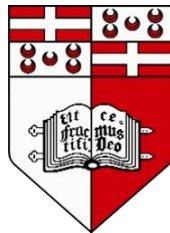# Critical Art Education: Supporting Art Educators in Maltese Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses the imminent need for critical thinking skills to be fostered among students through the subject of art at a secondary school level. This was undertaken with the aim of answering the following research questions: Firstly, how could, if at all, a focus on a critical thinking perspective be enhanced in the work of art teachers in Malta? Secondly, what policy recommendations, if any, would support art teachers to fulfil their commitments to encourage critical thinking skills that are in line with SEC syllabus among secondary school students in Malta (University of Malta, 2020)?

This was initially undertaken by investigating the nature of art teacher identity, followed by examining art education, art pedagogy and anarchist pedagogies and the benefits they hold in fostering critical thinking skills. The nature of fatalism within the context of enacting positive social change was, moreover, defined and contextualised to this end. Finally, the role of critical thinking and its societal impact and understanding among educators within International and national studies was addressed.

This information was then utilised as a springboard to inform roundtable focus groups among art educators who are employed within Malta. The data collected through these focus groups was then analysed and thematically organised into relational and structural categories. Subthemes identified were then used to inform policy recommendations oriented towards answering the research questions.

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0.   Executive Summary

Within our contemporary society, several pressing issues such as corruption, environmental concerns, and other socio-political problems are caused by a lack of critical thinking skills and agency among citizens. Amongst these issues is the inability for citizens to accurately make sound judgment and rationalise their decisions. The situation is largely unaided by the persistent multiple 'realities' which are superficially accepted and presented to the population through social media, partisan news sources and other sources of biased or improperly sourced information. As a result of these factors, students are oftentimes left unable to distinguish fact from fiction. It is for these very reasons that there is an urgent need to foster critical thinking skills among students to directly combat disinformation while directly combatting fatalism in all forms (Zammit, 2019, P. 14). The fostering of critical thinking among students thus has the ability, through a reconstructionist approach, to enact positive social change within the ever-pluralistic democracy of Malta.

"We have failed the nation. We have failed to educate people to think critically and we cannot let the current events slip by without starting a national education campaign about democracy and politicians' obligations." (Cutajar, 2019, as cited in Carabott, 2019).

Art as a subject is particularly effective in fostering critical thinking skills among students as it provides wide areas of discussion, reflection and direct kinaesthetic and psychosocial agency for the undertaking of praxis (Lampert, 2006, pp. 226-227). It is thus the obligation of art educators to ensure the fostering of critical thinking skills among students to this end. The intent behind this dissertation was to identify issues which, according to educators, hinder this process and to find modes with which to support secondary school/O-Level setting art teachers in the fostering of critical thinking skills among students on a national level.

0.1 Research questions

Throughout the dissertation, the following research questions were addressed. Firstly, how could, if at all, a focus on a critical thinking perspective be enhanced in the work of art teachers in Malta? Secondly, what policy recommendations, if any, would support art teachers to fulfil their commitments in order to encourage critical thinking skills among secondary school students, in Malta, in line with SEC syllabus (University of Malta, 2020)?

0.2 Key Themes

The overall themes that were explored throughout this dissertation uncover the thematic clusters of relational and structural components which affect the fostering of critical thinking skills on a national level. Firstly, the relational subthemes of teacher identity, educators' backgrounds and personal histories was examined. The purpose of this was to see the modes by which these shape art teachers' perceptions and pedagogical inclinations

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in the fostering of critical thinking skills. This was then followed by student participation and modes of engagement in reaction to the art subject. Secondly, the structural theme is initially explored through the subtheme of society and the perceptions it holds. Following this, the modes by which institutions impact the fostering of critical thinking skills through direct and indirect means was addressed. Finally, the subtheme of the classroom and modes through which the learning environment directly influences the transmission of critical thinking skills among students was examined.

1.   Introduction

There are several reasons why the researcher chose to explore the subject of ''why and how critical thinking is nurtured by art teachers (and potentially enhanced) within Maltese Secondary schools''. The primary questions arising being ''How could, if at all, a focus on a critical thinking perspective be enhanced in the work of art teachers in Malta?'' followed by ''What policy recommendations, if any, would support art teachers to fulfil their commitments in order to encourage critical thinking skills among secondary school students, in Malta, in line with SEC syllabus (2020)?'

Firstly, art teachers' identities, roles and art education were examined with regards to their abilities to foster objective critical-thinking skills in students. This was then followed by discussing various factors and strategies which may impact the effectiveness of secondary school art teachers' pedagogical abilities to foster critical thinking. Various pedagogical techniques were then addressed to discuss modes by which art education may be used to

foster critical thinking skills among students. Following this, the importance of anarchist pedagogies' innate abilities in fostering critical thinking skills among students and teachers was discussed. It is important to state that the core reasoning behind this was aligned with the researchers' anarchist beliefs and artistic practice in discussion of fatalism.

The importance of nurturing and defining critical thinking skills for the benefit of the individual and society was also discussed. After this rationale is considered, various international and regional studies tackling the role critical thinking plays among teachers' practice were examined. This is done for the sake of elaborating on potential themes which this research clearly demonstrates are occurring among secondary schools locally. The Maltese national context was then contextualised in light of these aforementioned factors. Recent outcries made by academics calling for the necessity of fostering further critical thinking skills through interdisciplinary STEM approaches on a national level were also discussed (Colombo et al., 2021). An overall evaluation of what critical thinking is defined as contemporarily within Malta (in light of newfound themes) was then finalised.

These various interlinking factors and themes were then synthesised and referenced throughout this research's methodology. It is these very themes which were then discussed at a later stage among secondary school art teachers (in Malta) with the intent of extracting relevant data. Said data was then used to indicate how secondary school art teachers foster critical thinking skills among students, as well as to enhance the effectiveness of this process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The role art education plays

2.1.1 art education

Art education plays a major role in fostering critical thinking skills within students, particularly if it is oriented in an inquiry-based learning approach. This allows for individuals to discover newfound connections, solutions and create imagery influenced by higher-order thinking. As discussed within *Critical Thinking Dispositions as an Outcome of Art Education* (Lampert, 2006)*,* this is the case as learning in the arts requires critical analysis of both the work oneself creates and that created by others, leading to the synthesis of various perspectives. These beneficial skills are coupled with the broad spectrum of knowledge associated in art education, particularly art history and critique of sociocultural, political and historical information (Lampert, 2006, pp. 226-227). These factors make art education ideal

for fostering critical thinking skills among students through direct kinaesthetic routes which provide saliency and direct feedback. These qualities in turn directly encourage classroom participation, discussion, and engagement among students. It is these qualities which may provide students with the direct engagement which may otherwise be lacking in rote-learning and other forms of 'banking education' present (see academic attainment on a national level).

When incorporated in a multidisciplinary approach, art education also has the potential to foster critical thinking and creative thinking skills in all students, even those who do not take it up as a specialised subject. Through integrating art in a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math) approach, critical thinking skills stand to benefit students whose interests may not reside within the confines of traditional art production. These arguments may be found in publications such as *Full STEAM ahead: CREATING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS* (Tan, 2017, p. 24). Overall, the art subject offers the possibility to introduce students to diverse topics which may otherwise be inaccessible in other subjects.

2.1.2 The role of the artist-teacher

Another aspect which directly influences art teachers' efforts to foster critical thinking relates to the dual role of the artist-teacher. Within *The Dual Identity of the Artist-Teacher: What Does Teaching do to the Artist-Teacher in a Contemporary Educational Context?* Jordan (2015), analyses differences between art teachers' identities and the influence which their personal development plays on their conceptions of Critical Thinking. Jordan's study utilises a life history approach to examine the key points of art teacher identity formation. The main divide was found to be oriented in 'concurrent' and 'consecutive' models respectively.

> *The four-year Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Art and Design Education (concurrent model) and a one-year Professional Diploma in Education (PDE) (consecutive model) were available to students who wanted to become art teachers up until 2013. The latter*

has been replaced, in 2014, with the two-year Professional Masters in Education (PME)… The consecutive model sees the artist or designer coming to the course with a high level of specialist skill, and a well developed understanding of his/her artistic practice. There can be a perception that a hierarchy exists between models of art teacher education. (Jordan, 2015, pp. 17-18)

Though Jordan's writings are based on Ireland's models of teachers' professional development, a similar situation could be seen to be undertaken on a Maltese national level. 'Consecutive' art educators may be seen as having a deeper understanding of the curriculum, school structures and a level of expertise oriented in pedagogy. In this regard, they may be far more knowledgeable in engaging with their 'teacher identity' first and foremost. In the case of the 'consecutive' example given by Jordan, teachers who come from a Fine Art/Design background were more likely to foster a deeper content knowledge (part of which is critical thinking-oriented practice) within their pedagogical practice (Jordan , 2015, p. 19) This said, Jordan noted that it is important to not misplace any hierarchical misconceptions on which 'route' is correct, for both are equally accepted and valid 'routes' to the profession. The relevance of respecting all art educators regardless of their 'route' to the vocation is thus instrumental as it may be a bone of contention among educators themselves.

Jordan also stresses the importance that art teachers engage in praxis through 'critical thinking' pedagogies and 'studio thinking' pedagogies through their artmaking process. Processes such as observing, creating and reflecting when synthesised (all of which are components of critical thinking) allow for a deeper understanding to be reached within teachers themselves. The implementation and interpretation of these pedagogies are likewise heavily influenced by teachers' own professional development. It is thus essential to ensure that when such pedagogies take place, art teachers are aware of the pedagogical strategies which may be employed and the modes through which these may be undertaken.

2.2 Pedagogy

2.2.1 Art pedagogies oriented in fostering higher-order thinking skills

According to *Educational Research and Innovation Fostering Students' Creativity and Critical Thinking WHAT IT MEANS IN SCHOOL* (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019) there are numerous approaches which teachers may use to foster critical thinking processes among students. Whilst the *Art Syllabus* (University of Malta, 2020, p. 3) discusses on a national level the need for students to be 'critical', particularly in reference to 'critical and analytical faculties' (University of Malta, 2020, Aims), no mention is made with regard to contextualising and fully defining how this is to be accomplished and to what ends.

Teachers are thus left to their own devices to accommodate and interpret the syllabus. As technique is prioritised at this level, emphasis over technical and aesthetic assessment objectives may be seen to take precedence over these 'non-prioritised' strands of learning outcomes during lessons. Considering this, the importance of detailing different pedagogical strategies used by art educators to foster critical-thinking skills in students is to be addressed.

Co-dependent to this is the influence which the artist-teacher identity plays in successfully fostering critical thinking skills in students. Aspects of these approaches (as well as other issues) are to then be used as a springboard by which to inform focus group questions among secondary school art teachers.

2.2.2 Activist education

Within *Facilitating Activist Education: Social and Environmental Justice in Classroom Practice to Promote Achievement, Equity, and Well-Beingm,* Niblett, (2017, p.1) defines Activist education as intentional educational practice which aims to guide participants in learning activities that fosters agency capable of enacting socio-economic change and justice through praxis.

If the aim of the anarchist educator is to foster 'critical thinking' skills (see Anarchist pedagogies) in order to enact positive social change, then practices oriented in activist education may play an integral role in establishing agency to enact these goals. The reason for this is that, when undertaken through the lens of anarchist pedagogy, activist education can also discuss the issues of power, democracy, equity as well as social issues all while maintaining a stance against fatalism through direct agency. Niblett (2017) discusses the modes with which these activist-attitudes may be fostered in students by educators. This may be achieved through the contextualising of the environment, ideas and actions aid students in understanding the interconnectedness of their classrooms and the physical world.

Thus, anarchist pedagogies and activist education can be seen as being synergistic and beneficial to one-another. Activist art education similarly refers to these aforementioned practices within the context of the arts subject. Through this approach, students may see that the arts can directly be used as a means of fighting fatalism and undertaking constructive social change (Inwood, 2013, pp. 129 -130).

Teachers are to be aware that environment severely impacts the modes in which knowledge is acquired by students. To this end, the classroom environment is to be constructed in a manner which motivates and stimulates students, acting as a catalyst for discussion. This could include augmenting the physical location to one that is more open for discussion. As previously discussed, it would also be beneficial to adapt an approach oriented in co-constructing lessons among learners. Following this, teachers may also make use of constructive questioning and modes of pedagogy known to foster agency by putting students' ideas into action and designing opportunities for students to tackle social and environmental issues.

A delicate balancing act oriented in *'simplifying the complex and complexifying the simple'* as discussed by Irwin & Springray (2007, p. 80) within *Being with A/r/tography: A/r/topography as practice-based research* therefore emerges, to ensure that educators explore an appropriate range of topics to foster critical-thinking with the goal of enacting agency and social change among students.

This can be seen within eco-art activist practice, with the use of recycled and sustainable materials regularly being employed as a medium whilst promoting environmental sustainability. Such artistic practices enable students to foster habits of mind oriented in critical thinking which may directly benefit society (Inwood, 2013 p. 129 -130). Such an example is greatly applicable on a national level and may aid students in directly confronting local issues of environmental development and industrialisation through agency and direct action.

2.2.3 Studio thinking

One of the primary pedagogies known to foster critical thinking is oriented in the 'studio thinking' framework, which focuses on eight habits of mind to imbed a thinking-centred art practice in students. This pedagogy emphasises the intentional development of creative dispositions and critical thinking skills through the students' own artmaking practice. These include the practices known to develop critical thinking skills in students, engaging in questioning, evaluating, understanding and explaining (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019, p. 93).

Firstly, the procedural aspects of this pedagogy may be summarised as consisting of four studio structures. These are suggested as being: demonstration-lecture, students-at-work, critique and exhibition. Through these studio structures the temporal, spatial and social dynamics are described. It is recommended that, within this pedagogical framework, the instructional period is kept short (demonstration-lecture), with teachers instead focusing on talking with individual students. Enquiring on students' processes and techniques should also be undertaken to assist them by providing reflections and opinions (Students-at-work). Critique is given emphasis in this pedagogy, focusing on the students' and teachers' subjective opinions with regards to what they like and dislike about an artwork. This acts as a period of evaluation, receiving and imparting feedback. It is this back-and-forth which allows for praxis to occur (Vincent-Lancrin, 2019, p. 93).

Secondly, the fostering of thinking dispositions is undertaken throughout the studio thinking approach. This includes the ability to develop technique and practice-based reflection and

creation, engagement and persistence in the art-making process, envisioning and preparation, self-expression, observational skills, reflection, exploration and adaptation as well as contextualising and understanding art worlds and respective communities (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019, p. 93).

Overall, the studio thinking pedagogy allows students to foster habits of mind which are innately present within the lives of many practicing artists through the use of a practicing studio, recontextualising the art room and separating it from the other environments of the school. It is the aforementioned processes which when coupled with a consistent physical location, allow students to consistently foster habits of mind; allowing them to engage with materials, thoughts and practices in innovative and critical ways.

2.2.4 Teaching for artistic behaviour

Another pedagogy known to promote critical thinking among students in visual arts is 'teaching for artistic behaviour'. This pedagogy owes much of its development to the grassroots movement oriented in a TAB (Teaching for Artistic Behaviour) approach. The fundamental 'pillars' of this approach are that children are considered to be artists primarily, allowing them to utilise the classroom as their studio. This pedagogy allows for students to find salience and agency in the creative process and may be compared to 'research-based' pedagogy within the sciences. Compared to the 'studio thinking' pedagogy, it focuses further on creativity, with inquiry, imagination, agency and critical reflection taking precedence (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019, p. 94).

Students in this pedagogy are encouraged to independently develop their own practice and thus dismantle political hierarchies found in traditional banking-education. Aspects of the creative process which all artists face may thus be incorporated and included within the lesson. These include periods in which students must seek inspiration, develop the idea, develop a scheme/ general plan of action, create, evaluate and persistently amend any shortcomings before completion and final assessment. (Vincent-Lancrin et al., p. 94) Much like the aforementioned 'studio thinking' framework, it also utilises a short period of

teacher-directed instruction which is required for the sake of maintaining a curriculum and may be concluded with a 'sharing' session (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019, p. 94).

These sharing sessions may be utilised in approaches which may encourage class critique and open discussion, allowing students to evaluate their own work alongside the work of their peers. Dialogue and critique-based sessions may be undertaken in a manner which is reminiscent of constructive criticism, paralleling the practices which take place among practicing professionals within the art world. This practice and the fostering of these critical faculties may be undertaken in novel manners to ease students into these habits of mind.

Modes of parallel thinking such as those of the late Dr. Edward de Bono's Thinking Hats (De Bono, 1999) which are known to foster critical thinking and criticism in students. Fostering different modes of assessment and reflection as discussed within *Six Thinking Hats Method for Developing Critical Thinking Skills* (Setyaningtyas & Radia, 2019) may equally be put to use in the classroom to this end.

2.3 Anarchist pedagogies

2.3.1 Defining fatalism

 As educators, it is our duty to make sure that students do not fall into a fatalistic mindset. Within this research, the term 'fatalism' is used in a variety of contexts in which an individual internalises the belief that external or internal conditions are unchangeable. It is this fatalism which mitigates societal issues and causes the population to ignore agency necessary to improve their situation. Institutions maintaining hierarchies may be seen as being the source of instilling fatalism within the *vox populi* through Cultural Hegemony as discussed within *Antonio Gramsci's Impact on Critical Pedagogy* (Mayo, 2014, p. 3) and other means of indoctrination through education as expressed within *The Centrality of the State in Neoliberal Times: Gramsci and beyond* (Buttigieg, 2002, p. 26 as cited in Mayo, 2011).

Paolo Freire maintained a stance against fatalism throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and is one of the key components that he wished to directly tackle throughout the publication. Freire makes a point to discuss how a pessimistic 'fatalism' is thus problematic as it causes individuals to not only view societal issues as a lost cause, but also themselves as such. Freire moreover argues that fatalisms' immobilizing ideology causes individuals to lose agency, insisting that cultural and socio-historical realities are unchangeable through the veil of a neoliberalism based 'status quo'*as discussed within Pedagogy of Freedom Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (1998, p. 7-8).

Other factors also enable this phenomenon to occur. The 'banking' system of education, which itself limits the students to the traditional giver (teacher) and receptacle (student) of knowledge (Freire, 1972), further reiterates this. Through the process of internalising themselves as merely 'receptacles' of information, students learn not to question the status-quo and instead seek acceptance and validation. This quest for acceptance and validation in turn advances into fatalism, as they become incapable of questioning the powers that be.

In order to constructively de-stabilize fatalism's clutches on the masses, one must be delicate with initiating social dialogue and destabilizing others' worldviews regarding hierarchical order, information and opportunities within educational institutions entirely. One mode by which these issues may be effectively overcome is through the fostering of critical thinking skills among students and educators alike through discussion. *(Freire, 1972, p. 92-93).*

> *Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.* (Freire, 1972, p. 92-93)

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2.3.2 Defining anarchist pedagogies

 The term anarchism is often misunderstood as well as misrepresented. Within *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology*, Graeber highlights that *"most academics seem to have only the vaguest idea what anarchism is even about; or dismiss it with the crudest stereotypes"* (2004, p. 2). For whilst there is a plethora of left-wing as well as right-wing oriented educational pedagogists and theorists, the anarchist is oftentimes lost in obscurity.

Contemporary anarchist pedagogies are often the backbone for many alternative pedagogies and schooling. Home-schooling, unschooling and transitional pedagogies, whether incorporated during periods of peace or conflict, epistemologically require the fostering of essential skills. Skills such as critical thinking may thus be used to empower students to reflect on their ever-changing environments as well as to fight against the clutches of fatalism. Thus, anarchist pedagogies are essential in a post-COVID-19 education as home-schooling and remote education become ever-more commonplace and normalised as discussed within *Anarchist Pedagogies: Collective Actions, Theories, and Critical Reflections on Education Edited* (Haworth, p. 60- 87 & p. 220-241).

It is for these reasons that Anarchist Pedagogies should not be overlooked as they are both historically as well as contemporarily significant in fostering critical thinking skills among students, and thus interwoven throughout the remaining chapters.

2.3.3 Anarchy and education

 It is only through anarchism that all ties to political power struggles may be looked at in a manner that is critical and objective so that true alternatives to reach justice may be discussed. The enacting of anarchist pedagogies does not entail the absence of any rules whatsoever. Rather, it discusses the dismantling of coercive hierarchical power-dynamics whilst maintaining an ethical fostering of skills, content, responsibility, salience and individual liberty. These various practices, when synthesized, give individuals the ability to

enact critical reflection and praxis, as discussed by Freire throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972).

Within *Anarchist education and the paradox of pedagogical*, Fretwell depicts the goal of the anarchist pedagogue as being the establishing of an *''egalitarian, horizontal social order, in which coercive authority, hierarchy, and inequality have been eradicated, then the practices adopted by anarchists, including education, must be consistent with this end.''* (Fretwell, 2019, p. 59 - 60). Fretwell also expanded further on this issue by discussing the way in which education has always held an important place for anarchists. This is due to education's abilities to enact social renewal as well as providing space through which direct democracy can be practiced and critically reflected upon. Fretwell notes that anarchist pedagogues are aware that the act of dismantling power structures alone is not sufficient in enacting social change and that what should instead be nurtured is a 'moral enlightenment' within society.

Anarchist theory holds numerous benefits when discussing political (from a Foucauldian standpoint) power dynamics' hold on the perceptions and practices of societal institutions, said institution's workforce/contributors as well as the general public. In this instance, the primary institution and respective workforce at hand are those of secondary schools and said schools' teachers and school actors. The reasoning behind this is best exemplified by Chomsky within *The function of schools: Subtler and cruder methods of control* who stated tha*t "the basic institutional role and function of the schools"* is providing *"an ideological service: there's a real selection for obedience and conformity"* (Chomsky, 2003, pp. 27–28)*.* Within this stage of late-capitalism, educational institutions enable a perpetuation of not only class-power dynamics relating to social standing, but also subjugation of the masses and an acceptance of the status quo.

Anarchist pedagogies reject this hegemonic fatalism which maintains a dominant group's agendas. It is within these institutions that fatalism is thus first truly established within the individual. Haworth (2012, p. 27) argues that this is undertaken by means of 'moulding' young minds to fit the predetermined goals and expectations of the state through educational systems. Within a capitalist society, this may take form as mandatory apprentice-training for government or corporations and other state endorsed businesses, as well as in the systemic reproduction of the educational system itself. Moreover, the

continual 'adjustment' of students to conform in psycho-social behaviour through repeated conditioning maintains the requirement of obedience. This is undertaken by means of bell-ringing, hierarchical authority, disciplinary actions as well as regimented temporal control. Such educational institutions thus may destroy agency, drive and spontaneity in young minds as they are conditioned to be obedient workers.

However, this is not the only key point of saliency that anarchist pedagogies hold. One aspect which allows for Anarchist pedagogies to truly hold standing in contemporary debates is that of its interconnectedness to Critical Thinking as means of enacting social change.

2.3.4 The anarchist educator and role of critical thinking

The paradox of the anarchist educator is one which Nathan Fretwell had explored within *Anarchist education and the paradox of pedagogical authority* (2018). After all, as educators, teachers must oftentimes impose a role of coercion upon students. The anarchist educator stands to paradoxically deny all forms of coercive authority in principle, yet simultaneously also affirm it within practice. As Fretwell (2018) puts it ''*This is the paradox of pedagogical authority in anarchist education. Coercive authority is simultaneously impossible and indispensable*'' (p. 55).

Fratwell's solution to this issue is rooted within Derrida's *'ordeal of the undecidable'* when seeking the acquisition of justice. Anarchist educators are to approach these issues not as limitations, but to instead treat their own practice as accepting the burden of responsibility on what is a conceptually grey ethical area. This burden encompasses the issue of having to remain sensitive to the delicate aporia when exercising any form of authority, all the while knowing that justice may not effectively be taking place (Fretwell, 2018, p. 68). Haworth discusses that anarchist teachers may overcome these issues through the act of 'infiltration' within schools (2012, p. 319).

By this, Haworth does not mean to directly instruct teachers to spread anarchist propaganda to students, but rather the nurturing and fostering of beneficial objective skill

sets. Skills such as critical thinking are thus interlinked with anarchist pedagogies as they can remove obstacles latent within our post-colonial hyper-capitalistic landscape. This is because critical thinking serves as a steppingstone for emancipatory education. This is enacted by allowing students to assess contextual hierarchies' values, and interrogate the socio-political contexts. Such practices greatly contrast the act of simply focussing on fixed solution finding and momentary problem-solving (Sultana, 2019 p. 38) otherwise found in 'banking' education and rote learning.

The role of the anarchist educator should thus be to aid in remedying the aforementioned issues. This may be enacted through the fostering of critical thinking skills within students. As Zammit (2019, p. 4) notes, critical thinking presupposes a willingness to question the beliefs and motives of others. As a result of this, anarchist pedagogies are essential in fostering objective and apolitical (non-partisan and/or state regimented) critical thinking skills to topple fatalism and hegemonic structures which plague educational institutions.

Through these measures, fatalism may be combatted effectively by empowering students with a skill set oriented in high order thinking. The mode through which this may be reached is through praxis, initially within the classroom environment and then among society at large. In doing so, the dismantling of power-dynamics comes as a secondary function as both students and school-actors engage in praxis. Initiating social change should thus be the role of not only anarchist pedagogues but of all educators, with the nurturing of critical thinking being the ultimate tool at their disposal. It is this interlinking nature between anarchist pedagogies and critical thinking which provides this pedagogy with an advantageous saliency.

2.3.5. A word of caution

There are, however, issues oriented in anarchist education as discussed by Suissa (2010, p. 149), noting that very little attention is paid to a definite 'anarchist' pedagogy is paid by anarchist writers. Suissa argues that this allows doubt with regards to which pedagogical approaches are best to enter the minds of anarchist educators, thus resulting in the potential for questionable pedagogical practices to be at play.

It may likewise be argued that fostering critical thinking is a double-edged sword unless properly assessed and guided by the educator who must be aware of potential issues. Firstly, there is the inherent problem that simply teaching students 'how to think' metacognitively is not inherently innovative and that even though they are capable of doing so, some students may not wish to engage in critical thinking altogether (Haworth, 2012, p. 294).

In response to these concerns, it is important to realise that, when critical thinking is nurtured within students, it is not misused in selfish self-interest unless we foster critical thinking as a tool for further oppression and/or manipulation. As a result of these factors, Haworth (2012, p. 294) notes, it is integral to see the modes in which critical thinking skills are not only nurtured in students, but to see how students utilize critical thinking and to what end it serves through their chosen pedagogical techniques. These may also be synthesized in light of the aforementioned anarchist pedagogies for the sake of ensuring egalitarian principles coinciding with anarchist pedagogies' innate ability to foster critical-thinking skills, agency and praxis among students.

2.4 The role of critical thinking

2.4.1 A general definition

As Zammit (2019, p. 4) notes within *Fostering Critical Thinking Skills through the teaching of Ethics in Maltese Schools*, some pedagogues may have come to embrace 'critical thinking' yet fall short of establishing a fixed definition and/or understanding of the processes which

it entails. In view of this, it is integral to create a fixed definition of critical thinking which is not just a broadly interpretable process but a definition which can be used within the national curriculum and Learning Outcome Framework as a technical term and discipline. This is because art from a secondary school standpoint is predominantly a visual subject. It is important to examine the role that language and 'literary literacy' play in comprehending and discussing visual literacy. Educators must not forget that language is a tool which is essential for meaning-making and critical reflection.

2.4.2 The elements of critical thinking

As discussed when dealing with the subject of Language Across the Curriculum (Volmer, 2006; Byram, M et al., 2007), defining critical thinking is important not only for students but also for teachers. This is because language serves as a constituent component and precondition integral for fostering higher-order thinking skills (Bailey & Heritage, 2008; Scarcella, 2008).

One of the more detailed definitions of critical thinking is described by Jun Xu (2011) within *The Application of Critical Thinking in Teaching English Reading,* where he discusses the ideas of William Huitt (1998) as well as those held by Michael Scriven and Richard Paul (1987)*.*

> William Huitt (1998) defines critical thinking that the disciplined mental activity of evaluating arguments or propositions and making judgments that can guide the development of beliefs and taking action. Michael Scriven & Richard Paul provided the most important features of critical thinking and intellectual standards. They describe critical thinking as the intellectual process of actively conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision,

consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness (Scriven & Paul, 1987; Huit, 1993, as cited in Xu, 2011, pp. 136-141).

These various processes combine to provide us with a well-rounded list of terminologies which may be used by educators within the learning environment in order to allow students to overcome the clutches of fatalism. It is, however, essential to understand the modes in which such terminology is used and to what ends.

2.4.3 The compartmentalisation of terminology

Quality And Inclusion In Education: The Unique Role Of Languages (Thürmann, 2017) maintains the importance of distinguishing the use of terminology into different dimensions. These dimensions have the effect of separating academic and conversational language respectively.

These are described as being the: lexico-grammatical dimension, discourse dimension, cognitive dimension, socio-cultural dimension and socio-psychological dimensions respectively. The lexico-grammatical dimension is oriented in technical terminology. The discourse dimension is tied to the contextual structure and purpose of the topic at hand. Similarly, the cognitive dimension is oriented in thinking-skills at a variety of levels and is tied to context. The socio-cultural dimension deals with the community/habitus in which the language is used. Finally, the socio-psychological dimension is tied to the identity of the language user, their verbal habits, mannerisms and beliefs (Thürmann, 2017, p.5).

These dimensions can be contextualised in the academic 'language varieties' based on the purposes they serve within the school. Terminology in this instance may be built up as 'stocks of academic language elements' (Thürmann, 2017) and their intended use described and clearly defined by educators so as to remove any ambiguity. Meaning making of content discussed within classrooms is to then be reached through use of modelling, scaffolding and apprenticeship (Thürmann, 2017, p.6). The defining, correct use and referring to such terminology in the classroom environment makes it far easier to refer and foster habits known to instil critical thinking within students. As such, it is integral to contextualise what

critical thinking means within the minds of educators, and the modes within which its use is contextualised and referred to.

2.5 Global and national contexts

2.5.1 Chinese and American (USA) pre-service teachers

Similar studies have been recently explored by researchers, tackling teachers' or pre-service teachers' understanding of critical thinking. In both of the following cases, the studies made use of qualitative research. Liu et al. (2017) had in fact taken interest in the same substantive area within the field of physical education.

Within *Physical Education Pre-service Teachers' Understanding, Application, and Development of Critical Thinking,* Liu et al. (2017) gathered pre-service teachers from a major university in Texas and extracted data through focus group interviews relating to how participants understood, learned and applied critical thinking to their practice.

Pre-service Teachers' Conceptualization of "Critical Thinking": a Cross-Cultural Case Study, by Chen & Wen. (2018) similarly conducted research on pre-service teachers, making use of interviews from U.S. based language art pre-service teachers and Chinese ESL pre-service teachers.

These research papers highlight innate differences concerning how critical thinking is defined and understood cross-culturally by pre-service teachers. Certainly, there are many comparisons which could be drawn from the Chinese oriented studies which may be discussed in a Freirean manner. The Chinese Communist Party may not seek to instil critical thinking in students, partly because it would cause citizens to rise against them (one can see that there would be an immediate opposition to the aforementioned suggestion of anarchist pedagogies), but also because there is an overall difference in habitus.

Much of the issue relates to the fact that many Chinese educators had a distinct understanding of what critical thinking itself entails. Oftentimes the term 'critical thinking'

was found to be simplified by participants to a basic evaluation between pros and cons when facing scenarios requiring decision making (Chen et al., 2018).

For these reasons, we must also understand how the use of terminology involving critical thinking is defined, contextualised and used among educators within a national Maltese context.

2.5.2 Jordanian secondary school teachers

Likewise, *Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking: A Study of Jordanian Secondary School Social Studies Teachers* (Alazzi, 2008*) addressed* this very issue from a Jordanian national perspective. Alazzi found that many social studies teachers, even those conscious of the various processes critical thinking entails, failed to understand critical thinking and teaching strategies which may foster higher-order thinking skills within students.

Firstly, this was partly due to the Jordanian education system, which is heavily reliant on 'banking education' and a rigid educational system based on expository instruction (Alazzi, 2008, pp. 245-246). Secondly, Alazzi uncovered that although long-term teachers were aware of critical thinking strategies, job security of lifetime employment has created a rut in which teachers did not experiment or change their pedagogical methodologies. This job security was, potentially, further into question in the likelihood that teachers would ask students to discuss 'cultural norms, active government and other social constructs which are known modes by which to engage higher-order thinking among students (Alazzi, 2008, pp. 245-246).

This is particularly relevant when one considers that Jordan has its fair share of societal issues such as corruption and has faced backlash due to restricting individuals' freedom of speech. One such example of censorship was the recent arrest of notable Palestinian-Jordanian cartoonist Emad Hajjaj for a satirical drawing in 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

As such, this study exemplifies how, even when critical thinking's benefits are known among educators, they are still forced into a fatalistic mindset for fear of losing their employment. Whether these issues resonate or conflict within a national Maltese context, they are, regardless of interest as we may draw parallels and solutions which may be utilised cross-culturally.

This is particularly the case when we look outside the scope of issues oriented in different interpretations and understanding of terminology. Differences within the societal, institutional, or self-imposed limitations and self-censorship which may otherwise be present and perpetuated by educators through fatalism. This notion is to be further expanded upon within a Maltese national context (see The Maltese national context).

2.5.3 Danish secondary school teachers

Within *Fostering critical thinking skills in secondary education to prepare students for university: teacher perceptions and practices,* Van der Zanden, et al. (2020) discuss the modes by which secondary school teachers within the Netherlands foster critical thinking skills among students with the aim of preparing them for university. This was undertaken by extracting data from semi-structured interviews.

Overall, Van der Zanden et al. uncovered how dialogue and real-world examples were best suited to the task of fostering critical thinking skills, particularly when related to authenticity and contemporarily relevant themes (Van der Zanden et al., 2020, pp. 410). This study also uncovered ambiguity among Dutch secondary school educators' understanding of critical thinking, describing the issue of a potential 'mismatch' in what is fostered within secondary level education and what is intended within the curriculum. Van der Zanden et al. (2020), argue that the modes through which critical thinking was understood and fostered was largely shaped by secondary school teachers' own experiences and personal histories (Van der Zanden et al., 2020, pp. 407-411).

This likewise mirrors the modes which personal and professional development of teachers' identities, as discussed by Jordan (2015), influences the fostering of critical thinking skills

among students. Van der Zanden et al. (2020) consider these personal experiences understand to be most instrumental in shaping the ways in which critical thinking are addressed and understood by art educators.

Moreover, this study emphasises the importance of educators collaborating, sharing and collectively stockpiling and contributing materials oriented in fostering critical thinking skills. This extended itself both within the context of secondary schools, but moreover among post-secondary educators (Van der Zanden et al., 2020, pp. 410).

2.6 National context

2.6.1 The Maltese national context

A number of issues are embedded in the very core of our contemporary society, with corruption, freedom of speech and environmental concerns being regularly reported nationally as well as globally. Students have been left in a state of being unable understand the complexities of the democracies in which they live. Far from it, discourse of this nature rarely takes place within pre-tertiary educational institutions. This is naturally not only a localised issue, as aforementioned from a national Jordinian perspective within *Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking: A Study of Jordanian Secondary School Social Studies Teachers (Alazzi, 2008).*

These issues are further reiterated by Maltese media which propagate varying 'realities' and cause the population to be unable to make sound judgement. Throughout *Fostering Critical Thinking Skills through the teaching of Ethics in Maltese Schools*, Lucianne Zammit (2019) brings to light the imminent need for digital-literacy and critical thinking skills to be emphasised on a national level. In light of the aforementioned issues, this can, for this very purpose, be achieved through cross-curricular practices within the national curriculum. Zammit (2019, p. 14) highlights the need for 'critical thinking' so as to educate students as global citizens and enable them to make sound decisions and informed opinions within pluralist democracies.

It is for these reasons that anarchist pedagogies are to be used as a crucial tool in order to allow social praxis and foster metacognitive reflection on the social issues which are around us.

2.6.2 Academic attainment on a national level

On a national level, it is important to also note that we are failing students academically. This is caused by institutionalised education itself, as it fails to consider that 'banking education' hinders students when tasked with finding solutions oriented in higher-order rationale. The reasoning behind this is that while western education has begun to slowly migrate from 'banking education', as discussed by Paolo Freire within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Malta has seemingly latched onto it.

The result of this short-sightedness is that when Maltese students are scored within international assessment tests (such as PISA, TIMMS), they fall short. This is because in such scenarios they are no longer being tested on rote-learning, but rather being instructed to perform higher-order thinking. This problem is so widespread that 40 academics have reflected on these issues on a national level and vehemently recognised and addressed these shortcomings in an open letter titled *STEM Thinking - The Way Forward* (Colombo et al., 2021). Within this letter, said academics addressed these issues to the Ministers for Finance & Employment, Education and Equality and Research & Innovation as recently as of December, 2021, (Times of Malta, 2021) and indicated the much required need for educational institutions to shift their focus on fostering critical thinking skills on a national level.

Throughout this letter, the primary source of concern is the issues which rote-learning has on students upon entering the workforce that is the primary source of concern. The reason for this is that, due to a lack of critical thinking skills, employees and students alike are unprepared for the dynamic and ever shifting realities of the workplace environment as they lack the necessary skills to engage in innovative and creative problem-solving. Colombo

et al. (2021) argue that it is this short-sightedness that has increased our reliance on third party nationals to accommodate for the demands of the labour market.

While this letter has managed to spark conversation over the importance and dire necessity for critical thinking to be further fostered in education on a national level, the overall emphasis of it being undertaken for the purposes of meeting the requirements of the labour market neglects the holistic benefits and positive socio-political impacts it holds. Moreover, throughout this letter, Colombo et al. (2021), stress the importance of STEM subjects but directly exclude the humanities which are otherwise found within a STEAM approach. This indicates that even when critical thinking is emphasized for the purposes of academic attainment on a national level, the use of the art subject for the purposes of attaining this goal is not taken into consideration.

What is further concerning is that, as discussed within *PISA 2018, Insights and Interpretations* (Schelischer, 2018, p. 14), as well as by Zammit (2019)*, some students failed to even identify fact from fiction as they lacked the ability to perform higher-order thinking. This issue further reinforces fatalism among students, as it causes the inability to make sound judgement within their daily lives. These issues persist further within contemporary Maltese society through the use of social media, with 'fake news' and propaganda often manipulating the populations' abilities to make sound judgement (Zammit, 2019, p. 14).

Tools of social stratification in state schools such as tracks and banding (softened forms of the streaming previously in place) further reiterate these notions, oftentimes causing students to be incapable of progressing further by the systems in place. This is a perfect localised example of the aforementioned 'immobilising ideologies' within Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (1996, p. 7-8). This was also discussed by Boaler et al., (2000) within *Students' Experiences of Ability Grouping— disaffection, polarisation and the construction of failure.*

Though intending to establish equity, shifts to the 'My Journey' learning programme fail to address the elephant in the room as they directly filter students into clearer divides. These problems have long been known, as discussed within *Streaming in Malta : Current Practices and Future Prospects.* (Borg & Falzon, 1989). This, in turn, not only limits students' academic

strata but also their long-term social and financial stratification (Boaler et al., 2000). Moreover, such systems discourage an interest in holistic education, with many students failing to find saliency and thus never internalising a 'life-long-learning' approach as discussed by Peter Mayo (2019) within *Higher education in a globalising world : Community engagement and lifelong learning (Universities and lifelong learning).* As a result of this fostering of hegemonic structures, the tyranny of these academic systems inhibits personal and social advancement through fatalism and hegemony while outwardly appearing to be for the students' benefit.

As a result of these national academic issues, the use of practices originating from anarchist pedagogies may serve to foster objective critical thinking skills among students, thus enacting positive social change not only on an academic level but also to improve society at large.

2.6.3 Contextualising critical thinking in contemporary Maltese art Lessons

Critical thinking from a contemporary Maltese national level cannot exist as a listing of non-contextualised processes. Students should be able to analyse and conceive societal power dynamics, current events and other such issues, unveiling them within the microcosm of the classroom so as to better the macrocosm of society as true pluralistic democracies.

In the context of the art classroom, this is to involve the democratization of the classroom as a space of discussion and exploration as previously discussed within both the aforementioned anarchist pedagogies as well as within activist education. Contemporary critical thinking may utilise these contexts as the platform on which to inform the faculties as described by Jun Xu (2011, pp. 136-141). The manner in which this is undertaken thus falls in the hands of the teachers themselves and is the reason secondary school art teachers may interpret and contextualise critical thinking skills among students.

Though there has been recent development in discussing these very issues as evidenced by courses offered by the University of Malta such as the Master of Arts in Social Practice Arts and Critical Education (as well as the Master in Teaching and Learning in Art addressing how

the fostering of critical thinking is essential) this is not exclusive for secondary school level art teachers alone. It is rather, a far more cross-disciplinary course which incorporates theatre, visual arts, adult education, community work, critical pedagogy and various other artistic practices (University of Malta, 2021). This course, though certainly likely to aid any secondary-level art educators' professional development in fostering critical thinking skills among students, is certainly an intense commitment which may fall outside the ability for many secondary school-level art educators to attend and/or show interest in.

As such, it is imperative to determine if Maltese secondary school teachers are aware of their duties to foster critical thinking in students as is already stipulated within the Learning Outcome Framework as well as within the Syllabus. Moreover, it is also essential to establish what their definition of 'critical thinking' entails and what pedagogical approaches known to establish critical thinking (if any) are used so as to find ways to actively assist and support these processes among educators.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research question

 As previously discussed, anarchist pedagogies and art education may play a crucial role in fostering critical thinking skills in students on a national level which may in turn allow for improving the conditions of our democracies through the furthering of social agency and overcoming of fatalism. In view of the aforementioned issues, we must seek to find modes to create recommendations with the intent of supporting and ensuring the fostering of critical thinking skills in students within secondary school art education. Firstly, the research question of ''How could, if at all, a focus on a critical thinking perspective be enhanced in the work of art teachers in Malta?'' is to be explored. This is to then be followed by the

research question ''What policy recommendations, if any, would support art teachers to fulfil their commitments in order to encourage critical thinking skills among secondary school students, in Malta, in line with SEC syllabus (University of Malta, 2020)?'' These questions are to be explored so as to shed light on how art teachers perceive, enact and foster critical thinking skills among students. It would be of benefit to likewise determine which practices are already in use and to extract modes by which they may be enhanced.

3.2 Identification of participants:

Participants were projected as being secondary school art teachers of varying ages, genders and nationalities who teach art at secondary level (SEC O-Level) standard in Maltese schools and/or privately. These participants were intended to be from different school categories, who teach from independent, state and church schools respectively in order to attain as wide an array of experiences, opinions, and practices as possible. The reason for this is that secondary school level educators shape and interpret the curriculum and syllabus through their unique pedagogies and are thus responsible for the fostering of critical thinking skills in students. As such, the extraction of their epistemological philosophies, pedagogical approaches and opinions is essential for the creation of policy recommendations. Moreover, by directly engaging with these teachers, further positive social change may occur by initiating praxis through the chosen research methodology itself.

As a prospective art teacher who has experience in art education at secondary level, it was within my professional and personal interest to identify modes by which to enhance and assist the act of fostering critical thinking among students. Thus, selecting this group of participants directly aided in identifying their unique voices, experiences and any minutiae which are present within the profession.

3.3 Research methodology

A qualitative research methodology was chosen as it allows for topical depth and detail to be extracted from participants. Qualitative analysis successfully allows for participants' subjective emotions, experiences, opinions, practices and aspirations to be discussed in a manner which quantitative analysis would otherwise fall short. Moreover, qualitative research methods allow for hidden themes and correlations to be extracted and identified from participants in a manner which allows for further prospective reflection and focus. It is thus essential for the methodology to allow for the researcher to not only extract newfound data but to positively influence the lives of educators by engaging them directly in critical reflection over their own pedagogical practice outside of the school environment.

3.4 Undertaking of qualitative research

This qualitative research was determined to be best undertaken through roundtable focus groups utilising semi-structured questions so as to allow for various attitudes, opinions, practices and themes to emerge from the participants themselves. Focus groups are historically well known for their unique ability in allowing for the development of discussion, consensus and group agreement among target demographics. As this research was intended to directly address the needs of art educators, such a qualitative approach undeniably was capable of illuminating and extracting the needs, opinions, as well as overall themes which secondary school art educators harbour with regards to the research questions through direct consensus. This was to ensure that the primary focus remains on modes by which to support educators in fostering critical thinking skills in students, rather than simply formulating policy documents on theory in isolation from the very educators who are to enact them.

The dynamic of all participants being secondary-school level art educators moreover allowed for there to be an immediate sense of familiarity and comfort amongst participants. Such a roundtable focus group allowed for participating teachers to directly take agency and

enact critical reflection on their professional practice. The group dynamic of focus groups was essential to this as participants raised issues and concerns which would otherwise not be identified. In addition to this, aspects of basic action research allowed for further continuous comparison, extraction of key concepts and identifying factors which emerged from data extracted throughout the focus groups. Moreover, this had the advantage of retaining a focus on the primary themes at hand while allowing for guided exploration of newfound discoveries. The date and time of these groups were pre-established in collaboration with the participants to ensure that all participants' needs were met and that this was at a time of their collective convenience.

Following discussion and further evaluation, it was determined that smaller focus groups consisting of three individuals per focus group would be far more optimal, with a total of three focus groups each lasting two hours to be undertaken. This quantity of participants and focus groups as well as the duration of time was selected so that further qualitative and in-depth experiences and information could be extracted from participants and elicited more detailed responses. This was to allow for participants to divulge and express their opinions with less time restraints, enabling further themes to be extracted and potential policies and recommendations compiled.

3.5 Recruitment

Participant were projected as being employed within church, state and independent schools respectively. These individuals were to be invited to participate by respective HODs who were to be contacted by the researcher (pending gatekeeper approval) through an opt-in approach. Moreover, due to complications related to COVID-19, further participants were gathered (after discussion amongst respective FREC personnel) by means of convenience sampling so as to attain a suitable number of participants. Said participants were then asked if they could aid in distributing and informing any prospective secondary-school level art teachers they know to also participate and thus establish a snowball-effect. Due to health and safety issues, no physical meetings of said groups could be held and, as such, these

roundtable focus groups were to be undertaken virtually. This was accomplished through a secure video communication platform wherein all audio was anonymously recorded.

3.6 Research design and research strategies:

The research design was mixed, emphasizing a critical design based on axiology (in reference to the values which O-Level/secondary standard art teachers hold towards practices oriented in critical thinking) whilst also seeking to accomplish aspects of practices commonly associated with action research design. The pillars of this analytic framework rests on the identification of comparative and differential elements, as well as key concepts and patterns found within data extracted from the routable focus groups. Thus, questions which were to be used to inform the semi-structured roundtable focus groups were largely informed by topics discussed within the literature review, cross-referencing participants' practice, contemporary pedagogical practices, secondary school level syllabus, curriculum and Learning Outcome Framework. These questions were to be open-ended and to allow for further salient themes to arise from participants' discussion.

3.7 Analytic methods

Following the collection and documentation of recordings from the roundtable focus groups, all contents were then transcribed. Following this transcription period, open coding via Atlas.ti and other qualitative analysis software for content analyses, narrative analysis, as well as discourse analyses was undertaken. These were then used so as to correlate repeated themes and identify patterns from participant's responses and thus further contextualise participants' contributions in an in-depth manner. For further contextualisation to see how this was undertaken, See Appendix A.

3.8 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised as the primary means by which to analyse and identify themes and patterns from the roundtable focus groups. For further contextualisation of how this was undertaken, see Appendix A, Figures 1-4.

3.9 Ethical considerations

This research conforms with the University of Malta's Research Code of Practice and Research Ethics Review Procedures. This project and its framework received confirmation, following review, from the University Research Ethics Committee - Data Protection (UREC-DP) on 25 May 2021.

All participants were provided with details of this study through recruitment and consent forms alongside all necessary documents in respect of their rights. This was undertaken in accordance to General Protection Regulations (GDPR). These recruitment and consent forms detailed and presented the scope of this study in full. The consent form and all of its implications were discussed with participants by the focus group facilitator ahead of each individual session. These documents and all pertaining information were provided in English for the sake of increasing accessibility.

Participants were promised anonymity and, as such, pseudonyms were assigned. Only generic information extracted from the data has been included to maintain anonymity. No compensation was offered to participants in return for their participation.

All ethical considerations were undertaken prior to the data collection process. No ethical issues were expected to be encountered throughout the roundtable focus groups. The reason for this is that participants were not expected to discuss subjects which may contain personal information and/or cause any form of harm to themselves, businesses and/or institutions. Outside the scope of discussing political (from a Foucauldian standpoint relating to power dynamics), pedagogical, epistemological and professional views relating to critical thinking, no sensitive data was intended to be discussed throughout. No religious beliefs or

other information relating to health statues, race, ethnic origin, sex life, sexual orientation or union memberships were intended to be collected purposefully. As such, no ethical issues were projected to occur because of this personal data. However, should participants had wished to freely engage and discuss such personal information of their own volition so as to illuminate further on experiences, practices and beliefs relating to art pedagogy and critical thinking, then they were free to do so of their own accord.

As aforementioned, participants were initially invited through their respective HoS, who were initially contacted by gatekeeper institutions as well as by the researcher through official school channels. Said HoSs were then responsible for accepting to allow teachers to participate and disseminating consent forms and invitations to teachers so that they may participate in the roundtable focus groups. Following this, teachers then contacted the researcher so as to ensure an opt-in strategy throughout. Following the conclusion of this initial phase (refer to Appendix C), further participants were recruited by means of convenience sampling as well as the snowball effect to recruit other participants.

Other issues related to the recording and handling of data as per GDPR regulations were to be handled with care and security. Outside the scope of participants discussing topics among one another, audio recordings were made. These recordings were to be the only point wherein participants were initially identifiable although audio-distortion was immediately utilised to ensure anonymity. These recordings were then used for the exclusive purpose of creating transcripts and all participants were then pseudonymised/coded, thus ensuring total anonymity. Said transcriptions were then converted into ODF format documents which were then coded and through Atlas.ti. Pseudonyms were then used throughout the dissemination of results. These recordings, as well as all derivative data (transcriptions, instruments, etc), were then encrypted by means of Axcrypt software and securely stored within the researchers' possession. All of said materials and derivative information (excluding materials for dissemination) were only made available to the researcher (Alessio Cuschieri) alongside the dissertations' supervisor (Peter Farrugia). For a further detailed assessment of all ethical considerations, See Appendix C & D.

3.10 Potential limitations of the study, evaluation and justification

Though a wider range of participants was projected to be obtained from a wide array of sources; these being church, independent and state schools respectively, circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions had greatly reduced chances of gathering participants through both direct and indirect means. As a result of this, although it was initially intended for teachers to be gathered by contacting HoSs, this was later adapted so as to also include convenience sampling and snowball effect to maximise the number of potential participants. This was undertaken with institutional support after discussion and the approval from members of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. As a result of the self-selected recruitment method, bias inherent with self-selection is evident throughout.

An additional limitation was that, in spite of the many attempts to include participants from state, private and church schools respectively, no participants from church schools could be included. Many participants were in fact educators employed in state schools respectively. However, in consideration that the policymaking recommendations are largely intended to be applied within a state-school context, this limitation may be seen as being negligible (see Appendix A, Figure 8).

Although no students' voices and opinions were extracted for the purposes of data collection, as the focus of this study was instead centred on modes through which the teachers' role in fostering critical thinking among students may be supported first and foremost. This was undertaken as it was the teachers' own perceptions, opinions and pedagogical practices which would largely influence the modes with which students are exposed to critical thinking. In spite of this, the students were always at the centre of concern and where not forgotten at any stage of this research.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1.0 Teacher identity

4.1.1 Art Teacher Identity and professional development

Through the focus groups, it emerged that the modes by which art teacher identities are formed and self-described heavily impact the way critical thinking skills are fostered among students. Participants reflected that this was partly caused by their own ongoing artistic practices (if any), artistic preferences, professional developmental, ongoing vocational experiences alongside the rhizomatic relationships which these aforementioned factors hold. Through participants' discourse, these interdisciplinary relationships were found to bear similar conditions to those discussed within *The Dual Identity of the Artist-Teacher:*

What Does Teaching do to the Artist-Teacher in a Contemporary Educational Context?
(Jordan, 2015).

It is thus essential to see how art teachers' a priori assumptions regarding art education and the fostering of critical thinking skills are forged by their subjective experiences, personal histories and identities. Moreover, the similarities between the needs and means of fostering and encouraging the implementation of critical thinking skills could be seen as occurring parallel among students and teachers alike. Teacher-student and student-teacher identities' (Freire, 1972, p. 71-75) development may be seen as directly being two sides of the same coin, both affected by the same institutional and environmental conditions and require similar modes by which to be overcome (see Examples of structural concern).

4.1.2 The role of the artist-teacher and professional development

Through the focus groups, participants reported that there was difficulty in maintaining their artistic practice alongside their teaching profession. This was oftentimes expressed in dismay as they reflected on the importance and symbiotic nature of these professional identities. This was even the case in instances wherein teachers expressed their identity of 'educator' as being of more importance to them. The cause of this was reported as as being due to temporal issues as well as the general 'draining' qualities which the profession holds. In other instances, an art teacher (Stefanie) expressed the desire to see their students live out their own desired 'artist-experience'.

> …in reality I am always willing and wanting to be more of a practicing artist but I see myself more as a teacher who pushes her students to be the practicing artists. I try to give them all the opportunities which I never took. I push them, I encourage them so that they are living my dream. [I put my artistic practice in my] work funnily enough. (Stefanie, FG 3)

Another participant (James) moreover expressed issues of self-censorship which became apparent as they pursued the profession. This was described as being an aversion to the exploration of certain themes (dealing predominantly with religion and industrialisation) and/or methodologies and techniques (such as pyrography-based art) which are otherwise commonly in use within a Fine Art context. This was explained as being rooted in the symbiotic nature of the artist-teacher identities, with this educator fearing the potential consequences of negatively impacting students and any resultant accompanying parental/institutional difficulties.

As a practicing artist you are a bit [freer] and more liberal to push morality and ethics you know. To play along that line. I found that as a teacher you have a sort of responsibility that at times your public identity as an artist may clash with your public identity as a teacher. So there are certain works that I would have dreamt about and would have wanted to do for a long time, both with live performance and related to fire thing that are more on the extreme side of art things that sort of clash with the idea of being some kind of extremist or crazy artist and also the identity of the teacher. So there's this clash of identity at times.... (James, FG 1)

One art teacher, Michael, interestingly rejected the artist-identity in entirety due to a dislike of pretentiousness which may be associated with it, instead preferring to strictly self-label as a 'painter' first and foremost. Michael, whose works often comment on Maltese society and contemporary issues, had likewise expressed difficulties because of artworks he had created. Some parents had reported him to the Head Of School due to the subject matter which his paintings depict, only for the school within which he is employed to effectively support him and defend his work:

Regarding how I identify myself, [it] is as a painter. I'm not an artist, I'm a painter because for me it is a big bone of contention. Plus, I paint a lot for myself

personally…Sometimes I have had small clashes because of the subject which I depict in my paintings, once I had a report with the head of school, once [I had] a report to [Ministry Of] Education but we have mostly always fixed things and then it's plain sailing. (Michael, FG 3)

4.1.3 Art teachers' professional development

Participants Steven and Maria expressed the importance which fostering critical education holds within art education. This was identified as being caused by their ongoing professional development through the undertaking of a Masters in Social Practice Art and Critical Education course (within the University of Malta) which exposed them to newfound pedagogies.

I wasn't sure which MA I wanted to start but I said if I wanted an education career, I must go to a critical art education course because critical education in art is inevitable. I wouldn't have survived as an educator if I didn't nourish critical thinking. (Steven, FG 2)

One participant, Steven, discussed the importance of undertaking this Masters degree programme by directly stating that it made him further conscious of how to foster critical thinking among students; by promoting the writings and theories of Paolo Freire' writings to this end. This very much reflects the positive influence which (see Literature Review: Defining Fatalism) may hold over influencing educators to embrace critical pedagogies and foster critical thinking among students.

I would mostly associate myself with Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy, especially since starting this MA because it made me more aware of the importance. Although

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something I experienced earlier this year was when the headmaster of [REDACTED] told me to teach thematic based projects 2D and 3D to O-level students. I think that was a life-changing experience as I began to teach art lessons from the theme rather than from the medium. (Steven, FG 2)

Moreover, another participant, Maria, directly referred to this Masters degree programme to show how it had directly caused a shift in her teaching-style so as to address critical thinking as this focus was not present prior.

I never thought about it to be honest or rather I thought about it more when I started reading this Masters about critical education. So, then I was more inclined to come up with more critical lessons or more time for critical thinking or discussion but no, I do not identify with a particular pedagogy. Maybe there is one, but I don't know what it is. (Maria, FG 2)

Such modes of professional development are essential in encouraging skill sets and modes by which critical thinking is fostered amongst students in the arts; whilst being aligned with a reconstructionist approach to education (see Critical thinking and society). The interdisciplinary approach which this Masters degree programme implements allows for a broad range of skill sets, backgrounds and community contexts to be explored.

4.1.4 Teachers' revaluation of terminology

Through the focus groups, it emerges that participants found age-appropriate terminology as being essential in fostering critical thinking among students. Even in cases wherein the term critical thinking itself was used or explained within the classroom environment, participants oftentimes referred to sub-dimensions and aspects of critical thinking as

necessary among their students. Throughout the focus groups, many participants came to shift their view over the use of the term 'critical thinking' within the classroom environment, remarking that they would now be much more likely to start incorporating it within their lessons.

I've never used the term itself in front of students, critical thinking, probably because of the nature of the age of the students. Even certain art terms...I try to stay away from them in order [to] not overcomplicate the subject or stray away from [it]. If they are [learning] one new word in a lesson, or three new words. You need to be careful with how much you burden them with the weight of words. But [the term] itself, critical thinking, never have I mentioned it. I mentioned thinking, self-assessment and the idea of dialogue. Never directly critical thinking. (James, FG 1)

This shift came about through participants' consensus that the term critical thinking itself need not be seen as daunting even among younger students. As such, it is beneficial to report that the focus groups directly aided in allowing for this aforementioned shift within the mindset of participants with regards to the importance of terminology and its uses within secondary-level art education. This reinforces the notion that the use and 'stocks' of academic language elements as discussed by Thürmann, (2013). Moreover, from these focus groups, it was observed that participants were overall made more aware of the importance which terminology and language plays within the classroom environment and learning space.

I don't use the term critical thinking, but I do refer to it in other ways so. For example, let's discuss this, what do you think about this, what is your opinion about this artwork, how has the artist tackled this subject… What do you think about this artwork, how has the artist dealt with this subject what would you have done differently? Or the colour scheme you know so you are encouraging critical thinking

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but not necessary referring to the term critical thinking. Maybe I should, I never thought about referring to it with the students through [discussion]. (Maria, FG 2)

At other times, it emerged that there was an aporia with regards to the role of terminology, and the issues present in the age-appropriateness of technical language used in the classroom (see Listening to Students: Student-age derived issues).

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You need to be very careful with how much knowledge you give them. As much as I like students using the term critical thinking, because some of them show how much they are capable of critical thinking most to them. You don't want to tell 12-year-olds about Socrates or Plato, because it will ruin their lives, too much knowledge at a young age. I believe that certain knowledge is shown over a certain amount of time as they grow older… but you have made me think about this, why don't I mention critical thinking? Good point. (James, FG 1)

4.1.5 Interdisciplinarity and lack of fixed pedagogies

Throughout the focus groups, it emerged that, with the exception of one participant, Steven, who identified with Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy, no other participants reported identifying with a fixed pedagogy for the sake of fostering critical thinking skills in students. This is not to say that they did not employ modes by which to allow students to engage in the various sub-dimensions of critical thinking. Many participants directly made use of questioning strategies, lesson-structuring and other means to allow for students to foster critical-thinking throughout the lessons. The benefits of utilising fixed pedagogies were however unseen amongst focus group participants:

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I would mostly associate myself with Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy, especially since starting this MA because it made me more aware of the importance. Although something i have experienced earlier this year was when the headmaster of (REDACTED) told me to teach thematic based projects… I think that was a life-changing experience as I began to teach art lesson from the theme rather than from the medium… (Steven, FG 2)

Participants also stressed the importance of interdisciplinary approaches within their own artistic practice, as well as within school subjects as a whole. Many of them reflected on the fact that critical thinking should be applied not only within the context of art-education but that it should also be supported through an interdisciplinary approach throughout all subjects both before, during and after secondary school-level education. This would ensure that it is not only a select few subjects which address this issue.

I would say that critical thinking would have to become a norm, that it's implemented in every subject, every pedagogy, even within the PSCD classes which don't necessarily require any grading. So, the fact that it is implemented everywhere, rather than it being just a construct out there, it becomes the bread and butter of everyday school life. So, everything you do, everything you think, there should always be critical thinking as a student. (James, FG 1)

Throughout the focus groups, participants also expressed that the modes in which this should be undertaken are thus dependent on careful scaffolding and collaboration across all professional educators within the school environment (see How critical thinking could be applied within the art room).

I think it is all about not seeing a subject on its own but also seeing it as a component of many other subjects. There comes the interdisciplinary idea that art is linked to history and that to mathematics and it's linked to literature and to poetry and so many other subjects so seeing them together as one whole. Many times, I make reference to different subjects and to everyday life so that you are not looking at the artwork as something which is still on its own...This thing of understanding your artistic practice as a reaction to your experiential baggage is important. (Jane, FG 1)

Thus, it is evident that participants regarded the art subject as being greatly aided by an interdisciplinary approach, allowing students and educators alike to engage with art not within an isolated context, but through a holistic approach which is influenced by the broader context of students' and teachers' own lives. This may be seen as being greatly influenced by the aforementioned STEAM approach (see Art Education).

4.2   Student participation

4.2.0 Listening to students

Student autonomy and student-centred pedagogical approaches have proven to be successful in fostering critical thinking skills among students, as aforementioned within *Educational Research and Innovation Fostering Students' Creativity and Critical Thinking: WHAT IT MEANS IN SCHOOL* (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019 pp. 93-94). The fostering of critical thinking skills was best determined throughout the focus groups to directly rest upon maintaining student focus while allowing for active participation and inquisitively throughout the art lessons (see Defining critical thinking in a contemporary context).

 For this reason, participants felt that one of the main modes through which critical thinking may be fostered among students was by directly listening to students' opinions, questions and nurturing curiosity through the zone of proximal development. The modes through which this may be undertaken are greatly varied and it is important to ensure that the

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dismantling of any pre-existent barriers which hinder this process are addressed first and foremost. This is particularly important should fatalism have already negatively influenced students' perceptions and beliefs over what the art subject entails.

4.2.1 Student-age derived issues

One issue which art teachers reported was oriented in the age of students. This was regarded by participants Jane and Riley as stemming from the difficulty which comes in fostering habits of mind among 'older' students due to pre-existing fixed worldviews and opinions. Among participants who are experienced with teaching both children, youths (at secondary level) and even higher levels of education, many reported that this issue progressively becomes more noticeable among older students.

> Yesterday I had a discussion about Duchamp's fountain. They had a discussion with another teacher, and they were still [saying] 'but that is not art Miss, how can they call it art' so they are also very much resistant. So, it is probably age, [they are] very much into realistic art and they want to go into what they see as classical... Possibly it will come with maturity. But the more we expose them to it, the more they hear it in different ways... They will become more open minded, and they will become ready to accept certain concepts. *(Jane, FG 1)*

To this end, focus group participants highlighted the importance for measures to be taken in order to foster critical thinking skills not only among older secondary-level art students. Rather, these measures may also be suited for middle school/ lower-secondary years so as to foster habits early-on among students.

…It is very difficult [among older students] because they do build this comfort zone, because [having been in] primary and secondary school …they do not question themselves anymore … they don't even try to imagine other solutions [or] other possibilities. They come with this [pretentiousness] that the teacher is always right and nothing is wrong about it. So, [they] can't question the teacher, or [they] can't question ideas. Somehow, I do feel that I need to dismantle this boundary and reconstruct it in their own way… I always believed that primary and secondary school shape their opinions. (Riley, FG 1)

Participants discussed this issue as potentially being confronted and tackled by making use of scaffolding strategies throughout secondary-school years and potentially primary-level education (See MATSEC and the need for standardisation and scaffolding).

4.2.2 Dialogic-teaching, discussion and groupwork

Throughout the focus groups, it emerged that Dialogic-Teaching was recognised as being essential among art teachers for fostering critical thinking among students. This was discussed (as was in Steven's experience as discussed in institutional fatalism, career rut and professional dialogue) reference to Paolo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1972.

The dialogic gathering is basically an art discussion which raises critical thinking. It is something which has to do with the topic you are going to deliver on the day. You give students a choice between arts classics masterpieces, also contemporary. You chose two - three to try to find common ground and if you are going to introduce a lesson … [such as] assemblage art [by] Louise Nevelson, Pablo Picasso [and then] the ready made by Duchamp…Then they critically discuss these [artworks]. (Steven, FG 2)

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Even when the term 'Dialogic' Teaching itself was not utilised, many participants discussed the importance of discussion and other sub-dimensions of dialogic pedagogy to this end. Alongside this, class-critique and group work were held in high regard amongst all participants for their abilities to foster critical thinking skills and autonomy among students and should thus be further emphasized throughout the scholastic year. As such, the importance of the social aspect of art and modes through which students may engage in critical reflection within group settings may be seen as optimal in the fostering of critical thinking skills.

> Where you have groups exploring each other's ideas together. I think it helps a lot, group work and I need to try and bring it in more of my lessons. That's the most thing that's coming to mind at the moment. (Charles, FG 2)

4.2.3   Brainstorming

Much like the need for a sketchbook/journal (See Examples of Good Practice), persistent brainstorming (as discussed within FG 2 and 3 respectively) and the idea generation stage were referred to during focus groups by art teachers as being instrumental in allowing students to discover all initial possibilities, thoughts and creative ideas in a manner which allows for direct agency. One educator, Michael, appropriately referred to the importance of this initial 'draining phase' at the beginning of lessons so that students have a sense of focus, direction and a mode by which to critically assess their own creative process and development.

> I always start with 'l-ewwel għaffeġ'. Put your first idea down on a paper, once I drain them out of their own ideas, I guide them. But I find this draining stage important because they come up with a fixed idea that this is what [they] want to

do. The worst thing you can tell them is 'don't do it'…Then most often they come up with their own conclusions from this end to improve. (Michael, FG 3)

Participants highlighted the importance and the efficiency of this brainstorming process for its lack of initial restrictions, allowing for students to funnel ideas through selective efforts rather than through outright dissuasion by art teachers. This approach allows for critical reflection to thus take place through the process of selectivity by students and is invaluable for this reason. Approaches such as this allow for students to directly foster habits oriented in decision making which will greatly impact their lives holistically.

Likewise, the use of particular 'triggers' to encourage new ideas during this brainstorming-stage was discussed as being of equal importance among participants. In addition to this, such practices moreover may be further compiled and examined over an extended period (see Examples of good practice).

Practically I think that I would like to start from triggers. Very often triggers of ideas. Then we do brainstorm and everything and so there would be a lot of ideas that someone wouldn't have thought of. It's very much like having the title of a book but then you start opening it and you start reading a lot about it but I like to work in that way. Many times, I do not have a very predefined direction, it is a trigger and I like them to explore it in a very open manner. (Steven, FG 2)

It emerges that this open-ended approach allows for the aforementioned funnelling of ideas to likewise take place in a broader context. This may directly reinforce the brainstorming process by allowing for the emergence of further concepts and possibilities. The selection of the themes which serve as triggers must, however, be undertaken with care (See Ecosocial concerns) so as to direct students to newfound possibilities which may have greater socio-political impact and praxis.

4.3 Social structures

4. 3. 0 Critical thinking and society

 Throughout the focus groups, participants discussed critical thinking in light of current social realities, their perceived responsibilities, and the psychosocial commitments which the profession holds. This may be seen to parallel the manner with which critical thinking skills and the role of the educator was regarded within *Anarchist Pedagogies: Collective Actions, Theories, and Critical Reflections* on Education Edited (Haworth, 2012).

Participants also discussed issues present within contemporary society, finding it imperative to empower students through the fostering of reasoning skills so that they may clearly differentiate fact from fiction, make sound judgments and hold informed opinions which can be realised through direct agency. These themes were likewise found to parallel the aforementioned issues present among students as discussed by Lucianne Zammit (2019, p 4).

Another emergent theme established through the focus groups is the importance of addressing these issues present within society through the art subject; as it allows for discussion and exploration of diverse themes, all the while providing direct kinaesthetic feedback and agency through the act of creation (see Literature Review: Pedagogy). It is thus essential to further explore what art educators' perceptions, experiences and recommendations are with regards to critical thinking's role in contemporary society so as to contextualise it fully.

4.3.1 Critical thinking in a contemporary context

Critical thinking is oftentimes a difficult intellectual discipline to define, especially when it is found within the habitus of a particular classroom environment with specific national

contexts, as aforementioned within findings of Liu et al. (2017), Chen & Wen. (2018) as well as Alazzi (2008).

Establishing a fixed definition of critical thinking among participants was difficult, however, overall consensus described it as being centred on students' autonomy in relation to their thinking habits as well as artistic creation. Focus group participants generally agreed that critical thinking may be summarised as the ability to independently engage in discussion, dialogue and independent analysis after reviewing information, as made evident in the following excerpt:

> Regarding critical thinking, I think it's more or less summed up as teaching students how to think rather than what to think as we did perhaps in the past. So, there is perhaps this element of teaching a certain element of reason. This process of how I get from A to B, how I am going to get there or what is the most reasonable way to do it. The Most beautiful thing about it is that it is a tool that each student can use separately in their own practices and creativity. (James, FG 1)

Participants shared other ways of conceptualising critical thinking in the classroom context, including:

> Critical thinking means the student will think about what I have just said and give me his or her own opinion and not be afraid of saying something which is different to something I just said during an explanation for example. This does not relate only to art and the teaching of art but to teaching in general. (Maria, FG 2)

The importance of a dialogic, mutual exchange in the relationship between teacher and student, as part of a critical pedagogy, emerges clearly. The consensus which emerged from

the focus groups was that of establishing the art subject as a prime source for critical thinking and communication:

> *Critical thinking is when I try to raise vital questions and problems concerning the art topics I am giving on the day. Also, when I encourage the students to think [in a manner which is more] open minded, to recognize [and] to also brainstorm about the subject and the theme we are dealing with. Also, to communicate effectively their ideas, thoughts and opinions about the subject or the topic which is being delivered.* (Steve, FG 2)

4.3.2 Social reconstructionism and social responsibilities

Throughout the focus groups, participants repeatedly maintained the need for critical thinking to positively influence the individual lives of students by making them informed and autonomous individuals capable of sound judgment and critical reflection. Moreover, the bettering of society through the fostering of these habits of mind could be seen as the primary reason for promoting critical thinking skills within arts education. The modes through which this was described falls within the veil of a social reconstructionist perspective and greatly aligns itself with the aforementioned necessity (see Literature Review: National Context) of fostering critical thinking among students.

Throughout the focus groups, it emerged that participants highlighted their interest in fostering critical thinking through art among students within the vein of a reconstructionist-education approach. James emphasized this notion regarding forming a prospective ideal and model 'future' citizen by empowering students with critical thinking skills regardless of educational background.

We often try to think of how we could make the world a better place… At some point I gave up on trying to convince adults to change their ways, but I found that children through discussion and dialogue are very open to these concepts. They are at a malleable stage even as teenagers. So, I felt that it was a very big potential space to advocate change for the future...the seed that you sow now produces the fruit of a mature adult who is capable of reason and discussion…I don't think anyone should not have critical thinking [regardless of their educational background] … I believe it's an important tool for making the ideal, model future citizen. (James, FG 1)

However, James also stressed the importance of art for the betterment of society by allowing students to foster habits of mind oriented in critical thinking which would allow them to participate in social dialogue and enact cultural praxis; so as to further improve our pluralistic democracies. This is made evident in the following excerpt which was indicative of the general consensus within FG 1:

I believe if a group of individuals in the future would have these critical thinking skills it would be much easier to come to conclusions, compromises, and dialogue which is what most people need in our society. So, it is a lifelong tool… and it is one of the most important I would say. (James, FG 1)

This very much aligns itself with anarchist-pedagogies and the aforementioned themes discussed within *Anarchist Pedagogies: Collective Actions, Theories, and Critical Reflections on Education* (Robert H. Haworth, 2012) in that it directly allows students to gain autonomy through the direct dismantling of fatalism. This reconstructionist approach was often passionately, albeit indirectly, emerging across focus groups for the sake of allowing students to become better individuals who are capable of critical reflection, agency and self-assessment throughout their day-to-day lives. This, moreover, also extended towards the subject matter and themes explored throughout the art lessons (see Ecosocial Concerns).

Critical thinking essentially puts putting knowledge into action… Ok you know a lot of things, you discussed, but now how will you enact that which you know? It is the actualisation process …alone or with others. (Steven, FG 2)

4.3.3 Ecosocial concerns

Aspects of environmentalism such as recycling and other environment-based topics were discussed by participants frequently as being appropriate for secondary-level art education, which could be used to engage students further within other socially relevant discourse.

...as well as the idea of sustainability for students to appreciate the environment because even from a cereal box you can produce the most amazing artwork. The cereal box [which] everyone thinks is to throw away. A simple cereal box, the thing you could make 2D or 3D [art out of] if you are making collagraph printing. Then as they grow up you show them woodblock printing [or] stone carving. [Like this from] a young age they can see an artwork in a piece of cardboard or toilet paper roll.
(Steven, FG 2)

However, throughout the focus groups it became apparent that 'other' topics were viewed as potentially being too complex for secondary-level education (see Teachers' Revaluation of Terminology). This issue questions which topics are age-appropriate for fostering critical thinking which art teachers (at a secondary school level) feel comfortable addressing. This is particularly relevant as maintaining a reconstructionist approach towards art may directly involve larger-scale issues which may verge on more socio-politically sensitive subject matter (Niblett, 2017).

The issue of the environment is good to combine traditional art, you hit the O-level and the societal [themes] out of the window practically. I think that is one of the easiest things you can do and I think that is the best way to bridge with them without seeing too big. (Michael, FG 3)

4.4 Examples of structural concern

Throughout the focus group, it emerged that the societal and institutional perceptions which the art subject harbours severely impact the modes through which it is supported by school actors and the way it is promoted and assessed by guardians, school officials and students alike. Participants have discussed that these issues are not only limited to the arts with regards to education but are also largely shaped by the perceptions which creative industries as a whole face on a national level. These perceptions, however, do not exist purely within the minds of individuals who could be seen as 'outsiders' to the subject of art education.

Participants within the focus group indicated that they may also be seen present among the MATSEC examination board and Art O-Level examiners through biases which, focus group participants perceive, severely impact the fostering of critical thinking skills among students. This is particularly the case when the subjective qualities of art are called into question. Practices which are otherwise acceptable within the realm of contemporary art are deterred throughout the O-Level portfolio and examination.

As such, these issues may present cognitive dissonance within the practices of art teachers and should be heavily scrutinised so as to ensure that no stifling of critical thinking techniques occurs as a consequence of the aforementioned issues.

4.4.1 MATSEC and the need for standardisation and scaffolding

An issue discussed among participants (within FG 3) is the perceived lack of standardized practices among art educators regarding technical, creative and conceptual skills taught in

class. Some participants (in FG 3) have expressed their frustration at finding many students behind in technical and critical-thinking skills upon progression to their classes. This would often result in the participants themselves having to compensate by teaching this content. As a result of this, time which could have been invested in fostering critical thinking and/or other year-appropriate lessons are lost. This issue of 'overlooked' skills is also prevalent with regards to practices which are otherwise required for MATSEC examination. This was exemplified by Christine and Michael, who mentioned how a number of students and colleagues reported a number of art teachers instructing students to copy still life paintings and drawings from secondary sources (a projected image) rather than from primary sources.

> I get students from other schools who never did printing, pottery, never did one-point perspective, never did any colour mixing so they always used ready mixed paints. They don't know how to hold a pencil, to do shading in still lives so this lack of strategy is causing students to... apart from coming to me with a lack of technique, they are coming with a lack of modes by which to undertake critical thinking…This isn't something which I am just saying, my students tell me 'We were going to drop out because it was boring, we always copy from the projector, we copy the still life from the all in one. (Christine, FG 3)

It emerged that some participants felt that this information leads to not only *spoon-feeding* of content, but the direct inability of students to truly make independent judgment on a technical and aesthetic level. Participants felt that educators cutting corners in this manner significantly reduces critical thinking skills among students. This issue was reported by Michael as requiring further investigation by internal verifiers.

> So, these are bad habits that do not help at all. But these are bad habits because there is no guide. If there is written that the still life has to happen from life, if

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someone was to check they would say 'how do you have the picture without having the objects?' Not that anyone would check, but we are being idealistic here. Unfortunately, it boils down to the teacher there, and [to see] how much critical thinking would happen in the classroom. (Michael, FG 3)

To this end, a mode by which to enforce scaffolding emerged (within FG 1 & 3) as being necessary. This would maintain consistency across students' education in order to overcome, this issue both in light of technical and creative dimensions. Likewise, the fostering of critical thinking is necessary to ensure that students internalise such practice in a manner which supports a lifelong learning approach.

... So, what we could obviously suggest is that there is a structure where every year the students do some amount of work and research and material and each year they are being exposed to new things. (Christine, FG 3)

4.4.2 Perceptions of art at secondary school: students, educators and guardians

4.4.2.1 Misguided students

One of the primary issues which surfaced across focus groups is the manner in which art as a subject is perceived among other educators, parents and students alike. Participants (within FG 2 & 3) recalled experiences with students who would choose art as a subject under the impression that it was merely 'copying' and a subject which did not require much effort. As such, participants reported difficulty in engaging students who chose art under such pretence as they may directly oppose engaging in creating original imagery, let alone participate in discussion and/or critical thinking.

Participants felt that this causes many of these students to show disinterest in the subject and thus lose agency entirely. This is further problematised by professional educators,

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guidance counsellors and/or guardians who may encourage students to choose art as a subject under the perception that they may find it to be 'easy' in comparison to others.

What emerges from the findings is that the promotion of art as a subject under the pretence of its therapeutic qualities by other educators within the school further blurs the perception of the schools therapeutic services with the art lesson.

> Charles: When it comes to showing the options, the portfolios are the first thing I show them. But there is the mentality that 'I do not want to study, let me choose art'. I find a lot of them (students). I unfortunately also hear guidance teachers that push them to 'choose art', because other subjects are difficult.

> Steven: Because it is therapeutic.

> Charles: But sometimes, some students become frustrated because they chose the subject.

> (Steven and Charles, FG 2)

Moreover, this extends to the perceived effort and time dedicated towards the subject outside of school, with participants expressing difficulty in getting students to experiment and explore the art-creation process critically in their own time (see Negative aspects of digitalisation In the learning environment).

4.4.2.2 The privatisation of art: perceptions amongst students and educators

Another issue voiced by Michael was that of the rise of private candidates who may opt to take art as private candidates, rather than as a main subject, as a result of these aforementioned factors. Moreover, participants also discussed their concerns regarding potential changes to the syllabus which may hinder older students who recently transferred into the school. Participants argued that these factors caused many students to choose art as private candidates as they viewed art as being merely an 'extra' subject which is not worthy of their time. Michael stressed that students themselves voiced this opinion in class. This resulted in his direct acknowledgment of the uncertainty his vocation holds should he lose further students as private candidates. Such conditions significantly stunted participants', morale and the perception which art holds within the minds of students, educators and guardians alike.

> Michael: After that seminar I was considering what I was going to do. To me you can't, it's like they are cutting both my arms off. I teach a lot of foreign students and if I get a lot of foreign students... What are they going to be doing? Form 5 comes up to me, what about those who come in form 5?
>
> Christine: He would probably have to apply as a private candidate.
>
> Michael: You know what they told me? I thought about it and didn't say anything, but the students who were listening said that no one will choose art, everyone will just take it as a private candidate, it's much easier and they take another subject.
>
> Christine: But you still have to correct the portfolio.
>
> Michael: Yes, but I already have a number of students who already do this, because they tell me art is a wasted subject in school. Not to mention all of the complications that they were mentioning…

(Michael and Christine, FG 3)

4.4.2.3 Negative external influence.

It also emerged that focus groups participants reported the issue of negative external influence by family and friends who may discourage and counteract any newfound opinions and or critical thinking skills fostered throughout the art lessons. This was seen as being one of the largest sources of difficulty among some participants. As such external influences, whether these are family members or friends, were seen among participants to dictate the overall habitus which students are exposed to outside of the school environment.

> What I see that interferes with critical thinking is the background which we find at homes. You find no kind of support, the teacher pushing students, their children in this case to improve or work with more diligence. As Michael said, students only draw during school hours. For them to work at home, it's like asking them to climb the highest mountain. So, the support of the parents is important not just in the case of arts but any subject, as guardians they are to push their children further*.*
> (Christine, FG 3)

This sentiment was, likewise, also shared by James, who reflected upon the way in which external influences directly hinder the fostering of critical thinking skills among students.

> I would say the biggest conflict, the biggest clash would be exterior influence. I mean if you are trying to teach them a certain concept, a certain way of thinking it may not be what they are used to at home or with their circle of friends. So, everything you may have done in one lesson can be easily undone with 2 or 3 words from a parent or guardian. Because as we know, at least with the case of kids, of children and with adolescents we know how susceptible they are to other influences from their peer groups or from their guardians. This is at least what I have found, personally, to be the biggest conflict. (James, FG1)

4.4.3 Teaching for the Art O-Level

One issue presented by two participants within FG 3, Michael and Stefanie, was the recurring motif that content and material created throughout the art lessons was stifled or 'dumbed down' for the sake of presentability to the unknown, albeit presumably conservative tastes and preferences of the Art O-level Portfolio examiner. As such, students were not encouraged to explore materials and concepts freely or critically throughout the scholastic year and instead guided to create more 'generic' imagery which would allow them to attain a pass mark.

I have some children who are really good at manga...they know how to create in a very specific way, many times this is my issue. They create something really interesting. It could be [in the style of] abstraction or whatever, but you don't know [how it will be received by examiners] because we are living in a very subjective kind of subject. If the examiner is not an abstract artist or not a conceptual artist what will happen? The student will suffer, the mark will reflect the examiner. That is one of the biggest problems I see. (Stefanie, FG 3)

As such, participants expressed that critical thinking was relegated towards a lesser role so long as the aesthetic values of the artworks produced by students met this enforced standardisation. When some art teachers directly wished to confront this, it was still met with a mixed- approach, encouraging students to still attempt to explore unconventional concepts and techniques while producing a quantity of artworks intended to appease the standards of MATSEC O-level examiners. One art teacher, Michael, voiced his frustrations regarding this issue as follows:

So, then if you are talking about art skill in art and how much can we as art teachers teach critical thinking, I want to press the red button and stop talking to you. If I am

to prepare them, the way I am to prepare them for the O-level, critical thinking doesn't play a role in it. Obviously, I am going to jump on the syllabus but, maybe I am running ahead. You are going to teach critical thinking, then at the end of the day they will find the titles being what they are, the still lifes are what they are… the way the system is built… We want critical thinking; we know how to teach it and we are good at teaching it but then when it comes to [it], how it will be applied in the exam? (Michael, FG 3)

4.4.4 Institutional fatalism, career rut and professional dialogue.

One issue which arose during focus groups which particularly concerned some art teachers was their inability in enacting agency to change the MATSEC syllabus in a truly efficient and constructive manner. Participants (throughout FG 3) described their experiences during a seminar outlining changes to the Art Syllabus (2022). Throughout their recollection of the seminar, the consensus was that their voices were not being heard. Although the meeting was intended to voice art teachers' opinions and suggestions regarding changes to the art syllabus. Three participants, Michael, Stephanie and Christine, expressed that changes to the O-level syllabus have already been put into action and that such seminars had in fact been for superficial reasons. The primary cause of such opinions among participants was the fact that no tangible document detailing the intended changes to the MATSEC O-level art Syllabus was provided for them to examine, assess and discuss prior to and/or following the meeting.

It isn't fair what you [MATSEC] are doing, the decisions have been made and by giving me just an hour time. Give me the document, mark everywhere that it is unofficial and give me a chance to see it in peace and then I can give you my opinion. Not just talking on and on and then [someone makes] comments which are unrelated, and then someone [is] speaking over one-another, and then 'facepalm'.

How could you do this in a realistic way? There are many different realities in different schools and environments. (Stefanie, FG 3)

Moreover, it emerged that, as a result of this lack of preparation, little to no time was made available to participants to actively assess these changes in a critical manner. This was also indicated by these participants' fatalism, preferring to remain silent rather than speak in an inexorable and uncritical environment. Said participants also commented on how, in cases wherein other art educators had voiced their opinions, these were obstinate and merely expressed preference to the pre-existent Syllabus, citing their years of experience and dismissing the need for change. One participant, Michael (FG 3), went so far as to directly show this live seminar to the class he was teaching as an act of defiance.

I was present and I did a bit of a cowboy move. I had a lesson and I told them [the students] 'I will leave this in the background, and you continue to draw'. And they were telling me that 'this is how teachers discuss? What are they saying? Sir, they have been fighting for two to three hours! Do they not see that they aren't going anywhere with these arguments?'... Then I turned it [the virtual seminar] off. (Michael, FG 3)

In view of these issues, focus group participants expressed the need for art educators to be supported in voicing their opinions with regards to any changes regarding the Syllabus in a critical environment so that they may overcome institutional fatalism. One participant, Maria, went so far as to explain how important these undertaken focus groups were, as they allow for open discussion which is otherwise professionally lacking. This issue parallels the very conditions which maintain the need for dialogic teaching among students and the need for open spaces for discussion (see Dialogic-teaching and groupwork).

One last thing... I think that if we as art teachers have more opportunities to meet between us in organized events where we are encouraged and given the opportunity to think critically, this would also help us within the classroom context... This sort of discussion that we did today, or other similar opportunities could be extended within the curricular context as part of our training to become better teachers and critical thinkers. (Maria, FG 2)

4.5 Examples of good practice.

Throughout the focus groups, examples of good practice oriented in fostering critical thinking skills among students were discussed. Other than the importance of emphasizing dialogic-teaching, discussion, groupwork and brainstorming (see Listening to Students) other examples emerged through the focus groups may be standardised on an institutional level. Said practices may support regular critical interaction with art creation among students.

One such example of this was the practice adopted by one participant, Stefanie, for students to create additional artworks which where not hindered by the aforementioned issues rooted in teaching for the O-Level (see Issues arising from teaching for the Art O-Level portfolio and perceived examiners' bias). It emerged that such practices allowed students to express themselves freely so that the positive psychosocial and therapeutic qualities of the art subject could still be attained. It emerged that this system allowed for the holistic development of students' work to serve both for their own personal satisfaction and for their self-expression, whilst also providing salience to the topic.

If they need to produce ten drawings in ink, five are MATSEC accepted then the other five are [for them]. I do not want to kill their style. They need to grow and feed [themselves] no matter what MATSEC says... so we try to balance. And if they have problem or whatever they can find them in the other five. So, you still need to stay

with the expectation for the exams, traditions, etc but then I give them a way to try and get out any problems or personal feelings. (Stefanie FG 3)

Another practice which was strongly supported by participants was the need for a sketchbook/journal to be utilised and evaluated for the sake of the MATSEC O-Level. This emerged throughout the focus groups and was described as being essential among participants.

The reason for this is as it would allow for exploration and critical thinking to be fostered by students in an uninhibited manner. One art teacher, Stefanie, went so far as to enthusiastically describe the sketchbook and journal as being the *'king of critical thinking'*. This is because the sketchbook/journal would allow for the exploration of techniques, concepts, media and other such elements freely. Stefanie moreover stressed that this would allow students to be prepared for creating and using journals for art in a post-secondary and potentially tertiary level-education context.

Examinations and the system can be limiting... I think that the sketchbook and the journal is the 'king' of critical thinking. The fact that [until] O-Level they do not do it, or rather there are some schools that do it but cannot present it, or otherwise the teacher sees it but not officially, so you have 85% of the schools who do not do it so then you have students then going to A-level with no idea of what a journal is, what an opinion of art is, etc. (Stefanie, FG 3).

The importance of the sketchbook was so strong that Michael had instructed his students to present it alongside the portfolio as proof of their progress and as testament to the true quantity of work and effort which they had made:

Because I am hard-headed, when I had visits from moderators, I always left sketchbooks with the portfolio. Whether it counts or it doesn't…we shall present it either way. Now the fact that it is there will show that we have done it. If he likes it, he can see it, if he doesn't, he doesn't see it. (Michael, FG 3)

Overall, participants voiced the importance for these positive practices to be adopted on an institutional level so as to directly benefit students. In such instances, participants also maintained the importance for such practices to be supported through the aforementioned scaffolding approach (see MATSEC and the need for standardisation and scaffolding) to directly aid students in fostering these practices as habits of mind which may come naturally in post-secondary and tertiary-level educational contexts.

4.6 Classroom

4.6.0 Learning environment and digitalisation

Throughout the focus groups, it emerged that the learning environment holds a great deal of importance in fostering critical thinking skills among students and teachers alike. Participants highlighted how modes by which critical thinking skills may be fostered within the learning environment are directly dependent on the subjective understandings of what critical thinking entails to educators, alongside the circumstantial physical learning environment itself. This was discussed among participants in respect to the necessity of having a designated classroom for the art subject and moreover the advantages and disadvantages of digital learning environments, digitisation, and social media in the wake of COVID-19.

4.6.1 How Critical thinking could be applied within the art room

One issue which emerged throughout the focus groups is a lack of guidance with regards to how much emphasis should be placed on critical thinking throughout the art lessons. Michael expressed how this is also coupled with difficulty in establishing to what ends critical thinking should be best directed, with the classic dilemma of technique versus creativity and concept playing centre stage.

> …Critical thinking has an element of subjectivity, if it is radical critical thinking and you want them to be covered in paint, I would be happy like that. If it is someone who is drawing a landscape from one point perspective instead, they draw it as an aerial perspective that could be critical thinking to that person. It depends on the teacher, the training of the teacher, the personal perspective of the teacher…
> Michael (FG 3)

As such, participants discussed how establishing a form of hierarchy and/or ratio for the sake of standardisation and guidance among secondary school art educators may be essential in establishing practical solutions to many of the aforementioned issues, particularly for the sake of assessment and any scaffolding strategies applied throughout the scholastic years.

> As a rubric we try to employ a four-category rubric we have the technical skills, creative and technical skills, communication and documentation skills, creative and furthering creativity skills and reasoning and reflecting [and the] fifth one is documentation. Steven (FG 2)

This categorisation of learning skills was likewise supported by Michael, who maintained the importance of skills by distinguishing lessons into technical and creative dimensions entirely, pushing and segregating them for the sake of efficiency. It is likewise important to note that this process was largely also shaped by his own artistic practice.

> In my case...I make a distinction between the technical lessons and the creative lessons. Now this boils down to my philosophy of the arts and my own practice. I tell them that without skills you cannot do anything. (Michael, FG 3)

This issue of maintaining a balance between technical, creative and reflective lessons is further explored at a later stage (see Perceptions, requirements & expected outcomes of art at secondary level).

4.6.2 The need for a fixed learning environment and field Outings

Throughout the focus groups, it emerged that the role of the learning environment is essential in fostering critical thinking skills among students. This is for the sake of establishing a habitus and critical, student-centered pedagogies which can encourage critical thinking as discussed within the Literature Review (See Literature Review: Pedagogy). Participants reported the importance of the school to have a fixed 'art room' to allow for a stable environment within which critical thinking and other artistic practices may be freely explored for teachers and students alike. This was expressed with particular emphasis for the sake of maintaining an artistic environment which would allow students and teachers alike to enter an artistic mindset overall.

One participant, Jane, indicated that the school having a fixed art classroom was akin to that of an artist having their own studio, thus serving for the mutual benefit of both student and teacher (see Art teacher Identity and professional development). This sheds light on an

emerging theme: that art teachers and students are both directly affected by the physical learning environment, or lack thereof.

> Having a studio makes a very big difference. If you want to be an artist, and artist-teacher you need to have a studio, your own space where your artistic practice starts... There is always that place which is yours, where things can really happen. Where you can do your research as a teacher. When you don't have time you have to leave, you leave everything there and you continue where you left. Not having your own space as an artist-teacher, it's like the teacher not having an art room in the school... Which is very much common practice unfortunately but you can make a big difference between a teacher who has an art room in a school and a teacher who doesn't have an art room in the school so you would be definitely and totally limited. (Jane, FG 1)

While the necessity of having a fixed art room was seen among participants as being crucial, the need and support for education to take place outside of the classroom environment was also expressed. A lack of field outings with regards to the arts was explored among participants, particularly between Maria and Steven. This issue has been reported as being present prior to the commencement of COVID-19 restrictions. This was caused by a lack of interest from the school institutionally.

> Let us take away the issue [of] COVID-19... we find resistance when it comes to organising some outings. I think school could be a good point for students to explore exhibitions, something simple like a walk in the countryside and painting there. To have more outdoor activities so that under our guidance they [students] can experience certain things. Unfortunately, because of the way the timetable is and because schools have a lot of things going on, and I am not blaming them either, you have resistance to these types of things. So a year would pass and not even one

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outing related to art would happen. One of the lessons could be that they are going

to an exhibition. (Maria, FG 2)

When outings and field trips did occur, Steven described how this was often undertaken as the art-teachers' sole responsibility, thus placing unnecessary pressure on them in order to secure all necessary permissions and general organisation.

But as Maria is saying you need to have the backing. Once I took [the students] out

myself and everything had to be self-done, even the consent forms. (Steven, FG 2)

From these emerging themes, it is evident that museum education as well as out-of-classroom learning experiences which are known to foster critical thinking among students are significantly hindered without institutional support. Throughout the focus groups, Participants maintained the importance for these activities to occur for the sake of them not being overlooked by schools on an institutional level.

4.6.3 Positive aspects of online teaching

Throughout the focus groups, it emerged that online teaching provided some benefits in fostering critical thinking among students. Remote learning allowed participants to adapt to the circumstances and confront difficulty in innovative approaches. In some instances, one participant, Steven, reported that this was beneficial as it allowed for educators to stretch their pedagogical abilities and assess the immediate requirement of shifting lesson plans and schemes of work.

What we also experienced with online teaching which was a certain benefit was that I had planned a scheme of work...and for four months the last project was barely managed. Now with online teaching you have revolutionised everything. The students would be at home. A pro would take less than one online lesson, you're not going to take the next week as they are home and would finish so I had to extend the scheme of work double that was an important experience as it made me have to take certain quick decisions and improve my problem-solving skills. (Steven, FG 2)

In some cases, remote learning also allowed for newfound modes by which students could directly participate in artistic practice through digital means. One participant, Steven, reported how remote learning allowed students to exhibit their artworks online, adding to their agency and salience in a manner which was otherwise lacking in conventional schooling. Other participants likewise discussed the importance of allowing students, when appropriate, to engage in artistic practice through social media, as many professional artists within the field would otherwise have to do (see Negative aspects of digitalisation in the learning environment).

In terms of critical thinking as Maria said we held many digital exhibitions. We shared a lot of the students' work on social media to stimulate them and they enjoy themselves too. (Steven, FG 2)

This aspect of organising online exhibitions was likewise discussed by Stefanie.

Discussing was not the same, when you have 5-20 students on a platform like Teams. Even technical issues to a certain extent. To be fair last year we also managed to come up with a digital exhibition with all the artworks that were being created and

produced at that time. Maybe the critical thinking was being done more through the practical aspect rather than through discussion. (Stefanie, FG 3)

Thus, it is positive to note that art educators expressed how the overall challenges which remote learning and digitalisation brought about where not entirely negative. This is as it allowed participants to actively engage in critical thinking and newfound pedagogical approaches; which aided them in efficiently conveying art-making concepts and practices.

4.6.4 Negative aspects of digitalisation in the learning environment

In contrast to the aforementioned positive aspects which digitalisation can have over the fostering of critical thinking skills (see Positive Aspects of Online Teaching), participants highlighted serious concerns regarding the contemporary issues that modern technologies and digitalisation pose, which hinder the fostering of critical thinking among students. This was regarded as being greatly impacted by COVID-19 and remote learning.

One issue which emerged as a result of shifting to remote learning was temporal restrictions. Many art lessons had to be cut short and/or halved in frequency as a result of shifting to online teaching. This severely impacted critical thinking as discussions, critique, extracurricular activities, and otherwise non-creation-based tasks related to fostering critical thinking were impacted and ambiguously left to teachers' interpretation.

We had discussed it, and again it comes back to the issue of time? How long am I to hold class discussions? Should I lengthen them? Do I need to begin on the work immediately? One double lesson a week passes fast. (Charles, FG 2)

Another participant, Steven, indicated that a shift to remote learning brought about the inability for groupwork, distribution of materials and extracurricular activities to be undertaken.

Obviously, the biggest challenge was that whoever planned groupwork couldn't act

upon it. As we had strict instructions to not allow students to use the same

materials… Then of course one of the biggest challenges we faced was the outdoor

activities. Many of the exhibition visits had to be postponed…We had a lot of

restrictions... (Steven, FG 2)

Throughout the focus groups it also emerged that, due to the tactile nature of art, there was
difficulty among some participants in explaining concepts through an online approach. One
participant, Stefanie, discussed how this would oftentimes cause the need for repetition of
both explanations and demonstrations.

…something [which would otherwise take] tree seconds would take tree minutes to

write it, to explain it or say it in words. [Then students would say] 'but I'm not

understanding'. Ok start again. [Then I would] try to show something visual, [in a]

practical [or] in a verbal way. It was hard. (Stefanie, FG 2)

It also emerged that external distractions such as social media and video games were seen
among participants as being potential hindrances among students which inhibited them
from effectively using their time at home in order to continue to develop ideas, sketch
and/or progress further in a critical manner.

Michael: I say this because if my students go home, and they go home and

work then I would say that I have place in my classroom to work with critical

thinking. But in my case, I have to 'beat them' to get them to finish in 3

hours. Because they only paint in class. I'm not sure if it's just me who faces

this but I believe that this isn't a question of other subjects. I believe that there are outside competition with every form of competition that exists. In the past the enemy was the PlayStation because it would be the PlayStation which was the enemy.

Christine: It still is the PlayStation?

Michael: It still is, or is it the TikTok nonsense?

Christine: My students who are boys play PlayStation in teams so…

Michael: I teach only boys and they play as well but it is more social media which they mention which they waste time on. So back to critical thinking. Yes, I try to get critical thinking and I think I do a good job in passing critical thinking but how much it comes across and how much they really apply it, I doubt it. We teach life skills when you are touching certain social contexts...

 (Michael and Christine, FG 3)

In addition to this, some art teachers also accredit the spread of disinformation through online platforms as causing students to be unable to distinguish fact from fiction.

Yes, it's a must for them to understand the critical thinking method they must outlook at what's around them and open their eyes and not to take what other people shove down their throat. Today there is the issue of disinformation and misinformation, we

teach them to distinguish as well. So we don't just teach art in reality, it helps. You can not make art which just focuses on aesthetics because they just read it somewhere, even sometimes where they get information, they don't know what's real, what's not, they can not make that distinction. But yes, we look at what's around them and even the themes of the SEC, that's it. (Stephanie, FG 3)

This very issue was aforementioned (see Critical thinking and society) by Zammit (2019) among students on a national level, being the cause of noticeable problems across multiple academic subjects. The participants from the focus groups indicated that this is likely due to students' inability to critically engage with content, instead relying on the repetition of information which is immediately available as they grow ever accustomed to practices which Stefanie referred to as, *spoon-feeding*. This was moreover also present in the visual resources which students utilised to create art. This is because many students simply referenced the first images which could immediately be obtained through Google Images.

They do not know how to analyse, how to criticise, [they are always using social media], the google era [has made them just] copy and paste, and they are not understanding …how to analyse. They ask me ''what do I need to write'' I am not going to write it for you! The spoon-feeding society, it is becoming insane. (Stefanie, FG3)

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5. Conclusions from Findings

5.1.0 Introductory remarks

Throughout the Findings and Analysis chapter, numerous rhizomatic relationships interconnecting the aforementioned themes and subthemes had been uncovered by focus group participants. These rhizomatic relationships indicated that many of the core issues which occur within the macrocosm of society are mirrored within the microcosm of the classroom. Likewise, the issues relating to fatalism and the fostering of critical thinking skills which are present among professional educators may be seen among students.

Throughout the following chapter, these various themes and subthemes' conclusions are presented and then discussed collectively to later inform a series of policy recommendations, with the intent of supporting secondary school art teachers in fostering critical thinking skills among students in secondary schools.

5.1.1 Art teacher identity and professional development

The importance of maintaining personal artistic practice, consistent professional development, interdisciplinarity and regular discussion among colleagues were reported as aiding art educators in furthering their abilities to foster critical thinking skills among students. This was discussed as being undertaken through praxis and ongoing self-improvement through newfound pedagogical techniques. The importance of furthering professional development, as was seen in art teachers who undertook a Masters in social practice art and critical education was directly linked to newfound abilities in fostering critical thinking skills among students. Participants felt that such actions directly aided for personal and professional progression, the countering of fatalism and the work-rut which may accompany the vocation.

However, it is essential that art teachers should not be required to spend four academic semesters of their professional careers ensuring that critical thinking skills are fostered among students. For this reason, it is integral to ensure that there are modes by which all art teachers can foster critical thinking skills among students without such commitments. To this end, further investment should be undertaken to listen to educators' feedback so as to inform policies. This would greatly aid in sustaining professional development and praxis without issue.

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5.1.2 Listening to students

The fostering of age-appropriate habits through participatory exercises and pedagogical practices which encourage group discussion, collaboration, self-expression, self-reflection

and autonomy among students were deemed essential among focus group participants in embedding critical thinking skills among students. The importance of allowing students to engage with art in this manner alludes to the need for further consideration of practices oriented in dialogic teaching as well as further student-centred approaches within a secondary school context.

In such instances, it is essential to allow for student saliency and exploration of multiple possibilities regarding mediums and ideas alike. These measures may directly fight fatalism as students take direct agency over their creative experiences.

5.1.3 Critical thinking and society

Throughout the roundtable focus groups, consensus was reached that secondary school level art educators are concerned with enriching students' lives through age-appropriate topics. These topics were seen as being springboards for discussion oriented in bettering their critical self-reflection alongside the critical reflection of contemporary social and environmental issues. For this reason, social reconstructionism may be viewed as being a key component within the hidden curricula of arts education within a secondary school context on a national level.

This educational philosophy recontextualizes the purposes and motivating factors behind the fostering of critical thinking skills among students, aligning itself with other such subjects such as ethics and PSCD to empower students with the aim of bettering society through the fostering of critical thinking skills among citizens.

5.1.4 Perceptions, requirements and expected outcomes of art at secondary level

Participants discussed how false perceptions regarding the art subject within the minds of professional educators, school authorities, guardians and students alike continue to impact the need for critical thinking and reflection throughout the art lesson. Primarily, the

perception that art is a 'simple' and mimetic subject which lacks the requirement for independent reflection, thought, research and critical thinking is sorely to blame for misconceptions among students who chose the subject under the guise that it would be effortless. It is for these reasons that many students may not wish to engage in critical thinking entirely throughout the art-making process, as such practices may fall entirely outside of their predisposed understanding of what the subject entails.

Many of the issues discussed among art educators throughout the focus groups concerned the MATSEC examination board. The potential bias which examiners may hold when grading student's portfolios and artworks produced throughout O-level examinations was also discussed by art teachers. Educators throughout the focus groups clearly reflected that teaching art in a manner which was directed strictly towards the conservative art O-Level is counterintuitively a hindrance to the development of students' critical thinking skills. Participants discussed this as being due to a dissonance between theory and practice in syllabus. As such, adopting pedagogies which are known to foster critical thinking among students may be seen as an essential mode by which to supplement the fostering of critical thinking skills among students; subverting the overhanded emphasis of the syllabus in favour of a holistically beneficial hidden curriculum oriented in critical thinking.

5.1.5 Institutional fatalism

Institutional fatalism was among the foremost issues present amongst art educators. Focus group participants felt that the MATSEC Examinations Board and parties responsible for shifts in the syllabus were at fault. This was directed at the seemingly predetermined changes made without prior consensus having been reached among art teachers.

The inexorability of the situation felt by participants during the focus groups was counterintuitively fortified by the voices of some professional educators who were unwilling to undertake any form of change based on their familiarity with the pre-existent syllabus.

In some cases, this was responsible for eliciting passive self-censorship among art teachers who preferred to remain in silence rather than continuously be ignored. At other times, art teachers saw it as cause for protest through direct action.

5.1.6 Examples of good practice.

Modes through which educators may foster critical thinking skills while effectively allowing students to voice their opinions and further provide students autonomy were encouraged. Participants saw it instrumental to allow students to articulate themselves without fear of having marks removed during assessment by O-Level examiners. This was often undertaken with the intent of creating a positive space wherein critical experimentation and expression of themes and concepts can occur more freely. These examples of good practice may however not only be undertaken individually on a classroom level but should instead be put into action on an institutional level to promote critical thinking skills among students.

One such method employed by participants was in allowing students to create additional artworks which would be utilised to allow the students to express themselves more freely, outside the perceived confined of examiners' bias. These artworks were discussed as not strictly being catered to the requirements of the O-Level syllabus or teachers' expectations of O-Level examiners' speculated standards and bias. Instead, participants described them as serving the essential function of allowing students to explore subject matter, style, material and personal expression in a constructive and critical manner without limitation.

Other such examples of good practice which may be adopted institutionally across schools is the adaptation of practices already in place among post-secondary art education. The need for a journal to be officially recognised for the art O-Level was also discussed among art teachers. The use and grading of the journal is common practice within a post-secondary context and a requirement for the art A-Level. For these reasons, it would be of great benefit in aiding students to foster the habit of using such a journal to prepare them for later life.

The implementation of this journal would allow students to not only grow accustomed to these positive practices for their own personal embitterment, but moreover aid teachers in seeing and accrediting students' progress far more effectively. This would serve as a clear message to students that critical processes are an important aspect of the art subject and necessitate official forms of evaluation and support.

5.1.7 Learning space and digitalisation

The learning space which is used for the art lessons should be a consistent location which would allow for both material and conceptual developments to be made by students. For these reasons, the art room was discussed by focus group participants to ideally be a dedicated location which would allow habits of mind and practices oriented in artmaking to be fostered. In such cases wherein it is essential for learning experiences to be held outside of the classroom for enriching students' cultural capital, as in the case with field outings, then educators felt the need for further support in their organisation as they were few and far between.

In instances wherein remote learning is mandatory, as was the case during COVID-19, then further detailed strategies should be undertaken. These strategies may be created to ensure a transfer of the critical kinaesthetic skills which are required by the arts subject. Likewise, the digitalisation of resources and information could be seen as a potential negative influence on students' abilities to undertake critical thinking due to the 'spoon feeding' of digital content, visual references and information.

5.2 Concluding remarks

Modes through which Secondary school art teachers can directly tackle the need for further student autonomy alongside other issues present within the MATSEC examination were discussed among focus group participants. Consensus was reached that the implementation of a journal/sketchbook throughout secondary school level education for the O-Level would be ideal; rather than having said journal/sketchbook only be adopted at a later stage within A-Level during post-secondary education. Participants argued that this would provide the opportunity for students to have further time to maintain their creativity, idea generation and medium experimentation techniques which engage students in creative and critical habits of mind.

Educators expressed how teaching purely for the O-Level under the assumption that examiners' bias and preferences may severely impact students' marks results in what could be considered pedagogical censorship. Similarly, this evokes the issues of self-censorship which are present for some art teachers within their own personal artistic practice.

Participants have noted that it is important that art teachers have means to discuss topics and issues in a space that is open, supportive and does not inhibit freedom of expression from the likes of institutional officials and colleagues alike. It is interesting to note that this issue which is found in the teaching profession is likewise mirrored by the need for students to have space for discussion and be listened to. In such cases, the dialogical teaching techniques which were aforementioned by Steven (see Dialogic teaching and groupwork) would likewise be of great value in the lives of teachers. This would greatly aid in dismantling and confronting any issues which they may feel are occurring within their own artistic practice and/or professional development. It would moreover be an ideal place wherein to share pedagogical ideas, techniques and/or philosophies so that re-evaluation and praxis is ensured.

This further calls into question the need for a learning space that not only exists as an open location to ensure the fostering of critical thinking skills among students alone. Rather, the need of a space wherein art teachers can themselves directly confront difficulties and come

to newfound understandings through praxis and perpetual professional development is necessitated.

In contrast to broader social factors which influence critical thinking (see Critical thinking and society), the learning environment of the classroom can be seen as the key location wherein critical thinking is both fostered and enacted by students and teachers with the aim of reaching 'power from below'. The learning space wherein education takes place is essential for the formation of positive habits of mind and the fostering of critical thinking skills in students. Throughout the focus groups, this was regularly discussed, particularly in wake of COVID-19 and the restrictions enacted as preventative measures.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Teacher responsive recommendations

6.1.1 Protecting the role of the art teacher

- Clearer boundaries should be assigned regarding the art teacher's role; this is in reference to art serving a therapeutic role as a subject.

Art is oftentimes hybridised as a therapeutic process and an academic subject simultaneously. In some instances, the art room itself often becomes a location of personal expression for students, reminiscent of a PSCD room. In such instances, the role of the art teacher should be clearly defined and the obligations of these spaces (and of the art subject itself) properly identified and respected.

In addition to this, pedagogical training and/or preparation is to be directed towards this end. This is to ensure that the art lesson may serve as a stable environment in such cases for rhizomatic discussion, self-expression and fostering of critical thinking skills. It is for these reasons that the hyper-specialised role of the art teacher should be discussed, and further diligence be given regarding academia and students' holistic wellbeing.

6.1.2 Supporting teachers' artistic practice

- The active continuation of art teachers' artistic practice is to be encouraged. This is to help foster and reinforce their chosen pedagogy as well as artist-teacher identities while serving as examples to students.

This extends itself not only for the sake of 'teaching by example', but also to help art teachers maintain their own critical thinking skills through an engagement in the arts akin to an A/r/tographic approach. The institutional promotion of such practice would allow for this to be enacted.

As such, schools may thus designate time or encourage such practice during and outside of school hours. Moreover, support by fellow professional art educators to maintain personal artistic practice would greatly aid in promoting this. For this to be achieved, some form of communication platform and/or gatherings among secondary level art educators would be vital in providing a space where educators may critically assess one another's' artistic practice, as well as how such practices may influence their own artistic practices.

6.2 Institutionally responsive recommendations

6.2.1 The necessity of professional interdisciplinarity and collaboration.

- The interdisciplinary nature of art as a subject should be explored with students for the sake of reinforcing critical thinking across the curriculum while

simultaneously expanding students' perceptions of what art is and its contemporary applications.

This may include group work/collaboration among other professional educators and or professionals within the arts sector. This may be undertaken among other teachers within the school to ensure that both critical thinking and creativity are fostered across the curriculum. To exemplify this, art and PSCD may collaboratively integrate to focus on arts' therapeutic properties, particularly in reference to self-expression. Such collaborations among educators is essential, particularly as many students utilise art as an outlet for their emotions.

6.2.2 Promoting platforms for discussion among art subject Teachers

- Art educators at secondary level require further platforms upon which to voice their opinions and concerns regarding the profession.

The reason for this is that fatalism was detected to be occurring on a structural level, with the overall feeling being that decisions were being made without teachers' voices being validated or their concerns heard. There is presently insufficient platforms for secondary school art teachers on a national level to regularly discuss issues collectively through official means. It is integral that critical thinking not only be upheld and fostered during the arts lesson, but that the profession itself, Art Syllabus, as well as O-Level be given a platform upon which to be routinely scrutinised through collective efforts.

One such mode through which this could occur is through an officially sanctioned 'public forum'. It is only through such means that institutional fatalism may be directly avoided though positive discussion among professionals in the field. This would allow art teachers to reach a consensus in defining what critical thinking is (with regards to the art subject) on a national level and allow for further discussion and praxis which may further promote the pluralistic democracy clearly present within Maltese society.

6.2.3 Addressing the privatisation of art education

- The steadily rising number of private candidates who take the art O-level should be further evaluated in light of the precarity felt by art teachers employed within the public sector.

This is with regards to art teachers' perception of the privatisation of the subject alongside the relegation of peripatetic art educators to teach other subjects and/or otherwise instructed to act as relief elsewhere.

Although the act of students choosing to undertake art as private candidates is positive by nature, it dramatically influences the overall perceptions which the art subject holds. This is caused by privatisation challenging the role and overall professional standing of art as a main subject accessible to all students; alongside the role of art educators' professions within schools. This is particularly the case in some schools wherein private candidates drastically outnumber students who had selected it as an optional subject. As such, the ardent privatisation of art should be addressed to reassure and validate the role of secondary school-level art teachers.

This route may moreover neglect the delicate minutiae and critical socio-cultural contexts which are otherwise explored and fostered through the hidden curriculum. Further assessment should be undertaken on this matter so that the overall precarity felt by some educators may find a resolve, while simultaneously ensuring the fostering of critical thinking skills amongst private candidates.

6.2.4 The necessity of regular and supported practice

- Students should be actively encouraged to create artworks which reinforce their own interests, stylistic choices, themes and self-expression while adjacently creating 'standardised' artworks for the purposes of O-Level examination.

This is intended to allow students to overcome censorship and fatalism caused by the subjectivity of O-Level criteria and assessment, thus allowing for their own artistic development to occur uninhibited by institutional restraints.

- The use of a sketchbook/journal should be standardised as common practice among O-Level students. This may be allocated a sufficient percentage of marks and presented for grading as part of the O-level exam.

This is to ensure that students' progress, critical development and overall experimentation is validated and given merit throughout their art-making process in a manner which is on par to the O-level Portfolio. This should be undertaken in such a way that the sketchbook/journal may not merely be seen as 'supplementary' material, but rather given the value which it deserves. Inclusion of the sketchbook/journal would ensure that the fostering and development of critical thinking skills in students may be witnessed directly as a testament to the developments made both within and outside of the classroom.

The reason for this is that experimentation may be documented and preserved first-hand for later reflection. Said sketchbook/journal thus holds a preeminent position upon which examiners and teachers may judge students' progress in regard to critical thinking as well as other forms of technical, visual and conceptual experimentation and development. In addition to this, such practice would allow students to adjust to the need of creating sketchbooks/journals, as well as to the need for critical self-reflection in later stages of their art education in a post-secondary context.

6.2.5 Addressing the precarity of assessment

- Further emphasis should be made in order to support different modes by which critical thinking may be expressed and fostered among students. This is to be undertaken to resolve the precarity felt by art educators when assessing students' critical use and exploration of 'unconventional' visual media, stylistic genres, aesthetics, etc with regards to the O-Level portfolio and examination.

This is to also respond to changes being made within our rapidly shifting art-world, art-industry, visual culture and modes of self-expression. This issue could thus be broken down into distinguishing between the following processes:

The stylistic choices and aesthetic qualities of the Portfolio and O-Level examination are to be defined and standardised so that educators and students alike may not be left at the whims of examiners' subjective preferences. This is so that artworks featuring alternative stylisation (whether it be manga, abstraction or any other form of stylisation) may be validated and thus identify what is appropriate at O-Level standard in a definite and all-encompassing manner. This is relevant as restrictions created for the sake of a standardised 'taste' may severely impact modes by which critical thinking may be fostered throughout the art lessons.

The subject matter and themes of said artworks are to likewise be given parameters so as to ease the minds of educators and students, particularly so that they are not left fearing the possibility of losing marks due to not meeting the subjective tastes of MATSEC examiners.

This standardisation may also directly reference and define the extent and kind of critical thinking which is to be assessed, i.e. the conceptual, technical, visual or other such material elements and the modes within which they are used.

6.2.6 The need for routine inspections

- Routine inspection should be undertaken across schools on a national level to ensure that a standardised transmission of both technical and concept-based skills among students is in fact taking place.

Said individuals assigned the undertaking of these 'inspections' are to also confirm whether minimal requirements are met from a curricular year-to-year basis. This is to ensure that students are in fact covering all necessary content (including basic technical and conceptual training through a 'scaffolding' approach) which may otherwise be overlooked. This should

take place through a non-invasive and non-disciplinary route to ensure that no negative perceptions are placed upon said measures by educators.

6.2.7 The necessity of standardised pedagogical evaluation

- The modes and end-goals through which skill sets are transmitted and fostered throughout the art-lesson should be further defined to ensure a national consistency through further detailed syllabus, Learning Outcome Frameworks and/or supplementary guidelines.

This is to address the ever-present use of digital resources and pedagogical techniques (in the wake of COVID-19 and remote-learning) and their use within art lessons. As such, modes wherein critical thinking occurs through physical and/or kinaesthetic transmission of information should be further explored by art educators, particularly in the case of remote teaching where such interactions are significantly stunted.

Likewise, direct 'lifting' and copying of pre-existent visual material should be guided so as to not allow for students' creativity and critical thinking skills to be diminished.

This is particularly relevant considering that students may simply reference the first images which are available from search browser results without further contemplation. It is thus essential to not simply allow the art created by students to be purely 'mimetic' and to promote creativity, reinvention and originality in order to foster their critical thinking skills. An example of this is establishing whether the copying of still lifes through photographs is sufficient in training students in place of physical objects being present in class. This is relevant as art educators have noted that such practices are in fact occurring across Maltese secondary schools, even within a pre-COVID-19 context.

6.3 Classroom oriented recommendations

6.3.1 The necessity of scaffolding and preparation

- To ensure that lesson plans and schemes of work should be structured with critical thinking as a core learning outcome, scaffolding and further preparation thus require further review. Such practices should be at the forefront of secondary-level art teachers' vocational practice.

This may be undertaken by means of scaffolding throughout all of the secondary school years, including the earlier stages prior to the selection of art as a chosen 'main' subject. This is to ensure a gradual and progressive fostering of critical thinking skills; which may then become a habit of mind throughout students' artistic practice both within and outside of the school environment.

Art educators are to ensure that, first and foremost, this occurs through student-centered approaches to teaching, as well as through regular didactic pedagogical approaches and question and problem solving both within group and solitary contexts. Constructive classroom critique of both the students' own work as well as the work of others should be routinely practiced to this end. In the instance of group critique/class critique, this holds the potential for collaboration with other schools/classes in order for a wider range of critical discussions to be had.

6.3.2 Reconstructing the art subject

- Critical thinking is to be transmitted as 'life skills' which need not be restricted to the art subject alone and may instead be implemented through an interdisciplinary approach.

These processes are to allow students to become independent learners and thinkers who engage in class discussion and active participation, both in and outside of the school environment. This is linked with critical-thinking's application through a reconstructionist-

education mindset, allowing for it to benefit students' lives holistically during the art-making process both across the curriculum and through a lifelong learning approach.

Moreover, this is to allow students to engage as active citizens within the pluralistic democracy of Malta while actively fighting against fatalism in its diverse forms. Through consensus, secondary school-level art teachers have concluded that it is these very principles which are to be upheld. This is as it is their duty to ensure that they are fostered alongside the conventional techniques throughout art lessons at secondary school-level.

6.3.4 Recontextualising the need for relevant topics

- Art (at secondary school level) within a post-fake news context should be utilised for the sake of highlighting the importance of critical reflection of information, visual or otherwise.

It is well known that art is oftentimes utilised within the context of activist-education, for the sake of its therapeutic qualities as well as for the expression of one's beliefs. As such, it is imperative that students foster habits of mind by which to assess their realities in a critical manner. This is in reference to both teachers and students' ability to identify fact from fiction within contemporary media landscapes which present various '*spoon fed'* realities.

Critical thinking through art may be fostered through the choosing of contemporarily relevant topics which students may explore. The topics and artworks produced may thus serve as a stepping-stone upon which to form communities within which truth is not 'shifting' through means of disinformation. Instead, truth may be grounded upon assessment and critical reflection, allowing us to improve our democracies through a reconstructionist approach.

6.3.5 The necessity of field trips

- Field trips and museum visits are to be given precedence and further importance in secondary-level education as they are highly apt in allowing for further salience and agency in students' learning, all the while reinforcing students' critical thinking and cultural capital.

It is thus essential to ensure that such field trips are held often, are carefully prepared, and considered within the lesson plans and schemes of work respectively. This would allow for such visits to be carefully scaffolded and to ensure that critical thinking is fostered in a structured way. Secondary school-level art teachers are to thus be aided in enacting such off-school visits for the purposes of exposing students to new content. HOS and other necessary school personnel are to aid in lightening the load of difficulties which may otherwise be encountered when organising said field trips so that this is not left as the sole responsibility of the art teacher.

Moreover, Malta's emergent identity as an increasingly diverse cultural hub makes the promotion of field trips and museum visits essential. These visits would benefit students by exposing them to the reality of Malta's ever increasing cultural and social diversity.

A. Focus group details, themes, subthemes and salient topics.

- Lack of standardisation regarding MATSEC requirements
- Issues arising from teaching for the Art O-level Portfolio
- Issues arising from MATSEC O-level examiners' bias
- Issues in the perception of Art as a Secondary school subject by students, professional educators and guardians.
- Negative external influence.
- The need for a journal/sketchbook
- Mimesis and lack of adequate student-training.

- Reconstructionism
- Relevant Topics of interest
- Defining Critical Thinking in a contemporary context

- Institutional Fatalism/Lack of art teachers' ability to change Syllabus.
- Lack of discussion amongst educators
- Fatalism and 'rut' of profession
- The role of the artist teacher
- The issues of maintaining an artistic practice whilst teaching.
- The symbiotic relationship between teaching and art-practice and teaching by example.
- The issues of self-censorship and auto-Fatalism whilst being an artist-teacher
- Professional Development
- Teachers' revaluation of terminology
- Lack of fixed pedagogies
- Interdisciplinarity

Critical thinking and Society

Structural Concerns

Art Teacher Identity and professional development

Learning space and digitalization

Listening to Students

- The need for a fixed art-room/environment
- Lack of Field Outings
- How Critical thinking should be applied within the art room habitus
- The Pros and Cons of online teaching
- Social media and the internet based external distractions and spoon-feeding of information

- Dialogic-teaching, the importance of discussion, class-critique and groupwork
- Student-Age derived issues
- Scaffolding
- Brainstorming
- Student Autonomy

Figure 1 Subthemes and salient topics

Figure 2 Thematic cluster and subthemes

Teacher Identity

Student Participation

Societal Structures

Institutional Structures

Classroom

Art Teacher Identity and professional development

Listening to Students

Critical thinking and Society

Learning space and digitalisation

Structural COncerns

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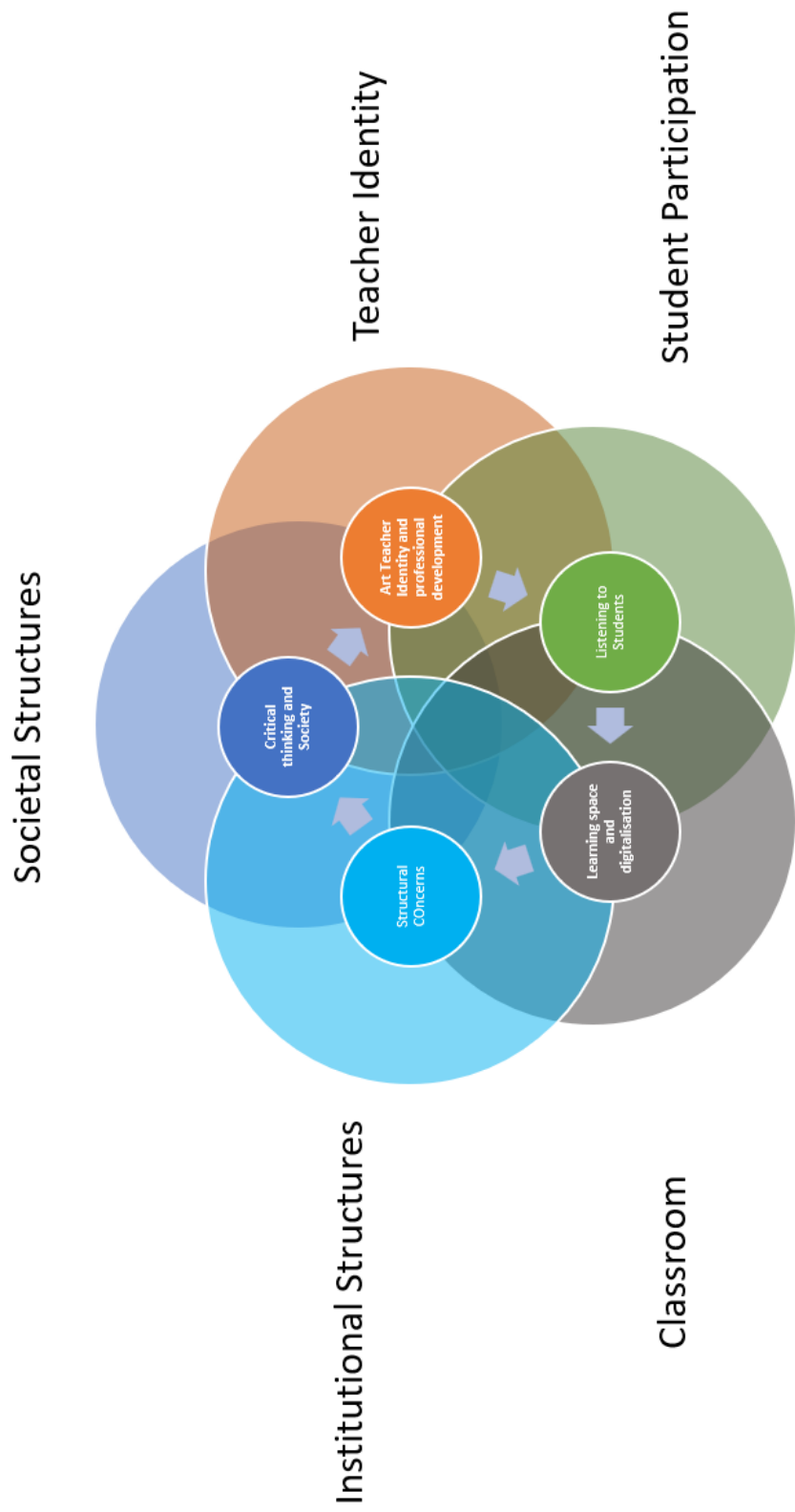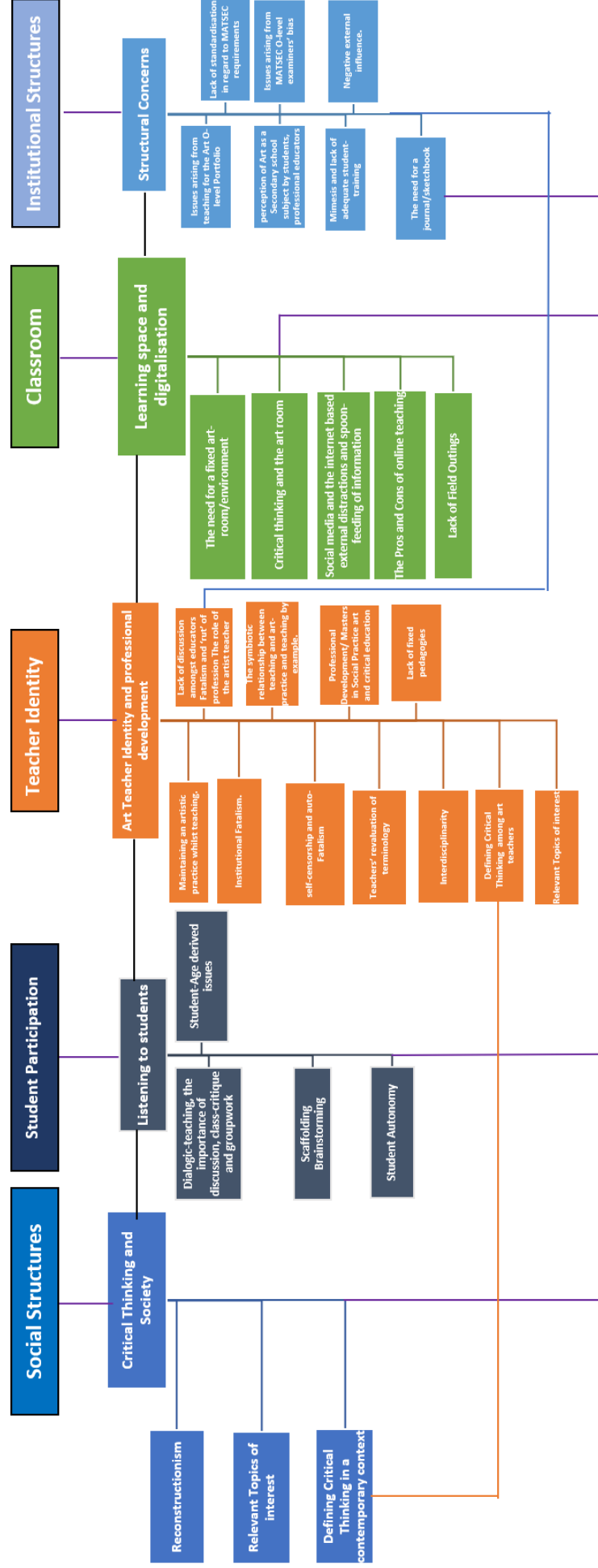
Figure 3 Organisational chart of themes, subthemes and salient topics

Social Structures
- Critical Thinking and Society
  - Reconstructionism
  - Relevant Topics of interest
  - Defining Critical Thinking in a contemporary context

Student Participation
- Listening to students
  - Student-Age derived issues
  - Dialogic-teaching, the importance of discussion, class-critique and groupwork
  - Scaffolding Brainstorming
  - Student Autonomy

Teacher Identity
- Art Teacher Identity and professional development
  - Lack of discussion amongst educators Fatalism and 'rut' of profession The role of the artist teacher
  - The symbiotic relationship between teaching and art-practice and teaching by example.
  - Professional Development/ Masters in Social Practice art and critical education
  - Lack of fixed pedagogies
  - Maintaining an artistic practice whilst teaching.
  - Institutional Fatalism.
  - self-censorship and auto-Fatalism
  - Teachers' revaluation of terminology
  - Interdisciplinary
  - Defining Critical Thinking among art teachers
  - Relevant Topics of interest

Classroom
- Learning space and digitalisation
  - The need for a fixed art-room/environment
  - Critical thinking and the art room
  - Social media and the internet based external distractions and spoon-feeding of information
  - The Pros and Cons of online teaching
  - Lack of Field Outings

Institutional Structures
- Structural Concerns
  - Lack of standardisation in regard to MATSEC requirements
  - Issues arising from MATSEC O-level examiners' bias
  - Negative external influence.
  - Issues arising from teaching for the Art O-level Portfolio
  - perception of Art as a Secondary school subject by students, professional educators
  - Mimesis and lack of adequate student-training
  - The need for a journal/sketchbook

Figure 4. Salient Topics Chart

Figure 5 School Category Of Participants.

Figure 6 Participants' Gender Ratio

Figure 7 Levels of academic achievement among participants

Figure 8 Organisational chart of pseudonymised participants distribution among Focus Groups
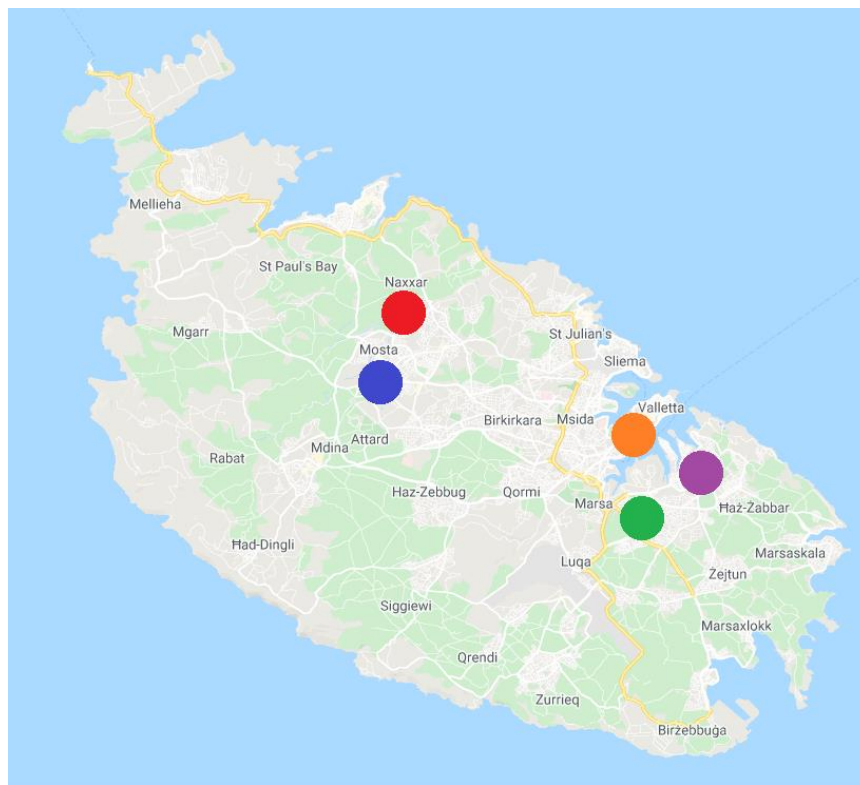
Figure 9 Geographic Pinpoints of Participant's employment by locality.

Salient Topics:

Theme	Frequency	Frequency across Focus Groups	Force	Number of participants	Consistency
Reconstructionism	4	2	High	4	Consistent
Topics of interest	6	2	Medium		Consistent
Teachers' revaluation of terminology	9	2	High	4	Consistent
Lack of fixed pedagogies	4	3	Neutral	4	Consistent
Student-Age derived issues (the older they are, the harder it is to foster critical-thinking habits.	3	1	High	3	Consistent
The role of the artist teacher	9	3	High	4	Consistent
The issues of maintaining an artistic practice whilst teaching.	3	3	High	6	Consistent
The symbiotic relationship between teaching and art-practice and teaching by example.	5	3	High	3	Consistent
The issues of self-censorship and auto-fatalism whilst being an artist-teacher	2	2	High	2	Inconsistent
Dialogic-teaching, the importance of discussion, class-critique and groupwork	6	2	High	4	Consistent

The need for a fixed art-room/ environment	2	2	Moderate	2	Consistent
Social media and the internet based external distractions and	4	1	High	4	Consistent
spoon-feeding of information	5	1	High	2*	Consistent
Institutional fatalism/Lack of art teachers' ability to change Syllabus.	9	2	High	5	Relatively Consistent
Lack of discussion amongst educators	4	1	High		
Professional Development	5	2	High	3	Consistent
Masters in Social Practice art and critical education	4	2	High	3	Consistent
Paolo Freire	1	1	Moderate	1	Consistent
Interdisciplinarity	5	1	High	3	Consistent
Negative external influence	2	2	Medium/High	2	Moderate
Issues in the perception of Art as a Secondary school subject by students, professional educators and guardians.	3	2	Medium/High	3	Consistent
Lack of Field Outings	1	1	Medium	2	Consistent

Issues arising from teaching for the Art O-level Portfolio	3	2	High	3	Consistent
Issues arising from MATSEC O-level examiners	2	1	High	2	Consistent
The need for a journal/sketchbook	5	3	High	4	Consistent
Brainstorming	4	2	Moderate	3	Consistent
The Pros and Cons of online teaching	4	3	Medium	3	Inconsistent
How Critical thinking should be applied within the art room	1	1	Low	1	Consistent

Table 1 Salient Topics chart

B. Protocol for online focus groups

Research Tools: Draft Questions

Opening Question/Ice-breaker:

Would you like to discuss why/how you became an art teacher?
Have you ever heard of the term anarchist pedagogies before?

Critical Thinking:

1. How do you recognise critical thinking in your classroom and what do you understand by the term 'Critical Thinking'?
    - ■ Prompt: How would you summarise the processes involved in critical thinking?

Personal:

- 2. What is the professional identity do you identify as and what schooling/training have you experienced?
    - ■ Promt: Do you identify as a practicing artist, teacher,artist-teacher or other?
    - ■ What is the relationship between these identities?
    - ■ Do you use critical thinking within your own artistic practice? If so, how?

Professional:

- 3. ·How important do you think it is to foster critical thinking skills among students?
    - ■ Promt: This is in regard to the aims discussed within the SEC syllabus and the Learning Outcome Framework? This is in reference to ''b) critical and analytical faculties'' (SEC syllabus, 2020)?

- 4. What contemporary 'critical thinking' related pedagogical processes, if any, do you use?
    - Prompt: Do you follow particular pedagogy, framework and/or rubric designed to benefit students through learning experiences which nurture creativity and critical thinking?

- 5. How are sub-dimensions (oriented in higher-order thinking) of creative and critical thinking skills used in class? These being; inquiring, imagining, doing and reflecting? (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019) How are these sub-dimensions encouraged?
    - Promt: Do you use the term 'critical thinking and or make reference to the aforementioned sub-dimensions within your classroom? NB:

Institutional:

- 6. What do you think are the main issues you find in attempting to instil critical thinking exercises within their art lessons?
    - Prompt: Do you experience temporal issues, lack of resources, etc?

7. What kind of support have you received (if any) as an art teacher throughout your professional experience during Covid-19? Have these issues ever been discussed among other teachers or with other school officials?

- 8. What would you recommend to enhance critical thinking further within secondary level art education? How would these help overcome any aforementioned issues?

Concluding:

Inform participants that the formal focus group questions have ended and that they are free to now discuss any extra-material which they think is relevant regarding the topic.

NB:

Other potential questions which may be used to expand on Professional practice based on (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019):

		Inquiring	Imagining	doing	reflecting
1	Are students encouraged to explore contemporary topics such as social issues, environmental issues ,etc within their art-making? If yes, how?	X	X	X	X
2	Do you show students their own progress (in some form of progression oriented in a formative approach ie, sketches, developmental progress, journals, etc) emphasized within the lesson? If yes, how?				X
5	Do you allow and/or encourage students to problem solve through open-ended exploring and discussion both materially and/or conceptually. If yes, how?	X	X	X	X
6	Do you give students time for reflection on their own work as well as to constructively criticize one another during lessons? How much time do you think is best?				X
7	Do you consider integration with other subjects feasible (to foster critical thinking skills) and if so which subjects would work best to this end?	X	X	X	X
8	Do you use terminology which is subject-specific (as discussed within Language Across the Curriculum theory) within your teaching practice? This includes the defining of terminology within the classroom.	X	X	X	X

Table 2. Question Chart

(Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019)

Data collection tools: Interview questions
NB: Subject to change as these are to serve as a general guide through the roundtables..

- Do you consider creativity and critical thinking skills important to foster among students? If so, why/why not?

- How important do you think instilling critical thinking skills is in regard to the Aims discussed within the SEC syllabus? This is in reference to ''b) critical and analytical faculties''?
  (SEC syllabus, 2020)

- Do you remain up to date on contemporary art pedagogy theory?

- What do you think are the main issues art teachers find in attempting to instil critical thinking exercises within their art lessons?

- Do you follow a framework and/or rubric designed to benefit students through learning experiences which nurture creativity and critical thinking?

- What strategies do you think are effective to foster critical thinking in secondary school art education?

- Are sub-dimensions/basic components of creative and critical thinking skills encouraged in class? These namely being; inquiring, imagining, doing and reflecting?
  (OECD, 2019)

- How would you approach the task of making creativity and critical thinking skills somehow become "dispositions" or "habits of mind" among students?

Regarding developing critical thinking skills, how do you as art teachers attempt to:

- Instill an interest in learning within students?
- Challenge the students (without overloading them)?
- Establish technical knowledge?
- Make an effort to show students their own progress (in some form of progression (ie, sketches, developmental progress, etc) emphasized within the lesson?
- Make students collaborate with one another? If so how?
- What do they think of using open-ended problems and exploratory tasks?
- Do you allow and/or encourage students to explore and discuss unexpected possibilities both materially or conceptually?
- Do they give students time for reflection on their own work as well as to constructively criticize one another during lessons?
- Is conveying of emotions integrated within some lessons? This is in regard to conveying emotional or aesthetic experience.
- Do you consider integration with other subjects feasible and if so which subjects?
- Is problem solving ever used as an educative tool?

(OECD, 2019)

References:

Figure 10 Question list

106.

(CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATION. ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND. (2019). *Fostering Students Creativity And Critical Thinking: what it means in school.*

Figure 11 Question list

The Role of the researcher as facilitator:

It is integral that the researcher when undertaking the role of facilitator is able to take an interventionist approach when required so as to ensure that the discussion maintains focus on the integral topics at hand as well as in encouraging participants to discuss, reflect and clarify any differences and or commonalities they hold. The role of facilitator in this instance should be one to encourage participants to keep a discussion going as well as to ensure that all participants' opinions are heard. Ensure that throughout the facilitator does ask questions and probes discussion however it is essential that no participation or voicing of the facilitator's opinions takes place within the focus groups

Running the focus group:

Materials:
- Computer with internet access and communication platform of choice. Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Hangouts would suffice ensuring that an audio-recording output option is available.
- Microphone and other audio input devices as necessary.
- Information sheets and consent forms for all participants.
- Background information on participants.
- Questions which are to be used as means of initiating discussion among participants.
- Any necessary writing materials and resources that may be required including pen, paper.

Upon Participants' arrival:

- Welcome participants upon arriving and ensure to introduce yourself and participants to one another.
- Explain the overall purpose of the focus group again and clearly explain to the participants why they were chosen as a demographic.
- Remind participants that as explained within the information letters and consent forms, audio-visual data will be recorded.
- Explain to participants the nature and structure of the focus group, as well as the duration and guide regulations to the focus groups. This is to include the use of pro-forma questions which are to be used as steppingstones of discussion. It is necessary to also stress the importance of all participants' opinions to be heard one at a time and that discussion may have to be interrupted so as to ensure that all necessary questions and topics are covered.

- Express the importance for all participants to know what will happen to all recorded and extracted information and that all derivative data and output from this research will ensure participants' anonymity.
- State that participants may voice any concerns or ask any questions prior to beginning the focus groups.
- Ensure that before beginning the focus groups that all participants have signed and sent all necessary consent forms.
- Thank participants for their participation.

Dialogue Script:

'A. This research is being undertaken by Alessio Cuschieri under supervision of Peter Farrugia and we would like to thank you for your participation.

B. Should anybody require to still sign and send the consent form you may find it attached within the email sent containing the link for this focus group alongside the information letter.

C. The aim of today's focus groups is to extract data by which we may tackle the following research questions. Firstly, the question of ''How could, if at all, a focus on a critical thinking perspective be enhanced in the work of art teachers in Malta?'' is to be explored. This is to then be followed by the research question ''What policy recommendations, if any, would support art teachers to fulfil their commitments to encourage critical thinking skills among secondary school students, in Malta, in line with SEC syllabus (2021)?

D. You were chosen as a demographic of participants so that your opinions, voices and experience may be extracted and inform any potential policy-making documents to this end.

E. We are recording these focus groups and will use this recording for our analysis. Information extracted from these focus groups may use direct quotes however no individuals are to be identifiable, and any other data extracted will not be attributable to any identifiable individual or and/or institution.

F. This focus group is to take an approximate 2 two hours of your time and is to be an open zone of discussion concerning the topics at hand.

G. All information regarding this research (including information letters, consent forms and guide questions) should have already been provided to you prior to today. Should there be any further queries following this focus group regarding this research, all contact information and details may be found on the aforementioned documents. We encourage you to contact us in such an event.'

H. If you feel uncomfortable at any point during this interview, you have the right to leave and/or to pass any question. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and no consequences will result in such an event.

I It is important to keep any personal information 'in the room' and to thus not disclose any information relating to other participants outside of this focus group. Everybody has the right to answer a question and to voice their opinions and it is essential that only a single person speak in any given time. I would like to remind you that you have already been informed on this matter alongside all other regulations and procedures within the consent form. All data will be pseudonymised and destroyed after a period of two years following the submission of this research.

J. Everybody's opinions are to be respected, and no judgment or negative comments are to be made in relation to their responses to questions and/or as a result of discussions. There are no right or wrong answers and I would like to remind all participants to feel at ease.

K. Does anyone have any questions?

L. Thank you for your participation.'

M. I would like to make it clear that the recording will now be starting thus officially beginning the focus groups.

N. Use of a short icebreaker activity is also encouraged and to be directly linked towards the subject of education and/or their own backgrounds, easing them into discussing further points progressively. This may include participants discussing their backgrounds and initial interest in education and/or art. 'When and why did you become an art teacher?' would serve as an effective starting point to this end.

Reference:

Williamson, A. & Miller, L., (2013). *Democratise, Focus Group Protocol Guide A GUIDE TO ORGANISING EFFECTIVE FOCUS GROUPS AND GETTING THE MOST FROM THE DATA YOU COLLECT.* Futuredigital

C. Approval Letters

22.06.2020

Dr Stephen Schembri
Chairperson
MTL Dissertation Committee

Through Mr. Peter Farrugia, visiting lecturer within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing - Department of Youth and Community Studies.

Dear Dr Schembri,

RE: Amendment to my dissertation proposal

Please note that I have made the following amendments (as the dissertation proposal was accepted subject to minor amendments) to my dissertation regarding the methodology which is to be undertaken:

Regarding section 6: Description of Research Methods to be applied: Focus group interviews.

Regarding Section 6.3: A qualitative methodology was chosen, this is to be undertaken by means of roundtable focus groups with participants consisting of secondary school art teachers working in Malta of varying ages, genders and nationalities. It is intended for there to be six prospective roundtables focus groups, with each group being made of seven participants (though exceptions with a minimum of six and a maximum of eight participants may be made) whose occupation is that of art teachers. Their employ is to be within independent, church and state secondary schools respectively. These individuals are to be invited to participate by their respective HODs (who may act as intermediaries) who are to be contacted by the researcher through official school channels, thus establishing an opt-in approach. These roundtable focus groups may be held within a conference room or prospectively within the VO centre in Valletta pending approval. Alternatively, due to health and safety concerns (following issues related to COVID-19) these may instead take place virtually through means of Google Hangouts, Zoom or other secure platforms. These focus groups are to take a prospective 2 hours each. These roundtable focus groups are to be oriented in discussing critical thinking within the participants' pedagogical orientation and classroom culture alongside any opinions they hold relevant to the subject.

Figure 12 Memo of accepted dissertation amendments

Faculty of Education

University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 3058/2932
educ@um.edu.mt

www.um.edu.mt/educ

Dear Alessio Cuschieri

Extension of Studies - Master in Teaching and Learning

Reference is made to your request to extend your studies in the above-mentioned course.

At its meeting of 24 February 2021, the Board of the Faculty of Education agreed that in terms of Reg. 21(1) of the General Regulations for Postgraduate Awards, 2008, you be allowed an extension of studies in order to submit your dissertation by not later than 9 December 2021.

The request is based on the current situation by COVID-19.

May I remind you that it is your responsibility to ensure compliance with the University Regulations and bye-laws applicable to your course available online at:
https://www.um.edu.mt/about/governance/statutesregulationsbyelaws.

Yours sincerely

David Pisani
Manager I

cc: SIMS Office
    Supervisor
    Head, Department of Arts, Open Communities and Adult Education
    Chair, MTL Dissertation Committee

Figure 12b. Letter of Extension of Studies

L-Università
ta' Malta

25th May 2021

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance 4753_17122020_Alessio Cuschieri

Dear Alessio Cuschieri,

With reference to your application 4753_17122020_Alessio Cuschieri for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure**.

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

You are reminded that it is your responsibility - under the guidance of your supervisor - to distribute Information Letters and Consent/Assent Forms that are written in appropriate and correct English and Maltese.

Yours sincerely

Prof. Suzanne Gatt
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

Figure 13 Acceptance letter of Ethics Clearance

Segretarjat għall-Edukazzjoni Nisranija
16, Il-Mall, Furjana FRN 1472
Num. ta' Tel. 27790060
Num. Tal-Fax 27790078

Secretariat for Catholic Education,
16, The Mall, Floriana FRN 1472
Tel. No. 27790060
Fax No. 27790078

The Head
All Heads of Secondary Schools

20th October 2020

Ms Alessio Cuschieri, currently reading for a Masters Degree in Teaching and Learning in Art at the University of Malta, requests permission to conduct six (6) focus groups with Art Teachers at the above-mentioned schools.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Mr Alessio Cuschieri, to carry out the stated exercises subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the schools concerned.

Rev Dr. Charles Mallia
Delegate for Catholic Education

Figure 14 Authorisation from Delegate of Catholic Education

Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

Tel: 25982743   researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 5th October 2020

Ref: R09-2020 388

To: **Head of School**
From: **Director**

Title of Research Study: *Critical Art Education: Supporting Art Educators in Maltese Secondary Schools.*

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to **Alessio Cuschieri** to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo
MA Ed (Open)
Research Support Teacher
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

f/ Alex Farrugia
Director
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability
Great Siege Road | Floriana | VLT 2000
t: +356 25982443 e: alex.farrugia@gov.mt | www.education.gov.mt

MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Figure 15 Permission to conduct research granted by Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty of Education

Masters in Teaching

and Learning
Dissertation Proposal Form

Date	Day	Month	Year
	6	2	2020
Proposal Number	(1)	2	3
Proposal Identifier			
Course Years		2	

1. Name of Applicant: BLOCK LETTERS	ALESSIO CUSCHIERI
1.1 I.D.	1.2 Teaching Area ART
1.3 Mobile	
1.5 Email	

2. Name of Principal Supervisor * BLOCK LETTERS	PETER FARRUGIA		
2.1 Faculty / Department / Institute	Faculty for Social Wellbeing – Dept. Youth & Community		
2.2 Telephone (office/mobile)			
2.3 Email			
2.4 Post	Full Time ☐	Part Time ☐	TR status
2.5 I confirm that, as Principal Supervisor, I have discussed the proposed research with the student and endorse this M.T.L. dissertation proposal	Signature		

3. Name of Advisor * BLOCK LETTERS			
3.1 Faculty / Department / Institute			
3.2 Telephone (home, mobile)			
3.3 Email			
3.4 Post	Full Time ☐	Part Time ☐	TR status
3.5 I confirm that, as Advisor, I have discussed the proposed research with the student and endorse this M.T.L. dissertation proposal	Signature		

Figure 16 Dissertation Proposal Form p.1

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4. Title of Research Study/Project (max.15 words)
Critical art education: supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools

4.1 Research Question/s

1. How could, if at all, a focus on a critical thinking perspective be enhanced in the work of art teachers in Malta?

2. What policy recommendations, if any, would support art teachers to fulfil their commitments in order to encourage critical thinking skills among secondary school students, in Malta, in line with SEC syllabus (2020)?

4.2 Abstract of the proposed research or project work

This dissertation will focus on the manner in which critical thinking skills are fostered during art lessons in Maltese secondary schools. Art education has the ability to instil critical thinking skills in students (Lampert, 2006), which in turn positively benefits them holistically (Dozler, 2017; Fava, 2017). As such it is imperative to see that teachers within a local context are actively supported to make this happen and that any potential shortcomings be discussed (refer to Appendices section 3). Art teachers' approaches regarding critical thinking skills will be compiled and discussed in reference to contemporary art pedagogical theory, (Dozler, 2017; Fava, 2017; Freire, 1968; Ivashkevich, 2012; Lampert, 2006) as well as the SEC Syllabus (University of Malta, 2020). As such these aforementioned writings will constitute the theoretical framework explored in the literature review chapter in this dissertation. This will provide an essential theoretical lens by which to read interviews and data, which is to then inform the formulation of policy recommendations. Following this, all findings will be analysed and from which policymaking recommendations will be extracted with the goal of assisting teachers by amending any shortcomings and enhancing the role of critical thinking in Maltese art education at SEC level. A chapter outline (Appendices section 1) and timetable outline (refer to Appendices section 2) may be found attached to this application.

5. Keywords (3 – 6 keywords related to the content of dissertation)

1 Art pedagogy	2 Critical Thinking	3 Maltese Educational Context
4 Art Educators	5 Art Students	6

6. Description of Research Methods to be applied.

6.1 Tick one or more of the following as applicable:

Questionnaire	☑	Text Analysis	☐
Individual Interview	☑	Focus Group Interview	☑

Figure 17 Dissertation Proposal Form p.2

Case Study/ies	☐	Bibliographic Search	☐
Curriculum Study	☐	Curriculum Development/Evaluation	☐
Resource Development/Evaluation	☐	Educational Intervention	☐
Combined ☐ (state combination)		Other ☐ (please specify)	

6.2 Will your research involve collection of primary data from human participants?	YES ☑	NO ☐

If YES - Where will the participants come from?

Sector:	Primary ☐	Secondary ☑	Tertiary ☐

Other ☑ (please specify) *Secondary School art teachers.*

6.3 If applicable, explain primary data collection from human participants for the different Research Methods chosen:

- Who will be your sample? (Indicate salient characteristics, such as age, gender, nationality, occupation)
- What is the minimum-maximum number of participants?
- How will the participants be recruited? (a brief explanation of how researcher proposes to gain access to potential informants for EACH research method ticked)
- What will participants be required to do?

The samples will be taken from art teachers in Maltese secondary schools who are of varying ages, genders and nationalities. It is intended that 10 semi-structured interviews are to initially take place to engage teachers on the role of critical thinking in their classroom culture and pedagogical orientation. Following this, a prospective 400 questionnaires will be filled in by Maltese art teachers. Data from interviews and questionnaires will then serve as a basis for 3 roundtable focus groups, with each group being made up of art teachers from independent, church and government schools respectively. These individuals will then be sent a follow-up questionnaire. This is to see if their perceptions on the role critical thinking plays in art education has changed following the process of interviews and roundtable discussion. These individuals will be invited to participate through their respective schools. All procedures will be undertaken in accordance with the University of Malta ethics and data protection protocol.

Figure 18 Dissertation Proposal Form p.3

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Case Study/ies	☐	Bibliographic Search	☐
Curriculum Study	☐	Curriculum Development/Evaluation	☐
Resource Development/Evaluation	☐	Educational Intervention	☐
Combined ☐ (state combination)		Other ☐ (please specify)	

6.2 Will your research involve collection of primary data from human participants?	YES ☑	NO ☐

If YES - Where will the participants come from?

Sector:	Primary ☐	Secondary ☑	Tertiary ☐

Other ☒ (please specify) *Secondary School art teachers.*

6.3 If applicable, explain primary data collection from human participants for the different Research Methods chosen:
- Who will be your sample? (Indicate salient characteristics, such as age, gender, nationality, occupation)
- What is the minimum-maximum number of participants?
- How will the participants be recruited? (a brief explanation of how researcher proposes to gain access to potential informants for EACH research method ticked)
- What will participants be required to do?

The samples will be taken from art teachers in Maltese secondary schools who are of varying ages, genders and nationalities. It is intended that 10 semi-structured interviews are to initially take place to engage teachers on the role of critical thinking in their classroom culture and pedagogical orientation. Following this, a prospective 400 questionnaires will be filled in by Maltese art teachers. Data from interviews and questionnaires will then serve as a basis for 3 roundtable focus groups, with each group being made up of art teachers from independent, church and government schools respectively. These individuals will then be sent a follow-up questionnaire. This is to see if their perceptions on the role critical thinking plays in art education has changed following the process of interviews and roundtable discussion. These individuals will be invited to participate through their respective schools. All procedures will be undertaken in accordance with the University of Malta ethics and data protection protocol.

Figure 19 Dissertation Proposal Form p.4

6.4 How long is the duration of the data collection process?

6 Months

7. Ethical clearance:

Anyone planning to carry out research under the auspices of the University of Malta must complete the Online Form for Ethics and Data Protection review once this proposal has been approved from the MTL Dissertation Board.

For Office Use:

Dissertation Proposal #	has been:
Accepted	☐
Accepted subject to minor amendments	✓
Accepted subject to major amendments (to resubmit form)	☐
Rejected	☐
Chairperson (MTL Dissertation Board) Name	Date 09/03/2020

Official feedback for student:

Choose one methodology and one set of participants. There are too many data collection methods included here

Figure 20 Dissertation Proposal Form p.5

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Appendices Section 1.

Chapter outline:

- Chapter I: Introduction
  This chapter will focus on the significance of critical thinking in secondary school art education, with a focus on local issues and historical background. It will provide the justification for this research, as well as the benefits of the data/recommendations to students and educators. Research questions and hypothesis will also be discussed throughout this chapter. Research Questions and Hypotheses will also be discussed throughout this chapter. Limitations of the study will be discussed.

- Chapter II: Literature review
  This chapter will focus on critical thinking in art pedagogy (Dozler, 2017; Fava, 2017; Freire, 1968; Ivashkevich, 2012; Lampert, 2006), alongside documentation of current and future SEC syllabus requirements. Due to the nature of the undertaken research a critical lens grounded Freire and informed by postmodern approaches to pedagogy (Hossieni & Khalili, 2011) will be used.

- Chapter III: Methodology
  This chapter will focus on the discussion of the methodology: semi structured interviews, questionnaires and roundtable focus groups. This mixed methodological approach will be utilised to assess contradictions, successful implementations and teacher aspirations in the area of critical thinking in art education. Moreover, a mixed methodology is ideal as it is capable of providing the basis for developing 'context specific instruments' which in this context is intended to be a policymaking document. This is to be followed by power analysis, shortcomings of the study and discussion of the overall research design. Discussion on the structure of procedures and data analysis are to follow suite.

- Chapter IV: Results
  This chapter will focus on qualitative inquiries alongside statistical analyses concerning primary research questions/hypotheses and organisation of data (visual representations and tables). Recurrent themes will be identified and extracted to inform policy recommendations.

- Chapter V: Discussion
  This chapter is to focus on discussing the obtained results and focus on conclusions and found limitations of the study. Key data extracted in Chapter IV will be used to support policymaking recommendations with the scope of facilitating secondary school art teachers' approaches to foster critical thinking skills in students. These are to then be further developed to create a finalised policymaking document.

- Chapter VI: Policymaking recommendations document:
  The policymaking recommendations will be clearly stated and their relevance to SEC art education in Malta will be reinforced.

- References/Bibliography

- Appendices:
  These appendices are to include result tables, graphs, data, etc

Figure 21 Dissertation Proposal Form p.6

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Appendices Section 2

Time Outline:

Month 1: Submission of dissertation proposal and initial preparatory period compiling readings & basic theoretical framework.
Month 2-3: Acceptance of dissertation proposal and progressive preparatory period, developing of theoretical framework and literature review.
Month 4: Submission of Ethical Clearance Form & Data Protection review. Beginning of Chapter I is to commence. Acceptance of Ethical Clearance (the Online Form for Ethics and Data Protection review) is also intended to occur in this stage.
Month 5: Beginning of Chapter II Literature review & preparation of all Methodological materials. Development and problem-testing period for contents of questionnaires, interview questions and focus group facilitation are to be created.
Month 6- 12: Submission of methodological materials (invitations, surveys, etc) through the education department to schools and respective teachers followed by period of data collection.
Month 13- 15: Undertaking of analysis and data extraction by use of mind mapping, NVivo, etc.
Month 16: Development of policymaking recommendation document.

Figure 22 Dissertation Proposal Form p.7

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Appendices Section 3

Possible shortcomings in contemporary Maltese art education:

Art Teachers may find it challenging to effectively support students to explore critical thinking in class due to various reasons, including:

- Ambiguity in the definition of what a 'critical' approach entails within the SEC Syllabus (University of Malta, 2020).
- Temporal issues which inhibit critical thinking approaches within the classroom, causing it (critical thinking) to not be given precedence in favour of other areas.
- Teachers and students alike may be used to the nature of 'banking education' which is not optimal for instilling 'critical thinking' skills and creativity in students.
- This aforementioned banking system is optimized for standardised testing and achievement grading. Thus, critical thinking may not be favoured as it may be seen as a subjective facet of art education which is difficult to quantify and grade.
- Potentially schools may not encourage students to explore critical thinking due to being perceived as potentially oppressive institutions.

These issues are moreover closely interrelated to the nature of power dynamics as discussed by Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968) and subsequent scholars in a Freirean vein (Donaldo Macedo, Augusto Boal).

Figure 23 Dissertation Proposal Form p.8

Appendices Section 4

References:

Dozier, L. (2017). Art as Text: Seeing beyond the Obvious. *English Journal, 106*(6), 29-34.

Fava, M. (2017). Drawing Analogies to Deepen Learning. *International Journal of Art & Design Education, 36*(3), 315-324.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Herder and Herder.

Hossieni, A., & Khalili, S. (2011). Explanation of creativity in postmodern educational ideas. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences,* 15, 1307–1313. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.03.283

Ivashkevich, O. (2012). Rethinking Children: Power, Pedagogy, and Contemporary Art Education Practices. *Art Education, 65*(1), 40-45.

Lampert, N. (2006). Critical Thinking Dispositions as an Outcome of Art Education. *Studies in Art Education, 47*(3), 215-228.

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Figure 24 Dissertation Proposal Form p.9

124.

Ticked one or more self-assessment issues. Submitting to FREC for review.

L-Università
ta' Malta

ETHICS & DATA PROTECTION

PART 1: APPLICANT AND PROJECT DETAILS

1. Name and surname: Alessio Cuschieri

Email Address:

2. Applicant status: UM student

3. Faculty: Education

4. Department: Department of Art, Open Communities and Adult Education

   If applicable
5. Principal supervisor's name: Peter Farrugia

6. Co-supervisor's name:
7. Study-unit code: MTL in Art (one main area), EDU5001
8. Student number:

9. Title of research project: Critical art education: supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary

   Schools

10. Research question/statement & method: Research Questions:

1.   How could, if at all, a focus on a critical thinking perspective be enhanced in the work of art teachers in Malta?
2.   What policy recommendations, if any, would support art teachers to fulfill their commitments in order to encourage critical thinking skills among secondary school students, in Malta, in line with SEC syllabus (2020)?

Method:
Data will be taken from art teachers in Maltese secondary schools who are of varying ages, genders and nationalities. It is intended that six roundtable focus groups take place, each lasting two hours which are to be recorded. These recordings are to then be transcribed and coding of this information/data is to then be undertaken via SPSS. Policymaking recommendations are to then be extracted from the data uncovered within these focus groups and discussed in line with contemporary art pedagogical practice and SEC 2021 standards.

Figure 25 Ethics and Data Protection Form p. 1

Ticked one or more self-assessment issues. Submitting to FREC for review.

11. Collection of primary data from human participants?
Yes/Unsure (PLEASE ANSWER NEXT QUESTION)

12. If applicable, explain: a. A prospective Seven Secondary school art teachers are to participate per roundtable focus group. Per focus group session, the seven participants are to consist of three participants being from State schools, two from Church schools and the final two from Independent schools. Thus the ratio may be seen as being 3:2:2 respectively. Six roundtable focus groups are projected to occur in total. Due to health and safety issues related to Covid-19, virtual focus group are to occur via applications such as Google Hangouts, Zoom or any other secure platforms.

b. A number of Secondary School Heads are to be contacted through emails initially. The researcher in question (Alessio Cuschieri) will inquire if the Heads of Schools can act as intermediary and distribute information sheets as well as consent forms digitally. These may then be returned to the researcher (Alessio Cuschieri) through email by teachers who may opt-in to participate within the aforementioned online focus groups. As of 17/12/20, this method of gathering permissions from participants will be finalized and instead convenience sampling is intended to then be used to gather any required participants. This is to be undertaken by means of emailing readily known secondary school art teachers, who may opt-in to participate within the aforementioned online focus groups. Should they wish, said teachers may also share information sheets as well as consent forms digitally among colleagues and/or other secondary school art teachers they know so as to achieve a snowball effect and acquire a broader reach of potential participants. Participants are to be grouped based upon their employ being within State, Church and Independent sectors at a ratio of 3:2:2 respectively. Should more participants than is required express a desire to participate than they may be placed as 'reserves' should other participants change their mind and/or not be available. c. They will be requested to answer and discuss a number of questions as part of a semi-structured roundtable focus group. These questions are based on the role critical thinking plays in their pedagogical practice at SEC level, as well as their opinions on the aforementioned subject matter. Their responses are to be documented through audio recordings (which make use of distortion, maintaining anonymity), transcribed and relevant data extracted. d. The duration of each individual round table focus group is to last two hours. e. Refreshments are to be provided should these roundtable focus groups be carried out face-to-face and will not be offered should said focus groups take place online. f. Participants will gain added value and salience with respect to their profession by contributing to the outcomes of this research. They will be directly contributing to the formulation of national policy recommendations.

PART 2: SELF-ASSESSMENT

Human Participants

1. Risk of harm to participants:
2. Physical intervention:
3. Vulnerable participants:
4. Identifiable participants: Yes or Unsure   5. Special Categories of Personal Data (SCPD):

Figure 26 Ethics and Data Protection Form p. 2

126.

Ticked one or more self-assessment issues. Submitting to FREC for review.

6. Human tissue/samples:
7. Withheld info assent/consent:
8. Opt-out consent/assent:
9. Deception in data generation:
10. Incidental findings:

Unpublished secondary data

11. Was the data collected from human participants?
12. Was the data collected from animals?
13. Is written permission from the data controller still to be obtained?

4753_17122020_Alessio Cuschieri

Animals

14. Live animals out of habitat:
15. Live animals, risk of harm:
16. Dead animals, illegal:

General considerations

17. Cooperating institution: Yes or Unsure

18. Risk to researcher/s:
19. Risk to environment:
20. Commercial sensitivity
21. Other potential risks:

Self-assessment outcome: **Ticked one or more self-assessment issues. Submitting to FREC for review.**

PART 3: DETAILED ASSESSMENT

1. Risk of harm to participants:
2. Physical intervention on participants:
3. Vulnerable participants:
4. Identifiable participants: i. The recordings are to be audio in nature and make use of distortion (which is to immediately be in effect upon saving) to anonymize participants. Use of codes/pseudonyms will also be used when saving these files so as to ensure total anonymity. Said recordings are to then exclusively be used for transcription into ODF format documents. Coding of data may then be made through SPSS. All data (including recordings and derivative information) is to then be backed upon a secondary drive and both drives encrypted by means of AxCrypt which are to be stored securely

Figure 27 Ethics and Data Protection Form p. 3

Ticked one or more self-assessment issues. Submitting to FREC for review.

inside a safe of the researcher's sole possession. All anonymised recordings and any derivative data are to be accessible only to the researcher (Alessio Cuschieri) with any anonymised transcripts being also accessible by the principal supervisor (Peter Farrugia). ii. Participants are to be protected within the dissemination of results by use of pseudonyms and coding. It is not intended that any identifiable information be attributable through said results. iii.As all data is to be immediately anonymised, there is no need for said information to be destroyed. All relevant audio-visual information may then be transcribed into ODF format documents. Coding of data may then be used through SPSS. All data is to be backed up upon a secondary drive and both drives encrypted by means of AxCrypt on a physical hard drive which is to be stored securely.

5. Special Categories of Personal Data (sensitive personal data):
6. Collection of human tissue/samples:
7. Withholding information at consent/assent:
8. Opt-out consent/assent:
9. Deception in data generation:
10. Incidental findings:
11. Unpublished secondary data - human participants :

12. Unpublished secondary data - animals:
13. Unpublished secondary data - no written permission from data controller:
14. Lasting harm to animals out of natural habitat:
15. Risk of harm to live animals :
16. Use of non legal animals/tissue:
17. Permission from cooperating institution: Permission is to be obtained from the Directorate for

Curriculum, Research, Innovation and Lifelong Learning, the Secretariat for Catholic Education and Heads of School. Said institutions are to be contacted via their respective official emails and other official channels. It is foreseen that no other ethical clearance will be required.

18. Risk to researcher/team:
19. Risk of harm to environment:
20. Commercial sensitivity:
21. Other issues
    21a. Dual use and/or misuse:
    21b. Conflict of Interest:
    21c. Dual role:
    21d. Use research tools:
    21e. Collaboration/data/material collection in low/lower-middle income country:
    21f. Import/export of records/data/materials/specimens:
    21g. Harvest of data from social media:
    21h. Other considerations:

PART 4: SUBMISSION

1. Which FREC are you submitting to? : Education

Figure 28 Ethics and Data Protection Form p. 4

Ticked one or more self-assessment issues. Submitting to FREC for review.

inside a safe of the researcher's sole possession. All anonymised recordings and any derivative data are to be accessible only to the researcher (Alessio Cuschieri) with any anonymised transcripts being also accessible by the principal supervisor (Peter Farrugia). ii. Participants are to be protected within the dissemination of results by use of pseudonyms and coding. It is not intended that any identifiable information be attributable through said results. iii.As all data is to be immediately anonymised, there is no need for said information to be destroyed. All relevant audio-visual information may then be transcribed into ODF format documents. Coding of data may then be used through SPSS. All data is to be backed up upon a secondary drive and both drives encrypted by means of AxCrypt on a physical hard drive which is to be stored securely.

5. Special Categories of Personal Data (sensitive personal data):
6. Collection of human tissue/samples:
7. Withholding information at consent/assent:
8. Opt-out consent/assent:
9. Deception in data generation:
10. Incidental findings:
11. Unpublished secondary data - human participants :

4753_17122020_Alessio Cuschieri

12. Unpublished secondary data - animals:
13. Unpublished secondary data - no written permission from data controller:
14. Lasting harm to animals out of natural habitat:
15. Risk of harm to live animals :
16. Use of non legal animals/tissue:
17. Permission from cooperating institution: Permission is to be obtained from the Directorate for

Curriculum, Research, Innovation and Lifelong Learning, the Secretariat for Catholic Education and Heads of School. Said institutions are to be contacted via their respective official emails and other official channels. It is foreseen that no other ethical clearance will be required.

18. Risk to researcher/team:
19. Risk of harm to environment:
20. Commercial sensitivity:
21. Other issues
    21a. Dual use and/or misuse:
    21b. Conflict of Interest:
    21c. Dual role:
    21d. Use research tools:
    21e. Collaboration/data/material collection in low/lower-middle income country:
    21f. Import/export of records/data/materials/specimens:
    21g. Harvest of data from social media:
    21h. Other considerations:

PART 4: SUBMISSION

1. Which FREC are you submitting to? : Education

Figure 29 Ethics and Data Protection Form p. 5

D. Information & permission letters

08/09/2020

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Alessio Cuschieri and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Teaching and Learning in Art. I am currently conducting a research study for my thesis, titled Critical art education: supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools. This is being supervised by Mr Peter Farrugia (visiting lecturer within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing - Department of Youth and Community Studies). This letter is seeking permission for you to potentially distribute permission letters to Heads of Secondary Church schools. This is to so that pending your permission, they may in turn distribute the information letters and consent forms (which may be found attached to this document) amongst any respective Art teachers within their schools.

Firstly, the aim of this study is to identify the manner in which critical thinking skills are fostered during art lessons in Maltese secondary schools. This study will focus on the way teachers within a local context are actively supported to make this happen. Secondly, this study seeks to compile Art teachers' approaches regarding critical thinking skills and discuss them in reference to contemporary art pedagogical theory, as well as the SEC Syllabus (University of Malta, 2020). Thirdly, this study intends to extract policymaking recommendations with the goal of assisting teachers by amending any shortcomings and enhancing the role of critical thinking in Maltese art education at SEC level.

Your contribution by allowing for this study to be undertaken would help contribute to a better understanding of supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools by enhancing the role of critical thinking in Maltese art education at SEC level.

Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study. Should you choose to allow the Church schools under your jurisdiction to participate (and in turn, their respective heads of School follow suite), teachers will be asked to take part in round table focus groups. This study is to consist of six roundtable focus groups in total, with each group consisting of seven participants. Each teacher is to participate in one (singular) focus group which will be held outside of school hours. Participants are to be grouped based upon their employ being within State, Church and Independent sectors at a ratio of 3:2:2 respectively. Should more participants than is required express a desire to participate than they may be placed as 'reserves' should other participants change their mind and/or not be available. These roundtable focus groups may be held within a conference room or prospectively within the VO centre in Valletta pending approval. Alternatively, due to health and safety concerns (following issues related to COVID-19) these may instead take place virtually through means of Google Hangouts, Zoom or other secure platforms. These focus groups are to take a prospective 2 hours each. These roundtable focus groups are to be oriented in discussing critical thinking within the participants' pedagogical orientation and classroom culture alongside any opinions they hold relevant to the subject.

Data gathered from these round tables focus groups will be used for the sole purpose of this study. Confidentiality is guaranteed throughout and no personal identification is to be published.

Figure 30 Permission Letter to the Secretariat for Catholic Education

08/09/2020

Information letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Alessio Cuschieri and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Teaching and Learning in Art. I am currently conducting a research study for my thesis, titled Critical art education: supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools. This is being supervised by Mr Peter Farrugia (visiting lecturer within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing - Department of Youth and Community Studies). This letter is seeking permission for you to potentially distribute information letters and consent forms (which may be found attached to this document) amongst any respective Art teachers within your school, so that they may participate in this study.

Firstly, the aim of this study is to identify the manner in which critical thinking skills are fostered during art lessons in Maltese secondary schools. This study will focus on the way teachers within a local context are actively supported to make this happen. Secondly, this study seeks to compile Art teachers' approaches regarding critical thinking skills and discuss them in reference to contemporary art pedagogical theory, as well as the SEC Syllabus (University of Malta, 2020). Thirdly, this study intends to extract policymaking recommendations with the goal of assisting teachers by amending any shortcomings and enhancing the role of critical thinking in Maltese art education at SEC level.

By giving permission for your school's art teachers to participate in this study, you would help contribute to a better understanding of supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools by enhancing the role of critical thinking in Maltese art education at SEC level.

Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study. Should you choose to allow the school to participate, teachers will be asked to take part in round table focus groups. This study is to consist of six roundtable focus groups in total, with each group consisting of seven participants. Each teacher is to participate in one (singular) focus group which will be held outside of school hours. Participants are to be grouped based upon their employ being within State, Church and Independent sectors at a ratio of 3:2:2 respectively. Should more participants than is required express a desire to participate than they may be placed as 'reserves' should other participants change their mind and/or not be available. These roundtable focus groups may be held within a conference room or prospectively within the VO centre in Valletta pending approval. Alternatively, due to health and safety concerns (following issues related to COVID-19) these may instead take place virtually through means of Google Hangouts, Zoom or other secure platforms. These focus groups are to take a prospective 2 hours each. These roundtable focus groups are to be oriented in discussing critical thinking within the participants' pedagogical orientation and classroom culture alongside any opinions they hold relevant to the subject.

Figure 31 Permission Letter to Head of School

131.

08/09/20

Information letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Alessio Cuschieri and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Teaching and Learning in Art. I am presently conducting a research study for my thesis, titled Critical art education: supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools this is being supervised by Mr Peter Farrugia (visiting lecturer within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing - Department of Youth and Community Studies). This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

Firstly, the aim of this study is to identify the manner in which critical thinking skills are fostered during art lessons in Maltese secondary schools. This study will focus on the way teachers within a local context are actively supported to make this happen. Secondly, this study seeks to compile Art teachers' approaches regarding critical thinking skills and discuss them in reference to contemporary art pedagogical theory, as well as the SEC Syllabus (University of Malta, 2020). Thirdly, this study intends to extract policymaking recommendations with the goal of assisting teachers by amending any shortcomings and enhancing the role of critical thinking in Maltese art education at SEC level.

Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools by enhancing the role of critical thinking in Maltese art education at SEC level.

Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools by enhancing the role of critical thinking in Maltese art education at SEC level.

Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study. Should you choose to participate, then you will be asked to take part in round table focus groups which are to be audio-recorded. This study is to consist of six roundtable focus groups in total, with each group consisting of seven participants. Each teacher is to participate in one (singular) focus group which will be held outside of school hours. These roundtable focus groups may be held within a conference room or prospectively within the VO centre in Valletta pending approval. Alternatively, due to health and safety concerns (following issues related to COVID-19) these may instead take place virtually through means of Google Hangouts, Zoom or other secure platforms. These focus groups are to take 2 hours each and are to prospectively be held between the: 05/01/21 – 30/1/21 on Saturdays between 10:00AM - 12:00PM. Upon consenting to participate, you will be contacted and assigned a

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132.

group and day.   These roundtable focus groups are to be oriented in discussing critical thinking within the participants' pedagogical orientation and classroom culture alongside any opinions they hold relevant to the subject.

Please note that you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access and rectify data where applicable. All data collected will be stored anonymously. A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. If you choose to participate, I would like to thank you for the effort, time and overall contributions you have decided to provide.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail

Sincerely,

Alessio Cuschieri   Peter Farrugia

Signature:

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133.

Participant's Consent Form

Critical art education: supporting art educators in Maltese Secondary Schools

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Alessio Cuschieri. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be stored anonymously
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in one (singular) roundtable focus group in which the researcher will discuss questions so as to explore and discuss critical thinking's role within the Secondary School art teachers' pedagogical orientation and classroom culture.
4. I am aware that the roundtable focus groups will take approximately two hours. I understand that the roundtable focus groups is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
5. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
6. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study.
7. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
8. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study.
9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
10. I am aware that, if I give my consent, this roundtable focus group will be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

11. I am aware that, if I give my consent, extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].

12. I am aware that focus group discussions should be considered confidential and that I should not disclose details of those participating and/or of the nature of discussions to others.

13. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymized; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that

Figure 34 Participant's consent form p. 1

link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cupboard. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of 2 years following the completion of this study and then be destroyed.

14. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

_____   _____

Alessio Cuschieri   Peter Farrugia

No.   no.

Signature:

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135.

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