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FORMER STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON MORAL EDUCATION LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the learning experiences of former Moral Education (ME) students in one of Sabah's districts on the East Coast. Since the introduction of ME subjects is tailored to the students' diverse religious backgrounds and beliefs, the student's background in the Sabah East Coast district, where the majority are Christians, might portray an alternate narrative of the aspects of the ME learning experience among the students. This study employed the qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to understand the experiences of former ME students in learning the subject at school. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and supplemented written documents, which were then analyzed using thematic analysis, revealing three main themes, which are: (i) Relating values to situations; (ii) Memorizing; and (iii) Conforming to syllabus and policy. They have influenced the success or failure of ME's goal, which is to produce virtuous human beings rather than academic achievement. Implications were discussed, emphasizing the role of educators and policymakers in ensuring that ME teachers understand the fundamental goal of the subject to allow for its implementation to be successful in nurturing virtuous human beings as desired continuously until higher education level.

Keywords: Moral Education (ME), student, virtuous human beings, Sabah

1. Introduction

Moral Education (ME) is one example of a character-based education program that seeks to mould an individual's character (Suissa, 2015; Taylor et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2015). Previous research found that the terms ME, Character Education, Ethics Education, Values Education, Civic and Citizenship Education, and Religious Education were synonymous and interchangeably used in most countries (Bourke et al., 2020; Haydon, 2004; Splitter, 2011; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2016). Furthermore, the introduction to the ME course at any level, including higher education, is deemed relevant due to its importance in assisting ongoing personal and social development in daily life (Balakrishnan, 2017a; Febriani et al., 2022; Wong, 2023), including the ability to remain positive in difficult situations (D. Ganub et al., 2019). In Malaysia, efforts to shape students' characters are carried out through the ME subject, which was introduced in 1983 in response to a growing awareness of the importance of addressing social problems among adolescents (Balakrishnan, 2010; Bambang et al., 2012; Hafizhah et al., 2018). However, it is only taught to non-Muslim students of various religious backgrounds, beliefs, races, and cultures. ME was also introduced in Malaysia to bridge the learning gap between Muslim and non-Muslim students when Muslim students are simultaneously studying Islamic Education subjects that focus solely on Islamic teachings. Furthermore, teachers who teach ME subjects may also be Muslim (Balakrishnan, 2017b).

At the outset of the ME subject's introduction, its curriculum emphasizes applying moral values as a principle that helps students make decisions and solve issues and moral problems to form virtuous human beings as the desired character. The primary goal of the ME subject is to produce students who can apply the moral values they have learned in their daily lives. The ability of students to put the values they have learned through ME into practice is critical to the effectiveness (Bourke et al., 2020; Mohamad Khairi, 2016) in achieving the goals of ME, which is to form a virtuous human being (Kalaiselvi, 2017; Nachiappan et al., 2017; Noor Zulina et al., 2022). This goal is consistent with the goals of the National Education Philosophy (NEP), which is then continued in several national education policies such as the Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) Interim Strategic Plan and the Malaysia Educational Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 (MOE, 2015, 2017). Figure 1 depicts a virtuous human being who wishes to be produced through ME subject in Malaysia:

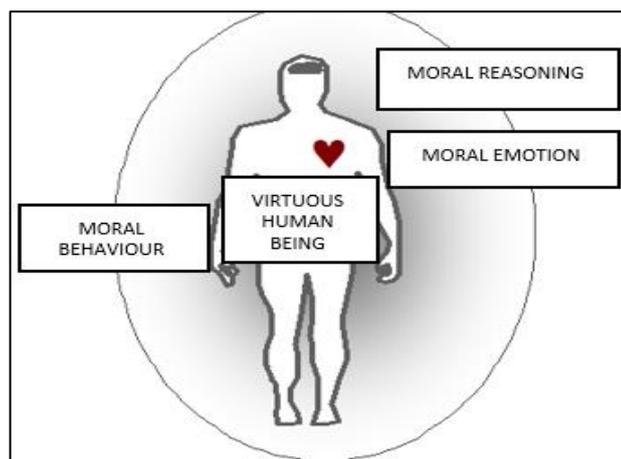


Figure 1: The goal of Moral Education subject

The teaching and learning practice in ME emphasizes the effort to produce virtuous human beings with comprehensive moral development in the domains of moral reasoning, emotions, and behavior, following NEP's desire. Therefore, ME teachers should have basic knowledge related to moral principles that contribute to an understanding of the concept of virtuous human beings, along with specific pedagogy to form a virtuous human being as a desired character formation. However, there are issues with ME's effectiveness in achieving the desired goal of character formation due to the lack of specific and formal training in moral pedagogy and a shortage of specialized teachers (Balakrishnan, 2017; Chang, 2010; Ettikan et al., 2015; Klug et al., 2018; Nachiappan et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the issue of moral teacher professionalism is associated with the problem of the teacher training programme itself, which is incapable of producing effective moral educators (Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2016; Revell & Arthur, 2007). Hence, teachers are inadequately prepared to teach ME even though they have received training in pedagogy and moral principles (Bourke et al., 2020; Revell & Arthur, 2007). These issues highlighted the importance of investigating whether the problem occurs in the context of ME classes, particularly from the perspective of former ME students' experiences. If the participants describe their experiences with these issues, it depicts that teacher preparation at the higher education level also requires attention.

Meanwhile, a shortage of specialized teachers and a lack of formal training in moral pedagogy has led to the use of rote learning and examination-oriented approaches by ME teachers (Abd. Rahman, 1984; Abdul Rahman, 2014; Azrina, 2004; Bleazby, 2019; Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016), rather than producing students with comprehensive moral development in all three moral domains: moral reasoning, emotions, and behavior (Abd. Shatar, 2007). Studies have reported a discrepancy between teachers' understanding of the moral concept and their practice of teaching

and learning, whether among trained moral teachers, non-trained moral teachers, experienced or novice teachers (Abd. Shatar, 2007; Chang, 2010; Kalaiselvi, 2017; Nachiappan et al., 2017; Rahimah, 1998; Tan, 2008). Besides, Mohamad Ridhuan et al. (2021) argued that cognition is a critical domain for ME students to develop to enable them to make decisions by evaluating and acting morally in real-life situations. Nevertheless, the focus on the development of the cognitive domain has resulted in a greater emphasis on the delivery of moral knowledge, where it is believed that teachers focus more on exam orientation and have a one-way teaching style (Solumuthu & Thambu, 2022). Consequently, it is claimed that ME is less effective in nurturing virtuous human beings, leading to the debate that ME is also ineffective at the higher education level (Wong, 2023).

Previous studies have focused on improving and diversifying teachers' teaching approaches to address issues pertaining to the ineffectiveness of ME in schools (Balakrishnan & Nadarajan, 2017; Balakrishnan & Narvaez, 2016; Limbasan et al., 2018; Zulkifli et al., 2018). These studies aimed to reduce teacher-centered, indoctrination, and examination-oriented strategies in the teaching and learning process of ME. While issues on ME have been extensively debated among academics, with teachers and secondary school students being involved as participants (Abd. Shatar, 2007; Johnson et al., 2017; Midgette et al., 2018; Ülger et al., 2014), the experiences of former ME students have largely been ignored. In this regard, former ME students' experiences are essential to explore as the success of ME is highly dependent on their comprehension, valuation, and application of ME principles (Balakrishnan & Claiborne, 2012; Wong, 2023) since primary school, and they are also bringing their understanding of learning ME in school into their higher education lives. Such uncertainty illustrates the fundamental problem with the effectiveness of character-based education, such as ME, which requires further and in-depth exploration.

1.1. The Study's Fundamental Framework

As mentioned earlier, no single factor determines the effectiveness of ME in Malaysia. Individuals' social environments are made up of moral agents (Bowers, 2012; Bullough, 2011) who communicate moral values in a variety of methods (Berkowitz, 2011), both formally and informally (Wubbels, 2012). Family members, particularly parents, teachers, and friends, are the closest moral agents to individuals (Avgar, Bronfenbrenner, & Henderson, 1977; Berns, 2010), and they have different perspectives on moral values (LePage et al., 2011). Moreover, Roest, Dubas, and Gerris (2010) argued that socialization agents, especially parents, significantly influence transferring values to individuals, particularly children. Children's understanding of moral values is said to be influenced by the main values that parents perceive as good and those described as good in the mass media. However, there may

be differences in perceptions of good moral values among socialization agents. As multiple factors can influence ME goal achievement, a framework that can explain this phenomenon from a social-ecological system perspective is essential.

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, the social-ecological system provides an overview of the diversity of ecological systems that can influence individual development (Cross, 2017; Yang, 2021). The five basic structures of social-ecological theory aid in the understanding of an individual's development in the context of family, school, and community as a dynamic and constantly evolving system, influenced by social changes (chronosystem) such as economics, politics, and technology (Berns, 2010). The microsystem environment includes relationships within the family, whereas the mesosystem environment includes neighbors, schools and higher education institutions, housing estates, and places of worship. Furthermore, the exosystem environment consists of social support for the family involving parent and guardian workplaces, health centers, and the police, while the macrosystem environment pertains to ideology, social policy, and government (Cross, 2017; Wilder & Lillvist, 2018). Those environmental structures offer different interpretations of moral values and might influence students' understanding and acceptance of moral values (Roest et al., 2010; Vinik et al., 2013) from various perspectives and teachers' practices in ME teaching and learning.

Since the goal of introducing ME subjects in schools is to make them universal for students from various religious, believers, racial, and cultural backgrounds in Malaysia (Noor Zulina & Maizura, 2021), previous research has often focused on dealing with such diversity to achieve the ME goal of producing virtuous human beings. Most preservice teachers lack a systematic knowledge base in multicultural teaching, frequently ignore the cultural diversity of their students, and are not culturally responsive in their instruction (Wen et al., 2022). However, studies on the perspectives of students studying ME subjects in classes with students from the same religious and ethnic background have yet to be discovered. An understanding based on the theory of Social-Ecological Systems can be used as a framework to further describe the variety of factors that influence the effectiveness of achieving ME goals (Wilder & Lillvist, 2018), particularly from the perspective of former students who studied ME in school. It can also provide an in-depth understanding of how ME may require a different approach to achieve its goal, considering its surroundings and geographical areas (Cross, 2017; Schachner, 2019), including in the context of higher education.

Therefore, conducting an exploratory study is crucial to help gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry. In exploratory studies, research aims and objectives may need to be flexible and more open-ended. In these studies, researchers typically investigate a topic about which limited is known. As such, we may want to keep our initial research aims and objectives relatively non-specific or

general or perhaps include an option to change our original research objectives if the project uncovers unexpected information. This approach is especially prevalent in qualitative research. Even if research objectives are finalized and written down, they can be modified later or even completely changed (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Hence, this study will explore the learning experiences of former ME students who shared the same religious background in their ME classes. The research questions are as follows:

- (i) How do former ME students perceive the ME learning process in school?
- (ii) How does the ME learning process, as experienced by former ME students in school, influence their real lives?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and Sampling Method

This study employs a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design to explore and describe the lived learning experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nikiforos & Karakitsou, 2020; Strand, 2019) of former ME students in a district on the East Coast of Sabah. Sabah was chosen as it has a demography that is different from that of Peninsular Malaysia. In this light, the majority of non-Muslim residents practice Christianity compared to the Buddhist majority in the peninsular (Noor Zulina, 2022). There are no predetermined criteria for locating and selecting research participants in phenomenological research. Age, race, religion, ethnicity, and culture are all general considerations. The research participants' experience, intense interest in understanding its nature and meanings, willingness to participate in a lengthy interview and have the data recorded, and publication of the data in any publications are all essential criteria (Moustakas, 1994).

The following criteria have been determined in advance for the selection of study participants: (i) Former ME students who are Christian; (ii) Former ME students who have experience studying in a class consisting of students from the same religious background; and (iii) Former ME students who have experience being taught by Muslim and non-Muslim teachers. The researcher used the results of pre-interviews with ME teachers in Sabah to choose a location in a district on the East Coast of Sabah that meets the inclusive criteria. The purpose of determining inclusive criteria is to provide a more detailed and unique picture of the phenomenon to be studied.

The key participants were identified using the purposive snowball sampling technique through the *WhatsApp* application, which their teachers recommended as they met the inclusion criteria determined by the researcher. The key participant then suggested other participants who met the inclusion criteria (Hennink et al., 2019;

Low, 2019; Patton, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out that the number of participants is determined by four factors: the questions asked, the data collected, the data analysis, and the materials available to support the study. They also mentioned that the number of participants will be determined by sampling adequacy, location, or activity to answer the research question. Meanwhile, Guba and Lincoln (2008) propose the term saturation point as the point at which no new data can be obtained from the other participant.

This study has adopted these two recommendations: (i) the number of participants is determined based on the saturation point of information, and (ii) the sufficiency of the number of participants involved after believing that the information obtained could answer the research questions thoroughly. Three former ME students were involved as participants, which was sufficient since phenomenological design typically involves a small sample of fewer than ten people (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hussen, 2022; Moustakas, 1994). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research tends not to generalize from the sample to the population; instead, the reader determines whether a study can be applied to the same situation in a different location, representing a group of individuals in that location (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the primary instrument, the researcher determines the appropriate procedures and methods for obtaining data that will assist the researcher in understanding the perception of ME learning among participants.

2.2. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through multiple methods, including in-depth interviews and documents, which is an appropriate method to understand an individual's life experiences (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), specifically students' attitude towards learning (Putit et al., 2022). The findings presented and discussed in this paper were mainly obtained from interviews, supplemented with the perspectives they shared through written reflections, and were also obtained from the subject materials and policy documents. In a qualitative study, participants should be fully involved in the data collection process and willing to cooperate voluntarily (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Therefore, the researcher ensured that the number and timing of the interviews with the participants were based on their preferences to avoid pressures (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant was interviewed for one to two hours on average, and written questions were asked to elicit additional information from the interviews. The document analysis method was then used to analyze the written responses until data saturation was reached.

Each interview was transcribed and independently coded before being sent to the participants for verification to ensure that every transcript and code produced reflected the actual views of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elliott, 2018;

Glesne, 2011; Stake, 2010) and the data were manually analyzed using a codebook created by the researcher (Hennink et al., 2019). Thematic analysis is used in this study as it is appropriate for analyzing text, such as interview transcripts and documents, by using open coding and categorization to find the pattern in the data analyzed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The generated codes are then used to create categories that ultimately represent themes (Low, 2019) of participants' perceptions based on their Moral Education learning experiences. Field experts were also consulted to validate the themes developed to ensure they met the purpose of this study.

2.3. Participants

The researcher initially aimed to identify at least 10 to 12 participants who met the inclusion criteria. However, after several interviews with the proposed study participants, only three were able to voluntarily participate in the study, as the other study participants were forced to withdraw due to unavoidable constraints. This is due to the limitations of distance and time to conduct face-to-face interviews, which were mutually agreed upon since most participants continued their studies at various higher education institutions. This situation also considered the reality that the data collection process at that moment was not conducted online as the researcher wished to spend adequate and prolonged time with the participants. Spending adequate and prolonged time with the participants is essential in phenomenological studies, where researchers must gather rich, in-depth information and data from participants' experiences.

All three participants voluntarily participated in this study. They were between the ages of 19 and 20 and came from various family backgrounds. They were given an appropriate pseudonym to protect their confidentiality and to comply with research ethics principles. Misha, 20 years old, is the eldest of three siblings and is currently enrolled in an internship program as part of her Diploma degree. Her mother is a housewife, and her father is a secondary school teacher. Jon, the second participant, is also 20 years old and the eldest of three siblings. His parents are both employed, with his mother working as a clerk and his father as an electrical engineer in a palm oil plantation company. He is currently pursuing a diploma at one of the local public universities.

Serin, the third participant, is 19 years old. Serin is the younger of two brothers. Serin differs from the other two participants in that his parents died when he was a child. His mother died when he was six, while his father died when he was eight. Raised by his unemployed grandparents, he survived on his parents' insurance and the support of other family members. He was unable to continue his studies after leaving secondary school due to financial constraints, so he now works and lives with his

aunt and uncle. The backgrounds of the three participants in this study met the requirements of the study, which can represent the experiences of former ME students who are currently studying or have not continued their studies at any higher education institution. This diversity can also provide a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of ME subject implementation in schools as a continuation of its importance at the level of higher education institutions and students' daily lives.

3. Findings

This section delves deeper into each of the themes that emerged from the data analysis and will be discussed in accordance with the research questions posed in this study, which are as follows: (i) How do former ME students perceive the ME learning process in school? (ii) How does the ME learning process, as experienced by former ME students in school, influence their real lives? At the initial phase of the reading process on the existing literature review, the focus of this study is to answer these research questions. Since the findings of a qualitative study rely significantly on the narratives of the research participants, the objective of this study was subsequently modified, as stated before, to ensure the narrative of the study findings reflected the true views of participants in the research (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). This is significant in avoiding biases in the context of phenomenological studies, which demonstrate research participants' perspectives on their ME learning experiences.

The analysis was carried out by paying attention to the following characteristics: a focus on the world of life, an openness to experience with the subject studied, an accurate description, the delay of preliminary or preconceived knowledge, and the search for the essence in the description. According to interpretive phenomenology, gaining direct access to a person's life requires exploring their own experiences (Suryadarsah, 2013). Moustakas (1994) pointed out that the data analysis identified five major stages in the phenomenological data analysis, which are: First, making a list of expressions from the participant's answers or responses while suspending the researcher's preconceptions (bracketing) to allow the expressions to be seen as they are. Each aspect of the participant's life experience is treated equally (horizontalisation). Second, the reduction and elimination of the expression refers to the question of whether the expression is the essence of the participant's experience and whether the expressions can be grouped and labeled as themes. Unclear expressions, repetitions, and overlaps are reduced or eliminated. Then, meaningful expressions are assigned labels and themes.

Third is creating a cluster and writing a theme based on expressions that are consistent, unchanged, and similar. The participants' lived experience revolves around the clustering and labeling of these expressions. Fourth, validating the expressions and labeling the expressions and themes by (i) whether the expressions

are explicit in the interview transcripts or the participant's written documents and (ii) when the expressions are not explicit, do the expressions "work together without conflict or compatible"? Expressions are discarded if they are incompatible and explicit with the participant's life experience. Finally, creating an Individual Textural Description (ITD). ITD is created by displaying validated expressions in accordance with the themes, which are supplemented by verbatim quotes from interviews and/or participants' daily notes. In this study, we consider Moustakas' views to produce the final data presented through the writing.

3.1. Theme 1: Relating Values to Situations

The universal values in the context of ME in Malaysia are one of the standards of conduct that must be adhered to by every student as a manifestation of virtuous behavior. Therefore, the participants described that their teacher implement the teaching of values in the ME curriculum by relating them to a variety of daily situations. Jon, for instance, confessed that learning values in ME class is easier if the teacher uses examples from daily situations. This perception stems from the teachers' teaching method, in which they typically provide an example of a situation based on values. Misha's teacher, for example, told them a close-to-real-life example about their responsibility to help their mother with house chores and relating values to a situation in which a student assists in bringing a teacher's book. Serin also said that learning ME is beneficial as it teaches students about values that are relevant to their daily lives, which Misha and Jon also mentioned.

However, Jon had a different experience in primary and secondary school when it came to the process of learning Moral Education by relating values to situations. When he was in primary school, he had a difficult time learning values in Moral Education. His teacher teaches them by giving them a situation from the textbook that they must relate to the values they have learned. As Jon explained:

"They give you a situation number one, like this. Situation number two, situation number three...What is the appropriate value in it? So, in primary school, I do not get it. I really had no understanding of what those values mean. Since I do not understand the meaning of the values, the situation is not entirely clear to me. It is because the definition is quite lengthy." (Jon)

Since the definition of values is lengthy and difficult to understand, Jon found it difficult to relate the situation discussed to the values learned. He only realized that values can be related to situations when he was in upper secondary school since his teacher always gave examples of values that are sometimes related to his real-life situations. It was around this time that Jon began to notice that the values he had

learned in ME were becoming easier to understand, and this prompted him to apply what he had learned in class to his daily life situations. Furthermore, in his responses to written questions, Jon emphasized the importance of having a good understanding of ME because it drives them to practice what they learned without realizing it. However, he has found it difficult to consistently apply the values he learned through ME since he started his studies at a higher education institution, saying, “Until now, I’m still doing it, but since I entered University, it’s a little difficult...”

Misha, on the other hand, believes that if morals are taught to them, they can apply them in everyday life by doing what they have learned. Misha also proposed that students should be presented with a situation and asked to answer based on what they had learned. The answers are then evaluated as an examination result. However, in her analyzed written document, she also mentioned that only when they are in a dreadful situation will they be able to adapt morals in their daily lives. This is in line with her statement in the interview that relating values in real-life situations requires a lengthy process rather than simply learning them. Serin also understood ME through his daily life experience, as the subject of ME teaches them how to respect the elderly, how to care for the environment, and how to care for others.

In conclusion, an individual’s environment plays an important role in achieving the goal of nurturing virtuous human beings through ME. Indeed, using examples of dilemmas and situations that are similar to or match the actual social background of students (Haidi & Mohd Khairuddin, 2019; Mohamad Khairi, 2016) will have a positive impact on an individual character (Balakrishnan & Narvaez, 2016; Balakrishnan & Thambu, 2017; Kurniawati et al., 2022). Although they do not mention situations directly related to their religious background, we can conclude that their social environment plays a significant role in the effectiveness of ME in their daily lives.

3.2. Theme 2: Memorizing

Memorization is one of the students’ key learning experiences in ME. According to Jon, Serin and Misha, as part of the ME learning process, they must memorize the values along with their definitions and the facts given in the textbook. In order to make it easier for them to answer exam questions, Jon and Serin, for instance, claimed that their teacher placed a strong emphasis on memorization of the moral values and facts covered in the ME curriculum. Moreover, when sharing her experience at a Chinese primary school, Misha mentioned how the teacher was overly strict in emphasizing memorization of the learning syllabus and that they were beaten if they did not memorize what they had learned. Misha said:

“The teacher was too strict during my time. He is ok in terms of teaching but

strict that he even hit us when we did not memorize this and that. He keeps telling us to memorize. He will hit us if we do not. He would hit us if we did not know the answer. So, in that sense, it is not instilling in the heart that you must be a moral person, but it is instilling in the brain that you must study, you have to learn this, you have to memorize. So, even if you are not in school, go wherever you want, it is not in the heart. It is in the brain. Have to memorize. That is it.”
(Misha)

Misha’s explanation of how she learned through memorizing demonstrates that her learning experience focuses solely on cognitive development rather than emotional development and has no impact on her behavior outside of school. Nonetheless, despite stating that memorizing does not affect her actions outside of school, the facts she learned in ME do have an impact on her work experience. The impact, however, is only on her ability to remember acts related to her job, not on her moral behavior. Misha said:

“There are also acts in our textbooks that we should memorise. It must be remembered. I only became aware of the significance when I began working (internship). Aaa...workers act, it is in Morals as well. So, when I go to training, he asks if there is an act related to your company? What does your company do? What is the policy? As a result of learning Moral, I now understand the fundamentals. There are employees, child policies, and a dress code. There is the attire policy...everything is there.” (Misha)

This finding is consistent with previous studies regarding the subject of ME, where it was discovered that teachers placed a strong emphasis on memorizing values and information learned according to the curriculum (Abd. Shatar, 2007). In some character-based subjects, such as those taught in Indonesia, the memorization method is also used (Adnyana, 2020). Al-Ghazali argued that memorization, while claimed to have a negative impact on students’ learning experiences, is crucial to the learning process as it is a basic step of knowledge appreciation (Nur Hanani et al., 2013).

3.3. Theme 3: Conforming to syllabus and policy

The findings also reveal that teachers tend to focus on syllabus completion, which leads to textbooks and workbooks being the primary resources used in teaching ME. Misha and Jon have had a learning experience in which the teacher is concerned with completing the syllabus by referring constantly to textbooks and workbooks. Serin, on the other hand, claims that his teacher assigned them exercises based on the values they had learned to assess their progress in learning ME and their ability to answer exam questions. That also persuaded Serin that he needed to learn ME and achieve high grades to demonstrate his commitment to the subject. Besides, when Misha was

in Chinese primary school, for example, they used textbooks and had to buy many workbooks despite spending a lot of money on school. Therefore, Misha suggested in her written answer that Morals should not be just in a book, exercise, and examination. She was so adamant that the ME subject should not be taught solely through textbooks and workbooks that she even capitalized the word “JUST” to demonstrate her firm belief in this. Jon’s experience was when he was in primary school as he said:

“To practise, we used textbook. The answer must then adhere to the textbook. Because we are in primary school, the answer in the textbook is extremely difficult. We have little or no prior experience. So, future teachers, please simplify to help us understand the values by using more convenient examples, as the example in the textbook was a little difficult for me to understand in primary school. We were too busy playing as kids in primary school to open up books.” (Jon)

Thus, Jon claimed that he found ME to be boring as he was forced to attend ME classes during his school days. Jon also claims that he took ME because it was part of their school’s curriculum; if he had other options, he might not have taken it. Misha shares this viewpoint when asked why they need to study ME subjects, saying, “...If the school introduced Bible Knowledge subjects, right...I would take the Bible Knowledge. If the Bible is to differentiate, the Bible’s teaching will strengthen our faith-based beliefs...spiritually, yes.

Furthermore, Moral, yes because you are dealing with these creatures. The same goes for Islamic Education.” Due to her Christian religious background, the introduction of the Bible Knowledge subject at the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) level influenced her standpoint on learning ME. Jon and Misha further admit that ME is only important during the upper secondary level because it is required in the public examination known as the MCE.

On the other hand, in her written response, Misha shared her belief that what they learned was not a guideline but rather a decision made for them to follow. Serin also claims that he learned ME because it is required and that he is simply doing what has been predetermined for them because the Islamic Education content is inappropriate for them as non-Muslims, saying: “First, I’m a Christian. Christians, for example, do not understand what is written in Arabic. As Christians, we have no idea what it means. Second, it requires you to memorize a language or an unfamiliar pronunciation (referring to the Islamic Education subject contents). Third, it is compulsory for us. It is not forced. We accept it willingly because it is required. Follow what is set.”

ME is perceived as a required subject because it is already mandated for non-Muslim students. Participants also argued that what they learned in ME was predetermined and that they were required to adhere to the content of ME subjects. This finding is consistent with the influence of the microsystem and the macrosystem on individuals, which includes the school, social and government policies (Cross, 2017; Wilder & Lillvist, 2018). Furthermore, conformity to syllabus and policy causes participants to learn through one-way learning in the ME learning process, contrary to the belief that teachers who use a variety of teaching approaches and engage students in the learning process can help students achieve learning objectives (Lilian & Amollo, 2020).

4. Discussions

This study explored and examined the learning experiences of former ME students who shared the same religious background in their ME classes. Their social backgrounds differed in terms of family, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood compound. Besides, they have had different schooling experiences in terms of the type of school they attended as well as the teachers. Hence, the participants' diverse backgrounds create a distinct but profound narrative to the questions posed in this study. ME is a religiously dependent subject in contrast to Islamic Education, which is taken by Muslim students, even though both subjects are taught concurrently and will be examined.

Due to the nature of a pluralistic ME classroom with students from various religious backgrounds, the ultimate goal is to create a virtuous human being based on values learned rather than referring to one specific religious belief. However, all participants in this study shared the same religious beliefs. Therefore, they specifically mentioned that they learned ME because they are Christians rather than saying that it is required for non-Muslims. This situation shows that environmental factors, particularly their socio-ecological system, are significant in shaping their educational experiences and development (Kitchen et al., 2019), specifically when considering the ME learning needs at school. Besides, the narrative suggests that their ME teachers lack or may not focus on the concept of comprehensive moral development and the application of moral values in the teaching and learning process of ME. This situation demands further research on the syllabus and ME teacher preparation programs, particularly at higher education institutions.

Furthermore, all responses indicated that the reason they have been studying ME is because it has been made a requirement and is going to be examined. For that reason, teachers are found to apply a teacher-centered approach (Tondeur et al., 2017) when teaching ME in the classroom, focusing on preparing students for examinations (Zulkifli et al., 2018). The learning process of ME is also found to emphasize completing the syllabus, causing one-way teaching among teachers and lessening

students' motivation to learn (Hamzah et al., 2022). These are evident in the teachers' teaching materials when the use of textbooks and workbooks is still prevalent.

Additionally, the use of the memorization method of teaching shows that students are drilled for exams because of the exam-oriented culture in the Malaysian educational system (Balakrishnan, 2017). Excessive focus on exam preparation causes ME teachers to be unaware of ME's goal of producing virtuous human beings. This situation is consistent with previous research findings indicating that teacher preparation programs at the higher education level are incapable of producing effective moral educators, even after they have received the necessary training (Bourke et al., 2020; Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2016; Revell & Arthur, 2007). Thus, the teacher preparation program at the higher education level requires further enhancement to effectively produce moral teachers who understand the philosophy underlying the introduction of ME and implement the teaching and learning process following that philosophy.

The shortage of specialized teachers and formal moral pedagogy training may also contribute to the use of an exam-oriented approach by ME teachers (Abd. Rahman, 1984; Abdul Rahman, 2014; Azrina Jonit, 2004; Bleazby, 2019; Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016). The emphasis given on completing the syllabus may arise due to teachers' confusion in the context of needs and goals that need to be considered in the teaching and learning of character formation-based subjects and have specific curriculum content to follow (Balakrishnan, 2010; Christina et al., 2015; Sporre, 2018). Besides, participants were also found to have the same confusion when they compared the ME subject equally to the Islamic Education subject for Muslims. They perceived ME as an exam-based subject as it is taught concurrently with Islamic Education, despite realizing its importance to be adapted in daily life situations. Hence, participants chose to learn a religious-based subject that is also offered in the education system compared to ME if they were given options.

5. Implications

Students' negative school experiences in learning ME appear to involve memorization and drilling based on textbooks and workbooks, yet this is unavoidable given the culture of exam-oriented systems implemented in the context of the Malaysian education system. Thus, preparing teachers for the specific pedagogy of ME teaching and learning is crucial in increasing the subject's effectiveness and usefulness in students' real lives. Higher education institutions that offer teacher preparation and training programs are responsible for this situation. Besides, when teachers relate values to situations in the classroom, students realize how important it is to apply the ME subject content in real-life situations. Implementing this approach in ME teaching can help produce virtuous human beings, as students can apply what they have learned in class to real-life situations. It can also help them to

be more consistent in applying moral values learned in any situation, even when they enroll in a higher education institution (Wong, 2023). Hence, ME teacher preparation programs, particularly those at the higher education level, may need to revise their curriculum to produce teachers who are significantly qualified to teach ME in schools.

Furthermore, Hamzah et al. (2022) pointed out that young adult learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and engagement can influence their learning outcomes. The school environment, the classroom, and the teacher, which also include the teachers' teaching methods, are among the extrinsic motivations that are important in character education subjects such as ME (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Gan et al., 2021). Moreover, the environment demonstrates how the social-ecological system influences ME's goal of producing virtuous human beings. The quality of teaching has a direct impact on students' learning outcomes (Creemers & Reezigt, 1996), where the ability of students to relate the values they have learned through ME into practice can contribute to the effectiveness (Bourke et al., 2020; Mohamad Khairi, 2016) in achieving the goals of ME in nurturing a virtuous human being (Kalaiselvi, 2017; Nachiappan et al., 2017). ME teachers should not be based on activities like repetitive memorization and rigid drills or rely solely on textbook and workbook answers for exams. Besides, if ME is introduced at the higher education level as well (Wong, 2023), every factor found in the social-ecological system must be considered to ensure its implementation can promote a continuous development of human character to produce students who are virtuous human beings.

As evidenced by the students' learning experiences in this study, teachers have employed a variety of teaching methods that have an impact on the students' learning outcomes (Bilqolam et al., 2022). At the same time, students should be given more autonomy in expressing their opinions on a topic discussed in class, guided by the moral values of the local community. When students are actively involved in the teaching and learning process, they can develop in a balanced manner through the three targeted moral domains: (i) reasoning, (ii) emotions and moral behavior. The development of these three domains will help students become more responsible citizens as they pursue higher education institutions. Balakrishnan and Claiborne (2012) suggested using real-life dilemmas in discussing moral issues, which is one of the teaching methods in this study that involves relating values to situations. For instance, students can discuss real-life problems in the classroom and apply the values they have learned in their real-life situations based on scenarios similar to those they have encountered in their daily lives.

However, as stated by the participants, teachers must consider students' maturity and ability to understand and relate to the situation discussed with the values learned. Using the examples from the textbook could make it difficult to understand values. Developing primary school students' critical thinking and moral reasoning abilities

can help them think more clearly and make better decisions, but primary school students are still in their playful stage (Bodrova et al., 2013). Since the student's ability and maturity level must be considered, the questions asked, and the situations discussed must be appropriate. Thus, the discussion of ethical dilemmas at the higher education level must also correspond to the maturity level of the students at the higher education institution.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study explores former ME students' learning experiences in a secondary school. They were interviewed and supplemented by written documents, indicating that the teaching and learning ME is focused on rote learning and relatively exam-oriented. The findings of this study add to the body of knowledge needed to comprehend the phenomenon of ME learning. The implementation of the ME subject in Malaysia's plural and multiracial society requires a thorough understanding of its goals in the development of virtuous human beings. Malaysian diverse society generates a wide range of standards, values, and beliefs about the role of ME in real life. In this regard, the Malaysian exam-oriented education system should not be a hindrance to ensuring the effectiveness of the implementation of the ME subject. It is up to teachers' wisdom and flexibility to address the diversity of students in the classroom during the ME teaching and learning process. As there is concern that the exam-oriented approach in teaching ME in schools is ineffective in nurturing students with noble characters, such issues should be addressed in the teaching of ME in higher education institutions. Finally, given the limitations of this study's samples, which only included former ME students, future research may concentrate on the alignment of teachers' and students' understanding of the fundamental goal of the ME subject. Exploring teachers' and students' understanding of the fundamental goals of ME subject implementation can be one of the contributing factors that improve the subject's effectiveness in constantly achieving its goals up to a higher level of education.

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