

**PREPARING TEACHERS TO PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY/CRITICAL THINKING IN SUBJECT ENGLISH TO  
EXPLORE INDICATORS OF GIFTEDNESS IN SECONDARY STUDENTS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

*A thesis submitted for the degree of*

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### **Certification**

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.



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## SYNOPSIS

The Australian Curriculum is due to be implemented fully in Western Australia by 2017. In an introduction to the new curriculum on the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority's website, *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) is quoted as stating that critical and creative thinking are fundamental to students' becoming successful learners. Later in this introductory section, it is explained that The Australian Curriculum will enable students to develop capability in critical and creative thinking. According to researchers such as Lipman (1969, 1974, 1995, 1998, 2003), critical and creative thinking are the consequences of engaging in a course in Philosophy.

The Department of Education and Training of Western Australia has indicated that "strong critical thinking skills" are indicators of giftedness and leading researchers, for example, Silverman (1993) and Clark (2002) have suggested a similar connection between "thinking skills" and giftedness when publishing their own checklists. It follows logically, that if critical thinking and the component skills that make up this term can be taught, then to some extent at least, it is possible to teach students to exhibit behaviours that characterise the academically gifted.

Although teaching critical thinking is widely acknowledged as desirable in the literature, it is noted that a crucial element to teaching it is teacher modelling and a wealth of research (e.g., Choy & Cheah, 2009; Rudd, 2007; Black, 2005; Vaske, 2001) suggests that students may not be able to think critically because their teachers are not able to model critical thinking sufficiently by incorporating it into their daily practice.

This qualitative study which is reported using evocative and analytical autoethnography investigated whether teachers who have limited or no background in Philosophy/critical thinking could present a course in Philosophy/critical thinking that had been prepared in enough detail to guide its delivery without further input. The course was designed to teach critical thinking skills in subject English, a subject which all students take in Secondary School, in order to learn skills useful across the entire curriculum. The study considered (1) whether delivering the course could provide enough professional development for teachers to allow them to design and deliver similar courses of their own and (2) whether the thinking skills described as indicators of giftedness would emerge, as a consequence of their exposure to the course, in students who had not previously exhibited them.

The six participants in the study were a mix of experienced and inexperienced teachers, and two home schoolers who had no teaching experience or qualifications. All of the teachers reported success in acquiring the skills to engage in a collaborative approach with their students while presenting a course in Philosophy/critical thinking, a result that was also reported by one of the home schoolers. All participants reported that "indicators of giftedness" had emerged, as a consequence of their presentation of the course, in students who had not previously demonstrated such behaviours.



The conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that teachers can acquire the skills necessary to model critical thinking by being provided with a course that enables them to engage in it collaboratively with their students without the need for other means of professional development. Another possible conclusion that needs to be supported by further investigation in future studies, is that identification of academically gifted students for special programs is unnecessary.

As the establishment of such programs is costly to taxpayers and their outcomes are dubious when considered in terms of providing for the academically gifted, there are direct benefits to both students and the community at large by offering to all students the opportunity to engage in Philosophy/critical thinking in their regular classrooms.