



# UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

## **1. Title of Research**

‘Dissecting the Bird to Articulate the Song’ Exploring the Nature of Teaching and Learning Poetry at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland

## **2. Name of Researcher**

Jennifer Hennessy, Ph.D, B.Sc.

## **3. Date of completion**

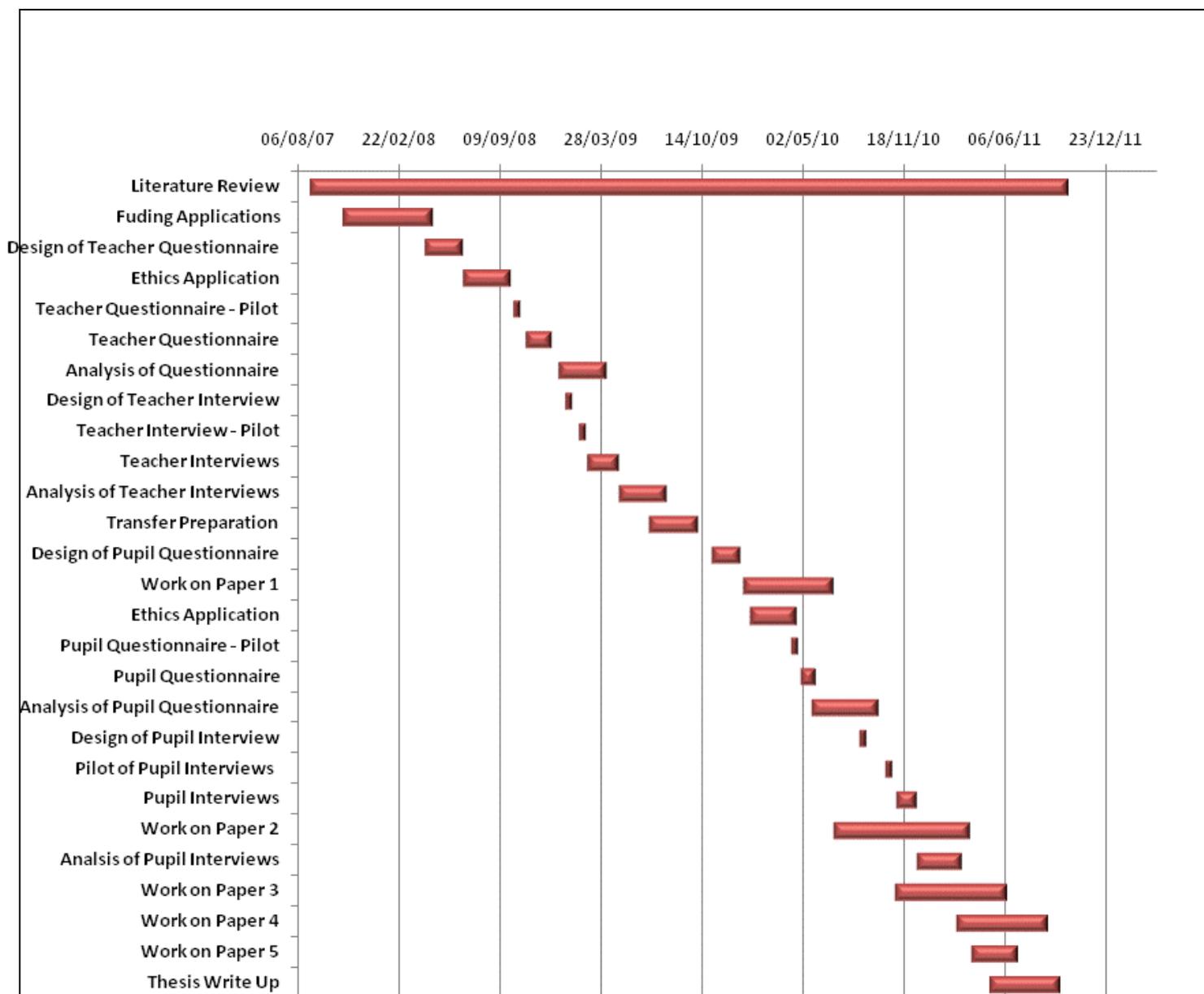
1<sup>st</sup> December 2011

## **4. Timeframe including details of when the research was carried out.**

The research was carried out over a four year period. It commenced in October 2007 and was completed on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2011. The first phase of this research involved an exploration into teachers’ perspectives on the experience of teaching poetry at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland. This phase of the research was conducted between October 2007 and September 2009. The findings of this phase served to inform the design of the subsequent design of the qualitative research tool.

Subsequent to this, the second research phase focused on an exploration into Leaving Certificate pupils’ perspectives on studying poetry at this level in Ireland. This research phase extended from September 2009 to April 2011. As the researcher is committed to the advancement of knowledge pertaining to the teaching and learning of poetry she subsequently sought to ensure the timely dissemination of the research findings. From April 2011 to October 2011, the researcher focused on final analyses of the research data and the widespread dissemination of the research findings.

Figure 1 below provides a graphical overview of the stages of this research and the timeline to which it adhered.



**Figure 1 Research Timeline**

### **5. Brief outline of the research idea**

Motivated by the conviction that listening to pupils' and teachers' perspectives enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of teaching and learning processes, this research explores the nature and provision of poetry at Leaving Certificate level in Ireland. It draws on research conducted over a four year period from 2007-2011 with 80 practicing Leaving Certificate poetry teachers and 200 Leaving Certificate pupils of poetry. Set against a backdrop of educational consumerism, this research identifies a number of areas of concern for educators including; a narrowing of the curricula, a traditionalist approach to pedagogy, widespread teacher dissonance and pupil disengagement in addition to a ubiquitous teaching to the test ideology at Leaving Certificate level. Drawing on the research findings, it is argued that poetry is vulnerable to becoming a marginalised and technicised endeavour in the Leaving Certificate classroom. Recommendations for

renewed teacher agency are proposed in striving to renew a critical and creative approach to poetry pedagogy in schools.

## **6. Summary of Research Aims**

In Ireland, little research has been conducted into the experiences generated in the poetry class. This research sought to provide empirical evidence on classroom practices pertaining to poetry at Leaving Certificate level in Ireland. In achieving this ambition two objectives were established:

- 1) Explore the experience of teaching poetry at Leaving Certificate level in Ireland from the perspective of the teacher, focusing on areas of significance as denoted by the cohort.
- 2) Explore the perspectives of pupils on the experience of studying poetry at Leaving Certificate level in Ireland, focusing on areas of significant as denoted by the cohort.

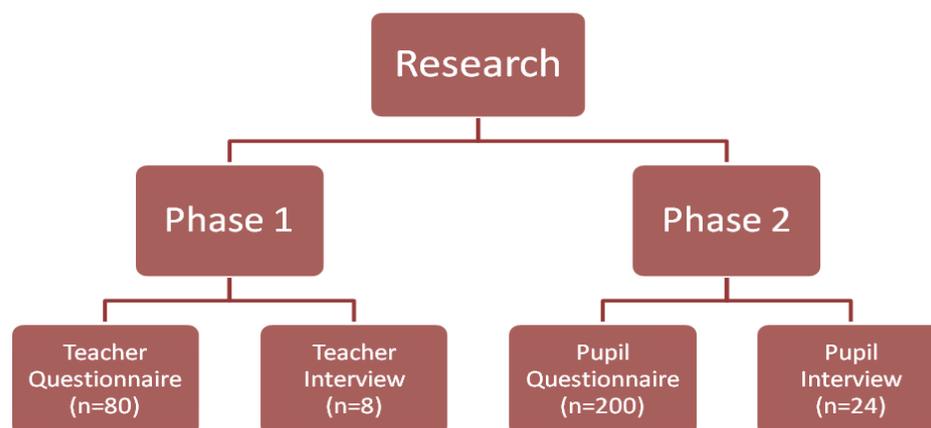
## **7. Outline of methodology used including details of how any ethical considerations were addressed**

### ***Research Approach***

The aims and objectives of this research were realised through a ‘mixed methods’ research approach. This combined the use of the positivist and interpretative research paradigms. The rationale for this approach combines a number of factors. In the first instance, the researcher employed the use of quantitative research to identify areas of statistical significance. However, it was noted that research which examines the perspectives of individuals, such as in this study, is based on subjective realities and quantitative data alone may not be sufficient to explore often deeply embedded individual responses (Dyson, 2006). Qualitative data collection was therefore also employed as part of this research and served to facilitate deeper inquiry in order to achieve what Bryman (2008, p.609) terms *completeness* in the research. Similarly, as noted by Creemers, Kyriakidēs & Sammons (2010, p.140), a combination of approaches provides greater opportunity for mapping, analysis and interpretation of experience and in doing so, may provide a more holistic understanding of the research area than may be gained if relying one paradigm alone.

### ***Research Design***

This research follows an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) which comprises two distinct phases, both of which reflect a mixed methods approach. The first phase focuses on the Leaving Certificate poetry teacher and includes both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in the form of questionnaires and interviews. The second phase focuses on the Leaving Certificate poetry pupil. This phase mirrors the methodological approach of phase one, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data in the form of interviews and questionnaires. Figure 2 below provides an overview of the research approach;



**Figure 2 Research Overview**

### **Ethics**

Conducting this research in an ethically sound manner was integral to the research conceptualisation, design, implementation and analysis. This research is guided by the six ethical principles of Parahoo (2006), specifically; beneficence, non-maleficence, fidelity and justice, veracity and confidentiality. Each of these principles was acknowledged with recognition given to each principle as outlined in the accompanying thesis. In addition, Graziano & Raulin (2010) identified seven ‘ethical checks’ (p.62) to be conducted once the research design is established. Adherence to these checks was prioritised as outlined in the accompanying thesis. Full ethical approval was sought and subsequently granted for the research by the University of Limerick Education and Health Sciences Ethics Committee on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2008.

### **8. Summary of background reading**

Socio-economic advancement over the last decade has been driven by rapid technological and scientific progression (Massaquoi 2009). Productivism, the belief that scientific and technological knowledge promises a happy ending to the problems of poverty, disease, and tyranny (Smith 1998), has become a globally dominant ethos (Anderson 2008). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 1996) notes that ‘in the long run, knowledge, especially technological knowledge, is the main source of economic growth and improvements in the quality of life’ (p.7). Given that education policy is frequently formulated under intense political, social and economic pressure (OECD 2004), the commodification of knowledge has become linked to the demands of corporate globalisation. In the current knowledge economy, knowledge has become something to be commodified and profited from (Sumner 2003). A consumerist agenda in education is problematic as it potentially relegates teachers to functionaries satisfying the demands of their managers and clients (Dunne 2002). Many schools now experience increasing

pressure to 'package performance' (Eisner 2002: 8) into a tightly restricted and measurable product, resulting in the imposition of micromanagement and curricular uniformity (Hargreaves 2003). Striving to achieve high levels of uniformity has meant that, for the most part, measurability and performativity have become dominant goals in contemporary post-primary education.

Within the consumerist agenda, the economic value of creative activities is more uncertain. The pressures of prioritising exam performance often challenges the teacher's commitment to taking pupils on 'meaning-making' journeys (Dymoke 2002; Caves 2003). It has been argued that cultures of performativity leave little room for creativity or caring (Ball 2003), as pupils are taught to pursue knowledge through objective lenses (Pavlovich and Krahnke 2008).

Within the 'dictates of performativity' (Papastephanou 2006: 85), tensions arise amid aesthetic and creative oriented subjects. Tacit knowledge is frequently relegated in favour of more easily accessible sources of intellectual capital. As a result, there exists a relative silence in the promotion of arts based subjects in education (Arts Council 2008). Therefore, as rigid accountability mechanisms force the narrowing of curricula, the fortitude of arts based subjects, such as poetry to withstand standardisation and reductionist patterns is arguably lessening (Pike 2004; Wilson 2007).

### **The Irish Context: The Post- Primary English Syllabi**

Ireland is not immune to current trends of educational standardisation and bureaucratic accountability. Within Irish schools, there is significant evidence of policy/ practice dissonance and of marketplace ideologies driven by the imperative of terminal assessment (Gleeson and O Donnabhain 2009; Ryan 2010). The current Leaving Certificate English syllabus was introduced in Ireland in 1999. It was presented as a 'radical and original response' (NCCA 1999b: 1) to changing needs of its learners, moving away from traditional 'dry-as-dust' and 'decontextualised' pedagogies of the past (NCCA 1999a: 15). It aims to afford teachers the opportunity to transcend traditional academic approaches to the teaching of English and poetry (NCCA 1999b).

However, as noted by Ryan (2010), within the Irish context, the translation of vision into practice is frequently mediated through the lens of assessment and the commodification of knowledge. Since the implementation of the current English syllabus, there has been a paucity of research conducted on the learning experience from the perspective of the Leaving Certificate pupil. However, research indicates that a strong transmission approach currently dominates in Irish post-primary schools (Government of Ireland 1999; Gleeson and O Donnabhain 2009; O' Donoghue and Harford 2010). It appears that rigorous accountability in Irish post-primary schooling has significantly increased the influence of the performativity agenda on teachers (Sugrue 2006). Performativity pressures now commonly result in pupils spending

considerable amounts of time on note-taking, memorisation and textbook based work (NCCA, 2002). Such evidence suggests divergent values and practice from the constructivist and altruistic aims of the syllabus.

### **The implications of performativity**

Eisner (2004b) argues that as we focus unremittingly on standards, rubrics and measurement, the deeper problems of schooling, such as the quality of conversations being generated in classrooms, go unattended (p.299). Such conversation is all too rare in schools according to Eisner. Hennessy et al. (2011) note a lack of higher order engagement and critical thinking in conjunction with a marked subordination of subjective engagement in the poetry class. They contend that the demands of meeting the requirements of a system privileging technicism and exam performance fails to provide the space necessary for critical encounters with poetry (p.191). It appears then, that as test scores increase, the value of what we are testing, and the educational challenge presented therein may be concurrently in decline.

A narrowing of curriculum is also evident within the poetry class owing to the dominance of a 'teach to the test' ideology. Dymoke (2001) argues that poetry has become "solely, even deadningly, linked with written critical response on terminal examination papers" (p.39). Moreover while working within the narrowed parameters of exam prescription as outlined here, Eisner (2004b) warns that the message we send to our students is that test scores are what matters in education (p.300). Within cultures of performativity, where knowledge is perceived as measurable and often explicitly defined, the propensity to question, challenge and critically evaluate knowledge is arguably limited.

### **The deprofessionalisation of teachers in neo-liberal education**

Hursh (2000) notes that "the efforts to impose standards, assessments, and accountability has been devastating for teachers and students". Emphasis on a performance-orientated, managerially effective model of teaching has caused many teachers to struggle with the development of wider educational goals (McNess et al., 2003). Dewey (1986/1922) argues that imposing an alleged uniform method for everyone breeds mediocrity in all but the very exceptional. As a result teachers often find their values challenged or displaced by the pervasive 'terrors of performativity' (Ball, 2003, p.216). Hennessy et al. (2011a) evidence considerable tension between poetry teachers' inherent and often altruistic values, and the practice required to meet the demands of high stakes testing. However, Hill (2004) contends this tension can be alleviated somewhat through the 'discourse of professionalism'. This discourse constructs teachers as committed to self-improvement, the upgrading of their skills and strategically orientated to the effectiveness of their work (p.512). Such discourse according to Hill "institutes a mentality of self-regulation by which the teachers themselves become the mechanism for legitimising the surveillance, marketisation and codification of their work practices" (p.512). Within this process a 'corrosion of

character' (Sennett, 1998) is all too evident amongst teachers who experience a loss of professional independence and often have to set personal values and beliefs aside in meeting the targets set down within audit cultures (Perryman, Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2011).

## **9. Overview of Research Findings and Recommendations**

The research points towards a shift in educative focus which appears to permeate both attitudes and practice within the poetry class. In a move antithetical to the aims of the syllabus and the genre of poetry, it appears that poetry is now vulnerable to becoming a technicised product in many Leaving Certificate classrooms. Poetry is frequently presented rather than taught and received rather than engaged with in the classroom. Moreover the research points towards a significant narrowing of the genre with many teachers adopting an *à la carte* approach. Creativity, subjectivity and innovation are often inadvertently precluded from this selection. Many teachers in the study were aware of their practice in this regard and indicated experiencing significant dissonance. Yet, they felt they had little agency in this regard due to the nature of the terminal examination, towards which they felt compelled to teach. This poses much cause for concern for the future of poetry in Irish schools. The consequences are far reaching;

### **Poetry teacher dissonance**

The performativity agenda was noted to have a significant impact on teachers of poetry. A widespread altruistic ambition amongst poetry teachers undoubtedly exists, with many teachers asserting a desire to develop the imagination through engaging experiences with poetry and in so doing, imbue a love of poetry in their pupils. However, given the technicist focus of the state examination, underpinning the performativity agenda, many teachers were struggling with their professional role and indeed experiencing significant professional dissonance. For many teachers acquiescence to the performativity agenda prevailed, rationalised through a discourse of professionalism, through which teachers were able to equate pupils' examination success as evidence of their professional achievement.

### **Pupil passivity**

A worrying trend of pupil passivity was also identified in the research. In many instances this could be linked to the teacher centred and didactic nature of the poetry classroom. Pupils were provided with limited opportunity for subjective response to poetry. For many pupils, critical engagement with poetry was seen as time wasting and as less favourable to being provided with poetry notes from the teacher. Success for pupils was often conceptualised in terms of rote learning and exam readiness. Engagement with poetry outside of the requirements for school was particularly limited and often negated. Moreover the majority of pupils assumed a product oriented stance towards poetry in which it was seen as only as means to an end, namely for the purpose of exam success. Yet pupils aspired for more, with many noting a desire for

enhanced engagement with poetry through poetry composition, group work and critical classroom discussion.

### **Affective development**

A marked imbalance in the prioritisation of pupil development was also identified, with many teachers taking a mutually exclusive approach to cognitive and affective development. In so doing, the expansive potential of the reciprocal relationship between the cognitive and affective domains was negated, and the development of affective, artistic and aesthetic sensibility was seen to be consigned to the realm of superfluous and inappropriate. Practices which encourage creative and expressive output including *inter alia*, graphic representation of poetry, drama-in-education techniques, the use of response journals and poetry composition were noted to be marginalised in the poetry classroom according to the research.

### **Epistemic development**

The provision for epistemic development within the Leaving Certificate poetry classroom was also limited. Here, knowledge was often seen to be constructed as dualistic in nature. The lack of pupil voice gives rise to inequitable and expert privileged knowledge on the part of the teacher, thus suggesting an absolutist view of poetry in which the teacher alone holds the key and expertise to poetic appreciation. Additionally practices which encouraged conformity and standardisation, many of which offered a dualistic view of knowledge (and poetry), were frequently noted.

### **The impact of exam-driven schooling**

The impact of the state exam on poetry was noted to be particularly malign in the Leaving Certificate years. The commercialisation of poetry was noted to be widespread and the treatment of the genre as exam currency was shown to be a common occurrence. A ubiquity of poetry notes provision, a lack of differentiated pedagogy, a narrowing of curricula, a tendency to produce rather than develop knowledge, and pupils' perception of poetry as something to be received and assimilated, rather than critiqued and explored, all served to consolidate this view. Critical engagement was notable by its absence in these circumstances.

### **Pupil conceptions of effective poetry teaching**

Pupils had clear messages to relay about the role of poetry in their schooling experience. Five conceptions of effective poetry teachers were suggested and posited as significant in tackling pupil apathy in the poetry classroom. Pupils noted the importance of a non-dualistic approach to the study of poetry, asserting that their interpretations also had a role to play in the poetry classroom, an approach that could be enabled through the espousal and practice of a more mature epistemological position by the teacher. This would entail the provision of space for critical pupil engagement in the poetry classroom. In addition pupils noted the importance of promoting critical thinking and understanding in the class. The significance of a

creative approach to encourage creative thinking was desired. The importance of encouraging poetry composition, a practice that appeared largely ostracised in the classroom, was cited as important in pupils' conceptualisations of effective poetry teaching. Moreover the importance of a positive attitude on the part of the poetry teacher (seen to imbue positivity and enthusiasm amongst pupils) was highlighted.

### **The place and status of poetry**

The findings of this research point towards poetry in crisis in Irish post-primary schools, owing to the growth of performative practice and the narrowing of critical educational experiences. The pressures of standardisation and bureaucratic accountability appear to have a significant impact on both the aspirations and practices of Leaving Certificate teachers and pupils of poetry. It can be argued that the weight of neo-liberalism and corporate hegemony have resulted in a narrow and politicised realisation of education now permeating the poetry class. The rise of exam driven schooling and cultures of performativity have promoted a technicist approach to schooling, which serves to limit the potential of the poetry lesson when taught by a teacher subscribing to this ideological agenda. The naturalisation of such hegemonic practice in the classroom and subsequent emergence of cultural reproduction has an impact on both poetry teachers and pupils who in many cases appear to lack agency in terms of changing how they teach and experience poetry.

An ethical re-evaluation of poetry pedagogy is required at this time centred on the purpose of education. If school is purported to act as an environment for the holistic development of the pupils, consideration needs to be given to whether a pragmatic approach to teaching and learning is sufficient to achieve this aim. The researcher proposes a technicist and utilitarian approach to pedagogy to be at odds with the broader ambitions of education. Yet, while this research reports a dichotomous view of teaching and learning for the exam and teaching and learning for the holistic development of the pupil, the researcher posits concurrent achievement in both areas to be possible. Moreover the researcher proposes that a more creative approach to poetry pedagogy may serve to counter current trends of pupil instrumentalism and passivity.

Drawing on the research, the development of a vision for the teaching of Leaving Certificate poetry based on the perspectives of pupils and teachers is now possible. In ascribing to the values of this model of teaching, the development of a more critically aware, pedagogically respondent and student oriented teacher of poetry is envisaged.

### **Reimagining the Leaving Certificate Poetry Teacher**

- The new poetry teacher is committed to the educational advancement of their pupils, maintaining a vision for poetry education which meets and more importantly transcends the requirements of exam performativity.

- The new poetry teacher rejects practices of standardisation and conformity and be critical in the selection of pedagogical approaches in the classroom.
- The new poetry teacher provides learning experiences which engage, challenge and inspire pupils, and in so doing aim to develop in students an enduring relationship with poetry.
- The new poetry teacher is committed to the promotion of both critical and creative thinking in the classroom, employing a variety of representational approaches in the classroom which serve to meet this ambition, such as pupil led critical analysis of poetry, poetry writing, drama-in-education activities, the use of response journals and graphic representation of poems.
- The new poetry teacher recognises the interconnectivity of the cognitive and affective domains and employs an integrated approach to poetry pedagogy.
- The new poetry teacher espouses and encourages a mature epistemological stance towards poetry, in so doing encourages subjective analysis and multiple perspectives on poetry, in addition to educating on the value of sustaining contradiction in poetic analysis.

#### **10. How the research contributed to your professional development**

This research has advanced my professional development not alone as a researcher but also as a teacher educator. As a researcher, I have refined *inter alia* my communication skills through the provision of seminars and conferences on this research. I have resultantly become more competent at networking and liaising with academics in my field of research. This has allowed for the development of important relationships which have served to both challenge and further my thinking in the field. My ability project management skills have also advanced as a result of this research. I have become significantly more adept at goal setting, monitoring my own progress and goal accomplishment.

Moreover, this research has contributed extensively towards my professional development as a teacher educator. I have gained much experience and deepened my understanding of the needs of both teachers and pupils in the post-primary poetry classroom. This knowledge will serve to direct my classes with pre-service English teachers in my institution. My critical understanding of the post-primary context has also advanced greatly. This insight allows me to appreciate the impact of the performativity agenda, neoliberal values and teacher dissonance on the translation of curriculum into the classroom. It therein enables me to prepare pre-service teachers to meet a complex web of professional challenges and become active agents for change in the classroom and empowered as creative and critical educators.

## **11. How the research will benefit the teaching profession and the wider educational community?**

This research provides much needed information on the perspectives of teachers and pupils on the teaching and learning of poetry at Leaving Certificate level which may act as a pool of reference in the pursuit of educational advancement for both the teaching profession and the wider educational community.

As noted by Flutter and Rudduck (2004) “Pupil commentaries on teaching and learning in school provide a practical agenda for change that can help fine-tune or, more fundamentally, identify and shape improvement strategies”. However, pupils’ perspectives have traditionally remained peripheral to the curriculum making process (Rudduck 1999; Rudduck and Flutter 2000). This research has afforded space for the exploration, not only of pupil commentaries on teaching and learning in the poetry classroom, but that of their teachers also. This research has therein provided an overview of the needs of senior cycle students seeking to engage critically with poetry in the classroom. This research identified clearly the strategies that pupils perceive as conducive to the advancement of their understanding and also highlights practice which they believe counterproductive to deep learning. Such information will be of key interest to teachers seeking to advance pupil engage and understanding at Leaving Certificate Level.

Commentaries from teachers on the experience of teaching poetry at Leaving Certificate Level hold much value for the wider educational community. The identification of an altruistic vision amongst teachers which is often eroded under the pressures of performativity poses cause for concern for educationalists. Recommendations for Teacher Education are posed in developing teacher agency at post-primary level in a bid to counter current hegemonic practices such as the narrowing of curriculum and the pervasive ‘teaching to the test’ ideology which was evidenced as ubiquitous within the field in the research. This research also identifies the malign impact of bureaucratic accountability on teacher creativity, a finding significant for those seeking to advance policy and curriculum in the field.

The imperative for the rejection of standardisation and reductionism in the poetry classroom as identified in this research holds significance for all vested parties committed to the advancement of educational practice and the development of more student centred critical learning experiences.