

Inclusion of voices of students in Moral Education: A Malaysian experience

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Abstract

The paper will discuss issues about how students' of Moral Education (ME) in Malaysia want to be included, heard and part of a syllabus that touches their mind, heart and action. The experience shared here is based on my PhD findings, which includes cultural and religious tolerance in a multicultural nation. My study indicates that the voices of students can be heard to enable ME to develop as a dynamic and meaningful subject in secondary schools in Malaysia. Students' experiences in the participatory process, in resolving conflicts with the help of their peers, and in gaining understanding of the types of problems that concern adolescents in Malaysia was invaluable to them. It is anticipated that the outcomes of my study will be useful to in revising the ME syllabus in Malaysia, to the training of teachers who will teach ME in teacher training colleges and universities, and most importantly it will enable students' voices to be heard during the implementation of the subject in secondary schools.

Introduction

The purpose of my paper is to explore new ways of teaching Moral Education (ME) in Malaysia in secondary schools. So far, the cognitive development approach that was introduced by Kohlberg (1984), the value clarification approach (Raths, Harmin & Simon, 1966) and character education (Lickona, 1991) has been implemented in the Malaysian ME syllabus. However, the problem is that students study ME as any other content related subject and are unable to see the relevance of ME in real-life situations. There is a gap between what is in the syllabus and how the students approach real-life moral dilemmas. So far, in Malaysia, students' perceptions have not been taken into account when formulating or revising the ME syllabus. This study aims to focus on students' voices through participatory action research (PAR), that is, to involve students of ME in active communication (Habermas, 1987) and discussion to resolve the real-life dilemmas that they face in their daily lives.

Terms such as morality and ethics are often used interchangeably in everyday speech as referring to justified or proper conduct (Alexander, 2005). In Malaysia it is the same, but ethics is usually associated with a certain conduct within a profession (i.e. the code of ethics for the teaching profession) (Vishalache, 2008). Morality is a more general term referring to the character of individuals and community. In Malaysia, both these concepts are also influenced by Islam, the official state religion, and many other religions which have been practised by non-Muslim societies for centuries.

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In Malaysia, morality is influenced by the state religion and religion embraced by different individuals (absolute morality), legislation (unless there is a change in the constitution), and the norms of the society. Morality here refers to the code of conduct that is accepted by the Malaysian society. A moral person, as defined in the ME programme, is one who abides by the *Rukun Negara* (National Ideology), is virtuous, is responsible, and is able to contribute towards the harmony and stability of the country and global community (MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary Students, 2000).

Moral Education in Malaysia

ME in Malaysia is a core subject in the secondary education system. The focus of the subject is on cultivating, appreciating, and practising the “noble virtues” of Malaysian society (MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary Schools, 2000, p. v). It is hoped that the subject will deliver students who are knowledgeable, who have noble personalities, and who are polite and willing to contribute productively towards their society and their country.

ME in Malaysia is defined as a subject that is compulsory for all non-Muslim students studying in government and private schools. While non-Muslim students study ME, Muslim students are taught Islamic Studies. Students study ME from Standard One to Form Five (ages seven to seventeen) following which they sit a formal examination conducted by the Examination Board from the Ministry of Education. For more than a decade, I and many other academics like me in the field of ME have been critical of formal assessment for ME arguing that morality cannot be assessed just by grading cognitive development; it also involves emotional development and students’ personal transformation. It is a government policy, which was established by an Act of Parliament, teachers. The Examination Board is required to assess ME, but vigorous debate by educators has had an effect on this assessment. Now, multiple methods are used to assess students in the ME exams, which test more than cognitive ability. Formal and informal strategies are used to assess the students. Formal strategies include written examinations, project work, assignments, and report writing. Informal assessments include observation, anecdotal reporting, and conferencing with students and parents. In pre-schools, ME is combined with Socio-Emotional Education and taught to all pre-school students. Subjects are taught in isolation or integrated into other core subjects like Mathematics and language.

ME emphasises the spiritual, familial, environmental, social, and humanitarian aspects in the total development of the individual. It is in accordance with the Malaysian Educational National Philosophy which states:

Education in Malaysia is an effort towards developing the individual’s potential as a whole and combined to deliver individuals who are balanced and harmonious, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically, based on belief and obeying God. This is a continuous effort to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable, dynamic, virtuous, responsible and capable of achieving self-fulfilment as well as providing their service towards the harmony and peace of the family, community and country. (MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary Students; 2000, p. IV, author’s translation).

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ME focuses on the effort to instil spiritual and moral strength through experiential and daily virtues of Malaysian society that are found in religion, traditions, and cultural rites. Thus, students can build a way of life that enables them to be moral individuals. This also enables them to be socially and morally responsible in any decision or action taken.

The ME curriculum in Malaysia enables students to:

1. understand and internalise values which are needed to be virtuous;
2. realise and accept the importance of harmony between man and environment and strive to sustain it;
3. enhance understanding and cooperation by sustaining a peaceful and harmonious life in a democratic Malaysia;
4. develop mature thinking based on moral and spiritual values and use them when making moral decisions and solving problems;
5. develop initiative to act morally, based on justice and altruism in line with the noble values of the Malaysia community.

(MOE, ME Syllabus for Secondary Students; 2000, p. 3, author's translation).

A variety of methodologies are used to teach ME in Malaysian secondary schools. They include small group and class discussions, singing, story-telling, debate, role play, drama, problem-based learning, and practice in resolving moral dilemmas. It is important to understand that the terms, ME and Values Education, are used interchangeably in Malaysia.

Why the need to include voice of students in ME?

It is the practice in the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) in Malaysia to revise the syllabus after a period of time (usually after more than 10 years) or when complaints are received from authorities like teachers and the public (MOE, CDC of Malaysia Report, 1988). I was involved in the revision process from 1998 to 2000 representing the teaching group, and argued that students should also be called upon to give their views and suggestions. But this never materialised and students' views were hardly considered.

Even though ME is established in the Malaysian education syllabus, many complaints are aired by various parties through the media. The National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) has often argued through the media that ME should be integrated into other subjects and ME, per se, abolished. Parents have complained to schools about the heavy workload for their children in ME and that their children do not benefit from the subject. ME lessons are compulsory, even at tertiary level and the workload varies from (two hours to three hours per week).

In the Malaysian ME syllabus, content and values are delivered without considering the possibility of discussing contradictory issues and conflicts. This could be seen as another weakness. Several times I have had students raise a certain moral issue, like cleanliness of the river. While one group of students may get emotionally upset because in their culture, a river is sacred and should not be littered, other students do not care about such issues. Solutions on how to deal with such contradictory views and opinions have not been spelt out in the ME syllabus and students' feelings and opinions have hardly been considered. This provides fruitful ground for this area of my proposed research.

During ME classes, students often claim that too much emphasis is given to cognitive development that is associated with assignments and exams, and very little importance is given to social and emotional development (Vishalache, 2004). This research, therefore, also looks into the notion of whether ME can prioritise social and emotional development without sacrificing cognitive development. Through their active open dialogue and, later, reflection, students have ample opportunity to consider the three junctures of the moral domains: moral thinking, moral feeling, and moral action.

Another timely concern addressed by this study is the assessment and implementation processes of ME. Students have experienced eleven years of ME syllabus without reflecting about whether any of the content which they have learned has made a difference to their lives and to their personal development. During my teaching period at the University of Malaya, where I provide courses like Curriculum in ME, Religion and Morality, and Assessment in ME for teacher trainees, my students agree that ME is important and should be in the education system. But when asked about what they learnt in ME in their eleven years of schooling, all they remember is jotting notes and memorising.

The use of participatory action research (PAR) was introduced to the students, and the students in this research have subsequently identified several real-life dilemmas and participated in the real-life dilemma discussions (Re-LiMDD) with the help of their peers.

PAR and Moral Education

PAR begins with issues that emerge from day to day living. PAR builds on Freire's critical pedagogy which is different to traditional formal models of education where the teacher stands at the front and imparts information to the students (Freire, 1986). In my research, students begin with their own real-life dilemmas, proceed through the process of PAR, and the expectation is that, with the help of capable peers as suggested by Vygotsky (1978), they might be able to take action on resolving their own moral conflicts. PAR involves a broad range of community participants to choose the issue or problem that is within their sphere of influence. Kemmis (2001) speaks of opening communicative space for progressive mutual understanding, authentic engagement, and consensus on and about action.

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Each phase of the unfolding inquiry process has iterative cycles of self-learning, reflection, and action (Heen, 2005; Koch, Mann, Kralik & Van Loon, 2005; Lewin & Greenwood, 2001). Throughout this study, students participate through active communication (Habermas, 1987) to mediate between the private concerns of the moral conflicts within their own, familial, and social lives as compared to the demands and concerns of social and public life.

The process of PAR in this study uses several ideas of Habermas's (1987) model of communicative rationality that takes into account the effect of power sharing. He opposes the traditional idea of an objective and functionalist reason. Students involved in my research were offered the space to talk, discuss, and argue about how their real-life moral dilemmas can be resolved within the constraints of a society with absolute cultural and historical norms. Students were invited to take charge of their own decisions. Torre and Fine (2006) argue that PAR is a successful methodology for engaging the voice of youth in the classroom and service learning projects.

Characteristics of PAR relevant to the research

PAR includes several characteristics relevant for my thesis (Kemmis, 2001). Firstly, it is participatory. The aims of PAR are active involvement and shared power by participants, empowerment of participants, a commitment to action, and the researcher learning with participants (Hall, 1981; Brown, 1990). As researcher, I play the role of facilitator who encourages and asks leading questions to enable the students to proceed with their resolution of moral dilemmas with the help of capable peers.

Secondly, PAR responds to a need for action. The students are encouraged to identify their own real-life moral dilemmas and address each dilemma to find resolutions. The research aims to be creative and transformative in that students, through the process of discussion, will try to reach their goal of resolving their own dilemmas with help from capable peers while continually reflecting on the usefulness of the process.

Thirdly, PAR creates knowledge that is useful and meaningful. My thesis is focussed on providing an avenue for students to be able to recognise ME as useful and meaningful. PAR provides the space for students in my research to analyse their real-life moral dilemmas and resolve them according to different perspectives but within the framework of ME in the Malaysian scenario. PAR recognises that knowledge is the meaning that students attribute to their experiences. PAR requires the research team, which includes the students and myself, to question and reflect upon the purpose of the research here, asking: what are the real-life moral dilemmas they are facing, how do they describe the moral choices they make, what moral orientations do they use to solve the conflicts, how do peers help them, who benefits from it, and who uses it for what purposes?

PAR is also flexible and iterative. The shape and focus of the research may change as students focus and refocus their understandings of what is really happening and what is important to them. Throughout the process, students may identify new questions, and understandings and directions may arise and reshape the course of them solving

their real-life moral dilemmas. The research proceeds through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The assumption here is that when real-life moral dilemmas go through the PAR process, it will generate “possibility theory” instead of “predictive theory.”

PAR methods applied Using moral dilemmas

Part of the moral dilemma analysis in this study requires students to keep their own conflict resolution journal, in which they reflect on the research process. Keeping a conflict resolution journal is a rigorous documentary tool (Janesick, 1994). The students keep journals as do the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I also encouraged students to use techniques such as mind mapping, short essays, notes, and other ways to express themselves freely, appropriate to the PAR process.

Field notes and journals

In this study, observations were also recorded by me, the researcher, in the form of field notes and journals. Students’ journals are used to complement my own journal and note-taking. As participants completed cycles of action and reflection, I was reflexive by regularly returning data to participants and critically reflecting on the developments of the research. My own reflective journal enabled me to record both what had happened, and also my reflections on what had happened. By observing my ME students throughout the research and also analysing the other data collection methods, I gathered insights into how the students react to resolving their own moral-dilemmas with the aid of friends and how they react to use of PAR in the ME classroom.

Audio and video recording

Video and other multimedia are used these days to generate evidence from data (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). They are very powerful because they help to capture the nature of reality which at times cannot be captured in words. According to Morse and Richards (2002), videotaping is becoming more commonly used in observational settings because cameras now seem less intrusive to participants and fear among researchers that the presence of the cameras causes participants to change behaviour is lessening. Videotapes also allow the researcher to review, examine, and re-examine the discussions slowly and even frame by frame. The use of non-verbal communication, possibly significant to my analysis, can be captured through the use of audio. However, to safeguard their rights and safety, specific permission was obtained from participating students.

Using focus group methods

The focus group may be defined as “an interview style designed for small groups” (Berg, 2004, p. 123). Using focus groups, researchers strive to discover how truth is formed (Foucault, 1980) through discussion about psychological and sociocultural characteristics and processes among various groups (Basch, 1987). Focus group

interviews comprise either guided or unguided discussions addressing a particular topic of interest or relevance to the group and the researcher (Edmunds, 1999). Krueger (1994) suggests that for complex problems focus group size should be kept to no more than about seven participants.

A typical focus group consists of “a small number of participants under the guidance of a facilitator, usually called the moderator” (Berg, 2004, p. 123). The informal atmosphere of the focus group interview structure is intended to “encourage participants to speak freely and completely about behaviours, attitudes, and opinions they possess” (Berg, 2004, p. 123). Focus groups that are administered properly are dynamic. Interactions among and between group members stimulate discussions in which one group member reacts to comments made by another.

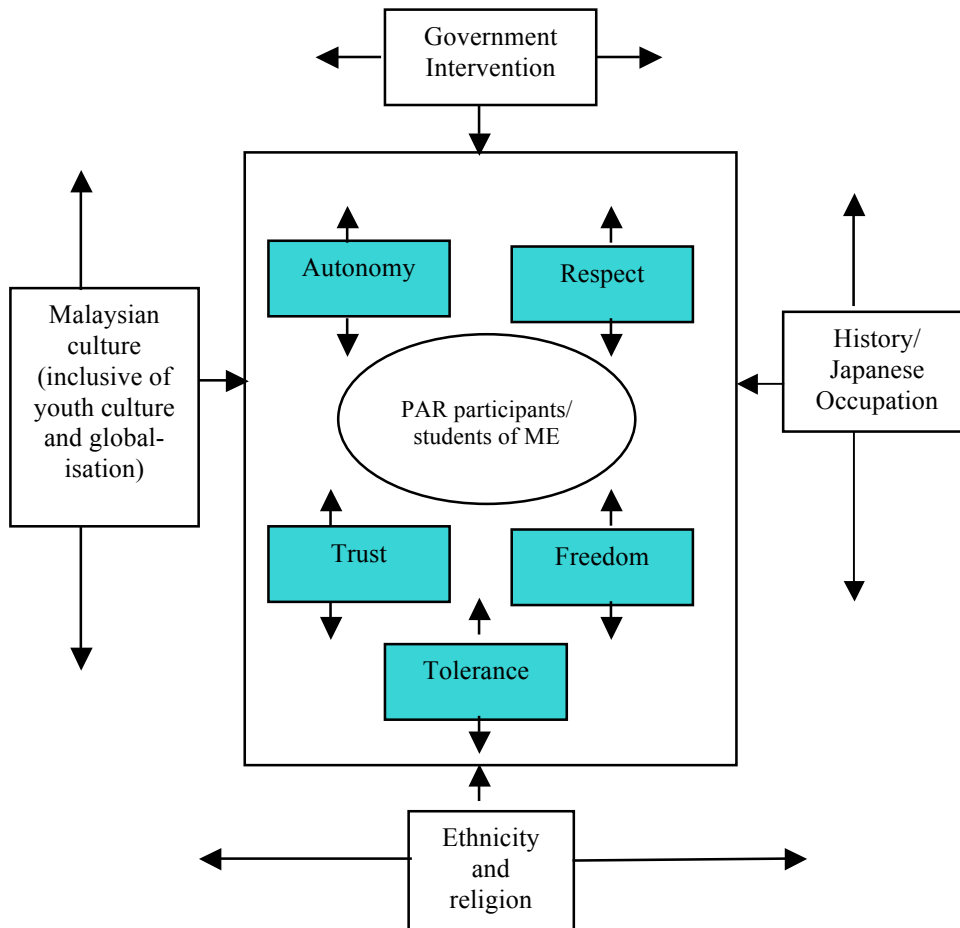
Below is a brief visual overview of the whole PAR process used for this study:

PAR Process	
Phase	Brief description
1	Approval and recruitment of participants
2	Rapport building with my PAR participants
3	Problem formulation by my PAR participants
4	<p>Procedures</p> <p>Real-life moral dilemma discussions - within this phase there are reflective cycles at the end of each real-life dilemma discussion</p> <p>For example:</p> <p>Moral Dilemma 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Real-life dilemma discussion (Cycle 1) - Reflection/Journal writing - Real-life dilemma discussion (Cycle 2) - Reflection/Journal writing
5	<p>Reflective cycle</p> <p>Final reflective cycle based on the whole PAR research process</p>

A brief overview of the research design.

Participants' real-life dilemmas

Based on the moral dilemmas that the participants provided, several major themes emerged. These are identified in diagram below:



Below is one example of one real-life moral dilemma:

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. There is so much difference between the past generation and the present. I don't mind them advising me like my brother. (Dilemma 2# *Orkid*)

Based on the PAR process above, students worked through their dilemmas, taking responsibility on their own with lots of collaboration and interaction. They found their friends in the focus groups were a great help in the PAR process.

Peer pleasure

As I have worked on my research, I find "peer pleasure" a more appropriate term than "peer pressure" where my participants are concerned. Students showed much in

common throughout the research, though arguments did occur. But what was unique is that their different languages and bodily gestures showed cooperation and collaboration among students themselves. Though in the initial PAR cycles they were very academically inclined (constantly referring to the values stipulated in the ME syllabus and talking about learning facts when relating to moral values), as the research proceeded, students became more engaged in deliberate discussion and expressing themselves as a group based on the real-life moral dilemmas they presented from their journals. During the final reflective stage, they reflected and described how they put their initial thoughts into action as well.

Below is an extract from one of the students' personal journals:

These few days, I've learnt to know myself better and learn to resolve my moral problems. I managed to express my moral problem [moral conflict was about learning to cope with academic pressure; Dilemma 2# *Seri Pagi*] and my feelings and find ways to resolve my problems with the help of my friends. It was a chance to discuss the moral problem which has been kept deep inside me for a long time. The process has taught me to be more sensible and to show tolerance in any situation that I am facing. I feel relieved and happy because not only is my problem solved but my friends who face similar problems also seem to have found the solution to their problems. I feel very happy to help friends by giving my opinion. I learn to have self control and self realisation about not making the same mistakes again. This whole experience has given me a new dimension about learning ME. (*Seri Pagi*)

Here are some opinions taken from the participants journals about why friends provide support in times of crisis:

Friends are the ones I would turn to when problems arise because they are in the same age range and would definitely understand the situation from my perspective. They are there to listen when we need someone to listen to. (*Kekwah*)

At this age, we don't get much support from family members. They don't listen to our side of the story and that is why we always turn to our friends for moral support. We need some help to decide. (*Orkid*)

Decision-making when faced with moral conflicts is very difficult and complicated. But my participants found the support of peers helpful and encouraging when they faced such conflicts. Since there is no one solution that is right, the experiences of their peers help in allowing space and time for them to learn how to decide for themselves. This is a new experience for the ME students, who are so used to being guided towards the "right" resolution. Here the students had the autonomy to make choices of their own which gave them a sense of moral responsibility too.

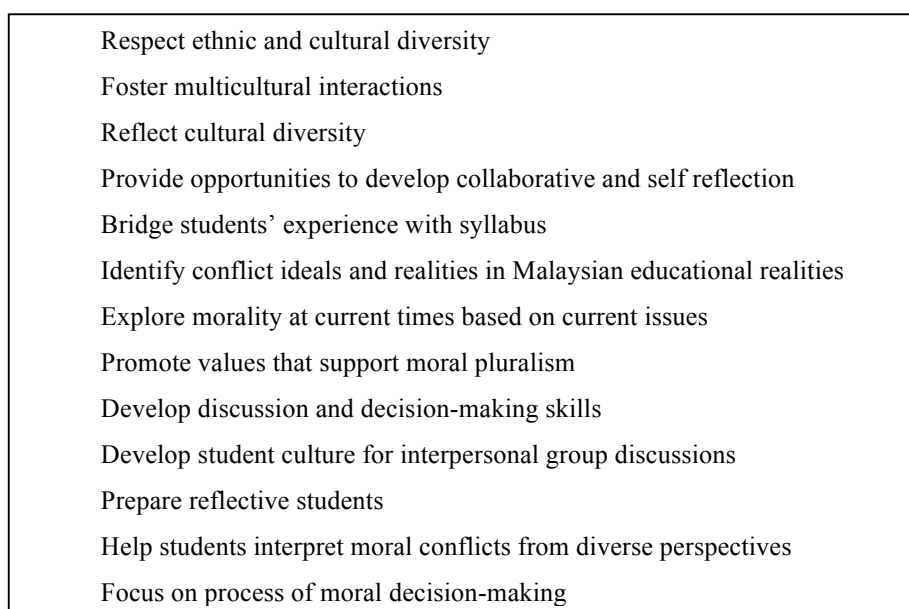
Since the PAR research was carried out in cycles, the participants were familiar with asking, suggesting, reflecting, and responding and as the days went by my participants became engaged in more in-depth discussions. They reflected upon their discussions continuously. One participant from *Seri Pagi* wrote this extract, explaining how working in group made their discussion interesting:

I get to discuss my problem with my friends. We as a group feel happy and excited because we get to discuss our conflicts voluntarily. We get to help each other in solving our conflicts and it is a nice feeling. We also learn to control ourselves, take turns in voicing opinions and all this strengthens our relationship with our friends. (*Seri Pagi*)

The interaction and collaboration with peers provided opportunities for them to learn from each other. The crucial realisation to them is discovering that there is no one right way to resolve a moral dilemma. This is an important finding because in the present system of treating dilemmas in the old fashioned way of coming to one final resolution, this is not possible.

My suggestions for ME curriculum for the use of Re-LiMDD

Based on my research and the research findings, I now propose a ME curriculum which is transformative in nature. In order to implement Re-LiMDD in classrooms, the ME curriculum has to be transformative and be able to facilitate the voices of students. There are several factors which need to be considered in order to enable the practicability of Re-LiMDD in ME classrooms. The diagram below which I have designed from my findings and analysis explains what the requirements are for a transformative ME Curriculum based on my Re-LiMDD.



Transformative ME Curriculum in relation to Re-LiMDD.

Students in this project demonstrated that cultural diversity is becoming globally recognised and accepted. The effective incorporation of Re-LiMDD into the ME curriculum requires cultural diversity to be acknowledged and reflected every time real-life moral dilemmas are discussed. The reality in such conflicts enables students to discover and appreciate cultural diversity unique to the Malaysian setting.

As demonstrated in my research, collaboration and self/group reflections are two important elements in the PAR process. These need to go hand in hand to allow students space for group and self development. Johnson and Johnson (1989) explained that cooperative learning, as compared to competitive learning, results in greater productivity across the group. Not only does this encourage students to work together but they also acquire skills and knowledge to guide them in other conflicts.

Based on my research, the notion of multicultural interactions is inevitable in the Malaysian setting. Without a notion of moral pluralism and allowing differences to be practised within the nation, ME curriculum for Re-LiMDD might not work. This is because students need to understand differences and to live successfully within such differences. Notions of tolerance, reciprocity, and mutual respect are important in creating a multicultural relationship. According to Burbules (1993), the ideal of dialogue opens the avenue to the possibility of open, respectful, and critical engagements where individuals can learn about others, the world, and themselves. A ME curriculum which considers the above would be ideal for the Re-LiMDD to take place.

Conclusion

ME not only involves the head but also the heart and action. A practical way of nurturing a sense of belonging is through involving adolescents in the decision-making processes that shape the institutions and environments in which they spend their time (Thomson, 2007). The cultures of students in my PAR as well as the Malaysian ME class are diverse. Through Re-LiMDD, such differences can be discussed and understood with clear notions of unity within diversity.

Re-LiMDD encourages such a process to take place within the ME classroom and promises a pedagogic space for such a vision in Malaysian secondary schools. Schools in Malaysia are being urged by the government, non-governmental organisations, religious bodies, and society on the whole to address notions of integration and Malaysian morality, diversity, globalisation, computerisation, and others in order to fulfil their obligations as educational institutions. Re-LiMDD could be a starting point for students of ME to see the subject differently and, after collaborative discussions, make decisions about moral dilemmas they face. Furthermore, it has the potential to provide an alternative pedagogy and be a powerful tool for ethical engagement with difference in ME in Malaysia classrooms.

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