

TRANSFORMATION IN EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: A LOOK INTO MORAL EDUCATION SYLLABUS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the Education System concerning Moral Education (ME) has evolved over the years. ME is a core subject for non Muslim students in Malaysian schools and complements Islamic Studies taken by Muslim students. Over the years, the subject has undergone various evaluation and changes. With the forthcoming implementation of a transformative syllabus starting from the year 2011 in Malaysia, the paper critically looks at the purpose of such a change in the system pertaining to ME starting from primary schools.

Keywords: Moral Education, First Moral Syllabus, Revised Moral Syllabus, Standard Document.

INTRODUCTION

Moral Education has been in existence in Malaysia since 1988 and has been through two revisions since then. The subject itself is dynamic in nature and is always evaluated to ensure that it keeps up with current moral and ethical changes (Vishalache, 2010). There are various factors connected to ME in the Malaysian setting and since this paper focusses on the transformation of ME in Malaysia, it is essential to see the time line that ME has undergone to be where it is now today and focus on what it's going to be in the future.

As mentioned in the abstract, ME in Malaysia only caters for the non-Muslim cohort in schools. The non-Muslims in Malaysia are mainly from various faiths such as Christians, Hindus, Buddhist, Taoists, Sikhs, Bahai's and believers in animism and paganism. While non-Muslims study ME, the Muslim students study Islamic Studies based on their religious book, al-Quran. On the other hand, the ME syllabus is based on common values across the nation which are outsourced from different religions, societal norms and the Malaysian constitution.

Historical view of education system in Malaysia

Education policies in Malaysia have undergone various changes from the traditional times until now. Figure 1 shows a clear picture of what used to be the starting education of children in Malaysia, then called Malaya during pre-

independence days.

During the British ruling in Malaya, there were four distinct strands of education; informal religious school conducted in madrasah, local Malay schools catering for Malay children, Chinese vernacular schools and Tamil vernacular schools, which helped reinforce the social, racial, linguistic and cultural ethnicity groups in Malaya (Mukherjee, 1983). As in Figure 1, the upper most picture is a typical religious school which has transformed over the years. Until today such schools do exist in different parts of Malaysia and Muslim parents send their children to such schools after their children have attended normal day schools. These schools focus on religious components of Islamic values



Figure 1. Left shows a Hindu priest teaching Indian students. Top shows a Muslim religious teacher (ustaz) teaching Malay students. Right shows a Chinese teacher teaching Chinese students.

and Islamic religious way of life. From Figure 1 the picture on the left shows an Indian priest teaching children of Indian parents. Such classes are usually conducted in make-do schools in temples where houses of Indian labourers are usually located. The Indian students were given six years of elementary education and later were expected to provide labour for the rubber plantations and railways and also road-building. This was a deliberate British policy to deny both economy and geographical mobility among the early Indian settlers in Malaya who came in as labourers.

As for the picture on the right in Figure 1 it shows the Chinese vernacular schools which are usually situated in towns and urban areas because that's where the Chinese community locate themselves for work and business. The Chinese usually established their own schools and used curricula, teachers and textbooks from China, as the British colonial government did not see the importance of providing education for the Chinese migrants. Until today, almost all Chinese schools in Malaysia have their own board of governors and develop their own projects using their own funds. The difference is the curricula, teachers and textbooks are all local and no more imported from China.

In all the early schools, there were no trace of ME except for the students in Malay and religious schools who learnt the Quran verses and virtues of Islam. The Tamil students were taught religious education based on the knowledge and experiences of the religious priest. As for the Chinese schools, a strong Confucianism value based education was cultivated among the students. They had and still have a solid foundation as putting education first compared to other material wealth. After several years and World War II, the Indian and Chinese community in Malaya realized that they were not in Malaya for a temporary basis. They demanded that education be provided for their children. Ethnic leaders and various local community leaders got together and made their voice heard stronger. These demands forced the ruling government, the British to formulate an education committee and devise a report. The main aspects of the Report of the Education Committee (1956:1) call for:

A national system of education acceptable to the

people of the federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, having regard to the intention of making Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and the culture of other communities living in the country.

The following year, according to the Education Ordinance of 1957, a system of education was to be formulated to fulfil the needs of the Malaysian nation and to initiate cultural, social and political development. Until then too, there was no mention of ME in the school syllabus. In the 1961 Education Act, the emphasis was on 3M basic education skills that are *membaca* (reading), *menulis* (writing) and *mengira* (arithmetic). Until then, there was still no mention of ME but Islamic Studies was implemented as a core subjects for students whose religion is Islam in primary and secondary schools.

In 1979, the Cabinet report made possible the birth of ME in Malaysia. By then the social ills caused by youths in Malaysia and around the world was increasing and nation leaders were constructing ways to curb such ills. All activities in regards to ME were based on the 1979 report of the Cabinet Committee on Education (127.1: 49) which stated that:

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.

Decisions resulting from this report included formation of several working committees. The Ministry of Education directed the Curriculum Development Centre, now renamed Curriculum Development Division to formulate a ME syllabus to be tabled at Parliament. Since then ME in Malaysia has been through three evaluations to keep up to the nation's aspirations and visions. The 1995 Education Bill

focussed on the need for the national education system to be redesigned to produce world-class education. Later in 2006, the Major Plan for Education Development (2006-2010) was introduced. The main purpose of the plan was to be a 'check and balance' for all the education plans designed earlier on. One of the strategies in this plan was to develop human capital where ME is directly linked to. The strategy focusses upon the possession of knowledge and skills.

First ME syllabus

The New Primary Schools Curriculum (NPSC) was implemented in 1983. The ME was officially introduced as a core subject in Year One in all primary schools throughout Malaysia. This procedure was carried out in stages on a year to year basis and was completed in 1988. In 1989, with the implementation of the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (ICSS), ME was extended to all secondary schools also on a year to year basis.

The first ME syllabus emphasised the spiritual, humanitarian, and social aspects in the total development of the individual. It stressed the instillation, inculcation, and internalisation of the noble values found in Malaysian society based on various religions, traditions, and cultures of the different communities and which were also consistent with universal values. Values taught were values that were accepted by all ethnic groups.

The general objective of ME in the primary and secondary school is the development of an individual who recognises, accepts and internalises his or her role as a responsible decision maker pertaining to moral values in a democratic society such that his or her actions are governed by moral principles in all situations. The first curriculum for ME consisted of values to be observed and upheld by the individual and society. These values were considered essential to ensure the healthy interaction between the individual and his or her family, peers, society, and the institutions of which he or she was a member (MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary Schools, 1988). In the first syllabus, the total number of values taught in secondary school was 16. These included: compassion, self-reliance, humility, respect, love, justice, freedom, courage, physical cleanliness and mental health, honesty, diligence, co-

operation, moderation, gratitude, rationality and public spiritedness.

The values to be included can be seen in the spiral or widening relationship with those closest to the student namely his or her family, peers, and school. These relationships which are initially confined to the individual, his or her society, and its institutions, are then expanded to include national and international levels.

One of the main weaknesses of the first ME syllabus was repetition of content. The other was that the value clarification and cognitive development strategies failed to recognise the socio-cultural richness that students brought into the ME class. Teachers teaching ME also talk of reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalised, and predictable. The teacher often thinks his/her task is to fill the students with the contents of his narration - contents which are detached from reality (Freire, 1993). With all these challenges and complaints the CDC decided to revise the ME syllabus.

Revised ME syllabus

In the first MOE, ME Syllabus (1988), the National Philosophy of Education, the Federal Constitution, and the *Rukun Negara* provided basic guiding principles for a faith-based ME. In the revised MOE, ME Syllabus (2000), the Malaysian Vision 2020 has been included. Vision 2020 is an ideology developed by the previous Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and includes nine challenges that the country foresees towards national and global building (Mahathir, 1991). They are: to form a nation that stands as one; to produce a Malaysian community that has freedom, strength, and is full of self confidence; to develop a mature, democratic community; to form a community that has high morale, ethics, and religious strength; to cultivate a community that is mature and tolerant; to form a progressive science community; to cultivate a community rich in values and loving culture; to ensure the formation of a community with a fair economy; and to cultivate a prosperous community. The essence of Vision 2020 is included in the content of the revised ME Syllabus for Secondary Schools.

According to the Malaysian Country Report presented in the 'Values Education for Peace, Human Rights,

Democracy and Sustainable Development for the Asia-Pacific Region' in Bangkok, 1998, ME in Malaysia is based on certain basic assumptions:

- Values are not passively received, but are actively built up by the cognitive learner. In other words, values are socially constructed over time.
- Values are not a collection of isolated rules and facts. Instead, they can be perceived as a network of ideas, where each idea is connected to several others. To be useful, values should be taught as a unified body of knowledge.
- God has a major influence on people's lives and, thus, there are absolute values based on the teaching of religion, and relative values created by human minds.
- There are some parallels regarding what is perceived as good by the different religions. Since Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, non-Islamic values could also be viewed in the light of their relationships with Islamic values.
- School is not neutral, but a value-loaded enterprise. Teachers need to play the role of moral educators, instructors, facilitators, and exemplars.
- God creates human beings for specific purposes, and values education should stress an integrated view of man, in as much as human character involves the interplay of four basic elements: spirituality; knowledge; attitudes and values; and action. (Learning to live together in peace and harmony, 1998, p. 119-120)

One major difference between the first moral syllabus and the revised version is the wider scope of the latter. With globalisation and associated concerns about it, wider and more critical issues were covered in UNESCO meetings and workshops and as a result the ME syllabus was also revised to suit the current needs. The ME curriculum aims to develop responsible individuals with high moral standards, who are able to contribute towards peace and harmony of the country and the global community (MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary School, 2000).

The focus of teaching and learning is based on several main principles assumed to deliver holistic individuals physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. The principles include:

- Being responsible towards self, family, and others
- Being steadfast towards one's religion
- Being caring towards the environment
- Sustaining peaceful and harmonious life
- Being patriotic
- Respecting human rights and
- Practicing principles of democracy in life. (MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary School, 2000:1)

The principles clearly guide the content of the revised syllabus. The content of the syllabus is divided into several learning areas which give priority to aspects of spirituality, humanity, society, and culture. Learning fields given prior importance are:

Values related to Self Development

The values included in self-development are belief in God, trustworthiness, self-esteem, responsibility, humility, tolerance, self-reliance, diligence, love, justice, rationality, and moderation.

Values related to Family

The values related to family are love for the family, respect and loyalty towards family members, preservation of family traditions, and responsibility towards family.

Values related to Environment

The values relating to the environment are love and care for the environment, harmony between man and environment, sustainability of environment, and sensitivity towards environmental issues.

Values related to Patriotism

The values included in the learning area related to patriotism are love for nation, loyalty to the King and nation, and willingness to die or sacrifice for the nation.

Values related to Human Rights

Values to be learnt in human rights are protection of child's rights, respect for women's rights, protection of labour rights, respect rights of disabled persons, and protection of consumer rights.

Values related to Democracy

The values included under democracy are respect rules and regulations, freedom of speech and expression,

freedom of religion, participation in nation building, and open-mindedness.

Values related to Peace and Harmony

As for learning area seven which focusses on peace and harmony, the values are living together in harmony, mutual help and cooperation, and mutual respect among nations.

In the revised syllabus, though the learning areas and the values are the same for each form, the scope and emphasis for each is different because moral issues which are discussed become more complex, according to the needs and maturity of the students. Furthermore, emphasis is also provided for students to acquire various skills like generic skills, critical and creative thinking skills, conflict resolution skills, and social skills. The hope is that these skills will prepare students to face the world of information technology and communication with confidence and also to have social and moral responsibility. The skills are also expected to help develop resistance in students facing pressure and challenges in their student life. All planning is based on the assumption that these are what the students need. The one issue of listening to the students' voices, and planning according to their level of needs, was never addressed in either the previous or the present syllabus.

ME 2011 Onwards

Though ME has come a long way in the development of education policies and implementations, certain structures are still similar that to yesteryears. Today in Malaysia, at primary school, there are three strands of different education stream. The Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools are still in existence but with one national type of syllabus which comes through a top down system through the Ministry of Education. Islamic Studies and ME are core subjects for students in primary and secondary schools. Starting from the year 2011, a new syllabus would be implemented in all Year 1 primary schools in Malaysia. The focus is more on hands-on and experiential activities. Where ME is concerned, values to be taught in primary schools have been lessened to 14 core values which include: Belief in God, good-hearted, responsible, thankfulness, courteous, respect, love, justice, bravery, honesty, diligence, cooperation, humility and

tolerance.

Various student-centred approaches are being experimented at nation and state levels to encourage ME teachers to bring a facelift to ME. ME in Malaysia which focusses on moral reasoning, moral feeling and moral action needs more than rote learning in the classroom. Teachers of ME need to empower students to a certain extent to allow creativity and skills in approaching moral dilemmas and resolving them. From 2011 onwards, all subjects in primary schools in Malaysia including ME will have a Standard Document as the syllabus. The difference between the old syllabus and the Standard Document is that the students would have to achieve the criteria mentioned in the Standard Document. This would ensure that no child is left behind. The ME textbook is designed to cater for every student's need. With components such as concept page, reinforcement, enrichment, remedial and assessment, there is some moral knowledge and skills catering for students of different maturity level. The final product of the day is to share a common moral language among all studying ME. The change or transformation has to come from all involved with the syllabus in the new Standard Document. If ever agency such as teachers, policy makers, parents, students and community do not make an effort to understand and implement this new approach, then the need for a revised syllabus will exist faster than necessary.

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