A reconceptualisation of Vygotsky’s ZPD into ZCD in teaching moral education in secondary schools using real-life dilemmas

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Abstract: In an effort to contribute to contemporary debates about alternative ways of teaching moral education, this qualitative study explored moral dilemmas identified by young adolescents and how they made moral choices to resolve the dilemmas. Data were gathered for textual analysis through a modified framework of participatory action research using participant observation, focus group transcripts, interviews and student journals. The data were interpreted using a revision of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, extended to suit the multicultural Malaysian setting, and here called the Zone of Collaborative Development. Participants were 22 16–17-year-old non-Muslim adolescents from different cultural backgrounds attending three different types of secondary schools. Moral Education (ME) in Malaysia (MEM) is designed to cater to this group while Muslim students study Islamic Studies. Findings show that students were concerned about moral issues and values not covered in the current ME curriculum. The moral dilemmas identified were relational and context dependent. Students named autonomy, self and mutual respect, trust, freedom and tolerance as main conflicting themes in their real-life moral dilemmas. The study suggests that including students’ voices in MEM in this way might better engage students’ interest and connecting the subject with students’ everyday lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Vishalache Balakrishnan is a senior lecturer at the University of Malaya, Malaysia. She was a secondary school teacher for 14 years before becoming a lecturer in 2002 at the University of Malaya. She is multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual. This background led her to pursue her career in moral education, and she is actively involved in teaching and the training of educators. She writes academic books, journal articles and chapters in books for moral education, civics and citizenship, and multicultural education.

Darcia Narvaez is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Notre Dame. Her research explores questions of moral cognition, moral development and moral character education. She has developed several integrative theories: Adaptive Ethical Expertise, Integrative Ethical Education, Triune Ethics Theory. She is the author or editor of four award winning books: Post conventional Moral Thinking; Moral Development, Self and Identity; Handbook of Moral and Character Education, Personality, Self and Identity.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Both the authors are keen to bring about transformation in the world of values and moral development. Vishalache Balakrishnan is focused on researching on aspects of multicultural education, religion and ethnicity and in looking at inclusive practices with a broader understanding. Darcia Narvaez research is mainly related to moral functioning and living a good life. She is very concerned about how to raise good, healthy and happy children.
1. Introduction

Moral Education (ME) in Malaysia took form after the 1979 Cabinet Report. All activities in regard to ME were based on the 1979 report of the Cabinet Committee on Education to review the implementation of education policy. In this report, it was 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. (para 127.1, p. 49)

Teaching ME in Malaysian schools has always been a “hot topic”. Often secondary students grow into young adults filled with “contradictory values and inconsistent beliefs and behaviours” (Kirschenbaum, 1977, p. 8). In Malaysia, it is considered essential that adolescents are exposed to the different norms of a multicultural society so that they are able to behave morally within the society (Vishalache, 2009, 2011). ME is intended to bridge the gaps between adolescent values and those of the nation (Moral Education Syllabus, 2000).

In the current ME syllabus, the focus of teaching and learning is based on several main principles assumed to develop holistic individuals physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and socially. The principles include:

(i) Being responsible towards self, family and others
(ii) Being steadfast towards one’s religion
(iii) Being caring towards the environment
(iv) Sustaining peaceful and harmonious life
(v) Being patriotic
(vi) Respecting human rights and
(vii) Practising principles of democracy in life.

(MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary School, 2000, p. 1: our translation)

The principles are clearly present in the content of the revised syllabus which is divided into several learning areas that give priority to aspects of spirituality, humanity, society and culture. The seven learning areas covered include values related to (1) self-development (belief in God, trustworthiness, self-esteem, responsibility, humility, tolerance, self-reliance, diligence, love, justice, rationality, and moderation), (2) family (love for the family, respect and loyalty towards family members, preservation of family traditions, and responsibility towards family), (3) environment (love and care for the environment, harmony between man and environment, sustainability of environment, and sensitivity towards environmental issues), (4) patriotism (love for nation, loyalty to the King and nation, and willingness to die or sacrifice for the nation), (5) human rights (protection of child’s rights, respect for women’s rights, protection of labour rights, respect rights of disabled persons, and protection of consumer rights), (6) democracy (respect rules and regulations, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, participation in nation building, and open-mindedness), (7) peace and harmony (living together in harmony, mutual help and cooperation, and mutual respect among nations).
Although learning areas and values are the same for students from the age group 13–17, the scope and emphasis for each changes because moral issues discussed become more complex, based on the developmental needs and maturity of the students. Furthermore, students are expected to acquire various skills such as critical and creative thinking, conflict resolution and social skills. The goal of ME is to prepare students to face the world of information technology and communication with confidence and with social and moral responsibility that includes the ability to resist peer pressure and other challenges of student life (MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary School, 2000). One issue missing from the curriculum that is tested in this study is how the interests and voices of students can shape the curriculum.

2. An introduction to the use of moral dilemmas in teaching ME

With a very strong Kohlbergian approach still dominating ME pedagogy in Malaysia, it is quite common to see hypothetical moral dilemmas used to teach a certain value. Moral dilemmas are conflicts faced by individuals, society and nations that involve clashes of values (Vishalache, 2008, 2011). In classrooms, students are encouraged to discuss dilemmas as a means for encouraging moral reasoning development. However, the use of hypothetical dilemmas in the classroom has been strongly criticised. For example, Marsh and Stafford (1988) suggested that hypothetical moral dilemmas oversimplify real-life dilemmas that students face.

Recognising the moral conflict in a hypothetical dilemma often requires considerable skill and experience. Moreover, what is considered normal in one culture can conflict with norms in another culture. For example, when giving or receiving things from others, Malaysians and most Easterners do it with the right hand but not so with the West. If one receives a gift with a left hand it is considered not so polite. Conversely, when a Western-designed dilemma is presented to Malaysian students, they may not accurately perceive the same value conflict as Westerners.

According to Wilson (1972), one effective way of teaching ME is to put students in a real-life situation, as much as possible within the four walls of the classroom, engaging students in the topic and the process. Culture-specific dilemmas are one way to do this. However, the Malaysian ME class contains students from different cultural backgrounds, making it difficult for teachers to present a dilemma that will be equally familiar to all students. The alternative suggested and tested here is to allow students to share their own real-life dilemmas and to proceed from there.

Although real-life moral dilemmas can be more complex than hypothetical ones (Gilligan, 1982), they are easy to generate. In the Malaysian context, moral dilemmas are widespread due to differences in cultural and religious group traditions, needs and belief systems, and the rules and regulations of the state. This project was focused on using real-life dilemmas presented by the participants themselves. The whole research was conducted within an ethical code where dilemmas were not identified and the students used codes to safeguard their privacy and anonymity.

According to Krebs and Denton (2005), hypothetical and real-life dilemmas differ in at least five ways. First, in real-life, students are the ones facing moral conflicts and they need to make a moral decision based on the conflict faced. They share a relationship with the conflicts, have feelings for them, have a history of past interactions with them and expect to interact with them in the future, and expect reactions and repercussions from the behaviour they emit (Krebs, Denton, & Wark, 1997). Second, students who make real-life moral decisions are usually involved in the moral conflicts. The process of students making decisions about what they should do may be quite different from the process of making decisions about what other people should do. Third, most real-life moral dilemmas involve consequences for the parties involved, and the parties have a vested interest in the outcomes (Krebs et al., 1997). Fourth, real-life moral dilemmas often evoke strong emotions, which may affect the students’ moral decision-making. Fifth, real-life dilemmas almost always are precipitated by behavioural acts and usually require behavioural decisions (Krebs & Denton, 1999) from the students. Moreover, students become highly engaged in real-life dilemma discussion, finding the experience to be meaningful (Krebs & Denton, 2005).
Initially, in the Malaysian ME, students were discussing moral dilemmas that were divorced from their experience, making it difficult to learn values that applied to their own lives (Vishalache, 2002, 2011). They could memorise values but not really “know” in the sense of applying them to their own dilemmas. Here, we used real-life dilemmas so that students could learn to apply the process of reasoning to their daily affairs.

3. Theoretical foundations

From a Vygotskian perspective, every social function is a cultural practice or practical activity that is mediated by language and forms of discourse and situated in a socio-cultural-historical context (Rogoff, 1990). The same can be said for moral functioning (Tappan, 1998, 2005, 2006). Moral language is shared only by people who participate in the same activities and who are engaged in similar social or moral practices (Tappan, 1997). Though Vygotsky’s focus was on mental cognition generally, here we link it with three moral domains; moral thinking, moral feeling and moral action. From a Vygotskian perspective, ME entails a process of guided participation where students are helped by more capable peers to attain new and more complex thinking, feeling and action. Students collaborate and work together, setting the stage for moral learning. This is further elaborated by Murphy, Scantlebury, and Milne (2015) who focused their research on co-teaching and collaboration.

Since students can be different in so many ways, schools need to cater to all these differences. Vygotsky recognised this challenge:

The goal of the school is not at all a matter of reducing everyone to the same level, on the contrary, one of the goals of the social environment that is created in the school is to achieve as complex, as diversified, and as flexible an organization of the various elements in this environment as possible. It is only necessary that these elements not be in any way irreconcilable, and that they be linked up together into a single system. (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 79)

Vygotsky warns of the dangers of reducing every student to the same level. In the Malaysian school system, it is intended to help students grow into socially responsible individuals in order to form a moral and civilised society but still maintaining their cultural and religious roots (MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary School, 2000). However, in reality teachers see students as generic and teach the same subject method the same way to all assuming all students are the same. In a research conducted in secondary schools (Vishalache, 2002), students in a co-educational school complained that teachers taught them the same values year in, year out and even quoted the same type of examples.

Vygotsky was able to combine two seemingly opposite elements into one distinct entity (Wink & Putney, 2002): providing an avenue for students’ views to be heard and at the same time, bringing together different cultural beliefs and values as one moral language. This study tries to do the same in the context of Malaysian ME.

Having rejected both the view that development precedes learning and vice versa, Vygotsky proposed a new approach called Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that focuses particular attention on learning and development in school-age children. Vygotsky (1978) conceptualised ZPD as a way of viewing what students are coming to know. The key to this approach is Vygotsky’s claim that in order to match instructional strategies to a student’s development capabilities accurately, what must be determined is not only the student’s “actual developmental level” but also the student’s “level of potential development” (p. 86). According to Vygotsky, learning is, at its core, a largely socially mediated activity, and real learning takes place in students’ ZPD and “What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it…” (1986, p. 188).

Vygotsky saw learning and development as an interrelated, dynamic process (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 86). Students become active participants in their learning through the use of language and
interaction with others (Silver, 2011). Wells (2000) refers to this process as an active “minds-on” activity. The tool of greatest importance is language, the pre-eminent joint activity is that of discourse and the purpose of the activity is to create common knowledge and enhance understanding. In this project, students engage themselves in a common ground to resolve their real-life moral dilemmas.

There are two culturally inappropriate aspects to Vygotsky’s approach that were modified for this project. First, although Vygotsky stressed that students play an active role in their own development in the process of internalisation, he says nothing about the content of what is learned. In a multicultural nation like Malaysia cultural and religious norms, constitutional rights and daily expressions do conflict at times. This might lead to a problematic relativism when applied to the moral domain in the Malaysian classroom. For example, if students learning ME in class judge a moral dilemma without considering their religion and the law and norms of society, they can experience serious trouble. Another instance would be if a female non-Muslim individual goes into a mosque without a head scarf then she is going against the norms of the Muslim community. At the same time, a non-Hindu who enters the Hindu temples without removing his or her footwear it is against the rules of the temple. This is the emerging challenge of ME in Malaysia. To remedy this, the teacher also contributed to the discussion in collaboration with the students, bringing in cultural expectations.

The students are also empowered to take responsibility for their own dilemmas and yet be able to resolve their dilemmas within the common communal acceptance. It does not take place without space and empowerment provided for social discourse in the ME classroom.

The second weakness is the concern for individual action after experiencing ZPD. In the Malaysian scenario, adolescents in secondary schools are constantly weighing their own decision against communal expectations. Vygotsky said that what an individual learns today, he or she is able to apply that tomorrow. But it is difficult and challenging when communal decisions out power individual decisions. It is even more critical in MEM because culturally, students are still maintaining within their own family and community and yet they have to share their intellectual, emotional and social space with individuals from other cultures. Thus, the collaboration with more capable peers encourages students to take collaborative moral actions which fulfil the requirements of the nation in developing a “shared moral language”. Though this can be argued as a kind of conforming to local norms but there is space for students to discuss and understand local and global values compared to follow what the books, curriculum and ME teacher has to say. This is a new venture compared to current practice where teachers provide all resolutions to the dilemmas discussed (Vishalache, 2002, 2011).

4. Prior theory and research
The underpinning ethic of open communication with the other (Habermas, 1987) contains a hope that the other will hold the same view. The process is also similar to the “just community” schools in America where students wrestled with everyday dilemmas, community decisions, empowering students, egalitarianism, caring community and democratic decision-making (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Of course, there are differences in the Malaysian context and the USA context above, such as the ME framework and cultural differences.

As discussed earlier, Malaysia is unique and stands alone as a multicultural nation which is different from other multicultural nations (Vishalache, 2010). The fact that the ethnic differences which was brought from different countries when the migrants came from China, India, Indonesia and other parts of the world to settle in Malaysia is still very dominant. In a recent research on Malaysian schools as spaces for multiculturalism, it was found that parents are in favour to send their children to vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools which were established in the 1940s and 1950s to cater for children of migrants from China and India. The collaborative environment in everyday life of students is constantly challenged by cultural and religious different of students’ background (Silvonen,
In order to address these issues, we modified the Vygotskian ZPD to construct a Malaysian version which we named the Zone of Collaborative Development (ZCD).

In this case, the ZCD was seen to be superior for three reasons. The ME classroom is a collaborative environment. Thus, students who manage their own level of development got to “check and balance” with communal expectations when deciding on matters even for themselves. This is different from ZPD which solely provides the autonomy for students to develop based on their maturity and development. Second, real-life moral dilemmas on various topics were expected to emerge from the participants themselves and could be discussed in a collaborative manner. Thirdly, ZCD encourages the participants to express their diverse cultural viewpoints and religious differences during the moral dilemma discussions, providing the opportunity for participants to learn from each other’s cultures and experiences in a power-sharing collaboration. In this way, a ZCD encourages students to be responsible for the real-life dilemmas they and their classmates raise. Together they are able to use their knowledge, skills and feelings to generate plans for moral action. Rather than “correct” solutions, students were able to develop a shared moral language which helped them face everyday moral dilemmas.

The strength of ZCD is that the characteristics of collaboration are applied at every stage. Typically, after experiencing the ZPD, students are left on their own to face recurring dilemmas. In ZCD, the cycles of discussion make it feasible for students to come back together as a group, collaborate and proceed with moral actions where applicable. Whereas the ZPD is focused on mental cognition, the ZCD also includes emotions and actions, complementing the ME philosophy in Malaysia. Collaboration is a key as students share their dilemmas and classmates offer their experiences and knowledge to resolve the real-life dilemmas. The result for the individual can be progression or regression, depending on the support of the peers.

5. Processes involved in the ZCD

The model developed by the first author for this research is presented in Figure 1. The model merges the four-stage ZPD with Participatory action research (PAR) research methodology. By merging both these components, the model illustrated the processes involved in ZCD. What is unique about it is the notion of being sensitive to contextual complexities when students undergo the process of ZCD. The process becomes the method by which dilemmas are analysed in the context of a respectful, caring relationship. Throughout the process, there is a need to build a safe environment for the students to operate in and to be able to resolve dilemmas without being threatened. This model is generic in nature and can be utilised in any moral dilemma analysis process.

5.1. Sharing and collaboration

The process of ZCD requires a safe and caring environment for students so the project emphasised an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1977, 1982; Baier, 1985; Held, 1993; Noddings, 2003). Caring means “to
care for, emotional commitment to and willingness to act on behalf of persons with whom one has significant relationships” (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001, p. 369). This is the context where sharing and collaboration best occur. In a caring climate, the sharing and collaboration phase can begin. Students discuss their real-life moral dilemmas and collaborate with their groups to analyse the conflicts from different perspectives. Moral thinking and moral feeling are integral to this phase. Capable peers, including teachers, help in bringing the discussions to more in-depth, connecting students with their real-lives. Social and cultural differences offer a rich source for ideas for resolving conflicts.

5.2. Self-help and reflection
The second phase of the ZCD begins when individual students begin their own reflections and focus on self-help. This has the effect of incorporating into ME the religious or cultural dimension based on the background of the students. Each student has a capacity to reflect that is given priority in the ZCD. The reflection process enables students to use their moral reasoning to think through moral choices and moral actions. The reflective phase also allows students to compare and contrast resolutions suggested, resolutions applied and future resolutions needed to be taken in order to be accepted as moral individuals. It is an important phase because differences in values and orientations are likely to disturb thoughts and emotions, but because of the earlier collaboration and cooperation phase, students are also in a better position to reflect upon the conflicts.

5.3. Internalisation of values and skills based on local context and constraints
The third phase of ZCD is the internalisation of values and skills based on local context and constraints. Without being sensitive to local context and constraints, moral actions can be ambiguous or even immoral. This process becomes an internal cycle where students start realising their conflicting values within compared to communal expectations. However, for students who have not reached that reflective level, teachers play a large role if students are unable to reflect about the conflicting values.

5.4. Recursiveness through prior phases when values conflict
Recursiveness usually takes place whenever values conflict. Within the group, the students discuss and bring out the various conflicting issues. The processes in this final phase of the ZCD are applicable even when students are alone. They provide an opportunity for students to put into action what they have learned, bringing the ME philosophy of moral thinking, moral feelings and moral action into perspective. The skills and knowledge acquired from capable peers may be applied directly or indirectly.

The processes of collaboration, self-help and internalisation of values can help the students face other moral dilemmas outside of the classroom. Students know they can ask for suggestions from groups of friends or other authorities and employ self reflection.

6. Research methodology
A collaborative social process of learning was described by Habermas (1994) as an open communicative process realised by people who collaborate to change the practices through which they communicate in a shared social world, and where they live with the consequences of one another’s actions. PAR which was used in this research builds on this notion.

PAR is a participatory, democratic, practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Within a PAR process, people create knowledge which is simultaneously a tool for the education and development of consciousness as well as mobilisation for action (Gaventa, 1991). McTaggart (1997) used PAR to emphasise both authentic participation and relevancy of actions. Habermas (1987) is well known for calling emancipation practice the life world (Kemmis, 2001; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003) where sharing power with poor and oppressed people gives voice to their decision-making and control to regenerate citizenship (Burgess, 1995; McKnight, 1987). In this project, students were in the position of “oppressed” in
the sense that they seldom had a chance to express their views, their problems and their voices in the ME classroom.

The study is divided into five phases as suggested by Park (1993) who sees PAR as a process of recovery and discovery which “provides a framework in which people seeking to overcome oppressive situations can come to understand the social forces in operation and gain strength in collective action” (p. 3). Park’s framework of PAR has been adapted and adjusted according to the Malaysian classroom setting. Below is a brief visual overview of the whole PAR process used for this study.

7. Research profile

Miles and Huberman (1994) provide a good example of a contact summary form that was used to keep track of observational sessions in a qualitative study of a new school curriculum and has been adapted here to suit a PAR research; what were the main issues or themes that struck you in this contact, summarise the information you got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions you had for this dilemma, anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact, and what new (or remaining) target questions do you have in considering the next contact with this site.

The research question focused in this paper is:

What are the moral conflicts faced by a representative sample of 16–17-year-old adolescents in a ME class in Malaysia?

How did the students apply ZCD during their ME class discussions?

The research was conducted in three different states in Peninsular Malaysia. Participating students were from three different types of secondary schools; all boys, all girls and co-educational. The choice of three different types of school is to gather a wider understanding of moral dilemmas faced in different types of secondary schools in Malaysia. The schools were randomly chosen based on their location; one school is located in a big city, another in a rural area and the third in a small city. These are the three types of secondary schools currently existing since pre independence era.

Across schools, the students were from the Indian, Chinese and Punjabi ethnic groups. Two were from mixed parentage families (Chinese-Indian and Punjabi-Indian). They belonged to different faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism and Taoism. Vygotsky (1986) argues that one’s culture provides the basic tools for human transaction and managing daily psychological dilemmas. This was supported in the discussions among the different groups. When the issues discussed were related to cultural aspects, such as cultural and religious norms, the participants were able to express their own ethnic-cultural perspectives and provide examples from their own culture focusing on certain moral-decision resolutions. Although these perspectives were not necessarily familiar to the students from other cultures, most students shared a common youth culture acquired from the media and internet.

Below is the description about the participants and research details:

Dilemma scoring. The real-life dilemmas brought up by students were categorised as relational—which includes an ongoing significant relationship—and non-relational, which involves persons with whom participants neither know nor are directly involved (Walker, de Vries and Trevethan, 1987). Of the 22 moral dilemmas presented by the study participants, 19 dilemmas involved relational relationships with others whom they knew and one involved the environment which everyone is part of and two were not included as moral dilemmas as rated by independent experts in the field of ME and psychology. As far as the participants were concerned, they were more likely to identify relational than non-relational issues in their everyday dealings. (Along with the first author two independent raters, a developmental psychologist and a counsellor, were involved in extracting the themes from
the dilemmas and categorising them as relational or non-relational. The two issues which were not included as moral dilemmas were accepted after two sessions of discussions with the developmental psychologist and the counsellor. Overall, there was 91% of agreement out of the 22 dilemmas as to which was actually moral dilemmas).

8. Results and discussion

When students in the research were asked to reflect upon their moral conflicts and to identify one moral conflict, every student took a corner or a space in the class and reflected on what they were undergoing and what moral dilemmas they were facing. After the first and second stage in the PAR process (refer to Table 1), students were asked to write their moral dilemma on pieces of paper. They sat in a group but wrote their dilemmas individually. At the end of the dilemma, the students wrote a pseudonym to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Researcher then typed out every single dilemma again to safeguard the anonymity of each student. The 20 conflicts were categorised into five conflicting themes after a discussion between the first author and the two independent raters: respect, trust, freedom, tolerance and autonomy. The first four themes are included in the ME syllabus though not spelt out in the way the PAR students presented them.

Types of dilemma presented by students:

Autonomy is not in the curriculum but evident in student-generated dilemmas. An example of a conflict discussion process: autonomy vs. authority (Tables 2 and 3).

Why do people control my life? I want to do what I feel is right. I’m already a big boy, but I hate people telling me what to do. Especially my parents who are not open minded and always ask many questions if I want to do anything. (Dilemma 2#Orkid)

| Table 1. Brief overview of the research design |
| PAR Process | Brief description |
| --- | --- |
| Phase | Approval and recruitment of participants: the comprehensive process started with obtaining approval from the nation Educational Planning and Research Department, then approval from the state and district education divisions for research and finally from the school principal, teacher-in-charge and students themselves. Written consent was obtained at every stage. Since the research was based on a certain subject taught in school, students in that particular subject were briefed about the research and they chose to be in the research based on their own will |
| 1 | Rapport building with PAR participants—ice-breaking activities to build the mutual trust and respect between researcher and participants. Also a stage where working agreement (WA) is constructed between students and students and researcher as a collaborative research team. Here, the ethics of research was adhered where students were students who volunteered to be part of the research were given an information sheet, a written consent form (individual and group), written permission from their parents were obtained and WA constructed and closely followed throughout the research to safeguard. Participants were free to leave the research at any time if they were not comfortable. Participants were informed that the role of researcher was neutral, as a facilitator and data collector |
| 2 | Problem formulation by PAR participants—students write their moral dilemmas and researcher types them all out to safeguard privacy and confidentiality of students |
| 3 | Procedures Real-life moral dilemma discussions—within this phase there are reflective cycles at the end of each real-life dilemma discussion For example: Moral Dilemma 1 • Real-life dilemma discussion (Cycle 1) in groups • Reflection/Journal writing individually • Real-life dilemma discussion (Cycle 2) in groups • Reflection/Journal writing individually |
| 4 | Reflective cycle in groupsFinal reflective cycle based on the whole PAR research process |
When students discussed their moral conflicts they mentioned—directly or indirectly—a complexity of factors like parental control, culture and the Japanese occupation which makes the conflict that they present difficult to resolve. But students from conventional background felt the control of parents was fine compared to students with open-minded parents.

### Table 2. Description of participants, participating schools, data gathering and analysis

| School          | Kekwah | Seri pagi | Orkid |
|-----------------|--------|-----------|-------|
| Number of participants | 8      | 8         | 6     |
| Gender          | All girls | 4 boys, 4 girls | All boys |
| Age group (years) | 16–17  | 16–17     | 16–17 |
| Withdrew from research | None   | None      | None  |
| Data gathered   | Eight cycles of discussion and one final reflection through journals, field notes, audio and video recording | Eight cycles of discussion and one final reflection through journals, field notes, audio and video recording | Eight cycles of discussion and one final reflection through journals, field notes, audio and video recording |
| Transcription   | Data collected was transcribed in the original form (Malay language, English language and mother tongue languages) and then translated into English language. The translation was done by the researcher herself as she is multilingual. For validity and reliability purposes, translated text was shown and verified to participants to ensure that the translated narratives were same as the original text. The translation process was very comprehensive. Firstly, the whole dialogic process was transcribed and shared with research participants. Then the translated version was also shared with the participants to ensure that there was no researcher biasness. |
| Interpretation of data | Data were interpreted based on the themes verified (see below) |

### Table 3. Examples of dilemmas presented by PAR participants

| Conflicting themes | Dilemmas presented |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| Respect vs. authority | My parents are busy at work every day. Sometimes, we siblings hardly see them for days due to their work schedule. My brother is always playing computer games while my sister is 24 h hanging on the phone. They don't respect me as a younger child at home and I wish my parents spent more time with us than at work. (Dilemma 6# Seri Pagi) |
| Trust vs. mistrust | I can't manage my time and I can't even keep to my own schedule. I spend most of my time playing football and other things. When it's time to study I don't respect me as a younger child at home and I wish my parents spent more time with us than at work. (Dilemma 6# Seri Pagi) |
| Freedom vs. responsibility | My parents don't understand me at all. I want more freedom in my life. I don't know whether it is good to think wrong of my parents. I wish they were more understanding of my individual needs. I feel whatever they think good for me is actually demoralising me. (Dilemma 1# Orkid) |
| Tolerance vs. care | My friend likes to gossip. She was in my class but now we are in different classes. Beginning of this year, we were okay and as usual during recess, we will talk until the bell rings. As time passed, I realised that every time she came to me, she started with “Do you know this girl/guy …?” I used to tolerate her habit earlier but I just don't like the way she keeps on gossiping about someone else. In my opinion, we don't need to care about others - like what they wear and what they do. I try to avoid her nowadays even though I still want to be her friend. I still meet her every time I go for tuition and this conflict is really bugging me. (Dilemma 2# Kekwah) |
| Autonomy vs. authority | My parents do not give me priority. They force me to study for long hours but I only can concentrate and study for an hour. They must not force me to study. I know when to study. They won't let me make any decisions on my own such as going out in the evenings to play football and many more. (Dilemma 7# Orkid) |
Here is a journal writing which voices the effects of the Japanese occupation and its impact on the amount of freedom that the participant gets as a teenager:

What I want is a bit of time for myself. My parents say during Japanese times they had to work whole day under hot burning sun to bring back home some tapioca. At times they even sleep without food. I understand what they had gone through. But I want some time for myself to do things I like. Is that too much to ask from them? (Orkid)

As seen in the journal writing, during the PAR process in Orkid, the participants considered the Japanese occupation as one reason that made their parents curb their freedom:

P: When I ask for a little extra pocket money also, Dad would bring the Japanese occupation story.
R: Parents always compare their times with now. It is difficult to explain to them that times are different and changing. (Orkid)

The above was the sharing and collaboration stage in ZCD (refer to Figure 1). Students in ME class come from different background and might not have had parents who underwent the Japanese occupation in Malaysia which was Malaya then. But they could feel what their friends underwent and provided caring phrases like “Put yourself into their shoes”, or “Try to understand them a bit.”

P who was in dilemma went through the second stage of self-help and reflection where he went back home, spoke to his parents and during his reflective discussion stage said.

I now am clearer why some parents are so thrifty. They practically ate tapioca for two years during the Japanese occupation. I felt sad listening to their stories. But I still insist that I should have my own extra pocket money and that I will earn during my school holidays.

Here, what has taken place is P has been reflecting based on what his peers and his parents shared with him. He has gone on to understand the experiences that his parents underwent during the Japanese occupation and learnt the positive aspects of being thrifty. But he again spoke about his own freedom and how he would still want extra pocket money which he hopes to earn during the school holidays. Thus, the collaboration and sharing with friends went on to self-help and reflection to internalisation of values and skills based on local context and constraints (which is the Japanese occupation) and how P is prepared for other conflicts if values conflict.

Students experienced a dilemma when they have to decide between issues like authority, mutual respect, self trust, cultural sensitivity and tradition, parental expectations and their own need for the conflicting values mentioned earlier. All in all they are in a constrained situation to make choices on the moral dilemmas that they face.

The moral choices made by the participants were heavily influenced by parents, culture, religion, utilitarianism, collaboration and friendship. These conflicts presented surprising ironies, for example, four out of five moral conflicts concerning autonomy involved conflict with parents but when the same participants considered their moral choices, they were tactful about what their parents would think when they decided what to do.

As written by one student (Q) in the reflective journal:

I will decide for myself but my decision will always consider my parents feelings and situation. I don’t want to bring shame to my family or my community. It is difficult but I have to abide by family traditions. (Kekwah)

Based on the research, it is found that the PAR students’ moral choices are greatly influenced by the need to make others happy as in a utilitarianism concept and this is one of the deciding factors
for their moral choices. As in P’s situation, he understood his parent’s ways of thriftiness due to the Japanese occupation experiences but had some of his own egoism decision at the end to have the extra pocket money by working during the school holidays. As for Q, she will abide by family traditions even though it might be tough on herself.

Culture and religion were also influencing their moral decisions because from a young age, the participants have been inculcated to respect and obey their elders. As times, the students made choices based on rationality but, as always, traditions and culture were there to influence their choices and they had to make choices within such constraints. For example, in Dilemma 4# Seri Pagi, participants were caught between making a choice to go against a brother who wronged them or keep to tradition and be respectful to the elder brother. It is an ongoing challenge for the participants to constantly struggle with the dilemma of making moral choices in their daily moral conflicts based on these factors.

9. Conclusion
The tension between traditional values and individual freedom in ME might be of relevance and interest to ME on a more global level, although the tensions may differ in strength and form. Understanding more about the unheard students voices in ME classes may provide a richer and more meaningful learning experience. Methods should be applied to gather information about students’ real-life moral dilemmas and use a collaborative method for resolving such dilemmas. If not carefully exploited, this can potentially expose students to exploitation. Thus, there is the serious issue of abiding the ethical code and ensuring that the safety, privacy and confidentiality of students and schools are always safeguarded.

It is hoped that this kind of approach may lead to greater effectiveness of ME. One key challenge is that it requires power being shared—rather than relegated to the “experts” alone in a top-down approach as it has been since ME was introduced in Malaysia. In 2010, the current ME syllabus for secondary schools was reviewed and revamped according to perceived needs of the adolescents and visions of the nation.

The first revised ME curriculum is being pilot studies in several secondary schools. It is greatly hoped that the above research will provide some useful input in allowing students voices to be heard. There should be more research in exploring the voices of students in ME in Malaysia and other Asia pacific nations where teaching and learning is always conformed to what is contained in the syllabus; and this syllabus is formulated by experts who include aspects which they think is essential for students. It is high time that a “bottoms-up” approach is conducted and merged with the current “top-down” system.

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