The role of the philosopher of education in the task of decoloniality

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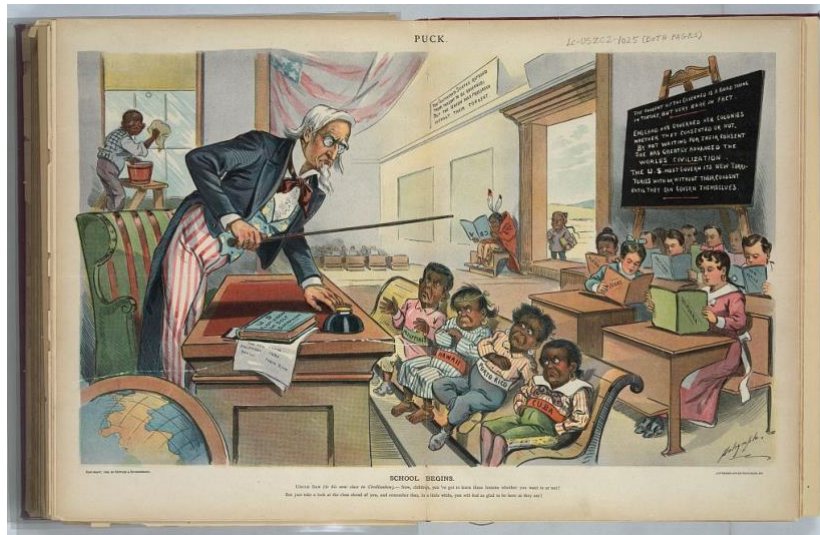
Figure 1. 'School begins' by Louis Dalrymple. Courtesy of the *Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress*, LC-DIG-ppmsca-28668.

The image above (Figure 1) is a political cartoon by Louis Dalrymple, which was published in the American satirical magazine, *Puck*, in January 1899. It shows a classroom with Uncle Sam as the teacher. Sitting on the front bench are four dark-skinned pupils wearing sashes on which are written, respectively, 'Philippines', 'Hawaii [*sic*]', 'Porto Rico [*sic*]', and 'Cuba'. Right behind these four children are another group of children sitting at desks, reading from books labelled with the names of US states that were annexed by the US following the Mexican-American War. In the far-right sits a pupil dressed in Indigenous American traditional dress, and that pupil is holding an upside-down book. In the far-left corner is a depiction of an African-American child cleaning the classroom window. Standing right outside the door is a child with a traditional Chinese pigtail.

On the blackboard at the back of the classroom are the sentences, 'The consent of the governed is a good thing in theory, but very rare in fact. England has governed her colonies whether they consented or not. By not waiting for their consent she has greatly advanced the world's civilization. The US must govern its new territories with or without their consent until they can govern themselves.' The caption of this cartoon reads: 'Uncle Sam (to his new class in Civilization): Now children, you've got to learn these lessons, whether you want to or not. But just take a look at the class ahead of you. And remember that in a little while you will feel as glad to be here as they are.'

This political cartoon was published around the time the US Congress was debating whether the Philippines should be annexed. Through it, Dalrymple connected those debates to the persistence at the time of the notions of Manifest Destiny and white supremacy. I begin this paper with this image to gesture to the context from which my reflections emerge. In the late 1800s, the Philippines launched a revolution of independence against Spain after 300 years of colonial rule. The leader of the revolution, Emilio Aguinaldo, declared independence on June 1898, formed a parliament, and ratified a constitution. However, at the same time, Spain and the US were fighting the three-month long Spanish-American War. After the war was over, they negotiated their peace treaty in Paris, and the US, which had originally considered recognising Philippine independence, decided instead to colonise the Philippines and some of Spain's other colonial territories. This decision ushered in a brutal and bloody war between the US and the Philippines, in which the Philippine forces, tired and depleted from their fight against Spain, were no match for American firepower. In March 1901, Philippine president Emilio Aguinaldo (whose likeness the Filipino child in the *Puck* cartoon above bears) was captured by US forces. By 1902, the US declared that they had won, and handed over the governance of the Philippines from the

military to an American civilian bureaucracy. The Philippines would remain an American colony until 1946.

During the almost five decades of American colonial rule, one of the biggest changes that the US colonial government made was to Philippine formal education. The government replaced existing schools and set up new ones, in an educational system that was shaped both by American self-interest and the pervasive racial theories and ideologies of the time. One illustration of this was the way that the US government viewed Philippine languages. Filipinos, even until today, speak almost 200 languages. Apart from their fears that soldiers engaged in pacification efforts would not understand what Filipinos were saying, proponents of US empire in the Philippines portrayed this as a sign of civilisational backwardness, an indication that the Philippines was unprepared for self-governance. Thus, partly out of a sincere belief that monolingualism was a prerequisite for civilization, but partly out of self-interest, some bureaucrats in the US educational system attempted to replace Philippine languages with English. W.C. Grimes would even say exaggeratingly, in 1928, 'The most stupendous undertaking in the school program was that of driving the mother tongue out of the mouths of millions of people by substituting for it the language of a nation whose habitat lay beyond six thousand miles of ocean' (Grimes, 1928).

This is not to say that Filipinos accepted this narrative. The Filipino diplomat Sixto Lopez, in a failed attempt to get the US Congress to give up its imperial ambitions in the Philippines, sent them this statement that was read in Congress in 1901:

> [The] difference between the dialects of the seven provincial districts would not be a real difficulty to independent self-government [.... The] alleged antagonisms between the inhabitants of the provincial districts, or between the so-called 'tribes,' have arisen, not in the minds of the Filipinos themselves, but in the minds of those who do not understand our people and who have reached conclusions in no way warranted by the facts.[1]

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[1] The "Tribes"' (statement by Sixto Lopez), read by the Secretary (*U.S. Cong. Rec.* 34, 1901, pp. 1716-1717.)

I take you on this short trip down Philippine history not only to explain the context from which my reflections arise, but also to highlight the degree to which coloniality and education were and continue to be intertwined in the post-colony,[2] using the Philippine setting as an example. Education is not neutral. Whereas in some places, formal education is seen unequivocally as something that brings liberation, in many places, the oppressive, sometimes even culturally genocidal history of education, is not a distant legend, but a fairly recent memory.

Moreover, today, decades after the end of formal colonial rule in the Philippines, elements of coloniality remain in the educational system. The educational system continues to privilege so-called international languages over local languages, Eurocentric ways of thinking and understanding the world over indigenous ones, neo-liberal approaches to trade and the exploitation of natural resources over indigenous ways of living with nature. This is not to demonise all Eurocentric practices, nor to romanticise all indigenous ones, Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò's recent critique notwithstanding. Each culture has something that other cultures can learn from. However, the history of colonialism in the Philippines, as it has been elsewhere, is a history where Western practices were taken to be the standard that the Philippines ought to follow, and a history in which practices that were different from these were immediately assumed to be backward, superstitious, unenlightened, and which were then and continue to be suppressed and dismissed rather than so much as considered. The system of formal education was often precisely the tool through which this suppression, dismissal, and sometimes erasure, was done.

This was true not only in the Philippines but also in other parts of the world. Against this historical backdrop, this essay aims to think through the meaning of the phrase that has become

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[2] In this paper, I use the term 'post-colony' (with the hyphen) to refer to former colonies that have since won their independence; I use the word 'postcolony' (without the hyphen) to refer to postcolonial theory.

something of a rallying cry in higher education institutions in the Global North, the call to 'decolonise the curriculum'. In the first part of this essay, I respond to that phrase by situating the task of decolonising the curriculum within the larger projects of decolonial justice. In the second part of the essay, I consider the role that might be played by philosophers of education and practitioners inclined towards educational theory in the task of decolonising the curriculum, using one of my own research projects as an example.

The problem with the phrase 'decolonising the curriculum'

In the seminar series from which this paper arose, a number of invited speakers commented on the inadequacy of the phrase, 'decolonising the curriculum'. Boaventura Sousa de Santos, for example, pointed out that it was not sufficient to decolonise the curriculum; the university itself needed to be decolonised. Dominic Griffiths discussed how he and his students have grappled with the question of what it means to decolonise knowledge, testing the range of possibilities, from what he calls 'softer' ideas to more 'radical' ones.

I too wish to challenge the idea of decolonising the curriculum. The 'softest' way of interpreting this phrase might be to see decolonisation merely as the task of diversifying curricular content. What is insufficient about this interpretation is that it separates the task from the much more robust and radical political and epistemic project that is expressed in the verb 'decolonise'.

To explain the meaning of the word 'decolonise', I begin by saying that decoloniality and the project of decolonisation must be seen, first and foremost, as a project motivated by a desire for justice. My understanding of the term draws from the work of the Latin American tradition. Latin American decolonial thought emerged in the 1990s after the fall of communism in Europe. Inspired but also dissatisfied by the work of postcolonial theorists working at Western

universities, these Latin American thinkers, led at the time by Anibal Quijano, began to think

about present-day asymmetries of global power (Escobar, 2007). They sought to explain why,

despite the formal end of political colonisation in many parts of the world, global asymmetries of

power remained between states and between peoples. To do this, they drew from world systems

theory, and began to interpret the history of modernisation through the lens of the history of

European empire, going as far back as when Spain and Portugal divided the world between

themselves in the late 15th century. Thus, in their analysis, the present-day asymmetries of the

world were created over the past 500 years as a result of empire and colonisation. As Walter

Mignolo put it, 'There is no modernity without coloniality' (Mignolo, 2011, p. 3); coloniality and

modernity are 'two sides of the same coin' (Mignolo, 2007a, p. 464). In their view, the so-called

modernisation of the world could not be extracted or separated from the history of colonialism.

The entire process of modernisation was made possible because of empire, not only in terms of

the extraction of resources from the colonies, but also in terms of the epistemic suppression of the

plurality of ways of thinking that existed around the world.

Based on this reading of history, Quijano distinguished between *colonisation* and

coloniality (Quijano, 2007). Colonisation is related to territory and sovereignty; it is the process by

which foreign invaders occupy territory resided on by another people, with the purpose of

extracting its natural resources, and in the process, often subjugating and dominating the people

who reside there. In the mid-20th century, there was a wave of political decolonisation, through

which several former colonies fought for their independence. Nonetheless, the notion of

colonisation is still relevant today. Colonisation persists in settler colonial states, where

indigenous peoples often continue to battle for different forms of sovereignty. It also persists in

post-colonial states (ex-colonies) in two ways. It persists through forms of internal colonisation

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that take place within these borders. But the concept also remains relevant because of new forms of dependency created between post-colonial states and former colonisers.

Quijano (2007) used the word coloniality to refer to the continuing legacies of asymmetrical power that continue even after formal colonisation has ended. He described the world as being overlain by what Mignolo (2007b) termed the 'colonial matrix of power'. In this global matrix of power, because of the history of colonialism, certain states and peoples are at the centre of power, and others are at the periphery. This asymmetry is maintained and perpetuated through different forms of coloniality.

One example is the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2007b), and I use language as an example to illustrate this. *Kung bigla akong magpasyang magsulat sa sarili kong wika, hindi ninyo ako maiintindihan at malamang, hindi magpapatuloy ang karamihan sa inyo sa pagbasa nitong papel.* If I were to write the rest of this essay in my mother tongue, most of you would not understand me, and most of you would not continue reading. The fact that I wrote the original lecture and this resulting paper in English, that English allows me a platform that can reach as wide an audience as this, is because of the dominance of English that developed out of colonial history. Compared to English, my mother tongue, Tagalog, is at the periphery. To be sure, it may be more useful than English in certain contexts, but overall, from a global perspective, English is more powerful than Tagalog.

The coloniality of knowledge, however, has an effect not just on the language that people feel compelled to learn and speak; it also has an effect on people's personal lived experiences, or what Nelson Maldonado calls, the 'coloniality of being' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). To return to the example of language: If I did not speak English or another so-called global language, it would be more likely that I would be at the global periphery, less able to fight for my interests, less able to have my voice heard even in debates and discussions that concern me, more likely to be

subjected to dominance and domination. On the other hand, if I were raised to speak English, and not Tagalog, I would become increasingly alienated from other Filipinos, from my ethnic community, and from the worldviews expressed by my mother tongue, the experiences captured uniquely by the Tagalog vocabulary. I might say even that I would be alienated from myself.

Apart from the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being, the Latin American thinkers have also written about other manifestations of coloniality, such as in systems of race, gender, relationships with nature, and so forth. In all these domains, the vision of the decoloniality movement is a world where this imbalance between the centre and the periphery ends, or rather, where there is no longer a centre and a periphery, but rather, a relationship of balance, parity, and equity among all peoples. I see this as a vision that, if it will happen at all, will take, not a few years, nor even a few decades, but a few hundred years of struggle and change, given the entrenchment of coloniality not only in our global systems but also in our ways of thinking and being. As colossal as the task is, it is a task that must be undertaken, and the path towards this vision is precisely what is expressed in the verb, 'to decolonise'.

In some places, the task of formal political decolonisation is still ongoing. In settler colonial states, for example, indigenous communities continue to fight for their rights to their land. But alongside this political task there is also an epistemic task (Grosfoguel, 2007), which is the effort to address the power asymmetries of coloniality by decolonising knowledge, decolonising ways of being, and so forth. Another way to think of it is that it is a task with both global and highly local dimensions, a task that implicates broad power structures with great influence on world affairs, but also small communities. Because it is (I think) a centuries-long project, every single smaller step – the Rhodes Must Fall movement, the creation of indigenous schools in remote places, the fight for historical reparations, the recording and conservation of

indigenous knowledge – all of these can be understood as the baby steps not even in a marathon, but in a centuries-long, transgenerational trek.

To return, then, to the problem with the phrase 'decolonising the curriculum'. The problem with the phrase is that it runs the risk of becoming disengaged from this larger vision. It runs the risk of creating the illusion that once we start including more indigenous authors in our classrooms, we've won the war. However, as long as we see these small battles as part of this larger vision, it still does make sense to speak of decolonising the curriculum (or rather, decolonising curricula, because there are of course, many curricula that need decolonising). Doing so, though, requires understanding that the task of decoloniality cannot end at changing the curriculum. If decoloniality aims at justice for people, it must also entail decolonising the structure of the school, our teaching practices, our learning practices, the world outside the school, and how we view our students.

Paul Standish (2010) has suggested that one of the possible approaches of philosophy of education is the work of conceptual clarification. How might a philosopher of education or a practitioner interested in philosophy of education undertake this work specifically in relation to the task of decolonising the curriculum? To answer this question, in the next section, I reflect on my own experience of attempting a decolonial project, in which I aimed to reimagine the teaching of national identity in post-colonial contexts, with a focus on the Philippine setting. Drawing from this experience, I propose that the role of the philosopher of education might be to engage, first of all, in two specific forms of conceptual clarification: historical critique and conceptual retrieval. I then propose that, following this, a further role of the philosopher of education might be to creatively reimagine these fundamental ideas in educational debates.

Decolonising the teaching of national identity

In a typical Philippine school, the school day often begins with a flag ceremony. Pupils and teachers stand at attention, singing the national anthem while the Philippine flag is raised on a flagpole. Through practices such as this, as well as more explicit curricular content, Filipinos are taught throughout their stay at school about being a Filipino, part of a strategy to instil a sense of patriotism. These practices, as you may guess, were introduced during the American colonial period when Filipinos were instructed to salute the American flag.

As a legacy of colonialism, it is no surprise that colonial ideas remain embedded in the concept of national identity as it is taught in the Philippines. To illustrate this, allow me to first describe how Filipinos themselves identify their own sense of group belonging. When two Filipinos meet for the first time, one of the first questions they ask each other is '*Saan ka sa atin*?' or, where in the Philippines are you from? This is really a way of asking, which ethnolinguistic group in the Philippines do you belong to? Based on the census questionnaire in the Philippines, Filipinos identify themselves as belonging to more than 170 ethnolinguistic groups. However, during the period of colonisation, this rich ethno-linguistic plurality was dismissed by the colonial governments and replaced by racialised taxonomies. In his 1899-1900 annual report, for example, US Commissioner of Education William T. Harris included a length essay titled, 'Intellectual Attainments and Education of the Filipinos', unattributed in the original report, but attributed elsewhere to R. L. Packard (1901). This essay claimed to synthesise 'impartial' European and Filipino scholarship about Philippine 'natives' by dividing the Philippine population into three categories. The first was the 'the Christianized or civilized peoples [...] who alone are now designated by the term "Filipinos", and who form the majority of the population'; Packard described this group as 'mixed race', descended from a first migration of the 'Malay' race but also from other races on account of the settlement of traders from China and Japan and of Mexicans and Peruvians who had served in army in the Philippines. A second group was 'the

Mohammedans [Muslims] of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago', described as having descended from a different Malay invasion. The third group were described as 'the wild mountain tribes' (pp. 1596-1597).

These three racialised groups were given different educational systems. The Christian peoples whom the Americans called 'Filipinos', were given a curriculum similar to the American one. The Moro Province, the province that was created in the part of the Philippines where most of the Muslim population lived, had a similar curriculum, but with more emphasis on vocational and industrial training. The so-called 'pagan tribes' were given a curriculum focused on industrial work and agriculture. This racialisation, in other words, was not merely a tripartite categorisation, but a tripartite hierarchy patterned after the social and racial hierarchies in the United States of the time involving white Americans, Americans of African descent, and Indigenous Americans. Since the period of political decolonisation, a lot of work in the Philippines has gone into reclaiming pre-colonial self-identities as seen in the present the census. However, the hierarchies created during the American colonial period have persisted in Philippine policy in various ways. For example, eighty years ago, the Philippines chose an indigenous language, Tagalog, to be a national language of the Philippines alongside English; however, only in the past ten years have schools been officially allowed to teach pupils in their mother tongues. For too long, the presumption had been accepted, a holdover from the American colonial era, that allowing children to learn in their mother tongues would somehow fracture the state.

Given the legacy of coloniality that remains embedded in presumptions about national identity, the question that motivated my project was, what would it look like if we were to rethink the teaching of national identity, looking at the notion of identity from our own perspective, that is, a post-colonial perspective? Embarking on this decolonial project required three steps: a

historical critique, a conceptual retrieval, and a creative reimagination. I give a brief account of each of these steps below.

Historical critique. Historical accounts of the history of the teaching of national identity often use seminal works based on the European experience, such as Eugen Weber's classic work *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976), as points of reference to describe the connections between education, national identity, and modernity. Decolonising this account required an examination of the connections between education, national identity, and modernity in the colonised world. In my work, I focused on the Philippine experience; I conducted documentary research, mostly on documents from the government record (congressional debates, official reports of the department of education, etc.), and built on the published and unpublished work of other researchers to stitch together such an account. This work showed that the American decision to colonise the inhabitants of the Philippines was justified based on the supposed 'savagery' of the latter, a notion that was developed among intellectual circles under the influence of the dominant social evolutionary theory of the early twentieth century. The idea of the 'nation' was crucial to this theory, which posited a linear scale of development from tribal fragmentation towards national unity (Go, 2000; Kramer, 2006). In other words, in the Philippines, the concept of national identity was a main justification for colonial domination.

I propose that a historical continuity can be drawn between the dominance of the idea of nation-state at the turn of the twentieth century, and the fashionableness of cosmopolitanism a hundred years later. As indicated above, at the turn of the twentieth century, the so-called 'tribal fragmentation' of the colonised world was labelled 'savage' and 'uncivilised' by academics in the Global North. In the middle of the twentieth century, anti-colonial movements in the colonised world deployed those same ideas of national identity in their own struggles for independence and for their right to self-determination to be internationally recognised. However, by the end of the

twentieth century, such discourses of national unity, which had mobilised these struggles for

sovereignty, were in turn labelled by Global North scholars as 'backward' and 'violent'; these

scholars called for nationalist discourses to instead be replaced by their more idyllic vision of

'cosmopolitanism'. Such accounts of cosmopolitanism, however, said little about the role that

nationalism had played in the Global South in the struggle for independence and self-

determination. Their accounts of their visions of peaceful multicultural exchange were similarly

silent about the way that encounters with foreign cultures in the Global South had often been

accompanied by violent acts of coercion and domination.

Foregrounding colonialism when thinking about the history of the concept of national

identity has implications for citizenship education. Educational theorists have followed the lead

of Global North political philosophers in their discussions about which dispositions are

appropriate to teach in the classroom, and in the past twenty years, such discussions led to a

general sense that the teaching of national identity was, at worst, harmful and morally

impermissible, and at best, tolerable only when regulated by the values of liberal democracy. A

more global account of the history of the concept of national identity challenges the

presumptions underlying these positions, showing how the notion of national identity has been a

tool for justice; it has been the very conceptual tool strategically deployed by populations in the

Global South to claim parity with the populations in the Global North, whether in past struggles

for self-determination or in present-day climate change negotiations (Ourbak & Magnan, 2018).

In my project, then, the task of historical critique unsettled the foundational

presumptions underlying dominant positions regarding the teaching of national identity. The

next stage in this decolonial project was the retrieval of post-colonial understandings of the key

concepts of the issue, to which I turn next.

Conceptual retrieval. The conceptual retrieval I undertook in my work, which has been published elsewhere (Azada-Palacios, 2021), was the task of understanding how national identity was conceptualised from a post-colonial perspective. To do this, I drew from Homi Bhabha's analysis of postcolonial identity (Bhabha, 2004). Through an analysis of various literary works from the colonised world, Bhabha gave an account of how colonisers' treatment of colonised subjects engendered within the latter negative feelings about their own identity: if not ambivalence, then an explicit desire to be someone else, what he called a 'splitting'. Such a description was a stark contrast from the notion of 'identity' in the West, the Cartesian image of the unitary subject.

Foregrounding this negative experience of identity challenged a commonplace presumption that underlies much of the Global North literature about the teaching of national identity: the idea that identifying with a nation is tantamount to being partial towards that nation. In the post-colony, identification with a nation is sometimes accompanied by ambivalence, if not outright shame about one's national identity. Taking political scientists Huddy and Ponte's (2019) conceptual distinctions between national identity, national pride, and national chauvinism allowed me to consider the possibility of teaching national identity (a sense of belonging to a nation) in a way that does not necessarily lead to national pride (a positive evaluation of national institutions and symbols) or national chauvinism (a sense of superiority and dominance of one nation over others).

Such a conceptual retrieval, therefore, allowed for a different meaning of the phrase 'teaching national identity' to emerge. To teach national identity did not necessarily mean to teach patriotism or nationalism. In the post-colonial context, to teach national identity could mean to carve out a space of post-colonial pupils to name and come to terms with the ambivalence surrounding their sense of national belonging.

Creative reimagination. The final stage of my decolonial project was the stage of creative reimagination. It was in this context that my access to a diverse range of academic literature (made possible because of the diversification of curricula) allowed me to imagine how national identity could be taught differently. For this, I found Bhabha's concept of hybridity to be useful. Bhabha used this concept both as an analytical tool, to describe how colonised populations had appropriated and transformed elements of the culture of the colonised, and also as a slogan for an ongoing political project. Bhabha advocated that post-colonial populations continue to cultivate hybridity, that is, continue to create new hybrid texts, cultural artefacts, and practices, for the purpose of resisting essentialist notions of culture such as those advanced by both imperialist and nationalist discourses.

I used Bhabha's concept of hybridity to think about national identity itself, conceptualising it as malleable rather than fixed (Azada-Palacios, 2021). This in turn allowed me to imagine how the malleability of national identity might be taught and cultivated in the classroom. National identity is commonly understood to be taught through the presentation to pupils of a fixed national narrative, or a fixed set of values that pupils are meant to imbibe. Fostering the malleability of national identity, however, requires a different pedagogical approach. It requires helping pupils to understand the historical contingency of all past portrayals of the nation, and the contentiousness of its conceptual content. It also requires helping pupils to recognise the role that they, as future citizens, will have in continuing to shape that identity, through cultural expression or political action. In light of this, I surveyed the Philippine curriculum to identify specific topics which could serve as opportunities for children to discuss national identity in this way: for example, the social science discussion on who counts as 'Filipino', the history lessons about the Philippine revolution against Spain, or the identification of different ethnolinguistic groups across the country. I identified alternative texts – anti-colonial

poetry and fiction, nationalist essays, the documents of the revolutionary government – that could serve as stimuli for classroom debates about the principles that children consider important in the Philippine context (Azada-Palacios, 2021).

As the above example of the flag ceremony shows, Philippine pedagogical approaches to the issue of national identity often mimic colonial-era practices and are underpinned by colonial-era ways of thinking. This is true of many other educational approaches in the post-colony as well. Because empires sought to cultivate citizens who would be useful to the efforts at colonial expansion, this is also true of educational approaches in the colonial metropoles. In the UK, for example, this is particularly evident in approaches to school geography or the curricular content of school history. By engaging in historical critique that foregrounds colonialism, philosophers of education can challenge patterns of domination perpetuated by such practices and ideas, opening up spaces to think of different, more justice-oriented approaches.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to consider how philosophers of education might participate in the task of decoloniality. Through a consideration of my own past attempts at decolonising the teaching of national identity, I identified the possible work of the educational philosopher to be historical critique, conceptual retrieval, and creative reimagination. However, as with other attempts to 'decolonise the curriculum', such efforts will remain merely academic – in the negative sense of the word – if they are disengaged from the longer-term goal of political and epistemological justice.

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