Philosophy can enable students to integrate and make more overall sense of their learning experiences from a cross-curricular perspective?

Have you used any specific strategies or approaches to incorporate philosophy and philosophical inquiry into the curriculum to enhance critical thinking skills?

How do you assess the impact of philosophy on overall academic performance and student engagement in the post-primary setting?