

## **AN APPRAISAL ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MORAL EDUCATION FOR SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA**

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### **Abstract**

Moral Education is a compulsory formal subject for non-Muslim pupils in the Malaysian school system from primary to secondary schooling. The subject is taught whilst the Muslim pupils attend Islamic Education. This is so as both subjects are considered to have the same aim of developing a disciplined, ethical and united society (Cabinet Report, 1979). The general aim of Moral Education is to build persons with virtues through inculcation, internationalization and practices of the noble values of Malaysian society (Ministry of Education, 1988). The noble values of Malaysian society are drawn from religious, traditional and cultural values of various ethnic groups in Malaysia that are in accordance with the universal moral values. Since the introduction of Moral Education as a school subject in 1980s, various issues were raised on its effectiveness in fulfilling its goals. This paper intends to appraise the implementation of Moral Education for schools in Malaysia in terms of teaching and assessment of the subject. Implications towards teacher education of Moral Education teachers will also be discussed.

**Key words** : moral education, school in Malaysia

### **Introduction**

Moral Education (ME) is a compulsory formal subject in Malaysian school system. It is taught to non-Muslim pupils whilst the Muslim pupils are taught Islamic Education. The pupils study this subject from Year One Primary to Form Five and it culminates with a formal centralized public examination conducted at the end of Form Five by the Examination Board, Ministry of Education.

Prior to the introduction of ME as a school subject in 1983, moral education was taught in various formal and informal ways. It was formally taught in Islam Religion (Ugama Islam) for Muslim pupils whilst the non-Muslim pupils had the option of learning religious education, outside the normal school time table. In most Christian mission schools, Ethics, fundamentally Christian ethics was taught as a school subject.

As a result of the racial riot of May 13, 1969, the Rukun Negara (National Ideology) was proclaimed in 1970. The Rukun Negara pledges the united efforts of Malaysians to practice the five principles: (i) Belief in God, (ii) Loyalty to King and Country, (iii) Upholding the Constitution, (iv) Rule of Law, and (v) Good Behaviour and Morality. The Rukun Negara forms the foundation of Malaysia's national policies, including education until today.

In 1972, Civics was then introduced as a compulsory school subject to all pupils from standard four to form three whilst the civics elements were incorporated in the Local Studies subject for standard one to standard three. The Civics syllabus, which was based on the Rukun Negara and the Federal Constitution, aimed at instilling and fostering patriotism, develop attitude of tolerance, as well as understanding and resolving social problems (Ministry of Education, 1979). This paper traces the introduction of Moral Education (ME) as a formal subject and subsequently appraises the ME syllabus for Malaysian schools in terms of its implementation.

### **Introduction of Moral Education**

In 1974, Moral Education (ME) as a formal subject was first mentioned when a Special Committee on Moral Education was set. The aim of this Committee was to identify a body of moral content diffused in the various school subjects. The Committee was disbanded in 1975 when it found that moral values were dealt with in the then existing Civics subject (Abdul Rahman Md Aroff & Chang Lee Hoon, 1994). However, a review on Civics indicated that although the aims of Civics were commendable, the implementation on the teaching and learning of the subject was less than satisfactory. As a non-examinable subject, many teachers and pupils regarded the subject to be unimportant, and in many schools the time allotted for Civics was substituted with the teaching of other subjects as the public examinations drew nearer (Ministry of Education, 1979). It was about this time in the mid-1970s, that there was a growing global concern on the modern and social problems such as drug abuse and moral decline among the youth. In Malaysia, these concerns were similarly expressed in the Parliament and there was need to provide some form of moral guidance that schools should be responsible for (Abdul Rahman Md Aroff & Chang Lee Hoon, 1994).

Due to the ineffective implementation of the non-examinable Civics subject in schools, the public concerns on the social and moral behaviour of the youths, and a need to provide moral instructions for the non-Muslims whilst the Muslim pupils follow Islamic Education, the Cabinet Committee on Education in reviewing the implementation of the national education policy, recommended that ME be introduced as an examinable subject. The 1979 Cabinet report states:

To build a disciplined, cultured and united society, it is recommended that while Muslim students study Islamic Religious Knowledge, and this includes other pupils who choose to follow this subject, non-Muslim pupils should be taught Moral and Ethics education. All pupils who study this subject, Moral and Ethics Education, must take it in the examination. In both these subjects, respect for the individual and the freedom to embrace any religion in a multi-religious society must be cultivated. (Ministry of Education, 1979, 127.1, p. 49)

In the light of the recommendation in the Cabinet report on ME, the Special Committee on Moral Education was revived by MOE to formulate a ME programme for non-muslim pupils that span a 11-year range from primary and secondary schooling. The members of the Committee consisted of representatives of various religious and voluntary groups, school heads, academicians from teacher training colleges and universities.

At that time, MOE participated in a series of workshops on moral education in Asian countries sponsored by UNESCO and organized by the National Institute of Educational Research (NIER) in Tokyo, Japan ( NIER Research Bulletin, 1981, in Mukherjee, 1983). In one of the workshops, there was an attempt to identify ‘universal moral values’ that participating countries could use in their moral education programmes. The list of ‘universal moral values’ were circulated to respondents from voluntary groups, religious bodies, school heads, teachers and other colleges throughout Malaysia. Based on the feedback from the survey conducted, the 16 core values were approved for the first ME syllabus in Malaysia (Mukherjee, 1983). These values were: cleanliness of the body and mind, compassion/sympathy, co-operation, courage, moderation, diligence, freedom, gratitude, honesty/integrity, humility/modesty, justice, rationality, self-reliance, love, respect and public spiritedness (Ministry of Education, 1983). These values are also taught as values across the national school curriculum in all subjects and co-curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1988).

### **The First Moral Education Syllabus**

The first ME syllabus was implemented as a core subject to non-Muslim pupils in primary one in 1983 with the implementation of the New Primary School Curriculum (NPSC). It was implemented in stages on a year-by-year basis and its implementation at primary school level was completed in 1988. In 1989, ME was implemented in the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (ICSS) at form one level and subsequently implemented on a year to year basis until form five in 1993. At the end of form five, the students had to sit for Moral Knowledge paper at the centralised public examination known as Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia).

The first ME syllabus focuses on the spiritual, humanitarian and social aspects in the holistic development of an individual. It emphasized on the instillation, inculcation and internalization of the noble values (nilai murni) of Malaysian society that were based on various religions, traditions and cultures of different communities and which were also consistent with universal values (Ministry of Education, 1983).

At primary school level, 12 moral values form the core of the syllabus content whilst at secondary school level there were 16 noble values. These values were taught at all school levels but in a spiral relationship with those closest to the pupils, namely family, peers, school and community to widening relationship to include national and international levels. The definitions of each value and suggested activities were given in the Moral Education Syllabus Specifications for each level of schooling.

In 2000, the ME syllabus was then revised in tandem with the revised national school curriculum for both primary and secondary schools. The national school curriculum was revised as it was the normal practice of MOE to do so after a 10 year-cycle of curriculum implementation so as to be aligned with the national policies.

### **Revised Moral Education Syllabus**

The revised ME syllabus in 2000 attempted to overcome some weaknesses of the first ME syllabus as reported in a nation-wide review of the national school curriculum. Some weaknesses identified in ME included teachers facing difficulty in teaching

similar values without any specific issues and situations for all school levels, and that there were too many values (80 values consisting of 16 main values and 64 sub-values for secondary schools) to be covered in any one school year. It is to be noted that at that point of time, MOE was involved in several UNESCO meetings and workshops on the global concerns in educating pupils to face the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Subsequently, the ME syllabus was revised to address the issue on the content syllabus to cover wider and critical issues as well as to be in tandem with the national policies and the National Philosophy of Education.

The general aim of ME is to develop individuals with good character, responsible and able to contribute towards harmony and stability in the nation as well as global society. The main objectives are to enable pupils to (1) understand and internalise noble values that are needed for good character, (2) aware and accept the importance of harmony between man and environment and strive to sustain it, (3) enhance understanding and cooperation by sustaining a peaceful and harmonious life in a democratic Malaysia, (4) develop mature thinking based on moral and spiritual values in making moral decisions and solving problems, (5) develop commitment to act morally, based on justice and altruism in line with the noble values of Malaysian society (Ministry of Education, 2000).

The ME syllabus content for secondary schools consists of 36 values that are organised in terms of seven learning areas, namely 12 values related to self-development, four values related to family, four values related to environment, three values related to patriotism, five values related to human rights, five values related to democracy, and three values related to peace and harmony. All the learning areas and values are similarly covered for each school level although the scope and emphasis differed as specified in the academic content of the ME syllabus specifications for each school year.

The academic content refers to specific themes and topics depending on the complexities of the situations and issues to be covered in each level of schooling. The academic content is drawn from various disciplines such as religion, history, environment, current issues and national policies. Similar to the first ME syllabus the situations and issues are to be covered a spiral relationship with those closest to the pupils, namely family, peers, school and community to widening relationship to include national and international levels. In tandem with the national school curriculum, the acquisition of generic skills such as critical and creative thinking skills, conflict resolution skills, social skills, and information technology and communication skills are included so as to prepare pupils to face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ministry of Education, 2002). This is the current ME syllabus that is being implemented in Malaysian schools.

### **An Appraisal**

The general framework of ME in Malaysia is integrated and holistic. It is essentially based on character education (Lickona, 1997) that focuses on the holistic development of moral thinking, moral feeling and moral action. According to Lickona (1997), the integration of three components in character education would mean that

to possess virtue of justice, I must first understand what justice is and what justice requires of me in human relations (moral knowledge). I must also care about

justice – be emotionally committed to it, having the capacity for appropriate guilt when I behave unjustly and be capable of moral indignation when I see others suffer unjustly (moral feeling). Finally, I must practice justice by acting fairly in my personal relations and carrying out my obligations as a citizen to help advance social justice (moral behavior) (Lickona, 1997 m.s. 46).

The holistic development of character education can be said to be aligned to the National Philosophy of Education that aims to develop a holistic person in all aspects, namely intellectually, physically, spirituality and emotionally.

Further analysis on the ME syllabus framework also reflects an integration of cognitive moral development that focuses on development of moral reasoning based on universal moral principles. It implies that pupils are expected to develop their moral reasoning from pre-conventional stage of “concrete individual perspective” to conventional stage “member-of-society perspective” to post-conventional stage of “prior-to-society perspective” (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987, p.16). The inclusion of the cognitive moral development, despite numerous criticisms on its weaknesses, can be said to be relevant as reasoning based on universal principles (post-conventional) rather than reasoning fear of physical consequences and individualism, exchange (pre-conventional) would be more aligned to the goals of ME of developing responsible individuals at all levels of society.

Another aspect in the ME syllabus framework is the traditional ME model that focuses on instilling a fixed set of values. These values are based on various religions, traditions and cultures of different communities and are consistent with universal values. The acceptance of these values are deemed to be important in developing virtuous character and responsible citizens in Malaysia’s plural society.

Given the framework of ME syllabus, the complications and perhaps even conflict would arise on the integration the components of character education, cognitive moral development, and traditional model of fixed values when actual implementation of ME. The following section presents some actual scenarios on how the teaching and assessment of ME.

### **Some Scenarios on Teaching and Assessment of ME**

Teachers in Malaysian schools seem inclined to adopt the traditional ME model rather than the components of character education and cognitive moral development. It was reported that teachers “compelled” students to memorise the set of given values in the ME syllabus as these values form the “basic content knowledge” required for public examination (SPM) that students have to sit at end of form five (See Tho, 2008 p. 103). See Tho (2008) further added that students were “even punished if they cannot memorise and remember the moral values spelt out in the ME syllabus” and that a teacher commented that “if I don’t force them to memorise, don’t blame me for their results” (p. 104). The rote-learning method used by teachers was reaffirmed in the posting of “How to score in SPM Pendidikan Moral” (Malaysia Students, 2007) in which the writer and responses to the blog indicated that students had to memorise all the moral values, the definitions and the key words “before you go to any moral test and SPM”. The actual

scenarios thus indicate that teachers and pupils seem to regard the values definitions as “absolute” as any interpretation of the values in a given situation should also be “similar to the definitions of values in the ME syllabus.

SPM Moral Education consists of two papers (Ministry of Education, 2004). Paper 1 is a 2½ hours written paper that students have to sit at the end of form five as set in the SPM examination schedule. Students have to answer the compulsory eight structured questions and two out of three essay questions. The questions are set based on the values in the seven learning areas given in the ME syllabus for form 4 and form 5. Paper 2 is known as coursework that students have to do when they are in form four and form five for a period of seven to nine months. It consists of character report (laporan sahsiah) based on four observations in and outside the classroom, and assesment on commitment (pentaksiran iltizam) based on a folio comprising of eight daily exercises, and social work report on four activities in three learning areas of personal development, family and environment. With the inclusion of Paper 2 in the public examination there is an attempt by MOE to include authentic assessment that can be said to be relevant in fulfilling the objectives of ME.

However, there was much dissatisfaction on how ME is being examined from parents, teachers and pupils. A ME teacher commented that in Paper 1, “students need to be accurate with the values and the key words” (The Star Online 2007). As for Paper 2, one writer to a blog (Malaysia Students, 2007) commented, “Get a good relationship with YOUR Moral teacher . . . Ask the teacher what he or she wants in your folio . . . Do everything he or she asks in your folio . . . Behave as a “good boy” or “good girl” in moral class . . . Like my classmate, we cooperate with our teacher and ALL of us get full mark for Paper 2!”

The actual scenarios on the teaching and assessment of ME in schools clearly indicates that the complexities in ME syllabus raised several concerns that have implications in teacher education, specifically in training of ME teachers.

### **Implications towards ME Teachers**

The traditional model of “reducing moral education to a process of imprinting a good set of moral messages” has been criticized as “bad practice” (Kupperman, 2005, p. 201). Kupperman (2005) further argued that whilst “the learning rules of good behaviour is useful”, it is “inadequate” as “good character should be thought of as a modification of the self of the person who acquires it, rather than as a fund of information in the memory banks” and “learning of rules often will not make virtuous behavior probable” (p. 216). Undoubtedly, it is important that pupils need to accept rules set by schools and society but it does not mean that they follow the rules blindly. For as said,

As a matter of rationality, there are moral claims which we have to recognise. But we have to recognise them, rather than blindly following answers given by others. If something like this is right, then the idea of imposing morality on others becomes a contradiction in terms. People will have to appreciate the force of moral thinking for themselves, and there will be a role for people to see what in the end they will have to see for themselves (Haydon 1997 in Tubb, 2000 p. 120).

If one were to analyse the framework of ME syllabus, it does not call for “memorizing values”. It is an integrated and holistic approach in developing individual with good character, responsible and able to contribute towards harmony and stability in the nation as well as global society. The aim and objectives of ME syllabus would not be attained if the current practice in “memorizing values” were to persist. There are numerous approaches in teaching ME that have been developed through various moral education, character education or values education programmes since 1960s (Chang, 2003). These approaches include moral cognitive developmental/just community approach (Higgins, 1991), value analysis approach (Metcalf, Oliver & Shaver in Hersh, Miller & Fielding, 1980), values clarification (Raths, Harmin & Simon, 1966), caring approach (Noddings, 1994), character education approach (Lickona, 1997) and skills-based approach to moral education (Narvaez, 2001). As all these approaches have its own strengths and weaknesses, teachers need to be eclectic and make professional decisions on how to use or even integrate these approaches when teaching ME in Malaysian schools.

It is not an easy task due to the complexities in ME as well as the learners who come from diverse ethnic, religious and socio-economic background. ME teachers need both pedagogical content knowledge and subject matter knowledge in teaching and learning of ME (Chang, 2008). In a research conducted on the teaching of ME by student-teachers (Chang, 2001), the student-teachers commented that “the present approach that most Moral teachers are using are dull and boring and too exam-oriented” and “I believe that the moral teacher must provide interesting activities, then students become interested and thus they have an impression that moral is fund. That’s what I experienced when giving them role-plays, I like it when my students enjoy the lesson.” In another research conducted by Chang (1988), contextualised rather than dichotomous responses are given within and across dilemma vignettes. This means that the interpretation of values would depend on context of the situation and this interpretation can also differ between individuals. This does not mean that values should be viewed relatively without any reference to moral rules and principles. It means that

The pupil should not merely be presented with a series of alternative moral views and allowed to choose between them. This could amount to a form of “window shopping” with no criteria for reasonable choice being given. We have to provide a set of standards or criteria relevant to choice if we are to educate pupils rather than merely amuse them with different pictures... Teachers must avoid the pitfall of implying that there are no right answers in morality; that it is all a matter of taste. The point that it is mistaken to give pupils right answers “on a plate” because they need to reach these answers by the exercise of their own reasons via the appropriate procedures should not be confused with the notion that there are no “right answers” at all. (Wilson cited by McLaughlin & Halstead, 2000, m.s. 253)

Although actual scenario indicate that the traditional model of memorizing is used in the teaching and assessment of ME in Malaysia, it is of interest to note that there are ME teachers and students who are aware that “rote learning does not inspire them (students)” (a teacher) and ““It isn’t worth remembering anything from that repetitive subject. I scored well because I practised past-year questions, not because I’m a moral person.” (a student) (The Star Online 2007).

## Conclusions

Character (moral) education is “a complicated business” ((Kupperman, 2005, p. 216). The complexities and perhaps the contradictions in ME syllabus and its implementation need to be acknowledged by all stakeholders. However, if the actual scenario in memorizing values in ME syllabus were to persist, ME will continue to be ineffective and meaningless to the students, a “just a waste of time”, and “I just studied Moral for the sake of doing well in the exam” (The Star Online 2007). Nonetheless, it should not warrant its exclusion in school as “schooling is character education” and it “is not only as a remedy to the crisis in society; its actual aim is to build responsible character and a society that is democratic and civil society” (Abdul Rahman Md Aroff, 2008, p.7). Hishammuddin Hussien (2005), the then Minister of Education Malaysia commented that

student’s pursuit of academic excellence should include character and personality development . . . only teachers who have the skills, experience and dedication would be able to help produce good students who are not only knowledgeable but also able to shoulder the challenges faced by the country in the future (The New Straits Times, September 18, 2005).

Teachers hold the key to the implementation of the national curriculum. They translate the curriculum, and put into action by providing and creating learning activities to achieve the learning outcomes of the programme. They provide the motivation, support and opportunities towards pupils’ learning. In this context, ME teachers, including ME student teachers, should not only be more knowledgeable on the subject matter of ME but also be more familiar with the pedagogical knowledge in the field of teaching and engaging pupils actively in learning ME that are practical and relevant to their daily lives.

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