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Country report: The teaching of philosophy in Singapore schools

Steven BURIK
Singapore Management University, STEVENBURIK@smu.edu.sg

Matthew HAMMERTON
Singapore Management University, mhammerton@smu.edu.sg

Sovan PATRA

Citation

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Steven Burik, Matthew Hammerton, and Sovan Patra, Singapore Management University
stevenburik@smu.edu.sg, mhammerton@smu.edu.sg, sovanpatra@smu.edu.sg

1. Overview of Singapore's education system

Singapore's education system is widely regarded as one of the best in the world.[1] In this report, we will focus on education at the primary, secondary, and junior college levels, and will not discuss the education offered in polytechnics (vocational colleges) and universities. We will also focus exclusively on Singapore's public school system, which Singapore citizens are required to attend unless they are granted a special exemption. In addition to public schools, there are also international schools, which cater to the relatively large expatriate population in Singapore and typically offer a curriculum leading to the IB diploma.[2]

All public schools in Singapore are administered by the Ministry of Education (MOE). English is the main language of instruction, although there are also compulsory "mother tongue" classes taught in either Malay, Mandarin, or Tamil. The public education system begins with six years of compulsory primary schooling. Based on their performance in the standardised Primary School Leaving Examination, students are then streamed into either four years ("Express" stream) or five years ("Normal" stream) of secondary education.[3]

Secondary schools offer a standardised curriculum that culminates with the "GCE-O Level" examination, which is jointly administered by MOE and Cambridge Assessments. After completing their O-Levels, most students will either enter a junior college or start a diploma course at a polytechnic. Junior Colleges provide an additional two years of pre-university education based on a standard curriculum that culminates with the "GCE-A Level" examination, which is also jointly administered by MOE and Cambridge Assessments. Performance in this exam is one of the key factors considered in university admissions (although, for students who do not go to junior college, there are alternative pathways to university).

One exception to this general model is that, since 2004, selected schools have combined secondary education and junior college into a single six-year "Integrated Programme" (IP). Students in the IP skip the GCE-O Level and instead work towards achieving either the GCE-A Level or the IB at the end of their secondary schooling. Institutions offering the IP have a significantly higher level of autonomy in both the curriculum/subjects they offer and the forms of assessment they employ.[4]

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[1] For example, see Singapore's high Pisa ranking reported in Coughlan 2016.

[2] However, some international schools also cater to particular national groups by offering the curriculum of their national school system. As of January 2020, there were 58 international schools in Singapore. By contrast, there were 186 primary and 153 secondary schools in Singapore's public education system; see https://beta.moe.gov.sg/schoolfinder.

[3] Further sub-streams are available; for a summary of all the options, see https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/education/landscape/print/singapore-education-overview.pdf.

[4] A list of schools offering the IP (currently 17) is available here: https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/whats-next/for-psle-students/where-do-i-want-to-go/integrated-programme-ip/index.html.

2. Philosophy in primary and "standard" secondary schools

Philosophy is not formally included in either the primary school or the standard secondary school curriculum. However, two subjects that are compulsory at both levels could be described as including some philosophical themes and methods. These subjects are Citizenship and Character Education (CCE) and Social Studies (SS). CCE aims to help students cultivate a "good character", which is conceptualized as involving six core virtues – respect, responsibility, resilience, integrity, care, and harmony. To achieve this, it gets students to engage with questions about self-identity, national-identity, ethics, multiculturalism, and globalisation. The teaching methods used in primary schools for teaching CCE include role-playing, personal reflections, group dialogues, and open-ended questioning.

Social Studies aims to develop "informed, concerned and participative citizens" (CPDD, 2016). Its syllabus focuses on three key issues: "Exploring Citizenship and Governance", "Living in a Diverse Society", and "Being Part of a Globalised World". Some of the questions covered in the SS secondary school syllabus include: "what constitutes citizenship?", "what constitutes social good?", "how do we respond in [sic!] a diverse society?", and "how do we respond to the economic/cultural/security impacts of globalization?". The pedagogy employed is "inquiry-based learning", in which students initiate investigations into social phenomena, seek and evaluate relevant evidence, and synthesise such evidence into hypotheses.

3. Philosophy in the "integrated program" and junior colleges

Singapore's MOE has identified critical thinking as one of three broad emerging "21st century competencies" that it aims to develop in all students. Because critical thinking is closely connected with philosophical thinking, the focus on the former has also led to more of the latter in the school curriculum.

Four schools in Singapore that offer the "integrated program" incorporate the IB Diploma Programme into the final two years (five and six). The course "Theory of Knowledge" (TOK) is one of three core components of the IB Diploma, and hence is taken by all students in their final two years at these schools. It follows the standard IB syllabus and is primarily an epistemology course that examines the nature of knowledge and its application in various disciplines.

Sixteen junior colleges and "integrated program" schools in Singapore offer the GCE-A Level. In seven of these schools, students are given the option of either taking the "General Paper" (GP), which is a one-unit course, or taking "Knowledge and Inquiry" (KI), which is a two-unit course. In the remaining nine schools KI is not offered and all students must take GP.

Like TOK, KI is primarily an epistemology course. It examines the nature of knowledge, its applications in various disciplines, and ethical questions that relate to it. Its assessment consists of three components: an essay, a critical thinking assignment, and a 6-month independent study project.

GP is not explicitly a philosophy course in the way that KI is. Nonetheless, it incorporates philosophical thinking into its syllabus. According to MOE, it "aims to develop in students the ability to think critically, to construct cogent arguments and to communicate ideas using clear,

accurate and effective language".[5] Furthermore, some of the questions that it tackles are philosophical. Examples include: "Assess the view that scientific research should not be constrained by ethical concerns", "Should the advancement of artificial intelligence be a cause for concern?", "Considering the increasing threat of terrorism, are governments justified in limiting people's rights?", and "Is diversity necessarily a good thing?".

Although anecdotal evidence suggests that a very small minority of students opt for KI, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in doing philosophy informally amongst JC and IP students. This has led to a number of student philosophy clubs being organized. Also, since 2018 Hwa Chong Institution has organized an annual philosophy event – The Hwa Chong Invitational Olympiad – open to all senior secondary and JC students in Singapore.[6]

4. Elective philosophy research projects in secondary schools

The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Programme (HSSRP) is a special program that caters to gifted students with an interest in the humanities and social sciences. It launched in 1994 and was initially open to both secondary and JC level students. However, from 2006 it has only been open to Secondary 3 and 4 students from gifted education programs or IP schools.

Students who undertake a HSSRP research project are paired with an academic mentor from a Singapore University, who they regularly meet with. They also participate in research workshops, present their projects at a HSSRP symposium, and eventually publish them in a HSSRP yearbook.

Philosophical topics are a good match for the HSSRP as they give students an important chance to develop their research and argumentation skills, and to explore an issue critically from different angles. Since 1997 there has been an average of 3-4 HSSRP projects per year that are philosophy based. A wide range of philosophical topics have been covered. Some recent examples include "A Study of the Moral Arguments Invoked by Political Parties in Singapore" and "To Alter or Not to Alter? An Examination of Whether it is Morally Permissible for Social Media Companies to Alter Users' News Feeds".

5. Conclusion

In recent decades, more avenues for thinking philosophically have been incorporated into Singapore's education system. This reflects Singapore's positioning of itself as a leader in the knowledge economy and an acknowledgement within policy making circles that the higher-order thinking skills that philosophy inculcates are crucial to such leadership. We are hopeful that in the decades ahead, this trend will continue and students in Singapore will have more opportunities to engage in philosophical thinking and reflection.

However, since Philosophy is not an official subject in the Singapore school system, teachers do not receive any specialized training in how to teach philosophy. Learning is on the job (through mentoring by seniors) or through ad hoc training. For example, MOE occasionally organises professional development courses, and inter-school teacher meetings to help those

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[5] https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/education/syllabuses/english-language-and-literature/files/2012-general-paper-syllabus-(pre-university)-h1.pdf
[6] For more information see: https://hcipo.wordpress.com

teaching Knowledge and Inquiry to develop their philosophical teaching abilities. We expect that as the interest in studying philosophy expands, teaching teachers to teach philosophy will also become more structured and formalised.[7]

References

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