

Does philosophy have a role in school?

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issue of teaching philosophy in primary, secondary and post-secondary/tertiary education and its potential inclusion in school curricula in Wales. The data for this empirical research were derived from a mixed methods study consisting of qualitative (semi-structured interviews, n=12) and quantitative (online survey, n=163) data. Descriptive statistical analysis for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data generated evidence suggesting that teachers see philosophy more as an integral part of other subjects and as a method for learning rather than as a discrete academic subject. Furthermore, philosophy is mainly seen as a part of the following three Areas of Learning and Experience: Humanities, Health and well-being, and Languages, literacy and communication. Therefore, the article considers the scope of research applications and implications for both educational practitioners and policy makers.

Keywords: Curriculum, Philosophy, Philosophy for Children, Teaching philosophy, Wales

Introduction

In 2015, *Successful Futures*, a report containing a review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales (Donaldson 2015) was released. The report included 68 recommendations, all of which were accepted by Welsh Government. Arguably, the most significant (and perhaps controversial) aspect of these reforms was the announcement of a new, national

curriculum. Unlike its predecessor, the new curriculum guidance for Wales operates as a general design framework intended to be used by schools in designing their own, school level curricula. Apart from the autonomy now granted to teachers in deciding what to teach and how, the curriculum framework also reconfigured curriculum content, moving from discrete curricular subjects to six 'Areas of Learning and Experience' (or AoLEs): Language, literacy and communication, Mathematics and numeracy, Science and technology, Humanities, Health and wellbeing, and Expressive arts. As a result of these reforms, schools across Wales will implement their own, distinctive curricula incrementally from 2022 to 2026. While this study took place in Wales and is concerned with how teachers perceive philosophy as part of their school curricula, this study contributes new insights regarding curricular deliberations over the inclusion of philosophy in school.

Teaching Philosophy in School

There has been the growing body of academic literature related to teaching philosophy at school within different countries and contexts. Teaching and research in philosophy (also its inclusion in school curriculum) have been regularly monitored across the world by UNESCO (1953, 1984, 1986, 2007, 2009a–d, 2011). The organisation emphasises that teaching philosophy provides the 'free exercise of thinking' and is the 'most useful tool for training a critical mind and responsible attitudes' (UNESCO 2009a–d). However, none of the 20 more-economically developed countries (including England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) incorporate philosophy in their 'prescribed curricula for the primary and lower secondary phases of schooling' (Hand and Winstanley 2009, p. xi).

The turn to thinking in school is a turn to philosophy as an educational tool and resource. Philosophy encourages thinking about thinking itself, so it is based on self-reflection and metacognition. Matthew Lipman, the founder of 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C), developed resources and strategies for teaching philosophy in schools (Lipman 1976, 1981, 1988, 1991; Lipman and Sharp 1978; Lipman et al. 1980). As Lipman (1991) puts it: 'I tried to make a case for the teaching of thinking in the schools and for the use of philosophy as the vehicle' (p. 262). Importantly, Lipman understands philosophy as a method or approach to learning rather than a traditional academic subject, which needs to be 'redesigned and reconstructed so as to

make it available and acceptable and enticing to children' (p. 262). Therefore, P4C is based on the philosophical story as a stimulus for philosophical discussion and relies on a 'community of inquiry' where teachers act as a 'facilitator rather than instructor' (Hand and Winstanley 2009, p. xii). Furthermore, Lipman celebrates Dewey's attitude that the aim of education is the encouragement to master thinking skills rather than the transmission of knowledge. However, he remains disappointed that Dewey sees scientific inquiry as a more appropriate way to achieve this educational goal rather than philosophical inquiry (Lipman 1988, p. 12; Lipman 1991, p. 262). Both Dewey and Lipman were committed to 'an education centred on thinking', but Lipman 'claimed that we should turn to philosophy rather than to science in order to secure this end' (Cam 2018, p. 59). Educational use of philosophy is 'far away from the model of scientific enquiry' as it is oriented towards not-knowing rather than knowing (Biesta 2011, p. 317). Thus, philosophy at school maintains an interdisciplinary, cross-curricular perspective and provides the possibility of thinking in the disciplines, about the disciplines and among the disciplines (Lipman 1991).

In fact, P4C emerged 'as a means of developing critical thinking skills in an educational environment' (Vansielegem and Kennedy 2011, p. 173). Demand for critical thinking is noticeable in the UK schools. In England 'the National Curriculum now explicitly includes a requirement to develop pupils' thinking skills, identified as "information-processing skills", "reasoning skills", "enquiry skills", "creative thinking skills" and "evaluation skills"' (Hand and Winstanley 2009, p. xiii). Similarly, the current curriculum framework for Wales (Welsh Government 2020) also focuses on the development of basic skills including critical thinking and problem solving.

Methods

Ethical considerations

This research was approved by School Research Ethics Committee of Social Sciences at Cardiff University (SREC/2709). During recruitment process potential participants were provided a detailed Information Sheet about the project along with an Informed Consent form detailing the rights of the participants, the voluntary nature of their participation, the option of withdrawal at any time, and the measures to protect anonymity

and confidentiality. I have anonymised the data and used pseudonyms for the participants.

Sampling Procedure and Description

The research employed purposeful, convenience and snowball sampling. The sample embraced teachers and lecturers from schools of various phases (primary, secondary and tertiary), types (secular/faith, mainstream/special) and sectors (public/private). The reason for this approach is because I believe teachers' professional experience and therefore intended to generate a diversity of teachers from a wide range of school settings. Teachers' views about philosophy play a crucial role in delivering learning content as educational practitioners 'are the gatekeepers of their classrooms and curricular innovations' (Höttecke and Silva 2011, p. 294).

Data Generation and Analysis

All face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Each interview lasted around one hour and took place in public spaces such as schools or libraries. The design of the online survey and its contents were informed by responses given in the semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was designed with a focus on the following questions: (a) how do teachers conceptualise philosophy? (b) what are their experiences (formal and informal) with philosophy? and (c) what are their views on philosophy teaching/learning at school?

Findings

Teachers' responses to questions about their knowledge and understanding of philosophy are classified below according to the main disciplines of philosophy as this mirrors teachers' tendency to define philosophy by selectively emphasising one or a few aspects of the discipline – from ontology and epistemology to morals and religious issues. The following are highlights from the data that succinctly and coherently demonstrate the themes produced through the analysis of interview transcripts.

Teachers' Understandings of Philosophy

Ontology

- Study of thoughts and ideas.
- The study of thought, the study and practice of ideas.
- The study of a bigger picture, bigger questions like 'why do we exist?'
- A framework for life / A mind design for life.

Epistemology

- Critical thinking
 - Philosophy is critical thinking. And it doesn't matter what your cognitive ability is, it gives everybody an entry point.
- Creative thinking
 - Thinking beyond the box.
- Independent thinking
 - The art of questioning everything and not taking things at face value.
- Abstract thinking
 - A way of thinking about deeper level things.
 - The deepest level of thinking, communicated to shape society and the world around us and beyond.
 - Higher order thinking like beyond school, university level.

Axiology

- Morality and social action
 - Philosophy provides a moral compass.
 - The etymology, origin of the word 'philosophy' is 'love of wisdom'. So, from that point of view I guess it's trying to become wiser in everything that you do.
 - I think philosophy is about us taking responsibility for those actions and things and how we impact on situations. And philosophy is about us thinking about what the consequences of our actions would be.
- Philosophy and Religion *or* Philosophy of Religion
 - I just always tie philosophy to religion.
 - I think philosophy for me is something different to religion. More, philosophy and ethics would be together really, I suppose.

Perceptions of teaching philosophy in school

Attitudes towards philosophy are controversial. Jaspers (1964) noted that it might be seen as 'basically simple and intelligible' or, on the contrary, as 'hopelessly difficult'. This is due to the misconception that 'philosophical thinking is far removed from ordinary or commonsense thinking' (Pring 2009, p. 18). Interviewees support contradictory reputation and public labels of philosophy: 'People get scared about it because they think you have to be very intelligent, super smart to access it' (Mary, 51, Secondary School). This tendency is also mirrored in the schools:

We probably steer away from it [philosophy] because maybe we are concerned that it's too in-depth or intellectually demanding for the pupils in front of us. (Eric, 31, Secondary School)

Philosophy as a misunderstood subject

I think it [philosophy] is the best subject in the curriculum because it teaches children to think. I think it's the most misunderstood subject on the curriculum. (Norma, 44, Secondary School)

Philosophy for Children in school

Four of the 12 interviewees reported that they had formal training in P4C. According to Sue, she 'can do weeks and weeks on P4C.' As a stimulus for discussion in the classroom, she uses thought-provoking books or works of art:

I didn't understand what philosophy was until I started having a tool or people gave me the tools for teaching children. You know, I am going through books and then they start to challenge each other. (Sue, 47, Special school)

Philosophy and School Curricula in Wales

Eric, a mathematics and economics teacher in a secondary school in central Cardiff is enthusiastic about the AoLE's, which 'provide great flexibility for schools to marry subjects together closely'. Due to this, he sees a real possibility for philosophy to be integrated in AoLE of Humanities:

So, we have, for example, here Humanities department and in the first year of Year 7 students will have Humanities lessons, which will be a mixture of History, Geography, Religious studies. So, that provides a perfect opportunity why not to

have a mixture of History, Philosophy, Geography and RS. You drop philosophy into that and do not much bother. (Eric, 31, Secondary School)

Therefore, the findings of this research support studies which argue for philosophy as ‘a meta-subject’ (Suissa 2009) or emphasise its ‘cross-curricular connections’ (Norris 2015). Thus, philosophy is quite reasonably seen in school as ‘a thread through every subject’ (Sue), which is ‘weaved’ into the curricular activities (Mary). It is also important to include and practise philosophy as a method for learning/thinking, which is ‘a way of channeling a child’s interests’ (Prudence, 50, Primary School) insofar as it links thinking and experience (Dewey 2012, 2015).

The following highlight how philosophy can be threaded through the AoLEs of Humanities (e.g. Religious Education) and Health and well-being (e.g. Personal and Social Education), and also addresses obstacles for students studying philosophy beyond compulsory schooling.

Philosophy and the Humanities AoLE

Philosophy might remain in the school curriculum as a part of the Humanities AoLE and specifically in learning experiences focusing on Religious Education (RE):

We are ‘Religious studies’, but we don’t think ‘Religious studies’ has actually done us any favours in a secular society. I think it would take more notice of us if we were more ‘Ethics and Philosophy’. (Norman, 48, Secondary School)

In the current National curriculum RE is seen as ‘a vehicle to get pupils to the point of philosophy’ (Norma) because pupils are more interested in philosophical debates rather than ‘in religion per se’ (Eric). This is also supported by Harry, a Design Technology teacher in a faith high school in Cardiff. He claimed, ‘I see religion as being a path that narrows down thinking’. Therefore, philosophy can be taught through the ‘collaborative inquiry’, which is more effective than ‘sectarian and didactic religious education’ (Cam 2014).

Philosophy and the Health and Wellbeing AoLE

John, a science teacher from the same faith high school pointed out that philosophy might be considered as an alternative to Personal and social education or pastoral lessons (in faith schools). Thus, philosophy might be combined with the PSE framework or even considered as its replacement:

Every two weeks we have PSE lessons, pastoral lessons. Some of them are good but the majority is just going through the motion of an hour. But if you replace that with a proper philosophy hour, I think that would be more beneficial than sitting there listening about what your hobbies are instead. (John, 40, Secondary School)

Further studies of philosophy

Mark, a Sixth Form College lecturer of philosophy in central Cardiff emphasised that WJEC/CBAC exam board does not provide philosophy specifications. Thus, students must choose another examination board in England:

There is not much of a place [for philosophy] in the curriculum in Wales at all because the Welsh governing body, examining body, does not offer philosophy at A-Level, which is why this college is having to go to the English examining body. And so, yeah, there is actually a difficulty there in the way that there is a lack of opportunity for doing philosophy in Wales. (Mark, 43, Sixth Form College)

Ultimately, both survey and interview findings suggest that philosophy fits in school, and this evidence supports Lipman's statement 'philosophy as a discipline is eminently suitable for the elementary and secondary schools' (Lipman 1988, p. 42). However, it seems that the form and extent of philosophy inclusion in school remains a conflicted and debatable issue.

Philosophy as a curriculum subject or method for learning

Teachers who completed the survey (n=163) were asked about the role of philosophy at school as both a curriculum subject and as a method for learning. The data show that 81 per cent (132) of teachers agreed they were interested in philosophy as a method for learning (meaning taking a systematic approach to questioning and scrutinising curricular content and ideas), while 59.5 per cent (97) teachers were interested in it existing as an area of study either within a single AoLE or threaded across multiple Areas of Learning and Experience.

Philosophy and the Welsh Curriculum Framework

Teachers completing the online survey were asked about their preference for the inclusion of philosophy in school as either a method for learning, a cross-curricular 'subject' or as a discrete, academic subject. The results

indicated that a small majority of teachers preferred the inclusion of philosophy as a cross-curricular 'subject':

- Philosophy as a cross-curricular subject (54, or 33 per cent)
- Philosophy as a method for learning (52, or 32 per cent)
- Philosophy as a discrete, academic subject (24, or 15 per cent).

Teachers were also asked about the role of philosophy in the school curricula in Wales. The following are the three most popular AoLEs where teachers' said philosophy had a role:

- Humanities (39, or 24 per cent)
- Health and well-being (34, or 21 per cent)
- Languages, literacy and communication (32, or 19.5 per cent).

Discussion

Conceptualisation of philosophy

Participants' definitions of philosophy give insight into their understanding of philosophy as they tend to emphasise a certain aspect of philosophy. However, these responses present a limited or distorted view of philosophy. They suggest a limited experience and/or understanding of the potential role philosophy can play in school curricula.

Experiences with philosophy

Teachers reported that they have encountered with philosophy in several ways: reading books (both academic and fiction), contemplating nature or participating in the social-political debates and protests. This suggests that philosophy can be experienced both in a solitary way and in solidarity with others. However, many responses provided by teachers demonstrate a sense of regret or an acknowledgement of their exposure to and understanding of philosophy. Notably, several teachers in this study were formally trained in Philosophy for Children methods, and these teachers possessed a more comprehensive of the nature and role of philosophy, as well as its potential in pupils' schooling experiences. Additionally, other participants who either studied philosophy or completed doctoral level studies also

demonstrated both a greater understanding of and enthusiasm for philosophy as both a method for learning and area of study, suggesting a rather commonsensical connection between experiences with philosophy and its inclusion in the school curriculum.

Perceptions of teaching philosophy

Teachers' relations with philosophy teaching are controversial because, according to data, philosophy is treated as a misunderstood subject in school. First and foremost, this refers to the limited 'turn to thinking' (Lipman 1991) in education. Further, this shows that philosophy teaching has no strong roots (tradition) in Wales and most likely lacks its continuity throughout all phases of education. In fact, some teachers successfully apply P4C approach in their practice, but this is usually limited to the primary level of education, whereas in secondary education, philosophy is randomly assigned to RE or PSE curricula. Finally, tertiary education reports difficulties to teach philosophy in the Sixth Form as WJEC/CBAC examination board does not provide philosophy specifications.

As evidenced above, most teachers see philosophy traditionally as a means to tackle problems related to human existence. However, they also have new understandings of philosophy orientated around one's personal well-being and ability to communicate. The current national curriculum does not have a 'Health and well-being' subject area, but PSE is often associated with aspects of 'Health and well-being'. The data show teachers often regard the PSE framework as an umbrella that accommodates 'marginal' or non-traditional subjects, including philosophy.

Teachers' responses also indicate a tendency to move from the systematic, academic understanding of philosophy to a more edifying and therapeutic philosophy (Rorty 1979), which is seen as a way of life or spiritual exercise (Hadot 1995). So, instead of relying on the traditional philosophical imperative 'Know thyself' (gnōthi sauton), teachers give priority to another one 'Take care of yourself' (epimelēsthai sautou) (Foucault 1988). The third major category 'Languages, literacy and communication' also makes sense as P4C aims to produce 'scrupulous readers' and 'reasonable discussants' (Lipman 1981). In terms of communication, philosophical discussion 'sharpens the child's reasoning and inquiry skills as nothing else can' (Lipman 1988, p. 24).

Conclusion

The findings of this research provide insights into teachers' perceptions in Wales of philosophy and how they conceptualise and experience philosophy. It shows that teachers who have previous experience with philosophy see its teaching at school more favourably than others. Most teachers perceive philosophy as important in broadening pupils' perspectives on their lives (87 per cent) or developing critical thinking and independent reasoning (84 per cent). However, in the educational system of Wales, philosophy is predominantly known as a part of the RE curriculum and P4C approach. This suggests that philosophy serves in schools as Philosophy of Religion, Ethics or it is treated as a means to achieve other educational goals, for instance, to boost literacy and numeracy skills. Therefore, philosophy as the 'lost dimension in education' (Lipman et al. 1980) might be newly discovered and explicitly introduced in school curricula in Wales.

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