UNFOLDING MORAL IDENTITY AMONG ADOLESCENTS: ITS CULTIVATION WITHIN THE EDUCATION REALM

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Abstract:

While there is growing global and national interest in fostering moral identity (MI) as a foundation for moral behaviour, the existing belief among Malaysian society members places a stronger emphasis on grade attainments, presenting opportunities to further enhance moral development. This may be due to the long-practised exam-centric education in the country. As the current education system is promoting a more balanced intellectual-character aspiration, this conceptual paper explores the MI cultivation among adolescents within the Malaysian education context, emphasising its significance alongside academic achievement. Drawing from both theoretical and empirical research, the paper advocates for a balanced educational approach that nurtures both intellect and character through the role of teacher and parental care in adolescents' MI formation. The paper concludes with a call for educators to prioritise moral identity development to address the ongoing moral decline and meet Malaysia's educational aspirations.

Keywords:

Moral Identity (MI), Moral Education, Moral Behaviour, Character Development, Care

Introduction

Education is claimed to have failed in its function if there is no positive change observed in the learners' moral, other than intellectuality (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 2014). In a larger view, the civilisation of certain groups of people is of utmost importance when it comes to the purpose of education. Not only that knowledge is meant to be acquired and mastered, yet to be

manifested and exercised accordingly. In other words, education does not solely revolve around academic achievement, yet also the inculcation of morality in individuals' character building (Lickona, 1997).

Hence, shaping adolescents' moral is believed to be essential, as claimed by Hardy, Bean, and Olsen (2014). Its importance has been translated into various education programmes or agenda, in which the ultimate aim is to promote better well-beings. In other words, education is not merely a process of enabling human beings to regurgitate the information they have acquired yet to humanise them. As a hub that aims for holistic excellence (as projected in the National Education Philosophy), the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (2017, 2023) is making effort to develop and put in place an education environment that encourages the growth of premier knowledge centres and individuals who are competent, innovative with high moral values to meet national and international needs. Quite recently, the call of producing such balanced individuals through the aspiration of generating '*Anak Baik Lagi Cerdik (ABC)*' has been spelled out in the Professional Circular Letter by Ministry of Education Malaysia dated 9 March 2023.

In line with such aspirations, the greater interest in moral identity as portrayed in the literature (Black & Reynolds, 2016; Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Hardy et al., 2014; Kavussanu & Ring, 2017), encourages the discussion of moral identity cultivation among individuals, particularly adolescents. Theoretically and empirically proven to contribute to adolescents' moral behaviours (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy et al., 2014), the dearth of studies on moral identity conducted within the context of Malaysian education warrants the need to further unfold the concept.

The Existing View of Education

While believing that the ultimate purpose of education is to grow students' character, Syed Mohd Naquib al-Attas sees the country as being affected with the domination of belief that education is here to serve the country's economic growth (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 2014). This intellectual confusion portrays how the society values grade attainment instead of the importance of character building. The education philosophy which is to create and develop human beings in a fundamental and comprehensive manner has been an elusive effort with the increase of such confusions.

The current existing educational practices are believed to have overlooked the importance of the affective aspect when education is rather valued in terms of physical grades and credits (Rosnani Hashim, 2017; Rosnani Hashim, Suhailah Hussien, & Adesile M. Imran, 2014). It is undeniable that the aspirations of the Malaysian Education (Ministry of Education, 2017, 2023) do emphasise quality of education which includes the process of harnessing thinking and inculcating values. However, the practice does not practically conform to the written aspirations when the current education is still associated with its traditional view that learners are still highly anticipated to achieve good grades (Anis Shaari & Aswati Hamzah, 2018; Rosnani Hashim, 2017).

A study conducted by S. M. Abdul Quddus and Khairil Izamin Ahmad (2015) infers that Malaysian education governance is more oriented towards "knowledge shopping" than "identity formation." The result implies how the country is still inclined towards producing learners of grade certification rather than shaping individual intellect and selves. This impacts

not only teachers at school, but parents at home where the primary focus of educating children has been placed on academic excellence, putting lesser attention to the importance of generating individuals and society with moral. In a way, despite the contributions of several other factors, the idea of focusing too much on producing scorers in meeting the economic needs may unfortunately result in decadent implications among some individuals, including adolescents.

Moral Identity: What is it?

The term moral basically resembles good traits or virtues that are valued across cultures and time. It enables individuals and societies, at large, to live and flourish in harmony. Of such, developing a moral individual, hence a moral nation is a universal goal aimed by diverse communities in the globe. Equipping people with personal or societal moral values is essential in ensuring mature moral individuals and society members who are capable of meeting moral challenges faced in their ordinary lives (Halstead & Pike, 2006). In a country with collectivist socio-cultural practices, like Malaysia (Kuldas, Allahyar, Hashim, Ismail, & Samsudin, 2014), whether such challenges are able to be addressed with moral decisions and moral actions have long become a matter of concern.

Discussions of current research highlight that a better understanding of moral action can be obtained by considering the role of the self in morality, which is often referred to as 'moral identity' (Jia & Krettennauer, 2017). MI or "the degree to which being a moral person is important to an individual's identity" (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 212), serves as a motivation for an individual to act morally. To illustrate, individuals who believe that moral values like being fair, caring, honest, generous and compassionate are central to their self definition have the tendency to consistently align what they believe in and what they project out. Regardless of the different countries, races and religions, this issue of moral cultivation has become a world-wide resurgence of interest (Anis Shaari & Aswati Hamzah, 2018; Chowdhury, 2016; Walker, Roberts, & Kristjánsson, 2015). Being an important phenomenon at a global level, the similar goal of each community group marks the essential need to create strategies towards meeting it. Among others, establishing MI amongst people through the education realm has been an undeniably fundamental endeavour.

Why MI Cultivation among Adolescents?

Despite the effort to help enhance people's MI, the responses people have towards the rapid-changing world development have resulted in various deteriorating consequences towards the idea of instilling moral values in the making of humane humans (Rosnani Hashim, 2017). This has largely impacted adolescents as vastly reported in various cultures and societies in many parts of the world (UNICEF, 2023; Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023). With underdeveloped MI, it is no longer surprising to witness a high achiever showing disrespect towards parents and teachers; and a creative student who does not care about the negative effects of vandalising walls and school desks. In Malaysia, a growing number of cases involving drug addiction, classroom misbehaviour, and juvenile delinquency point to the fragile state of MI among adolescents (UNICEF, 2020; Siti Rafiah et al., 2018). Recently, according to the Malaysia Crime Prevention Foundation, bullying affects 84% of children under 18 in some way or form which may lead to severe injuries and even deaths (Chai, 2018). These challenges highlight the urgent need for education systems worldwide to focus on moral development, as moral crises in youth threaten the broader goals of cultivating responsible and ethical individuals.

As everybody is aware, adolescents are important assets of the country in which they are anticipated to contribute towards the development of the country's or the nation's civilisation. Of such hope, moral related issues such as the underdeveloped MI implicating adolescents are deemed to be distracting. Discussing what adolescents go through as they experience the teenage years may allow deeper understanding on the alarming moral issues and further discourse on possible ways to address such issues. Being a crucial period in human development, adolescence is often associated with confusion and conflict. The years of struggles gone through by adolescents are labelled as the storm and stress period of human life (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2013). Erikson (as cited in Santrock, 2008), in his Psychosocial Theory, explains that adolescents have to face the dilemma of leading themselves towards either one of the two extremes: identity and role confusion. It is further clarified that having an identity means the ability of teenagers to relate their individual selves to the world while those who have role confusion are said to have identity diffusion, or unable to see themselves as partly contributing to the world they live in.

The crisis the adolescents have within themselves may cause them to internally develop self-conflict, in which they are confused with the role they are expected to play within the society. The occurrence of conflict could result in aggressiveness in terms of physical and voice, as well as undesirable silent protests in which adolescents choose to quietly show their disagreement over certain rules or expectations (e.g., hunger strike, vandalism, and suicidal attempts). It is hence crucial to note that role confusion and self-conflict are among the internal factors which contribute towards the tendency of adolescents committing moral related behavioural problems. In agreement with Mahmood and Khan (2010), the phenomenon affecting adolescents is in place because

> human identities and characteristics are converted into machines of consumption, feeding the desires of our bodies, but always to the detriment of the true desires of our souls, which has led us to a 'moral and spiritual void', resulting in a state of human disequilibrium (p. 4).

On that note, a series of questions arise - what fundamentally motivates moral behaviour? What makes adolescents do certain good and unacceptable deeds? What sustains an adolescent's motivation to constantly behave morally? The earlier crucial discussion on human disequilibrium, which reflects adolescents' role confusion and self-conflict, has possibly suggested that adolescents ought to establish their identities. The capacity to manage the conflicts well and have the 'good' identity developed is believed to be the answer to the abovementioned concerns.

Concerning the role identity may play in morality development, an adolescent's sense of self which is constructed on moral ground is believed to motivate him or her to consistently project himself or herself as a moral person. Such conjoined concepts of self and morality, or MI (Blasi,1984, as cited in Lapsley, 2015), reflect the degree to which being a moral person is significant to an individuals' identity (Hardy et al., 2014). Such identity, in turn, becomes a self-regulatory mechanism which directs individuals' behaviour or actions (Aquino & Reed, 2002). The idea of MI may help explain adolescents' involvement in immoral or antisocial activities. As explained by Hardy et al., (2014), research evidences show positive link between MI and prosocial behaviour and in contrast, MI is proven to be negatively linked to antisocial behaviour. In relation with that, MI is therefore argued to be an influential factor in determining adolescents' moral conduct. This argument is founded on Blasi's Self-Model which

conceptualises MI as a moral based identity structure that motivates adolescents to consistently manifest the moral values they have internalised as they define their sense of self.

Understanding the Emergence of Moral Identity: Key Factors

In view of the challenged educational effort in promoting moral growth among individuals (especially adolescents), it is worth to explore the factors which may predict their MI. Thus, understanding the chronology of moral development theories is believed to be essential in order to comprehend how MI comes into the picture and is seen as the most suitable variable that warrants a study.

Historically, in brief, the predominant theory of moral development has been Kohlberg's cognitive development theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002) which is developed as the extension of Piaget's developmental stage theories. Focusing on the cognitive function of a human being, Kohlberg's theory suggests that moral reasoning influences moral action. In this theory, moral reasoning is divided into levels namely Pre-Conventional Morality, Conventional Morality and Post-Conventional Morality and these levels are further divided into various stages (Table 1). Not much later, the Neo-Kohlbergian Approach which is theorised by Rest (1979) propagates that moral judgement is conceptualised within the cognitive notion but rather than stage-based, schema concepts are used to express moral reasoning (Kocabiyik & Kulaksizoğlu, 2014). On the contrary, believing that cognitive capacity does not influence moral actions, Hoffman (1975) theorises that moral emotions control moral motivation, which in turn predicts moral behaviour (Kocabiyik & Kulaksizoğlu, 2014).

Table 1: Kohlberg's Moral Development Stages (Hilton & Southgate, 2007)

Level	Stage	Social orientation	Characteristics
Pre-conventional (*elementary school level*)	1	Obedience and punishment	Behaves according to socially acceptable norms because they are told to do so by some authority figure (e.g., parent or teacher). This obedience is compelled by the threat or application of punishment
	2	Individualism, instrumentalism and exchange	Incorporates a view that right behaviour means acting in one's own best interests
Conventional (*generally found in society*)	3	"Good boy/girl"	Exhibits an attitude which seeks to do what will gain the approval of others
	4	Law and order	Oriented to abiding by the law and responding to the obligations of duty
Post-conventional (*not reached by the majority of adults*)	5	Social contract	Shows an understanding of social mutuality and a genuine interest in the welfare of other
	6	Principled conscience	Based on respect for universal principle and the demands of individual conscience

Of such early moral theoretical foundation, Narvaez and Lapsley (2009), as well as Lundberg (2014) state that research portray no statistically significant causal link between individuals' cognitive ability to reason morally and his or her moral behaviour. Past studies, too, fail to verify more than a moderate relationship between moral emotions and moral behaviour (Lundberg, 2014). Similar claims are also made by Kocabiyik and Kulaksizoğlu (2014) in their article indicating that cognition and emotions alone are not able to explain consistent moral actions by themselves.

As the moral development theories evolve, the low capacity of each construct - moral reasoning and moral emotion – in predicting moral behaviour has become a factor which leads to greater interest in the role of identity in morality (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Consequently, moral scholars such as Blasi (1983), Rest (1983), and even Kohlberg himself (Kohlberg & Candee, 1984), see the necessity to identify factors which may bridge the gap between moral reasoning and moral action. Consequently, as agreed by a number of researchers, MI is one of the constructs that links moral judgements to moral actions (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Hardy et al., 2014).

Given that MI has been theoretically and empirically proven to influence moral behaviours or actions (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Davis & Carlo, 2018; Hardy et al., 2014; Kavussanu & Ring, 2017), it is believed that it could best explain the inevitable psycho-social problems among the society members, particularly the decline of moral values among adolescents in Malaysia (Appalanaidu, 2018; Tan & Appalanaidu, 2017; Zainol Abidin Ishak, Mohammad Nasir Bistamam, & Mohd Noor Saper, 2017). As described by Hardy et al. (2014), MI is predictive of high prosocial behaviour and low antisocial behaviour in adolescents. Therefore, the tendency of adolescents of behaving undesirably is possibly the result of their underdeveloped MI.

In accordance with that, looking into factors affecting MI is vital. Classifying according to the dichotomies of perspectives to MI (i.e., Character/ Personological Perspective and Social Cognitive Perspective), Hardy and Carlo (2011) list several factors that may determine one's MI. From the character perspective, the factors include (1) individual characteristics (i.e., academic achievement, prosocial moral reasoning and empathy); (2) developmental context (i.e., religious involvement and effective parenting); and (3) opportunities for moral action (i.e., community service). As for the social cognitive perspective, moral schema (or one's mental image of what it means to be a moral person and event representations for specific morally relevant behaviours) makes up a construct that influences a person's MI formation.

Meanwhile, from an educationist perspective, Noddings (1997) perceives 'care' as the pedagogical pre-requisite of moral education. With the aim of equipping students with MI, it is argued that education ought to be managed around the themes of care in which students should be guided to care for self, intimate others, global others, animals, plants, the environment, instruments and objects, as well as ideas. Sharing the same opinion, Gilligan (2014) believes that 'care' guides people in acting carefully in the human world. Of such, Noddings (1997) propagates that care may decrease violence and at the same time increase responsibility. This notion is agreed by Collier (2005) as he adds that caring concerns values and it allows education to be reclaimed as a moral action. This justifies the need of establishing caring thinking among individual adolescents as it is perceived to be influential in their MI development. Correspondingly, individuals' care is seen to be essentially nurtured caringly as Noddings (1997) states "to nurture caring in our children, we have to show, first, that we care for them" (p. 37). Such statement explains the necessity of both parental and teacher care in cultivating caring thinking and MI in adolescents.

Learning from the factors determining MI as listed by Hardy and Carlo (2011), together with the idea of care in predicting one's moral self, the authors come to a point of departure that care may be said to ultimately base those factors outlined by Hardy and Carlo (2011). Despite the different perspectives to MI, one's care to care about oneself and one's care towards others are believed to stand as the foundation of one's MI establishment. To illustrate, empathy is an

affective-based human element which is rooted from the idea of care (Lipman, 2003). Other social-based factors, too, like effective parenting, family environment and social experiences reflect the requirement of care in such interpersonal contexts. Therefore, MI among adolescents is believed to be best understood (and studied in the future) within the framework of care constituting its factors.

Educational Strategies for Moral Identity Development

In order to foster MI among adolescents, this paper calls for a shift in viewing education as a predominantly grade-based system to a comprehensive one that weaves together moral and intellectual development. To achieve this, strategies that might be implemented can be two-fold:

1. Employing a care-based moral-integrated curriculum: Integrating moral education across subjects through a care-based approach is seen as of utmost important. This could be done through dialogic teaching and learning that allows both teachers and teenage students to caringly express their care through communicating on various real-world topics, hence develop their MI. The use of real-life examples to connect academic topics with moral teachings, making it easier for students to see the relevance of morality in their daily experiences. The projection of care by the teachers through a pedagogical method called philosophical inquiry, as postulated by Sharp (2014), may allow adolescents to have higher order thinking and later expected to also internalise care as part of their identity. By combining academic content with practical moral lessons through care-based activities, students can gain a deeper understanding of how moral principles apply to their everyday lives (UNICEF, 2023).

2. Teacher and parental partnership: The involvement of parents and teachers is crucial in the formation of MI among adolescents. Schools or educational institutions can facilitate this by organising programmes that provide parents with techniques for imparting moral principles, and by enhancing partnerships with parents to guarantee the continuous reinforcement of moral values both at home and in the classroom (Gilligan, 2014; Noddings, 1997). Studies have demonstrated that when educators (i.e. tecahers and parents) engage with children with empathy and diligence, it greatly fosters moral values (Zhang, 2022). Besides, being the closest individuals to adolescents at home, having the right education to inculcate MI enables parents to deal with their children accordingly, especially when they face certain identity struggles.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, in the attempt of achieving Malaysia's education goal that is to enhance the citizen's moral identity, the contribution of many parties is expected to be urgent and pervasive. This includes the process of empowering educators (i.e., parents and teachers) in the capacity of developing the element of care, hence moral identity among adolescents. Considering the storm and stress period adolescents have to undergo as they grow, the aspects of both teacher care and parental care are to be given a priority. Believing that there are caring individuals around while facing the identity conflicts may help guide and direct the adolescents to choose the right path, thus forming the right and acceptable moral identity. On the whole, to ensure such transferrable empowerment, the concept of moral identity must first be understood, and it is of the authors' anticipation that this paper has briefly, yet clearly illustrated it.

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