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## **'TEACHER, AM I EMPATHETIC?' INSTILLING EMPATHY IN ADOLESCENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose** – Empathy portrays a pivotal role in moulding an individual into an affectionate human being. Numerous studies examine empathy in multicultural settings; however, it is still clouded with scarcity, especially in the Asian context. This study aims to explore the approaches two teachers had undertaken to develop empathy among multicultural students in their Moral Education lessons in Malaysian schools.

**Methodology** – This study adopted a case study approach to investigate empathy development among multicultural 16-year-old students. The participants were two teachers who taught Moral Education (ME) in their respective schools. Data were collected for eight months through observations, interviews, teachers' journals, and documents until saturated. Analysis was done using NVivo 8 software.

**Findings** – Five categories were formed from the emergence of a single theme, ‘instilling empathy’ that revealed the representation of the approaches to be homogeneous between the two teachers. The categories were role-taking, watching movies, sharing stories, social activity, and discussion. The findings revealed the existence of limited strategies employed by the teachers in instilling empathy among the students, illuminating cognitive empathy over affective empathy.

**Significance** – This study implied that teachers need more training on various methods to instil empathy, especially among students from multicultural backgrounds. This could lead to empathy training programmes that is relatively new in Malaysian schools that could benefit the young to enable them to work effectively in multicultural settings reflecting the diversity of this country.

**Keywords:** Affective empathy, caring, cognitive empathy, empathy, multicultural.

## INTRODUCTION

Empathy is defined as a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive and affective components (Chopik et al., 2017; Hoffman, 2003; Whitford & Emerson, 2019). Many studies have shown that those with empathetic behaviour are positively inclined towards prosocial behaviour (Dallacqua et al., 2022; Fry & Runyan, 2018), and subsequent studies have shown that empathy reduces aggression, especially in older children (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Taylor et al., 2019); similarly, empathy acts to mitigate disruptive behavioural disorders in children resulting from a lack of regulatory skills (Baker et al., 2015; Wied et al., 2010). Overall, empathy brings positive psychological characteristics and altruistic behaviour.

Many studies related to empathy training have been explored on children, nurses, and clinicians but few on teachers and the field of education (Bouton, 2016; Whitford & Emerson, 2019). However, empathy training in schools is more prevalent in the West (Briones et al., 2022; Carlo et al., 2015) than in the East, especially in Southeast Asian countries. In Malaysia, the development of empathy in students is widely considered the responsibility of Moral Education (ME) educators. Since its inception in 1983, ME has been part of the New

Primary School Curriculum, locally known as *Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah (KBSR)*. ME was designed specifically for non-Muslim students since Muslim students are taught based on an Islamic education curriculum. Malaysia is multicultural and multireligious, but Malays (Muslims) are the dominant race, followed by the minority such as Chinese, Indians, and various other ethnic minorities such as the Iban, Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, Bidayuhs, and Penans (Barghi et al., 2017). In 1989, ME made its way into secondary schools, which was implemented as the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum, known as *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM)* (Balakrishnan, 2017). The ME curriculum has gone through several revisions, with the latest revision in 2017, where both the primary and secondary syllabuses were revised to meet present challenges and to ensure that students are holistically equipped with appropriate knowledge, skills, and values, including a strong national identity, to ensure that Malaysia is a globally competitive society in the 21st century (Barghi et al., 2017).

The teaching of ME is focused on children's holistic development, comprising moral cognitive, moral affective and moral action (Ministry of Education, 2015) for the benefit of non-Islamic students. This is in line with the National Education Philosophy, which distinctly affirms the shaping of individuals who can deal with situations intelligibly and wisely (Ministry of Education, 2015). Several themes are covered in ME, such as 'self-development', 'family' and 'society'. Several values and relevant concepts under these themes are explained. The specific objectives of each value are also displayed according to respective school levels. In carrying out this responsibility, ME educators, if trained appropriately, could play a critical role in instilling empathy (moral affective) according to topics from the themes mentioned, as they are considered ethical models who strive to contribute to the development of care and empathy in students (Noddings, 2013). Studies from the West have demonstrated methods for imparting empathy through various pedagogical approaches (Briones et al., 2022; Engelen et al., 2018) as well as promoting empathy in adolescents (Dallacqua et al., 2022).

However, many studies related to ME in Malaysia focused on moral cognition (Liau et al., 2003), given the fact that the education system is highly exam-oriented (Abd. Shatar, 2007); hence, there is not enough focus on the affective domain, especially on empathy. This

highlights a need to explore the approaches applied by teachers in instilling empathy among students in ME (Ilhavennil, 2013). This is more pertinent in Malaysia's context; since it is a multicultural country, empathy becomes a vital trait that builds bridges between people from different faiths and customs, encouraging them to co-exist and live in harmony. Therefore, this paper focuses on how teachers instil empathy in students through ME in Malaysia, as ME is taught to Chinese, Indian and other minority students who are of non-Muslim faith. This study focuses on the essential question: 'How do teachers effectively incorporate empathy into lessons in a multicultural setting?"

## EMPATHY – COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE

Hoffman's (2003) theory of empathy, which involves both cognitive and affective components, has highlighted a detailed explanation of care and empathy using empathy as the basis for caring. Slote (2007) advocates that empathy plays a significant role in developing a sense of caring for others. Understanding how one feels involves a cognitive dimension, and this understanding does not project itself in another's situation. Affective empathy occurs when one feels what the other person feels. The synchronisation of cognitive and affective empathy is known as perspective-taking or role-taking, the fifth mode of empathic arousal (Hoffman, 2003).

Perspective-taking is seen as a mechanism of empathic arousal, with the emergence of *self-oriented perspective-taking* and *other-oriented perspective-taking*, making the former experience involve more intense empathic distress than the latter (Hoffman, 2003), thus more caution is needed in *self-oriented perspective-taking* (Batson, 2011; Fry & Runyan, 2018). *Self-oriented perspective-taking* causes one to imagine how one would feel if one were in another person's situation, which could lead to empathic distress, eventually developing into empathic concern (Batson, 2011). In contrast, *other-oriented perspective-taking* causes one to imagine how another person feels in another person's situation. There are several methods to enhance empathic concern, including role-taking activities such as role-playing, watching movies, and sharing stories (Engelen et al., 2018; Fry & Runyan, 2018).

Thus, perspective-taking strengthens one's actions and better regulates emotions, which are strongly needed in adolescents (Carlo

et al., 2015). Moreover, empathy promotes prosocial behaviour, thus minimises aggressive behaviour (Dallacqua et al., 2022), for the betterment of society. In the Malaysian context, the multicultural society needs to be nurtured to function in tandem with the goals of our National Education Philosophy, which starts in schools. In relation to this study, perspective-taking is ingrained in 16-year-old students as they are in the adolescence stage and are conscious of how others feel in a situation and can imagine themselves in a similar situation (Hoffman, 2003).

## **EMPATHY IN MULTICULTURAL SETTINGS**

Many studies examine empathy in multicultural settings, but very few focus on the Asian context (Jami et al., 2019). With relevance to culture, Hofstede's work on culture has been widely used to comprehend cultures across communities in the world, using concepts such as 'individualism' and 'collectivism' (Jami et al., 2019), and there is a growing need for collaboration between the West and East to understand multiculturalism (Marovic, 2020). On the other hand, a large-scale study on empathy in multicultural settings has reported that collectivist cultures have a deeper empathic concern for others (Chopik et al., 2017), and Asian countries have been known to fall under the collectivism dimension.

In relation to multicultural empathy, the presence of multiracial or multicultural students in classrooms need to be acknowledged. Students' multicultural and ethnic backgrounds should be viewed through cultural lenses. Being mindful of differences that others inherit such as attitudes and experiences is vital in treating students' differences with justice and fairness (Harrison et al., 2016).

Moreover, as society is currently undergoing globalisation, teachers must be adequately knowledgeable about students' multiracial and cultural backgrounds. Teachers need to use imaginative strategies to create lessons that engage students effectively (Harrison et al., 2016). Noddings' (2013) subsequent writings have shown that students from multicultural backgrounds need to be encouraged to engage in dialogues so that they can recognise the strengths and weaknesses of each other. Students from culturally diverse backgrounds can cooperate with one another with the support of educators to attain a culturally responsive classroom to cultivate positive learning (Arthur et al., 2017). Malaysian schools embrace multicultural enrolments,

being a multireligious country that comprises three major races: Malays (53.3%), Chinese (26.0%) and Indians (7.7%) (Barghi et al., 2017). This encourages perceptiveness among the people to forge unity that paves the way for positive relationships.

## **EMPATHY TRAINING**

Empathy training is related mainly to role-taking or perspective training skills and has been proven to improve social behaviour or instil compassion through several strategies and methods such as problem-solving games, storytelling, group discussions and role-plays (Engelen et al., 2018; Fry & Runyan, 2018; Jones, 2022). Recently, with the advent of technological tools, Fry and Runyan (2018) have promoted empathic concern and altruism through 'ecological momentary intervention' (EMI), prompting students to engage in empathy-related exercises using smartphones. In Malaysian culture, empathy training is barely pursued in schools since teaching that is focused on examinations takes precedence. In the ME secondary syllabus, emphasis has been given to values (under themes) so that students are aware of the role of values themselves, their families, society, the nation and the world. The teaching of values focuses on three moral dimensions: moral thinking, moral feeling or emotion and moral behaviour. The concept of empathy is not explicitly stated in the ME syllabus from Year 1 to Form 5, although moral affective is mentioned; the curriculum leaves much to the teachers' discretion in terms of planning activities involving emotions. Nevertheless, weaknesses were found among teachers during instructional activities in the classroom (Barone, 2004, Liau et al., 2003). When students reach upper secondary level, they must sit for a formal written assessment which obviously stresses the cognitive domain (Liau et al., 2003). Hence, more work should be focused on the affective part of ME to instil culturally sensitive awareness among young Malaysians to foster unity (Arthur et al., 2017) in this nation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Context**

This study adopted a case study approach to investigate empathy development among multicultural 16-year-old students. Muslim students are not included in ME classes, as they attend Islamic

education lessons, which are synchronised with ME periods. Data were collected for a period of eight months through observations, interviews, teachers' journals, and documents until saturated. The teachers taught ME for two hours weekly in their respective classes during the 34-week academic year, covering moral cognitive, moral affective and moral action through topics clustered under themes in the ME syllabus.

## Participants

The study highlights two teachers, Bing, and Rita, aged 43 and 48, respectively. Bing, a Malaysian Chinese, was chosen not because she was an '*excellent teacher*' in ME but because she demonstrated several learning approaches for developing empathy among her challenging students. Bing's students were mainly from dense neighbourhoods and low-income families. These students are notorious for their misconduct, including playing truant and being involved in gang fights. In the Malaysian education system, teachers who display exceptional personality, excel in teaching and learning that result in the holistic development of students and produce research work will be conferred the title, '*excellent teacher*' in their respective fields. Being a dedicated and diligent educator, Bing has gone to great lengths to prepare materials for her students and is an avid listener of student problems, regardless of race. On the other hand, Rita, who is an *excellent teacher*, has demonstrated various approaches in developing empathy among her relatively less challenging students. Many of her students come from middle-income families. Most of these students obey the school rules. Rita has taught for more than 30 years and has won numerous innovation awards at the district and school levels since 2005. She has also presented effective pedagogical methods in ME at many local conferences. A teacher with a sense of humour, Rita believes in being proactive in devising various strategies to encourage her students to love the subject and to engage with the subject, such as by showing commercials on YouTube as an introduction to her lessons. These teachers teaching in multicultural schools are friendly, helpful, and compassionate. Both teachers signed an informed consent form to participate in this study after a brief explanation was given to reduce the Hawthorne effect as much as possible.

## Data Collection Method

The determination of ME teachers began by first obtaining permission from the Educational Planning and Research Development (EPRD)

before securing the approval of the State Education Department in Selangor, one of the 14 states in Malaysia. The ME expert teachers, Bing and Rita were chosen from a list given. Their entry to the schools was successful after obtaining consent from the respective principals. Bing and Rita consented to participate in this study. Bing's and Rita's lessons were observed, and interviews were conducted after each observation. Rita consented to the recording of her lessons; however, Bing did not.

### **Observation and Interview Protocol**

An observation protocol was developed to assist the researcher in eliciting information on incorporating empathy during lessons. In the observation protocol, a description of the physical environment of the class was noted as well as the implementation of the teaching and learning in terms of pedagogical approaches related to care and empathy. An interview protocol was developed to help the teachers relate their experiences and thoughts, such as 'What will you do to make students show concern for others?' and 'Why do you think the students reacted that way to the activity?' The same researcher conducted all the observations and interviews. Approximately nine to ten observations were conducted on each teacher (Bing – 800 minutes; Rita – 720 minutes). Five to seven semi-structured interviews were carried out, covering approximately thirty to sixty minutes per session.

### **Trustworthiness**

The triangulation method was employed in the use of multiple independent sources of data, such as nonparticipant observations, semi-structured interviews, teachers' journals, ME syllabus and teachers' record books, to elicit information on their approaches to instil empathy among students in order to confirm the validity and reliability of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The teachers' beliefs and values were also elicited. Initially, a preliminary study was conducted to seek clarification to reconstruct certain questions and refocus on specific areas, and to enhance rapport with the teachers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In addition to prolonged engagement to ensure validity, member checking was also employed as every expanded field note and

interview transcript was collected to ensure accuracy of the participants' opinions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences. After every data expansion and transcription rounded off, both participants' verbal feedback was solicited. Peer debriefing was employed, as two colleagues were consulted to comment and reflect on the categories formed during the analysis. In addition, the ME syllabus was analysed to ascertain the written description of moral affective or empathy in the syllabus. It was established that 'empathy' was not written in the document and that the teachers were indirectly made to understand that they were to use their creativity to deliver content knowledge embedded with empathy and care; thus the document was presented in the form of an 'unwritten curriculum'. The teachers' record books and the minutes of the meetings were also examined thoroughly to see whether moral affection was given equal importance to content knowledge in developing students' character. However, none of those words were evident in the documents. Another important source of data was the teachers' journals that contained their reflections and feelings on the teaching of ME.

## Analysis

After every round of observation (an hour and ten minutes), field notes were expanded, and all interviews were transcribed verbatim and subsequently uploaded to NVivo 8 software. Initial codes were established in the first expanded field notes, such as '*feel for others*', '*two-way communication*', '*instilling empathy*', '*movies*', '*role-play*', '*love for parents*' and '*discuss*'. Transcriptions were read multiple times and given codes such as '*role-play*', '*empathise*', '*feel*', '*concern*', '*communicate*' and '*love for parents*'. These codes depicted Bing's and Rita's incorporation of empathy in their lessons and verbal explanations. In addition, the codes were also related to the literature on empathy in terms of theory and practice. Memos were created to reflect deeper thoughts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and to interpret how Rita and Bing instilled empathy in their lessons, such as 'Why did she explain that way?' After three months, the initial codes were categorised under '*developing empathy*', but later the category of '*types of approaches*' surfaced to describe how the teachers instilled empathy in the students. Comparative analysis was applied here to understand the expressions used by the participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). Another analysis was also performed to identify an

explicit, detailed, and logical order between the categories and themes from this category. Therefore, codes with similar patterns, such as ‘acting’, ‘imagine’, ‘act-out’ and ‘taking part’, were classified under the ‘role-taking’ category. Other codes were reread numerous times to ensure that they did not overlap with the ‘role-taking’ category, such as ‘sad’, ‘love’, ‘feel’ and ‘family’, or the ‘watching movies’ category. Furthermore, a trained expert in Nvivo was consulted to verify the codes and categories. More categories were formed, reflecting the approaches taken by those teachers to instil empathy in their students. The analysis stopped at 165 codes. In their interviews and journal entries, the teachers referred to ‘instilling empathy’ consistently, further establishing it as the focus of the study. Five categories were formed from 165 codes from multiple sources under the emergence of a single theme, ‘installing empathy’. The categories were ‘role-taking’, ‘watching movies’, ‘sharing stories’, ‘social activity’ and ‘discussion’.

For this theme, a matrix coding query was utilised for cross-case analysis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). Under the query, Bing was identified as a case, as all the observations, interviews, journals, and documents were placed under ‘row’. Then, categories such as ‘*role-taking*’, ‘*watching movies*’, ‘*sharing stories*’, ‘*social activity*’ and ‘*discussion*’ were placed under ‘column’. The same procedure was done for Rita. From the emergence of the matrix, patterns were identified and the approaches taken by the teachers were confirmed.

## FINDINGS

The single theme that emerged revealed the representation of the approaches to be homogeneous between the two teachers, despite the disparity in terms of their experience and professional status.

### Role-Taking

In Bing’s class, students were of Chinese and Indian origin. Bing employed role-taking to make students understand the perspective of others. Role-taking allows students to understand the perspectives of others (Briones et al., 2022). In the first lesson observed, students acted out the residents’ and vandals’ roles in a multiracial residential

compound; however, in the course of acting, the students showed difficulty in displaying appropriate facial expressions, and their acting was rather stiff, as reflected in their responses.

S1: Look at the signboard. Let us scribble on it.  
G1: What are you doing?  
S1: We are scribbling.  
G1: How are they going to find the location?  
S1: What's the problem?  
G2: The ambulance will not be able to read the signboard.  
You are wasting other  
people's time.  
S2: Agree, we must think about the lives of our fellow  
Malaysians.  
S1: Sorry, we'll erase it.

Surprisingly, no questions were directed at the students after their role-taking. The students returned to their seats, and another group presented with a similar plot. Further probing revealed that Bing was pressed for time to complete the presentations. However, observations indicated that although the students were not eloquent, they could comprehend the consequences of their actions and decided not to vandalise the signboard so that the ambulance could locate people's homes. Bing explained:

They were able to portray... they understood the values through role-play. It can be evaluated in that way.

From the reflections penned in her journal, it indicated that she intended to get her students to empathise with others regardless of race through role-play, as demonstrated in the following:

I make them do a role-play to learn to say no to negative behaviour, whether Malay, Chinese or Indian.

In addition to Bing, Rita has also adopted role-taking as one of the approaches to instil empathy in her students. A lesson on 'Appreciating the rights of the disabled' showed Chinese and Indian students interacting well, chatting, and playing practical jokes on their friends, with no malice detected in their behaviour. At the beginning

of the lesson, the students gathered in the foyer below the classroom. The students were divided into two large groups and in each group, a student volunteered to be blindfolded. However, the situations given to both groups differed. The first 'blind' student had to return to the classroom from the foyer with help given by her peers through instructions. Nevertheless, the other 'blind' student had to return to the classroom with the aid of a stick, with minimal help from his group. When the activity was completed in 20 minutes, Rita asked Mei Yee, the first 'blind' student, to talk about her feelings.

Rita: Do you like the feeling of being blind?

Mei Yee: No.

Rita: Why?

Mei Yee: I was feeling scared.

Rita: Scared? Why?

Mei Yee: I felt lonely.

Rita: Lonely. Who helped you to reach your class?

Mei Yee: The help from others truly helped me to return to my class. Now I understand the problems faced by the blind.

The student's response indicated that she understood the perspective of the disabled as she was playing dual roles, *self-oriented perspective-taking* and *other-oriented perspective-taking*; however, her facial expression reflected indifference, lack of concern, anxiety, or sadness. No further questions were directed to other students. Despite the lack of response from other students, Rita maintained that role-play enabled her students to understand and feel the difficulties of others. Her journal reflected this, that she had a strong desire to educate them on the importance of empathy.

I make them empathise with others. I let them role-play to help them relate to others, whether Malay, Chinese or Indian.

Although Rita penned her thoughts on educating her students on empathy, in the actual lesson, no additional inquiry was raised regarding the feelings of others, thus revealing inadequate training in instilling empathy that could lead to an increase in empathic concern and prosocial behaviour. Similarly, this was found in Bing's lesson.

## **Watching Movies or Commercials**

In her lesson on ‘Love of family’, Bing presented a commercial through a video that showcased a compassionate mother who raised her two children in a Chinese village. The children eventually became successful career-minded adults but had forgotten to make time to visit their mother, who longed incessantly to see them. In due course, the mother drew her last breath without meeting them. There was lukewarm response from the students when they watched the video which was shown twice. Bing asked Ramita, an Indian student about her feelings after watching the video.

Ramita: Sad.

Bing: Why are you sad?

Ramita: The children could not repay their mother’s devotion because their mother had passed away.

Then, she asked Clement, a Chinese student, and he responded that he felt a little sad. However, no elaboration was given on why he felt a little sad, and Bing did not probe further. Bing proceeded to relate the sad story to the whole class where the daughter could not treat ill mother. She explained further that their mother carried them to school when they were children. However, when they became older and well off, they had neglected their mother.

Her rationale for presenting the video clip was that they should remember and try to repay their parents’ kindness and devotion. However, in many of the observations, the teacher’s inquiry was focused more on the students’ feelings, rather than questions about other people’s feelings, such as the mother’s feelings. Nevertheless, Bing’s reflection in her journal on making her students consider the mother’s feelings were not actualised in her class.

Students could try to understand the feelings of a mother’s love. They could attempt to talk about their reactions and responses.

Similar to Bing, Rita also presented a commercial video about family issues to the students. Rita showed a video commercial depicting a Malay family to instil empathy in her students. In the commercial, a

daughter and her spouse mistreated her ill father who needed palliative care in their family home. Before presenting the commercial, she asked the students to experience emotions as they watched the video. While the video was being played, none of the students showed any reaction. There was silence in class throughout the presentation. After the video presentation, Rita asked Amutha to relate her feelings.

Rita: How do you feel if you were the father?  
Amutha: Sad. I love my child, but my child doesn't love me.  
Rita: Okay, how do you feel about this, when the father had to share food with the cat outside the house. How do you think he felt? Do we think about the consequences of our actions? Imagine yourself as a child, your mother just fed you, and you soiled your pants. Does your mother throw you out of the house then?  
Students: No.

She asked other students about their feelings, and many of them said that they felt sad. Observations revealed that too many questions were asked, potentially confusing the students. Yet, there were no questions on the father's feelings. In fact, many rhetorical questions were posed to the students. An example was when she uttered, "Okay, how do you feel about this, when the cat ate together with him outside the house?" Students were not even required to answer this question. Instead, Rita proceeded to explain the situation to the students.

Rita also explained that her intention of showing the commercial was to delve into the emotional aspect of the students, as required in the ME syllabus. Furthermore, she also elaborated that many of the students lacked love or affection for their parents, and that their love for material things had taken precedence. Therefore, emphasising this point was important.

### **Sharing Stories**

In this approach, only Rita shared stories of her experiences with her students to instil empathy, as she recounted her observations during a vacation in India. She talked about how a shopkeeper poured hot boiling water on starved little children who were scrounging for food.

She recalled:

You know, they live in a small hut, impoverished people and their kids are tiny babies. I went to buy drinks, and these kids held on to my legs. The shopkeeper poured hot water on them. Pitiful.

Rita gesticulated ‘small babies’, and cringed with the mention of ‘pitiful’. Most of the students, including Indian students, gasped in horror on listening to Rita’s story, but no further questions were asked about the matter.

Rita also believed that real-life stories, if shared with students, could be opportunities for them to rediscover their attitude, and to create an awareness of being caring, as posited by Engelen et al. (2018, p. 352) who gave an account on exemplars and nudges strategies so that emotional responses can be triggered through ‘vivid representation of beneficiaries’ to influence behaviour. Rita also opined in her journal, ‘Share with them the other person’s problems and feelings. Teach them to be more empathetic.’ The students were asked to share their feelings, which indicated an opportunity to instil empathy in them.

Rita also presented her views emphatically that empathy is an important element in ME. Sharing stories or real-life events is one of the ways of teaching empathy, that enable students to think rationally and ponder on their feelings and actions. Hence, it has the potential to nurture sensitivity towards the feelings of others. Rita stated in her journal:

If you don’t share real or fictional stories, the students won’t believe... sharing stories will actually make them feel more empathic towards other people.

### **Social Activity**

Once again, Rita dominated this approach, as seen in the ‘Environment’ lesson. Rita informed the students about an activity related to the ‘Awareness of environmental issues’. Students got into their groups, and each group was given a location where they could pick up recycled

items, together with a reminder to select items that could easily be unearthed.

They collected paper, boxes, glasses, bottles, and plastic utensils in selected locations. Rita confessed that the rationale of the activity was “[the students] would have empathy, the feeling that others should not have thrown rubbish, as it would affect the lives of others. So how to stop this kind of behaviour? Students would come to this conclusion themselves at the end of the activity”.

Students were gathered after the activity, and each group presented how the items they collected would be recycled. Subsequently, Rita probed their feelings on this matter.

Rita: What are your feelings when you see the rubbish in your school compound?

Marissa: Yuck! It's so dirty. People shouldn't throw rubbish.

Rita: What are your feelings, Kong?

Kong: Not responsible.

Inthuja: Angry!

Although Rita enquired regarding their feelings about cleaning up the environment and those who pollute the environment, no questions were raised about those who voluntarily clean up the environment out of moral duty, thereby tapping into the students' emotions. Questions such as “How would you feel if those tardy students were asked to pick up rubbish all the time?” or “How would cleaners feel if they had to come and clean up your school area now and then?” were not posed; these questions might have made the students realise that they should empathise with those affected, as *self-oriented perspective-taking* and *other perspective-taking* could induce students to imagine the distress of others (Fry & Runyan, 2018).

Instilling empathy in this approach was seen as minimal, although Rita asked several questions to prompt students or to trigger their feelings of compassion. However, this activity captured the essence of unity, a revelation, as the Chinese and Indian students were seen chatting and enjoying each other's company while picking up rubbish. Thus, this activity is relevant to the Malaysian setting as it promotes social consciousness, akin to community service that encourages empathy awareness.

## **Discussion**

Both teachers adopted this approach to cultivate empathy in students. Bing appeared to be more dominating in her lessons, as there were fewer interactions from her students. In a lesson on ‘Love of family’, Bing enquired from her students about their parents’ well-being and the time spent with their family members.

Bing: Do you know whether your parents are sick or unhappy?

Have you looked at their faces and showed concern for them? Do you know if your parents are sad?

There was minimal response from the students as many listened to Bing and hardly uttered a word. Only three students nodded, indicating that they were aware of their parent’s emotional and health conditions, and one answered ‘yes’. There was an attempt on Bing’s part to initiate discussion on this matter, but there was hardly any response from the students.

When questioned later about the students’ lack of response, she explained:

Yes, I want them to understand their parents, and the students need to spend time with them. Many of them do not have time for their parents, you know, so I want to foster their love for their parents.

Rita also conducted discussions with her students, usually after their presentations. Similar to Bing’s style, Rita appeared authoritative in each of her lessons. In a lesson on ‘Appreciating the rights of the disabled’, Rita explained the difference between empathy and sympathy. She prompted her students to consider ways to assist the disabled and seek them to imagine as one.

Rita: You are a special needs student. Should one empathise or sympathise with you?

Students: Empathise.

Rita: Empathise. Imagine that there is a special needs student in a wheelchair. What assistance could you give to that student?

Observations revealed minimal discussion among students. Some pairs were seen exchanging glances, while others spoke a few words. The lesson continued with the teacher's suggestion to visit homes for the disabled. This undermined the teacher's lack of appropriate prompt questions and her strong desire for students to interact. As much as she wanted her students to interact and for awareness empathy to take root, this activity failed to create such an impact. Nevertheless, Rita explained:

...I believe we can take them to visit the disabled once a month, let them mingle... make them look forward to the next visit. However, we cannot do that every day.

## **DISCUSSION**

While Rita and Bing opted for several different methods to instil empathy in students, their approaches may give rise to concerns. Both Bing and Rita employed a role-taking strategy in role-play to create cognitive and affective awareness among their students in situations that enable perspective-taking. In Bing's lesson, students exhibited reasonably appropriate facial expressions, although they were rather limited compared to her other students who were self-effacing in acting out their roles. Role-play or role-taking has been acknowledged as one of the classroom-based approaches to develop students' empathy (Arthur et al., 2017). However, in Rita's lessons, it was not apparent that her students displayed appropriate facial expressions, and they lacked engagement. They only gave limited verbal responses that barely reflected their cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy involves cognitive processing, enabling students to take other people's perspectives, interpret and verbally state their affective responses (Briones et al., 2022). It would be unfair to judge that these students lacked cognitive and affective empathy, as there could be reasons for their inability to display verbal and/or appropriate facial expressions.

Regarding watching movies or commercials with the inclination to instil empathy, Wagner and Dversnes (2022) proposed that students discuss issues from victims' perspectives after watching videotapes of human beings being victimised. Although Rita and Bing displayed a commercial where the father was ill-treated by their children, only

a few questions were asked on how the students felt, with emphasis on *self-oriented perspective-taking* but devoid of *other-oriented perspective-taking* such as, 'How would the father feel in this situation, even though the former could lead to empathic concern; the emphasis on both orientations can further enhance the awareness of empathic feelings. Therefore, teachers should use pertinent questions that encourage students to be aware of the perspectives of others (Briones et al., 2022). As mirror neurons in children's brains could be altered; empathy can be developed if children are repeatedly exposed to role-plays or other opportunities in this case. However, they may not be exposed to real-life experiences. Watching movies or commercials, coupled with appropriate questions, could strengthen a sense of empathy in students (Briones et al., 2022; Wagner & Dversnes, 2022) as they would consider the perspective of another. Earlier analysis showed that the teachers were not aware of proper questioning techniques that could trigger feelings of empathy, as suitable questions are crucial in making the students step into the role of others, to encourage the development of empathy. In addition, the teachers disclosed that they had not received empathy training throughout their careers; therefore, there was no specific write-up on empathy in the ME syllabus.

In addition, narrating one's own experiences was shown in Rita's lessons to instil empathy among the students. Narratives could be used to strengthen empathy, and it has been acknowledged that shared stories could strengthen caring ties between teachers and students (Jones, 2022). Furthermore, storytelling benefits the learner in connecting one with another in groups that demonstrate empathy for effective leadership (Haigh & Hardy, 2010; Tzouramani, 2017). However, Rita's students listened attentively to her without noticeable gestures. The lack of response from the students could be due to their lack of ability to see themselves in another person's shoes. In relation to this shortcoming, the guidance of adults is imperative in nurturing empathy in children, as empirical studies have shown that children are capable of empathic responses (Jones, 2022).

The questions asked in the social work that Rita put her students through hardly cultivated empathy in the students; however, effective questioning could enhance cognitive and affective awareness. Although many students have not experienced real-life situations with empathy,

a teachers' role is seen as crucial in instilling empathy, as instructional practices create opportunities for students to regulate empathy (Arthur et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the social activity highlights a refreshing scenario in this context as it encourages empathy and prosocial behaviours among the students. It was heartening to watch students from diverse backgrounds working together for a single cause, protecting the environment.

Therefore, where empathy is concerned, focusing on cognitive empathy, where students are urged to state their own and others' feelings or to imagine being in someone's situation and to voice their feelings, were inadequate. It is imperative that students display appropriate gestures that indicate their compassion, sadness or pity for the misfortune and misery felt by others through affective empathy that comprises cognitive and affective processing which facilitates prosocial behaviour (Dallacqua et al., 2022; Hoffman, 2003).

Another note of worth is that the two teachers, both non-Malay and non-Muslims, volunteered in this study and were passionate about ME; however, an analysis of their work demonstrated more focus on the cognitive aspects of their lessons, and thus, improvements can be made to ensure that ME is taught more holistically. There are also many Malay (Muslim) educators who teach ME to students (of non-Muslim faith), which may give rise to assumptions that ME is 'taught within an Islamic framework and by authorities on Islamic education' and that students are being indoctrinated by Muslim teachers' religious beliefs in multicultural classrooms (Balakrishnan, 2017, p. 85). The vital question remains how empathy can be instilled in students from various cultures and faiths if teachers are not formally trained in ME, especially on the philosophical and psychological aspects of morality, including knowledge on religions, as ignorance in handling students of different faiths can result in tension during ME lessons. Some voices support the need to reconcile both Muslim and non-Muslim students for the period of ME so that both groups can benefit; however, this approval needs strong support from the government.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Given that this study focused on two teachers, more information is needed to adequately contribute to the literature on empathy,

especially in a multicultural context, involving further investigation of other ME teachers from other states, regardless of race, on their methods of instilling empathy. Further studies should also be conducted on social and cultural norms that mask students' verbal and facial expressions in relation to empathy. The present study indicates an attempt to instil empathy, but more effort needs to be made to bring about significant improvement. Adding to this concern, more studies need to be conducted, especially on Muslim teachers teaching ME and their methods in instilling empathy, as the teachers focused in this study were non-Muslims.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study implies that teachers need more training on various methods to instil empathy in students, especially those from multicultural backgrounds. The study revealed that teachers' approaches to developing empathy were limited and poorly thought out. Moreover, the ME syllabus should be reviewed to ensure that empathy is written specifically as a guide for teachers. An understanding of cognitive and affective empathy warrants one to view concern from others' perspectives and to vicariously experience the emotions of others, which could bring comfort to people from various walks of life. This could lead to empathy training programmes in Malaysian schools such as creative drama and forum theatre that could benefit the young to enable them to work effectively in multicultural settings. There could be other methods to nurture the development of empathy in students to promote a healthy affective domain so that their contribution to mankind becomes more meaningful.

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