

# TEACHING MORAL EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS USING REAL-LIFE DILEMMAS

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## ABSTRACT

*Moral Education (ME) in Malaysia has undergone numerous changes and face lifts but still there are complaints about the subject and the latest was how students themselves voiced their opinions that ME is of no use to them. However due to policy and the fact that the subject complements Islamic Studies confirms that the subject is going to be in existence. To date, the Moral Education syllabus has been revised once in Malaysia, in the year 2000, but it lacks attention to a student perceptive when being redesigned or evaluated. This paper looks into alternatives of teaching ME using real-life moral dilemmas and how the use of Vygotsky's principle on Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) encourages peer collaboration in adolescents in resolving their real-life moral dilemmas. By applying Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the paper aims to include the perception of students facilitated by adults and peers to open up an alternative dimension in the teaching and learning of the subject. Vygotsky's approach of using the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is utilized with adjustment and adaptations to the sociocultural setting in Malaysia.*

*Keywords: Moral Education, Zone of Proximal Development, Collaboration.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on the use of real-life dilemmas for teaching Moral Education (ME) in secondary schools in Malaysia. By applying Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the paper aims to include the perception of students facilitated by adults and peers to open up an alternative dimension in the teaching and learning of the subject. Vygotsky's approach of using the notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is utilized with adjustment and adaptations to the sociocultural setting in Malaysia.

### Challenging debates on pedagogical issues of Moral Education in Malaysia

Teaching ME in Malaysian schools has always been a "hot topic" from the time the subject was implemented. Often secondary students grow into young adults filled with 'contradictory values and inconsistent beliefs and behaviours' (Kirschenbaum, 1977, p. 8). In Malaysia, it is considered essential that adolescence is exposed to the different norms of a plural society so that they are able to behave morally within the society. ME was supposed to

bridge the inconsistencies in adolescence values to that of the nation. However based on issues brought in the media, it looks like ME really needs some serious restructure. A student wrote to a local paper expressing "After studying this subject for five years in secondary school, I can safely say that I have learnt nothing. How can remembering the definitions of moral values make you a moral person? (The Star, 2007). Students of ME are even punished if they cannot memorize and remember the moral values spelt out in the ME syllabus (See Tho, 2008). Another student expressed in the media that 'Adults should stop regarding students as nothing more than innocent vessels to fill with half-truths and propaganda (The Star, 2007). All these comments requires deep reflection on it as a researcher and ME teacher trainer. Students are lacking the awareness of ME and teachers are also implementing the subject in a regimental manner. There is crucial need to explore ways and means to bring 'life' to ME from the students' perspective.

Investment into researching different approaches that suit the Malaysian pluralistic nature of secondary students has been greatly debated over the years. For example the

shift from survey kind of research which generalises every student as same to qualitative research like action research to allow data from the classroom to unfold as natural as it is. This again has conflicts with the mind set of certain academics. In a National Moral Seminar carried out in 2007, one of the comment made was '*Setiap guru yang ada kelayakan ikhtisas boleh mengajar subjek berkenaan tanpa mengambil kira keturunan serta latar belakang pelajar*' meaning that each teacher can teach the subject concern (referring to ME) without taking into consideration the ethnicity or the background of the students (*Berita Harian*, 2007). This is where some serious mistakes take place because students are seen as generic which they are not. They are individuals with their own cultural upbringings and need to be explored collaboratively to ensure harmony and integrity takes place naturally not as filling up vessels as mentioned by one of the students above.

Another challenge of ME is moving away from behaviourism and cognitivism, which assumed that the individual was doing the constructing within the mind, perhaps in relationship with others, might not necessarily so be. For example in the earlier stage of ME in Malaysia, students ME assessment was solely based on examination results which only measures the cognitive ability of moral domain but now the shift is towards the whole person assessment which includes cognitive, affective and moral action (Vishalache, 2004). Also, the cognitivist perspective 'does not include a theory of culture, and so it assumes individual differences to be capability differences' (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 11 & 12). With the latest 12 general election held in Malaysia on the 8 March 2008, where majority Chinese and Indian ethnic groups discusses the importance of shared power, it is appropriate that culture of the different ethnic groups are also considered when deciding on pedagogical matters of ME since ME is focussed on the non-Muslim cohort in the Malaysian ME implementation.

In the 1980s, when the subject was first implemented, the cognitive moral development approach and values clarification approach were mainly applied because those two methods were popular then. Later on with the

revision of the syllabus in 2000 in Malaysia, the character education approach especially put forward by Lickona (1991) was implemented. Here I would like to argue that each approach that was implemented had its weaknesses and suggest an alternative or eclectic approach to teaching ME in the Malaysian setting. It is suggested that the use of real-life moral dilemmas as an alternative to teaching ME in secondary schools.

### **Real-life moral dilemma**

Real-life moral dilemmas are conflicts faced by respondents or other people in their every day life. Gilligan (1982) showed that the use of real-life moral dilemma is more practical and realistic in understanding the moral perspective of a respondent. She found that each individual differed from another and the way they interpreted a moral problem and those moral dilemmas in real-life were unclear and complex. It is seen as something by one individual and another by some other individual. Thus, when human beings are facing moral dilemmas in their daily lives, they interpret those problems according to their own moral orientation and level of moral development and particular context and experience. In Malaysia, students in ME classes are capable of sharing their own moral dilemmas (Vishalache, 2002) and interacting with others to resolve such matters.

According to Wilson (1972), one effective way of teaching ME is to put students in the real-life situation. This calls for moral educators to create real-life situations within the four walls of the classroom. Students need to feel what is being discussed. They need to be part of the process too. However in the Malaysian ME class it is not a simple task. Having a class of different students from different cultural background, teachers might not be able to undertake such a task involving so many cultural factors. An alternative would be to allow students to share their own real-life dilemmas and proceed from there.

As an alternative to the hypothetical dilemmas of the Moral Judgement Interview (MJI), some researchers have presented actual dilemmas as stimuli (Walker, Pitts, Henning & Matsuba, 1995). These dilemmas may be

factual, more realistic and may be more relevant to the respondents. However, they are usually raised by the researcher and not the participants as moral conflicts. It is suggested that the use of real-life dilemmas provide students the sharing experience of confronting their own moral problems or issues that people confront in their everyday lives.

### Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that researcher is focussed on is one of the principles (Zone of Proximal Development) of Vygotsky who was a psychologist and an educator. His two other principles are on the inherent connection between thought and language and the socio cultural nature of teaching and learning are linked with social cognition and social development theory. In his theory about thought and language, Vygotsky (1986) claims that:

*Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relation between things. Every thought moves, grows and develops, fulfils a function, solves a problem (p.128)*

In his theory on socio cultural teaching and learning, Vygotsky (1986) believed that life experiences affect and influence every one's development. Vygotsky indicates that being social is also being cultural and historical. This leads me to think that as an educator of ME, Vygotsky's perception of the socio cultural context leads us to recognize that educators and students are a part of the real-world that they all live in and 'creating our own path as we walk' (Horton and Freire, 1990) is essential to generate moral values through meaningful classroom discourse.

Students' life experiences influence their learning. They talk to each other, they listen to their friends and teachers and they develop new thoughts and ideas. When they do not understand something or have a problem, they discuss it with a friend and often are able to solve the problem, which leads to higher and deeper cognitive processes. Vygotsky goes on to challenge learning as not only in relation to and cooperation with others, but also in the process of individualization of thinking which enables

students to internalize what have been learned through interaction with others.

### Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky introduced the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in relationship to learning and development. It is based on his theory that learning is, at its core, a largely socially-mediated activity, and that real learning takes place in student's "Zone of Proximal Development". According to Vygotsky,

*What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it... (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 188)*

Having rejected both the view that development precedes learning and the view that learning and development coincide, Vygotsky proposed a new approach, one that focuses particular attention on learning and development in school-age children. He saw learning and development as an interrelated, dynamic process (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 86). In the process, the students become active participants in their learning through the use of language and interaction with others. This exchange of ideas relates to ZPD and ME in researcher's suggestion as students engage themselves in a common ground to resolve their real-life moral dilemmas.

Vygotsky (1978, 1986) conceptualized a zone of proximal development as a way of viewing what students are coming to know. The key to this approach is Vygotsky's claim that in order to match instructional strategies to a student's development capabilities accurately, what must be determined is not only her 'actual developmental level' but also her 'level of potential development'. 'Actual developmental level' reflects what the student knows and is able to perform at the moment. But Vygotsky argued that it only captures mental functions that are fully formed, fully matured, fully completed "the end products of development" (Vygotsky, p. 86).

Vygotsky (1987) argued that the actual level of development finally provides an inadequate measure of "the state of the child's development":

*The state of development is never defined only by what has matured. If the gardener decides only to evaluate the matured or harvested fruits of the apple tree, he cannot determine the state of his orchard. Maturing trees must also be taken into consideration. The psychologist (similarly) must not limit his analysis to functions that have matured. He must consider those that are in the process of maturing (p.208).*

So, Vygotsky claimed that what must also be confirmed is that the student knows and can do with help and were able to solve problems beyond their actual development level if they were provided with guidance in the form of prompts or leading questions from someone more capable. This person, the more capable peer, could be another student, a teacher or anyone who is able to help deliver the students from that problem. Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone as:

*...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (p.86).*

Vygotsky (1978) named these the "buds" or "flowers" of development- to differentiate them from the "fruits" of development that are the functions and abilities that the child can produce independently. Vygotsky's framework here indicates that after a student receives instructional support from someone more capable in that particular situation, the student internalizes the new idea or knowledge or skill and will be more able to perform without help in the next similar conflict or problem-solving situation. ZPD is a notion that takes into account individual differences and is focussed on the communicative nature of learning in which the students come to an understanding of the task they are performing. Continual guidance within the ZPD enables students to understand what is complex and move on to being able to know something well and share it with others. Just providing facts to clarify values or creating an ideal character that students are supposed to conform to provide students with only a superficial level of learning ME

Vygotsky related development of individuals integrally to development of the collective in which they learn and play (Souza Lima, 1995). In the Malaysian scenario, collective development is most consistent with the pluralistic nature of the society. Individuals who collaborate engage in networking and discussion as a way to begin developing collaborative relationships (Himmelman, 1997). It makes them better understand the world where collaboration is a social process in which meaning is constructed from discussion among group members (Vygotsky, 1978).

ZPD as advocated by Vygotsky reflects two foundational assumptions of his socio-cultural approach to human development. Firstly is that higher mental functioning is mediated by words, language and forms of discourse which function as "psychological tools" that both facilitate and transform mental action. The second assumption is that forms of higher mental functioning have their origins in social relations, as "intermental" processes between people and are internalised to become "intramental" processes within persons (Wertsch, 1985, Tappan, 1991 & 1997).

Therefore, Vygotsky's approach focuses attention both on how such mental functions such as thinking, reasoning and remembering are mediated by language and forms of discourse, as well as on the ways in which such functions necessarily have their origins in human social life. Vygotsky's theory is complimentary to the work of Bandura on the aspects of social learning and a major component of situated learning theory. His focus on the cognitive development is also in view with those of Bruner and Piaget. Bruner (1987) stated: 'Vygotsky's view of development was also a theory of education' (p. 1). In his view of development and education, Vygotsky placed great importance on the role of language as being shaped by historical forces and as a tool of thought for shaping thought.

Vygotskian's view of ZPD is also linked to the metaphor of the tidal wave. The idea brought in is development is both progressive and regressive (Wink and Putney, 2002). By observing the tidal wave, it moves front and back. It links with human experience which according to Vygotsky is

forward and backward movement that is finally progressive. Though the backward movement appears to be regressing but it is a time taken for making sense of the world and the conflicts we are in. This approach seems to suit ME development which involves facing challenges and dualism in a nation of diversity and multiculturalism like Malaysia.

### Zone of Proximal Development in Moral Education

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) use a four-stage model of ZPD (Figure 1) to show how children develop speech and language and the present researcher modified their model to show the teaching of ME using Vygotsky's ZPD.

ZPD in ME can be seen as the gap between what students can morally decide and accomplish independently and what one student can achieve with the guidance of a more capable peer. Vygotsky states that ZPD,

*"is the distance between actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978)*

Vygotsky (1978) believed that what a student is able to do in collaboration today; he or she will be able to do independently tomorrow. It is hoped that during ME classes in Malaysia, ME students collaborate and decide on solutions on moral dilemmas. These experiences are again expected to be used by the individual students when resolving their own individual moral conflicts. Though the present ME curriculum provides them the content for being a good moral citizen, it lacks the tools for achieving such objectives.

Students know what is morally right and wrong but do not have the skills or capability to resolve moral dilemmas in

different settings. Thus, collaborating with their friends in the classroom setting enables them to have a wider perspective and greater familiarity with moral issues in contrast to traditional methods which require them to simply memorise and recite materials. Vygotsky's ZPD which accepts knowledge as fundamentally competent discourse is a learning theory which ensures a more collaborative environment which may encourage students to create their own meanings and apply them to learned materials (Hausfather, 1996).

### Weaknesses in Vygotsky's ZPD in the Malaysian Setting

There is a gap that researcher can see in the Vygotskian perspective, though ZPD (1978) that holds narratives such as stories, myths and poems as providers of powerful models of moral behaviour (Tappan, 1998). Here again there is the possibility of using hypothetical stories and dilemmas which goes back to the weaknesses of Kohlbergian's moral approach.

Though Vygotsky stressed that students play an active role in their own development in the process of internalisation, he says nothing about the content of what is learned. This might lead to a problematic relativism when applied to the moral domain in the Malaysian classroom. For example, if students learning ME in class judge a moral dilemma without considering their religion and the law and norms of society, they can experience serious trouble. This is the emerging challenge of ME in Malaysia. The teacher's contribution and role in collaboration with the students play an important part in bringing out the students' voice.

The collaboration between teacher and students, students and students enables a vision of the fundamentally dialogic nature of all teaching and learning (Tappan, 1997). Without having an appropriate syllabus and some practical components to carry out the pedagogical component, whatever suggested might be worthless. Real-life dilemmas are crucial for making the link explicit in a Vygotskian approach to moral education. It also addresses the gap in the character education model.

By making that link coherent it addresses a bridge to the



Figure 1. Modified version of Tharp and Gallimore's Four-Stage Model of ZPD (1988) into the teaching of Moral Education

cognitive-developmental model and the values clarification model.

Wells (2000, pp. 60-61) spells out several characteristics of a Vygotskian class: constructing a collaborative community, engaging in purposeful activities involving whole persons actively forming identity, incorporating activities that are situated and unique, using curriculum as a means for learning, not just an end result, producing outcomes that are both aimed for and emergent and constructing activities that must allow diversity and originality. In order to achieve the above, power sharing is essential.

The traditional concept of 'teacher knows everything' cannot be applied. Instead students must have equal power with teacher in order to indulge in discussions of moral and be empowered to solve with guidance from capable peers. The role of teacher is more of a facilitator who probes and provides leading questions. Teachers can be the capable peer but other students also have equal empowerment to do so.

### Conclusion

Vygotsky (1978) believed that what a student is able to do in collaboration today; he or she will be able to do independently tomorrow. It is hoped that during ME classes in Malaysia, ME students collaborate and decide on solutions on moral dilemmas. These experiences are again expected to be used by the individual students when resolving their own individual moral conflicts. Though the present ME curriculum provides them the content for being a good moral citizen, it lacks the tools for achieving such objectives. The gap between written objectives and feasible techniques is what I am trying to research in this study.

Students know what is morally right and wrong but do not have the skills or capability to resolve moral dilemmas in different settings. Thus, collaborating with their friends in the classroom enables them to have a wider perspective and greater familiarity with moral issues in contrast to traditional methods which require them to simply memorise and recite materials. Vygotsky's ZPD which accepts knowledge as fundamentally competent

discourse is a learning theory which ensures a more collaborative environment which may encourage students to create their own meanings and apply them to learned materials (Hausfather, 1996).

It can be concluded from the above discussion that students of ME in Malaysia who come from different cultural and religious background would find an avenue to study ME with a new direction and be able to perceive the subject as meaningful and related to their own daily moral dilemmas and challenges. It is with this hope that researcher intend to undertake the above research and analysis the data from a qualitative perspective.

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