

# Kaupapa Māori Philosophy and Schools

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## Abstract

*Goals for adding philosophy to the school curriculum centre on the perceived need to improve the general quality of critical thinking found in society. School philosophy also provides a means for asking questions of value and purpose about curriculum content across and between subjects, and, furthermore, it affirms the capability of children to think philosophically. Two main routes suggested are the introduction of Philosophy as a subject, and processes of facilitating philosophical discussions as a way of establishing classroom 'communities of inquiry'. Two prevalent concerns about this idea are, firstly, that the school curriculum is already overloaded with subjects and content. Secondly, there are doubts that teachers know enough about philosophy to be confident or competent in teaching it. This paper discusses the question of including philosophy in the school curriculum with the aim of exploring some less widely acknowledged limitations of this apparently worthy aim. The discussion draws in turn on three relevant examples of school curriculum reform: social studies, philosophy of science, and Kura Kaupapa Māori.*

## Introduction

Philosophy is not currently part of the national school curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand (M.O.E, 2007, 2008), although the theme of this conference suggests most delegates would be assumed to support its future inclusion. Organisations promoting philosophy in schools originated out of the work of Matthew Lipman in the 1970s (see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/children>; [www.p4c.org.nz](http://www.p4c.org.nz)). Goals for adding philosophy to the school curriculum centre on the perceived need to improve the general quality of critical thinking found in society. School philosophy also provides a means for asking questions of value and purpose about curriculum content across and between subjects, and, furthermore, it affirms the capability of children to think philosophically (with the implication that this has previously been in doubt).

There are two main routes suggested: first, the introduction of Philosophy as a subject, and second, processes of facilitating philosophical discussions as a way of establishing classroom 'communities of inquiry'. Two prevalent concerns about this idea are, firstly, that the school curriculum is already overloaded with subjects and content. Secondly, there are doubts that teachers know enough about philosophy to be confident or competent in teaching it. The question of including philosophy in the school curriculum is discussed in this paper with the aim of focusing on some less widely acknowledged possibilities and limitations of this apparently worthy tradition of curricular reform. The discussion draws in turn on three relevant examples of school curriculum reform: social studies, philosophy of science, and Kura Kaupapa Māori.

## Social Studies Curriculum Reform for Critical Thinking

The first question concerns the novelty or otherwise of the declared goals of introducing philosophy into the school curriculum. The assertion that these are original goals is not supported by the literature on curriculum history. The prime example here is social studies, which originated in the mid-20th century from very similar considerations as those currently expressed by advocates of school philosophy. One of its three major traditions is defined as "social studies as reflective inquiry, where the emphasis is on pupils selecting the issues and problems themselves and evolving decisions through critical thinking" (Openshaw, 1996, p.163).

Is philosophy in the curriculum therefore designed to take over this function, as an off-shoot of Social Studies, similar to the evolution of Media Studies out of English? This question is posed in a ludic spirit, given the lack of suggestion in the literature on philosophy in schools that such is the case. Nevertheless, given the intersection between their stated goals, the history of social studies may well be relevant to the

future prospects of philosophy. The literature documents an ongoing struggle for social studies to compete against the more traditional subjects such as mathematics and science, and to resolve its internal conflicts into a clear, universally accepted rationale. There is little evidence of success in operationalising the ideals on which social studies was founded, especially those concerned with questioning the fundamental values of society, such as the tradition outlined above (Openshaw, 1996).

The primary cause of these struggles lies in the fact that school curriculum is a site of contest between the aims and discourses of diverse groups who seek to influence the direction of education, given its perceived role in shaping society's future. These debates have only become more polarised and explicit in recent decades (since 1990 in Aotearoa New Zealand) in moving away from centralisation towards a 'contractualist' process of curriculum development (Openshaw, 1996). Resulting curricula therefore embody political compromises, or perhaps more to the point, political solutions found by state agencies to unresolved conflicts between educational stakeholders. In this way, the contestation process drives curriculum towards a conservative, apparently 'value-free' outcome, which militates against achieving the sorts of goals with which advocates for philosophy (or, indeed, social studies) are concerned.

But such goals are not restricted to social studies within the framework of the existing school curriculum. Calls for increased relevance to modern society have been influencing school curriculum development for around a century now, to move beyond or away from its origins in the 'traditional academic disciplines' (Openshaw, Clark, Hamer, & Waitere-Ang, 2005, p.193). School curriculum reform in the 20th century has been characterised as containing three traditions, each arguably at odds with the others: the social efficiency movement, the child-centred movement, and the social meliorists. The latter movement 'believed that the curriculum should encourage students to challenge and critique what they saw around them in the interests of creating a more just society' (ibid). In other words, the stated goal of improving critical thinking for social justice applies not just to existing subjects, but to the school curriculum as a whole.

In broad-brush terms, through the middle part of the 20th century, social studies was charged with responsibility for these social meliorist goals, but in today's curriculum, every subject claims to play a role in which each of these three traditions is recognisable. For example, mathematics education includes in its rationale the need for modern citizens to understand statistics about society; science education draws attention to the need for informed social debate on science issues; English points to the crucial role of literacy in democratic participation, and so on. The newer subjects of Health, Technology and Education for Sustainability are even more strongly underpinned by rationales of personal development and social improvement, as opposed to traditional disciplinary knowledge.

Besides the subjects themselves, today's school curriculum has an increasingly important 'front end' specifying generic goals expressed as sets of principles, values and key competencies, which schools are expected to engender in students through the curriculum. The descriptors 'critical and creative thinkers' and 'informed decision makers' appear in the statement titled 'Vision: What we want for our young people' at the start of the New Zealand Curriculum (M.O.E., 2007, p.8). The role envisaged for philosophy in schools has clearly already been thoroughly rehearsed, which minimises any likelihood that this rationale for including philosophy in the curriculum will meet with success.

### **Philosophy of Science in Science Curricular Reform**

If the process-oriented goals for philosophy in schools are insufficiently novel or distinctive, advocates might still wish to argue for including philosophical disciplinary knowledge - in other words, philosophy as a subject. Yet this move seems perilously close to falling into the very trap from which the school curriculum has for many years been trying to escape - that of justifying curriculum content on the grounds of its inherent value as knowledge. The older or starting-point orientation towards curriculum 'as a fixed and traditional body of knowledge' succumbs to the weaknesses of epistemic transcendence or universality, and ignores the changes that have taken place in epistemology since around 1900. As mainstream academic philosophy continues to struggle to overcome its lack of historical reflexivity, to redefine itself beyond the end of metaphysics and in response to the linguistic, cultural and narrative turns of the 20th century and beyond

(Peters, 2010), there seems more danger than promise in the attempt to inaugurate a 'body of knowledge' as the subject of philosophy in the school curriculum.

The source and nature of this 'danger' is made apparent by the broader contemporary understanding of school curriculum, labelled 'the pedagogical view' (Openshaw et al., 2005, p.188). This view recognises the biases, distortions, embedded discourses and silences that contribute to the 'hidden curriculum' - the unavoidable companion to that which is set out in official curriculum documents, and with considerable influence in the outcomes of school education. For philosophy, the hidden curriculum amounts to an ideological burden resting on questions such as *whose* philosophy might be taught, and which cultural, gender and class perspectives might be privileged in so doing? These questions echo those used to challenge the selection of curricular content in other subjects, with science being a case in point.

The history of the science curriculum documents particularly intransigent debates concerning the philosophy of the subject, and its nature as a form of knowledge, which make a useful comparison for considering the prospects for philosophy itself, especially considering the close links between science and philosophy in the academy (Matthews, 1998). No other school curriculum area has been more concerned with the philosophy *of* the subject; nor had greater difficulty meeting the challenges of diversity - especially cultural diversity - in recent decades (Siegel, 2002). Science is a good example of what happens when distorted representations of the subject are portrayed in the school curriculum.

The term 'school science' is widely used to refer to these overly reductionist, simplistic versions of science (Aikenhead, 2000). Such 'myths about science' also include misogynist, racist and scientific overtones (Hodson, 1999). The phenomenon of 'school science' acts to perpetuate societal ignorance and misunderstandings about the nature and philosophy of science, with an ultimately impoverishing influence on science itself. No amount of curricular rhetoric can conceal the extent to which science education still acts as a gatekeeper for the wealthy in terms of access to higher education and the professions in our society today (McKinley, 2008). These trends show little if any sign of changing, despite pressure on schools and teachers to take measures such as adopting culturally responsive pedagogies (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007).

In a recent paper, a long-time advocate for teaching philosophy of science in science education attributes his support in part to the influence on his views of Matthew Lipman's *Philosophy for Children* (Davson-Galle, 2008, p.677). P. Davson-Galle makes a careful examination of the possible justifications for teaching philosophy of science (to various degrees of complexity and active engagement) as part of the compulsory secondary school science curriculum. He weighs the possible benefits (extrinsic or intrinsic) to the individual student, or to the group, of these various degrees of compulsory teaching of philosophy of science (both epistemic and ethical issues), against the cost of the loss of freedom of choice suffered by the entire populations of students involved. After thorough discussion, he reaches a pessimistic conclusion:

As far as I can work out, beyond a possible warrant for the most basic "Nature of Science" sense of "an introduction", it is hard to see enough benefit of any sort, or the individual, or for the rest of us, to outweigh the loss of student choice as to what is learnt. (Davson-Galle, 2008, p.708)

Davson-Galle bases the strength of his argument on the 'observation [that] compulsory schooling is a sustained exercise in force in which individual freedom of action and freedom of thought are interfered with' (p.684). The argument of his paper is that there is an ethical contradiction in the situation where all future citizens, who have the right to be treated as 'free agents', are nevertheless compelled to 'learn' ethics. In closing he notes, 'although narrowly focused upon philosophy of science, [much] the same sort of freedom-valuing onus argument would seem to apply to other parts of the compulsory curriculum' (p.708). In particular, these objections apply to any suggestion that philosophy *per se* become part of the compulsory curriculum.

This forms a specific example of the processes of the 'hidden curriculum' at work. Davson-Galle (2008) draws attention to the paradox of how curricular reforms seeking to improve social equity break against the

bedrock criteria of universal human rights, on which the ethical basis for state education rests. Given due consideration of the inherent discursive processes of curriculum, there is little scope for politically innocent expectations of philosophy in schools.

### **Philosophy and Kura Kaupapa Māori**

Disillusionment with the extent and efficacy of reforms within the mainstream school system to address historical inequity for Māori in education was a contributing factor in the efforts to establish a separate school system, namely Kura Kaupapa Māori (KKM) (Sharples, 1994). The relevance to this discussion is that 'kaupapa' encompasses the meaning of 'philosophy' (tellingly enough, it also simultaneously means 'political cause'). The case of KKM and their underlying philosophy of 'kaupapa Māori' forms the third and final specific example against which to discuss the prospects for philosophy in the school curriculum.

As noted above, the second half of the 20th century was a time of increasing awareness of the human and group rights of cultural minorities in Western societies. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there was a new level of acknowledgement concerning the historical disadvantages suffered by Māori people, and the role played by schools in advancing these inequities. Despite expressed positive will, however, changes for Māori in the mainstream education system in the 1970s and 1980s were neither substantive nor rapid enough to accommodate the process of widespread political conscientising of Māori people and their resulting cultural, political and economic aspirations (Smith, 1990, 2002). The monocultural system presented structural impediments to Māori aspirations, which ensured the failure of Māori educational policy reforms to meet the needs of Māori individuals and communities (Smith, 1991).

The emergence of autonomous Māori educational reform efforts, in particular Te Kohanga Reo and KKM, was in response to these frustrations. KKM are schools 'based on Kaupapa Māori philosophy' (ibid., p.18). Kaupapa Māori philosophy is a critical, culturally specific philosophy that underpins an overall orientation towards education. The key point about KKM, which could not be achieved within the mainstream education system, is that they represent a structural intervention. They embody the recognition that, in education, philosophy goes beyond the curriculum to permeate all structures and practices of the school at every level. But to describe the situation in these terms recalls the previous discussion concerning the wider, pedagogical view of curriculum:

embod[ying] the broader social, political and cultural processes or constructs which embrace values, assumptions, fundamental beliefs about the world, basic knowledge and visions of utopias... it is not an object to be transmitted but a socially constructed set of shared understandings set within, and influenced by, the social and policy contexts of education. (Openshaw et al., 2005, p.188)

The establishment of KKM as culturally-based school systems can thus be conceived within a wider consideration of school curriculum reform. It brings us back, in conclusion, to the question of who is envisaged to benefit from the introduction of philosophy into the school curriculum? If KKM are based on Māori philosophies, then mainstream schools must be based on Western philosophies, and the philosophy proposed for inclusion in the school curriculum is by extension an implicitly Western philosophy. Without critical reflection on the inherent Eurocentrism in the existing school curriculum, calls for the introduction of philosophy in schools serve only to further entrench the cultural one-sidedness of the hidden curriculum.

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