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Country Report: The Teaching of Philosophy in Singapore Schools (Part 2)

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Introduction

In the existing country report, Burik et al. (2020) provide a helpful overview of the teaching of philosophy in public schools in Singapore. This paper builds on their insights by highlighting some recent developments that suggest, in my opinion, reasons to be optimistic about future developments of philosophy in Singapore. I will focus on (S2) Philosophy within the standard curriculum, (S3) Philosophy as electives and enrichments, (S4), and the training of Philosophy teachers in Singapore.

From the outset, it would be useful to state that in Pre-University philosophy education in Singapore, ‘philosophy’ is often understood in at least two different ways: the development of philosophical skills (such as logic, critical thinking etc) and philosophical content (such as concepts, arguments, topics etc.).¹ Most philosophy programmes in Singapore teach both skills and content, though the emphasis differs according to the individual programme’s learning objectives. Consequently, when I note that schools *teach philosophy*, I mean that they teach at least one kind of philosophy education (skills and/or content).

Philosophy within the standard curriculum

As Burik et al. (2020) have pointed out, public schools in Singapore generally follow a standardized curriculum, and philosophy is not typically taught in most public schools. There have, however, been significant attempts to include some version of ‘philosophy’ in individual public schools, often through P4C (Philosophy for Children) programmes and techniques.² In this section, I focus on recent developments of ‘Philosophy’ in the curriculum of schools that offer the Integrated Programme (IP).

As noted by Burik et al (2020), some IP schools include the IB Diploma Programme as part of their curriculum, and students in these schools study ‘Theory of Knowledge’ (TOK, students in Years 5-6). In recent years, several of these schools have included subjects in Years 1-4 that teach philosophy. For instance, one school teaches an “elementary Theory of Knowledge (eTOK)” (Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) 2021) and another teaches ‘Philosophy,

¹ While there may be some shortcomings of distinguishing between skills and content (since there are often overlap, and demarcating the definitions are not always clear), a rough distinction such as this is useful in understanding the different *focus* schools place on philosophy.

² Let me provide several examples. Lim reports that as early as 1992, several primary and secondary schools began to adopt P4C (Lim 1993; Lim/Ho 2007: 4). In 2005, P4C was tested out in another primary school (Chang et al. 2007). Tan also points out that some schools offer P4C as part of their English lessons (Tan 2008: 115). See also (Koh et al. 2016; Tan 2017). Since 2006, one primary school has been carrying out P4C lessons for Primary 3 and 4 students (Woodlands Primary School 2020). Since 2013, another primary school has using P4C as a “key pedagogic approach” in their lessons (Huamin Primary School 2019). Since 2013, yet another primary school adopted P4C in English and Chinese classes (Singapore Teachers’ Union 2016).

Thinking and Knowledge' (Methodist Girls' School 2021).³

In addition, there are 13 IP schools which offer the A-Levels in Years 5-6 (Ministry of Education 2021). Several of these schools have included Philosophy as part of their Years 1-4 curriculum. For instance, one school offers a four-year Philosophy curriculum (Raffles Institution 2021: 45). Several schools offer Philosophy for Year 1-2 students (e.g., Nanyang Girls' High School 2021). In some other schools, aspects of Philosophy are infused into their curriculum (e.g., Raffles Girls' School 2021). Importantly, some schools focus on teaching Chinese Philosophy (e.g., CHIJ St' Nicholas Girls' School 2021a).

It is worth noting that one of the primary pedagogical approaches adopted by schools for the teaching of philosophy is through the Community of Inquiry Model.⁴

Philosophy as Enrichment

Outside of the standard curriculum, several IP schools teach Philosophy as enrichment programmes. Notably, one school began running a week long Philosophical Sabbatical (Temasek Junior College 2021). Under the Special Assistance Programme, several schools now teach Chinese Philosophy (e.g., CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School 2021b, Nan Hua High School 2021).⁵ Three schools also collaborate to offer a joint 'Philosophy of Knowledge' programme that incorporates 'Eastern and Western Perspectives' (Catholic High School et al. 2020: 14).

In recent years, there has been an increase in inter-school philosophy conferences on offer. The most prominent of which are: since 2004, the annual Inter-School Philosophy Dialogue (Loy 2018); since 2014, the Philobytes Inter-School Dialogue (Nanyang Girls' High School 2019); and since 2018, The Hwa Chong Invitational Olympiad (Burik et al. 2020). Beginning in 2019, several schools have collaborated to run the PhiloJam Conference, where students from participating schools present papers on philosophical issues (PhiloJam 2021).

Teacher Training, Pedagogical Research and Global Standards

In the earlier days, much of the pedagogical training for philosophy teachers was informal.⁶ Australian practitioners were heavily influential in conducting workshops on P4C in Singapore since the 1980s (Burgh/Thornton 2019: 62–63; Lim 1994).

One important strand of formal training has been supplied by the Singapore Teachers' Union (STU). In 2003, they invited consultants from the Federation of Asia-Pacific Philosophy in Schools Associations to train local teachers (Lim/Ho 2007). In 2006, they hosted the international Philosophy in Schools Conference, where "experts and practitioners" from "Malaysia, Australia, the United States" and Singapore presented papers on this subject (Shanmugaratnam 2006).⁷ Teachers from Singapore were invited to present and participate

³ It is worth noting that several private schools which offer an IB curriculum also offer some version of philosophy at the lower levels. For instance, one school teaches 'Critical Thinking' for students in years 3-4 (School of the Arts 2021, 6). Another school teaches 'Classics' and 'Religious Studies and Philosophy' (Tanglin Trust School 2020).

⁴ For instance, see (Fai et al. 2006, Lim 2006, Lim/Ho 2007, Chang et al. 2007, Singapore Teachers' Union 2016).

⁵ Other schools have incorporated P4C and Chinese Philosophy into the teaching of the Chinese language (see Seet/Chang 2008, Singapore Teachers' Union 2016).

⁶ Apart from the formal training of undergraduate and graduate degrees in philosophy.

⁷ In 1997, the National Institute of Education in Singapore hosted the 7th International Conference on Thinking –

(Singteach 2005). In 2016, the STU hosted a P4C symposium on “Creating Communities of Inquiries in schools” (Singapore Teachers’ Union 2016).

Another important strand of pedagogy development can be seen in grassroots efforts by individual educators. For instance, philosophy educators have organized, presented, and participated in many P4C conferences.⁸ In 2011, Kristie Chen participated in the founding of ‘Philosophy with Children and Youth Network for Asia and the Pacific’ (PCYNAP 2013).⁹ Most recently, a pedagogical conference for local philosophy educators ‘Philosophy in Schools 2021’ was hosted online and philosophy educators were invited to share good pedagogical practices. The National University of Singapore offers a Teaching Internship module where students who are trained in philosophy are attached to schools. In this, philosophy graduates learn from practicing pre-university school teachers, and in turn, help teach students philosophy (National University of Singapore 2015).

Finally, it is worth noting that several research projects have been conducted over the years in order to contextualise and improve philosophical pedagogical approaches in Singapore (e.g., Chang et al. 2007; Raffles Girls’ School 2020; Lim 2006; Fai et al. 2006). While the results of these projects have generally been published in journals and presented at conferences, its uses have primarily been to improve pedagogy within the IP Curriculum.

Conclusion

Overall, as a curriculum subject in public schools in Singapore, Philosophy is primarily taught in Years 1-4 in IP Schools and in Years 5-6 in IB Programmes and in Junior Colleges (under ‘Knowledge and Inquiry’).¹⁰ Among the IP schools, there has been much activity in the form of enrichment programmes and inter-school conferences. Interestingly, many schools (including government primary schools) adopt the P4C and Community of Inquiry framework into the teaching of English, Social Studies, and Chinese.¹¹

What these findings suggest is that Philosophy is present in various forms across various kinds of schools in Singapore. Given the increase in recent momentum across IP Schools, and the Singapore government’s emphasis on Critical Learning in the 21st Century, there is a reason, I think, to be optimistic about the future development of Philosophy education in Singapore.¹²

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with “more than 2,300 researchers, educators and practitioners from well over 40 countries” (Quah/Ho 1998, ix). Importantly, several papers were presented on Philosophy for Children in Singapore.

⁸ For instance, at the 6th International Conference of the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children: Learning to Think: Philosophy in the Classroom (Lim 1993), the 15th International Conference of the International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children, Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference 2017 (National Institute of Singapore 2017).

⁹ PCYNAP received support from UNESCO for their 2015 conference (Philippines National Committee for UNESCO 2015).

¹⁰ See Burik et. al (2020). Note also that typically, Years 1-4 refer to students aged 13-16 and Years 5-6 refer to students aged 17-18, though of course, there are exceptions.

¹¹ Government primary schools typically teach students aged 7-12.

¹² There is some evidence that the value of teaching in Philosophy in schools remain a controversial topic of discussion among the Singaporean public (e.g., Gibran 2017; Loh 2017; Khoo 2021; Chow 2021).

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