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MA MODULE: INVESTIGATING RESEARCH

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CHARACTER EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

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1.0   Statement of Interest

Character education is 'a rapidly growing movement' (Arthur, 2003, p. 2) in both the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) (Arthur, 2003). In particular, in the UK, character education has received renewed interest with the 2001 UK Green Paper, 'Schools: Building on Success', and the 2001 UK White Paper, 'Schools: Achieving Success'. In Singapore, character education has also been an area of intense focus and interest in the past few months. This resurgence in interest was partly ignited by the speech given by the Singapore Minister for Education, Heng Swee Keat, at the 2011 annual planning seminar for all state school leaders in the country, where he outlined his vision for a "Student-Centric, Values-Driven" education system.

Character education has overlaps with other similar concepts such as moral education, values education, civics and moral education, ethics education, affective education and citizenship education. As such, the approaches towards character education and the outcomes of its programmes differ widely. For the purposes of this study, the definition of character education adopted will be that proposed by Lockwood (2009, p. 12):

> Character education is any school-directed program designed to shape directly and systematically the behavior of young people by teaching explicitly the nonrelativistic values believed to directly bring about good behavior.

Given the increased interest given to character education, the ironic lack of consensus and clarity in its definition, as well as the frontline role of the teacher in

the teaching of this complex 'subject', there is a necessity to further explore the role and perceptions of the teacher in character education. Hence, this study is important for the following three reasons. Firstly, the teaching and translation of character education into classrooms and teacher-led navigation of character education may be non-uniform given the lack of a unanimous agreement on the definition of character education. Secondly, there exists a gap in current academic literature on the perspectives teachers have of character education. This will be important given the centrality and importance of the teacher to the teaching of character education in schools. Thirdly, current literature on character education tends to focus on specific aspects such as moral and citizenship education. Given the current emphasis Singapore is placing on 'character education', there is a need to focus on perceptions of 'character education' as a singular concept.

The central research question of this study, therefore, is 'How do teachers in Singapore view character education?'

2.0   Literature Review

Character education in Singapore incorporates a multi-dimensional approach and comprises different strands: citizenship education (or National Education, NE), civics and moral education, social-emotional learning, education and career guidance, sexuality education, cyber wellness, service learning, and student leadership development (MOE, 2011).

Few studies have considered character education as a single entity, with those which do so either examining the role of the school in character education

(Arthur, 2011; Galloway, 2009; Williams, 2003), or investigating the tensions created by differing religious and educational objectives in character education (Pike, 2010). Moreover, even fewer studies have considered teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards character education in its entirety, and only in respect to one of its strands, that of moral education (Revell & Arthur, 2007; See & Arthur, 2010).

Other studies exploring teachers' perceptions do not explicitly refer to the concept of character education, but explore singular strands such as teachers' attitudes towards citizenship education (Carr & Landon, 1998; Koutselini, 2008; Oulton et al., 2004, Sim & Print, 2009), and values education (Stephenson & Killeavy, 1998). Clearly, while citizenship education is a key aspect of character education, character education is more all encompassing, and further research into the area will contribute to a better understanding of the latter. Also, given that Singapore is focusing on character education in its entirety, and given that the different strands can differ widely from one another, it would be interesting to research this subject more comprehensively.

Nonetheless, the few studies examining teachers' attitudes towards character education focusing on specific areas are useful in forming a preliminary composite picture. For instance, Revell and Arthur's (2007) study, which explored the attitudes of student teachers in England towards moral education, yielded interesting results where they found that many student teachers were hesitant to explicitly guide students morally despite this being a key tenet of character education programmes. The authors posited that this was possibly because of a lack of belief or commitment in moral character education, or a lack of opportunities during teacher training to

engage with, and to learn to effectively deliver, moral concepts. Similarly, Oulton et al. (2004) found that teachers were largely underprepared to teach citizenship education, evinced by the unevenness of their approaches to the subject, despite their stated confidence to do so. The authors traced this to the lack of pre-service and in-service teacher training, and argue that it is limiting the teaching of citizenship education in the classroom. This situation was sufficiently critical for the authors to suggest that a teacher training development programme for citizenship 'be given national priority' (p. 505). Hence, both Revell and Arthur (2007) and Oulton et al's (2004) studies reveal a certain ambiguity or a lack of preparedness on the part of the teachers, despite explicit objectives or professed confidence. Hence, further research in the area of teachers' perspectives towards character education will be valuable, given the varied perspectives teachers may have and the struggles they could possibly face in teaching it.

More specifically, in the context of Singapore, a study conducted by Sim (2008) on the understandings of teachers in Singapore towards citizenship education reflected how teachers' understandings of the subject shaped their dissimilar communication of it. In her three-year case study approach studying eight teachers from four different schools with different ages, genders, races, and disciplinary backgrounds, Sim examined how secondary social studies teachers understood the concept of citizenship and put it into practice in the subject. The focus on social studies was primarily due to the explicit agenda of social studies being one of the ways in which citizenship education was taught. Sim found divergences, which were far from the official discourse, in the way teachers understood, and therefore communicated, notions of citizenship. This highlights the influential role of the

teacher as a curricular-instructional gatekeeper (Thornton, 2005), even in a 'tightly controlled education system in Singapore' (p. 263). This therefore highlights the importance of exploring how teachers perceive character education, primarily because teachers' conceptions and depth of understanding of a subject can have a potentially significant impact regarding the implementation and eventual understanding of a curriculum.

The proposed research in this paper will therefore be able to critically inform the development of the still inchoate character education curriculum in Singapore.

3.0   Methodology

This dissertation will employ a qualitative approach to research, with the particular use of semi-structured interviews, with participants identified through theoretical sampling, and data collected via video-conferencing programs. The entire research process will also be closely guided by ethical guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA).

Firstly, a qualitative approach, specifically grounded theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967), is chosen to obtain a richer understanding of the situation through the data accumulated from participant perspectives. A qualitative approach is also an acknowledgement of the value in appreciating the subjectivity of these perspectives (Creswell, 2007; Hatch, 2002). Rather than pure description, an interpretation of the situation will be made so as to generate a theory to better explain the perspectives of teachers towards character education.

In particular, a semi-structured interview format will be adopted for its ability to provide scope to explore in greater detail the opinions and views of the research participants, and for its advantage in further clarification, through either probes or prompts (Dowling & Brown, 2010). A variety of guiding questions that are open-ended, clear, neutral, and respectful of the valuable knowledge possessed by participants, would be developed and questions will be organized such that questions move from the particular to the general. Sensitive questions, such as those involving particular aspects of the participants' background, would only be asked towards the end, and only if necessary, so that participants would not think it intrusive and be able to feel more at ease during the interview. Interviews do have their drawbacks as well, such as the researcher's inexperience, as well as the 'asymmetrical power distribution between the interviewer and the interviewee' (Creswell, 2007, p. 140). It is therefore necessary to anticipate these difficulties, and for this researcher to have the list of guiding questions to facilitate improvisation while ensuring focus, and to practise interviewing before the actual interview sessions. With a knowledge of the issues relating to the power distribution, there can be greater sensitivity during the interviews as well to ensure participants are at ease and not made to feel threatened at any point (Gadd, 2004).

Theoretical sampling (Creswell, 2012), derived from grounded theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967), will be carried out, with a particular focus on the careful and intentional selection of participants to help in the generation of theory. An interview will first be conducted with a reasonably interesting subject, possibly a teacher in a state-run Singapore school involved heavily in work relating to character education. As most schools in Singapore are state-run and are expected to teach character

education, finding a suitable first subject should not be too problematic. Next, an initial interview transcript will be analysed for any preliminary categories, before a decision is made on the profile of the next interviewee so as to better contribute and inform the refinement of emerging categories. This constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007) of data analysis, where new data collected is constantly compared against emerging categories, will progress until the point of saturation when this researcher has made 'the subjective determination that new data will not provide any information or insights for the developing categories' (Creswell, 2012, p. 433). Due to time constraints, a pragmatic limit of no more than 10 teachers will be interviewed.

Data collection will be in the form of remote interviews (King & Horrocks, 2010) conducted either using Skype or Apple Facetime, depending on the program available to interviewees. Remote interviews have been chosen as the best alternative as this researcher will be physically removed from Singapore, thus rendering physical interviews difficult and highly unlikely. Furthermore, the use of Skype or Facetime facilitates the recording of interviews for further analysis, with programs such as 'IMCapture' (from GeoVid), or 'Call Recorder for Skype' (from Ecamm Network). However, there are certain shortcomings to remote interviews to be mindful of to reduce any problems that may arise. These shortcomings include technological glitches, and a dependence on the stability and speed of the Internet connection. Hence, separate preliminary interviews using Skype and Facetime will be conducted to ensure the programs are able to run as smoothly as possible before the actual interviews. Another shortcoming may be an unnecessary restriction of participants to those with either the Skype or Facetime programs. However, this will

not be problematic as all teachers in Singapore are issued with a computer, and Skype is a free program easily available for download.

Lastly, ethical considerations are of utmost importance and this study will be treated in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2011 "Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research". Specific points of concern will be that of voluntary informed consent, privacy and disclosure. Firstly, voluntary informed consent is important as these interviews will be recorded via Skype, and records kept until the completion of this Masters degree. Hence, the participants of this study will be 'clearly informed that their participation and interactions are being monitored and analysed for research' (p. 5). Secondly, the privacy of the participants, a point closely related to voluntary informed consent, will be guarded at all times. Given that teachers' perspectives could potentially have an effect on their professional standing and career progression, and that the teachers involved have voluntarily and generously given of their time and perspectives, it is imperative that this researcher 'recognize[s] the participants' entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity' (p.7). Thirdly, teachers will be provided with a follow-up of this study, following on BERA's call to demonstrate good practice by 'debrief[ing] participants at the conclusion of the research and [providing] them with copies of any reports or any other publications arising from their participation' (p. 8).

4.0   Approach to Analysis

Data analysis will be carried out throughout the course of the interviews, and interpreted in various stages, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, to generate a substantive-level theory (Creswell, 2007).

Firstly, in open coding, broad categories of information will be created from the transcripts, and properties within each category segmented. Data is then found to fit the 'extreme possibilities on a continuum of the property' (p. 67). There needs to be constant reviews of the data to ensure that no categories are overlooked, thus limiting the results of this study.

Following open coding, data will be organised in new ways in axial coding. This is where a central phenomenon is identified, and possible conditions and contexts explored to better understand the phenomenon.

Lastly, selective coding is carried out when hypotheses are put forth to explain how teachers perceive character education. Creswell (2007) proposes an optional final stage where the researcher may 'develop and visually portray a conditional matrix that elucidates the social, historical, and economic conditions influencing the central phenomenon' (p.67).

5.0   Anticipated Problems

In conceptualising this research, it is also important to consider possible problems that may arise during the course of this dissertation. These possible problems would include the inability to obtain a sufficiently representative sample for

the generation of theory, the reticence of participants, and the analysis and transferability of the data analysis.

Firstly, there might be issues finding appropriate and willing participants as the interviews would be carried out over Skype during the first half of 2012, which would imply that the willing participants would be typically taking time outside of working hours, in the midst of a busy term time, to be a participant in this study. Nonetheless, as the interviews are not expected to take longer than 30 minutes, this might not be problematic, as the interviewees may not see the interview as a huge disruption to their schedule or an overly inconvenient imposition on their time.

Secondly, what would most significantly impact the study might be that participants may be reluctant to provide full or extensive disclosure during the open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Compounding this problem might be this researcher's lack of experience with research interviews. Given that this is a qualitative study, with interviews as the only data collection method, and that the comprehensiveness of a qualitative study hinges on the richness of the data collected, careful steps would be taken to build rapport with participants, to be sensitive to participants' cues, and to plan the questions and rationale carefully, so as to have more meaningful and extensive data collected.

Lastly, the transferability of the data, in terms of the quality of data analysis, might be a concern. To mitigate potential issues, the analysis of the data will be carried out in close consultation with a more experienced member of the qualitative research community, namely that of this researcher's supervisor.

6.0   Conclusion

It is hoped that this study will be able to contribute to understandings of character education, and in the Singapore context, to the conception and development of the new character development curriculum in Singapore.

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