MUSLIM TRAINEE TEACHERS' WAYS OF EXPERIENCING AND UNDERSTANDING ON THE TEACHING OF MORAL EDUCATION AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT

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Abstract

This paper describes the findings of a qualitative study utilising the phenomenographic approach. This research was aimed to identify qualitatively some different ways of Muslim student teachers' (N=15) experience on moral education as a school subject, using essays. The findings indicated that the target phenomenon was discussed through the understanding and experience of the teaching of moral education as a school subject in a variety of ways. The hierarchically-ordered categories arrived at vary along several themes of deeper understanding. The findings are expected to be useful for the basis for planning experiences with a view to broadening Moral Education student teachers' understanding of moral education towards the adoption of a substantive idea of Moral Education in their pedagogy. This will help teachers who have no experience to be well-prepared and better evolved in their pedagogy of moral education.

Keywords: teacher preparation; moral education; student teachers and pedagogy

Abstrak

Tulisan ini menjelaskan temuan penelitian kualitatif dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenografi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi secara kualitatif beberapa cara yang berbeda dari pengalaman guru siswa Muslim '(N = 15) tentang pendidikan moral sebagai subjek sekolah, menggunakan esai. Temuan tersebut mengindikasikan bahwa fenomena sasaran tersebut dibahas melalui pemahaman dan pengalaman pengajaran pendidikan moral sebagai mata pelajaran sekolah dengan berbagai cara. Kategori yang disusun secara hierarkis ada di berbagai tema pemahaman yang lebih dalam. Temuan ini diharapkan dapat bermanfaat sebagai dasar untuk pengalaman merencanakan dengan tujuan untuk memperluas pemahaman guru siswa Pendidikan Moral tentang pendidikan moral terhadap penerapan gagasan substantif Pendidikan Moral dalam pedagogi mereka. Hal ini akan membantu guru yang tidak memiliki pengalaman untuk dipersiapkan dengan baik dan berkembang lebih baik dalam pedagogi pendidikan moral mereka.

Kata kunci: persiapan guru; pendidikan moral; guru siswa dan pedagogi

Introduction

The role of teachers in the teaching of moral education especially as a school subject is evolving. From a contemporary perspective, teachers' role is described as more than just mere facilitators of morality in pupils (Noddings, 2011; Narveaz & Lapsley, 2008). In addition, current research on moral judgement (for example, Haidt, 2012) suggests a much more socio moral constructivist role for moral education teachers. Among other aspects of teacher development, these different but related developments in the understanding of the role of the moral education teacher draw attention to the importance of adequate teacher training and preparation programmes. Successful programmes should contribute to the development of teachers who are able to appreciate the nuances of the subject (Barrows, 1995; 2006). The programmes should allow student teachers to construct a substantive notion of their role as moral education teachers. One way of doing this through teacher education programmes is by effectively addressing student teachers' prior experience with the subject during the programme. This involves understanding student teachers' experience with the subject matter either as a school subject (if it is a formal subject in the school curriculum), or as subject matter that is taught through other subjects (if it is not a formal subject in the school curriculum).

The current resurgence of interest in the teaching and learning of moral education in the Asia Pacific region draws attention to the need for further research on the effective preparation of Moral Education teachers as it is becoming more important to social cohesion of people in the region as a whole and the respective countries. In line with these developments, teacher education programmes in the region are beginning to show more interest in the teaching of morality and hence, the preparation of teachers to teach be it as a subject matter integrated in other subjects or as a subject in schools. In this context, studies that contribute to the successful preparation of moral education teachers is relevant to the current discourse in Moral Education in the region. In this context, Malaysia is unique as Moral Education is a core subject in schools.

Historically, Moral Education was introduced into school curriculum in Malaysia in 1983 as a way of addressing the issues to do with the social, moral and political behaviour of its people. However, it was only introduced as compulsory subject for non-Muslims students. Muslim students were required to take Islamic Education which had moral values infused in its teaching (Cabinet Committee Report, 1979). It is now taught at both primary and secondary school level. Teacher education in this field only began as a minor programme in a local university in 1995. It was not until 2005 that an undergraduate programme in education specialising in Moral Education was introduced at the Faculty of Education, University Putra Malaysia. At present, there are three public universities offering teacher education programmes in moral education. However, when it came to the training of teachers to teach the subject, there were no such restrictions. Both Muslim and non-Muslim candidates could opt to take Bachelor in Education (Moral Education) or variation of it and in doing so train qualify as Moral Education teachers in secondary schools. This raised a few issues although not much attention has been given to addressing the questions they raise. Among the issues are the suitability of teachers from diverse backgrounds to teach a specific idea of moral education, and the problem and issues of teachers' beliefs in teaching Moral Education. These issues have arisen because of the unique aspect of Moral Education in schools that is it is only compulsory for non-Muslim students. This

has resulted in Muslim and non-Muslim student teachers, having different exposure to, and experience of the teaching of the subject. At a minimal level, Muslim student teachers may be aware of the content of the subject from having interacted with their non-Muslim friends or to the elements of the subject during the course of their school life. Within this context, Muslim student teachers' prior experience of the subject matter would vary from those of non-Muslim students in certain respects specifically their understanding of Moral Education as a school subject.

Prior to this research, as a senior lecturer in Moral Education, it had been observed that Muslim student teachers entered the programme with a somewhat different if sometimes narrow perspective of, and a limited appreciation of the subject matter as compared to non-Muslim students. For instance, their view of Moral Education was articulated in words such as "teaching students to be good", "non-Muslim students do not have religious education". There seemed to be an incongruence between what they perceived the subject to be, and what they actually knew about the subject that was situated in their experience of the subject whilst in school. This suggested that as a teacher educators, the understanding of student teachers of the core courses related to their subject matter specifically in the context of Moral Education, could be influenced by their experience and understanding of the subject as a school subject when they were in school. This observation was also informed through informal discussions with students over the years. Students mentioned that they were surprised by what they came to know about moral education during the course. What was more interesting, and of concern to this study was that student teachers who had no or little experience with Moral Education when they were in school seem to have preconceived notions about the nature of the subject matter,

and its teaching and learning. This was observed to have some implications for their engagement with the subject matter and appreciation of the subject in schools during the programme and later during teaching practice.

A review of research on teacher education showed that studies on teacher beliefs' pointed to the experience of the student teacher in the subject matter that they are being trained to teach, in this case moral education, as playing a constructive role in student teachers' approach to teaching and learning of moral education. This suggests the researcher that it was important for those who are involved in teacher education including teacher educators to consider the different aspects of student teacher development that should be given priority in teacher training programmes to ensure better grounding in the subject matter. It was considered that the preparation of Moral Education teachers should be focused on different aspects of their development as teachers for effective teaching of Moral Education. However, research on teacher training, teacher preparation and moral education, values/moral/character education had not focused much on teacher preparation and training on moral education. In the case of the preparation of Moral Education teachers in Malaysia, little focus had been given to student teachers' prior experience and understanding of moral education in schools, and its implication for their development as Moral Education teachers. Based on the assertion as evidences by many studies in education that the teachers' teaching and students learning is correlated and the idea that teachers' beliefs are related to their background experiences, a study on the way teachers from different backgrounds understood Moral Education was clearly necessary particularly in the context of Malaysia.

The fact that Muslim and non-Muslim student teachers would have different experience of the subject was an evidence from the policy

on Moral Education. By understanding the variety of ways that teachers from different backgrounds experienced and hence, understood moral education, teacher educators could better approach the preparation of student teachers in Moral Education. The study is also relevant in the context of the preparation of teachers to teach moral education where the difference in the exposure of student teachers based on their background is evident.

This study was conducted to help the Muslim student teachers' in improving their quality of teaching and learning of Moral Education subject. Observation during lectures and micro teaching as well as teaching practicum highlighted their lack of engagement with the subject. Part of this the researcher felt based on the perspective of Trigwell, Prosser, Martin, & Ramsden (2005) was due to the relationship between teachers' experience with the subject matter, and their practices. Hence, it was hypothesized that the Muslim teachers' lack of engagement with Moral Education while at school has an effect on their overall appreciation of the subject matter and its complexity, and hence, would affect their understanding of the teaching and learning of the subject. Another reason for this hypothesis aside from the pedagogical explanation (Prosser et al., 2005) is the policy on Moral Education as described earlier. The fact that only non-Muslims pupils are allowed to take Moral Education in schools while Muslim students can only take Islamic Education means that there is a greater possibility that the experience would be different for Muslim student teachers than those of the non-Muslim teachers. As a result, less exposure to the subject may have a less then positive effect on their learning while in the programme compared to non-Muslim pre-service teachers in the same programme. This is supported by the researcher's observations of Bachelor of Education students majoring and minoring in

Moral Education, and through informal discussions with students. Furthermore, the literature also suggests the need to examine teacher trainees' understanding of the subjects they are being prepared to teach. Not much research in teacher education has focused on this aspect. Much more focus has been given to teachers' belief of their subject matter.

The lack of research on the actual experiences of student teachers led to this small initial study to explore the experiences and understanding of teachers. It focused on Muslim student teachers as they had little or no prior experience with the subject in school. There was also some indication that their appreciation of the content of the core courses related to moral education was influenced in certain ways by their prior experience and understanding. Therefore, an examination of the experiences and understanding of Muslim teacher trainees would be helpful in illuminating the programme on what approaches and steps may be taken to improve the approaches presently taken to address those trainee teachers who come into the teacher training programmes with different experiences of the subject. This is relevant specifically for student teachers who have experienced the teaching and learning of the subject, and those who have not. The Findings of the study is important in the context of improving the quality of Moral Education teachers produced through teacher education programmes.

Therefore, this research is relevant to the understanding and improvement, if necessary, of teacher training programmes particularly in Moral Education in Malaysia. With the development of teacher training programmes such as the Bachelor of Moral Education offered by several public universities in Malaysia as well as the increasing importance given to the development of the moral and ethical aspects of the pupils through holistic and humanistic

approaches to education, this is one area of research that needs more focus from researchers and teacher educators. More research in this particular area can provide more research based evidence to better inform approaches in teacher training and preparation of teachers involved in moral aspects of the pupils' development specifically those teaching moral education as a subject in the school curriculum. The findings also provide valuable information about some problems in teacher preparation in other subjects where the trainees may have little, limited or no exposure to the subject they are being prepared to teach, and how it can be addressed based on the suggestions made in this study.

Theoretical Framework

The beliefs of pre service teachers are important in drawing up appropriate programmes that take into account the different ideas they may have about the subject they have to teach (Kagan, 1992). Beliefs impact the teaching practices as well due to what teachers believe must represent their ways of teaching. Pre service teachers' various experiences on their subject matter is influenced to certain extent by those beliefs because it conceptualises the teaching and learning of the subject (Wan Ng, Nicholas, Williams, 2010; Pajares, 1992). It is well said that student teachers' understanding that includes experience in learning enables them to figure out how to deliver the subject during the teaching. Student teachers' experience in learning for instance, it creates a reflection for them to apply certain kind of technique to make students learn the way they learned the subject. Also, the way student teachers saw their teachers teaching them Moral Education can inspire their beliefs to teach the same way as their teachers taught them. Moreover, teachers' beliefs amongst others inform the way they experience it while learning to teach it (for example, in how they appreciate its complexity), and how they

understand it (for example, in their philosophical perspectives about the subject) (Trigwell & Prosser,1996; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999). Thus, teachers' beliefs somehow affect teachers' way of teaching in many ways.

Beside beliefs, preparation should become a concern of pre service teachers. In a study on the preparation of multicultural teachers, Schoorman & Bogotch (2010) identified and described how the preparation of multicultural teachers is important to their conceptualisation of the teaching and learning of the subject. They based their study on perspectives in multicultural education that theorised that teachers' concepts of teaching and learning of the subject are influenced by the different conceptualisations of the subject (Fong & Sheets, 2004).

As this paper is situated in a need to develop better ways of approaching the preparation of student teachers in moral education specifically in societies where teachers and students adopt different beliefs, values and practices, pre service teachers conceptualisations of moral education can influence how they experience and understand the teaching and learning of the subject in their training. The way student teachers experience a school subject while in school can inform to a certain extent their understanding of that subject as a school subject. Hence, the focus of this study is on the readiness of student teachers for training in moral education in terms of their understanding of Moral Education as a formal school subject. At present, there is a serious lack of studies in this area.

The purpose of this research was to explore how student teachers with no experience in the subject, in this case not having taken the subject at school; understand the subject based on their experiences whilst at school. Muslim teacher trainees were chosen because in Malaysia the subject is only offered to non-Muslim students.

The aim of the study was to find out Moral Education student teachers' understanding and experience of Moral Education as a school subject using qualitative methods. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to: (1) Identify the Muslim pre service teachers ways of experiencing Moral Education, and (2) Identify the aspects of their understanding that are important to the meaning of Moral Education

The research question focused on students' understanding of the place and role of Moral Education in schools based on their perceptions and description of the subject while at school. The following was the question posed:

What kinds of qualitatively different ways of experiencing moral education as a school subject can be identified, and what are the actual differences between the ways of experiencing thus identified?

Muslim pre service teachers were chosen as the subjects for this study because the policy on Moral Education in Malaysia strictly restricts the teaching of Moral Education in schools to non-Muslim students. It is compulsory for Muslim students to take Islamic Education. However, the intake of teachers for undergraduate teaching programmes for Moral Education takes students from both Muslim and non-Muslims. The problem is that for Muslim pre service teachers in the programme they have no real exposure in moral education as a subject yet will be trained to teach it in schools. However, there is a lack of studies on how Muslim pre service Moral Education teachers understand the teaching of Moral Education. In addition, the lack of knowledge in this area does not give a fuller picture of pre service teachers' readiness to go through the programme and engage with the theory and pedagogy of moral education and if necessary, what needs to be done to improve the situation.

Method

The research reported here is a small exploratory qualitative study employing the phenomenographic approach. The approach identifies the different ways of experiencing and understanding of the teaching of moral education as a school subject among Muslim pre service teachers who have not formally taken Moral Education in schools. The approach was chosen because it has certain advantages over quantitative approaches in giving a clearer picture of the existing understanding of third semester Bachelor of Guidance & Counselling students minoring in Moral Education who have yet to take any courses on or about moral education. The participants were sixteen undergraduate students in majoring in Guidance and Counselling who minor in Moral Education at a major public university in Malaysia. Based on purposeful sampling, all sixteen students were included in the study based on the inclusion criterion of being Muslims. They were in the first week of study and had not attended any courses in the area. There were fifteen female and one male participant. All the students agreed to be part of the study. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

The data were collected on the first week of lectures before the respondents began to learn about moral education to obtain authentic responses. This was the first semester that they began their programme of study in Moral Education. The students were asked if they had any knowledge of the subject. All of the students said they that they had only heard of it in school, and had little or no experience of it as a subject taken by non-Muslim students in school. The data was collected using essays. The participants were asked to narrate their experience of moral education whilst at school.

Data collection was carried out in two phases. The first phase consisted of an informal

discussion with the respondents to make them comfortable with describing their experience later on in the narratives. The discussion also allowed them to engage with the narrative they were later asked to write on their experiences. The second phase consisted of the actual collection of data. Respondents were asked to narrate in an essay, their experiences as Muslim students (who did not take the subject) with Moral Education. They were given a week to reflect on and describe their thoughts and experiences with Moral Education. Their narratives were collected during the lecture the following week. A check with the respondents on doing the narrative found that some of them found it an interesting experience while some found it difficult to not understanding what was required in this task (though this particular respondent did carry out the task). All the respondents submitted their essays. The credibility of the account was strengthened by member checks, peer review and external audit. The data from the narratives once transcribed provide the categories of description. Based on the data, the categories of experience of the participants were identified at a collective level. As the categories can be used to build a hierarchical model of pre service teachers understanding from their basic understanding to the more complex understanding, the categories were used to identify the outcome space.

The data were analysed using phenomenographic research techniques advocated by Marton & Pong, 2005; Akerlind, 2005a, 2005b). The analysis was carried out in two stages. The first phase was to identify and describe the informants' ways of experiencing the ideal of moral education, and the formal teaching of moral education in school. The essays were read as a whole over several times, to look for the focus. Repeated readings were carried out to look for both differences and similarities between the expressions. This was used to prepare a draft of the set of categories for the collective meaning. The categories identified were "organised in a hierarchical and inclusive way based on both logical argument and empirical evidence. In both cases the inclusiveness were confirmed by reference to the original data. Following Akerlind (2004, 2005b), based on the nature of the categories, some conceptions can be regarded as more complete and more complex than others.

In the second phase of the analyses, the ways of experiencing moral education was analysed in terms of the aspects that appeared most important for both grouping together and distinguishing the varying ways of understanding. Here the structure of the outcome space was analysed. The focus was only on the critical aspects of variation to reveal the variation in experience in a way that would be meaningful from the perspective of Muslim pre service teachers. This was followed by a consideration of whether these critical aspects could be grouped into themes of expanding awareness, running through the categories. The two phases of analyses described here were done at the same time. The original data was continually referenced to confirm the results while the structure was taking shape to avoid bias and maintain the authenticity of the data.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings are discussed in terms of the different ways the trainees experienced and understood the place and role of Moral Education in schools. The initial analyses of the narratives found wide ranging differences in the students' ideal of moral education. Several key dimensions of variation were identified:

- Subject as an object
- Affect of subject

- Value of subject
- Relevance of subject
- Outcomes of subject

On the whole, their experiences were coloured by among others; the opportunity to be in schools where there were non-Muslims students; their having non-Muslim friends who took the subject; their own curiosity and interest about the subject; the lack of or secretive way the subject was treated by teachers; and the lack of information from teachers about what was taught in the subject or about the subject.

A more detailed analysis of the data revealed three qualitatively different ways of understanding Moral education as a formal subject (Table 1). The categories are described in detail below, with illustrative extracts from the data. However, these extracts have to be understood in the context they are offered and do not necessarily represent the categories of description. Further analyses revealed the following hierarchy of understanding of Moral Education (Figure 1).

The findings can be summarised as follows: (1) Muslim pre service teachers appear to understand moral education in school in three qualitatively different ways. (2) Hierarchically, they range from a limited/literal/shallow experience to one that is expansive/deep

Their understanding moves from "what moral education is or is not" to "what moral education ought to be".

Table 1. The Different Ways of Experiencing Moral Education in School among Muslim Pre Service Teacher

| Moral education in school is experienced as ...	Description	Focus	Sample quotes
An object	Something that is unknown, non-existent, secretive, unclear, lacking definition, suspicious, unimportant.		"...it is as if it does not exist" "...I totally do not know what is moral education..." "...I totally never knew that there was a moral education subject in school"
Relational	Moral education is experienced in terms of its perceived role, relevance, relation with rights	Structure of the experience	"even though they are the minority but it is as if they have no rights as students to get an education specifically in moral education subject" "...one thing that separates and differentiates us is when it is time for Islamic Education and moral education"
Outcomes	What can it contribute/the outcomes	The value	"....moral education is only in its name and it does not give any affect towards the students self" "Moral Education is a subject that asks students to do good..."
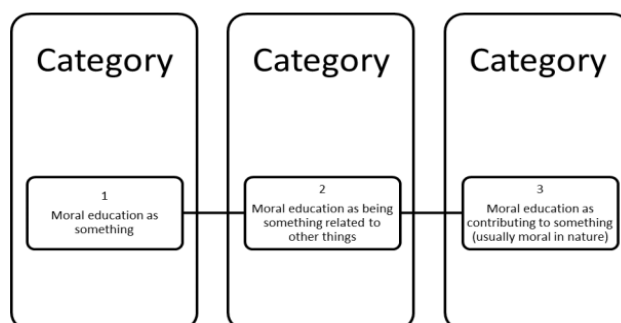
Figure 1. The Hierarchy of Understanding of Moral Education

Discussion

The study shows that pre service teachers with no background exposure to moral education experience and understanding the subject in qualitatively different ways. The way they described moral education as a subject reflects the collective ways of understanding moral education. This was based on their particular experience of moral education as subject in school. In essence, moral education moved from a literal to an abstract understanding. In addition, the categorisation reveals an exclusive to inclusive way of understanding moral education in schools.

The identification of pre service teachers existing ways of seeing moral education can help teacher trainers plan the kind of experience and curricular content that should be include in their programme to enable them to have a holistic understanding as required to teach moral education. It can also help trainers understand where they need to differentiate their teaching and learning approaches to better consider the different beliefs that pre service teachers coming into the programme for the first time with no background in the subject they are being trained to teach.

One of the things teacher trainers can do to better prepare pre service teachers is give them exposure to the subject early on in their training. This would help them have a better idea of what constitutes the teaching of the subject. This would increase their familiarity of the subject and in a better position to engage with the theoretical components of the course and put them into perspective with regards to the teaching and learning of the subject in school. This would allow teacher trainers to ensure that students make better connections between what they are learning and what they are to teach in future with respect to the subject matter as well as the pedagogy of the subject.

Conclusion

This study has shown that there is a possibility that pre service teachers may have different understandings of moral education. These findings directly or indirectly could have implications on how they engage with the theory and pedagogy of moral education for the duration of their programme. The moral education pre service teachers' readiness to teach the subject is important in ensuring that they are able to approach the subject in a similar manner.

In the context of Malaysia where Muslim and non-Muslim pre service teachers are trained to teach the subject, the possibility that they may have different understanding about the subject should be given serious consideration as these understandings to a certain degree reflect their beliefs about moral education as a subject. This could influence the teaching and learning of moral education once they have graduated.

Based on the findings, it is suggested that appropriate steps be taken to give more emphasis on pre service teachers beliefs about moral education to help teachers have more congruence between them about what they are teaching and why. These steps among others would help improve the quality of the teachers and the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of moral education by recognising the struggles of pre service teachers to put teaching and learning of moral education into context of what the trainers are saying and what they themselves think thus reducing disparate notions of the teaching and learning of the subject in future.

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