THEMATICALLY CHARACTER-BASED LEARNING MATERIALS IN EARLY CHILD EDUCATION: A PRELIMINARY

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Abstract

Character education has become a reference for the development of learning patterns of schools in Indonesia. The development of classroom learning instructions integrating character education has been applied in a variety of interesting teaching and learning patterns, despite not all of them being capable of promoting character education appropriately. In its capacity as a reference for learning, learning materials should be able to act as a basic guideline which is to be further developed by teachers in the learning environment. This study aims to identify the needs of PAUD teaching materials in PAUD institutions in West Java and to find teaching

materials that had been and are being used in PAUD institutions in West Java. The subjects of the study were three PAUD institutions in West Java selected based on the accreditation of BAN PNF West Java. The instruments used were document analysis, questionnaire, and observation. From the interim results, it was found that the teaching materials used still has not integrated thematic learning in a friendly character education environment. Initial needs analysis of the thematically character-based materials shows that teachers still do not understand in detail about the characteristics of a well-designed thematically character-based learning materials. The teacher's knowledge of evaluating teaching materials has not been able to support teachers' understanding on how the thematically character-based learning materials were developed integrated with character education, whether in the forms of direct instruction, games, or assignments. Related to teaching materials that had been and are being used, there are differences of understanding where an institution have begun to evaluate and integrate the vision and mission of the institution with the vision and mission of national education and other two institutions regard textbook as a standard reference on how the learning process should take place.

Keywords

Thematic Learning, Learning Materials, Character Education in Indonesia

1. Introduction

The issue of character education has been a global matter in the education setting. As what had been reported by Harrison, Morris, and Ryan (2016), the issues on character education have arisen in the UK, US, India, China, Taiwan, Canada, Korea, Australia, and Malaysia. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the introductory of character education has since emerged in the introduction of the 2013 curriculum, where the moral values and character are ones of the underlying cores in the education.

It may remain unanswered as to what is wrong with the youth behavior in the Indonesian context. The cause may be caused by the lack of well-designed formulation into religious-integrated lessons, civics lessons, or character lessons, where the main program lies at the introduction of cognitive values alone. At least a little deeper into the affective value of appreciation. In fact, the education of character should bring children to the recognition of values cognitively, appreciation of value affectively, ultimately to the actual value of the practice. Thus,

emerging from the aforementioned reasons, the government attempted to balance religious instruction and character education (ADB & OECD, 2015). Yet, the recent momentum from the Indonesian President Regulation no. 87 of 2017 on strengthening character education further ignites the curriculum reformation, where this, in effect, requires the teacher to explicitly include the character education in their classroom (Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat, 2017). This allows the government to provide technical guidance in order to embrace and supplement the implementation of character education in both formal and informal education, through various means such as civic education, religious-infused subjects, or any other implementation (UNESCO, 2014).

Character education has a higher meaning than moral education because it is not just teaching what is right and what is wrong. Moreover, character education inculcates good habits so that students become understandable, able to feel, and want to do good conducts. Generally, the introduction of character education can only be seen as the general needs of the current degrading situations in the country. However, as what Arthur, Kristjánsson, Harrison, Sanderse, and Wright (2017) consider, character education should be built on the basis that the characters should be developed, logically used, and internally motivating the users to form their moral identity.

The integration of values in the formation of character through the world of education requires careful planning for the results in accordance with the expected. The process of cultivating values in character building through education must be well packed and structured that can be implemented through learning activities. One of the supporting learning requirements is the textbook. Teaching materials are very helpful for teachers and students in achieving learning objectives. This research reports on 1) the identification of the need for teaching materials for character education and the context of character education in early childhood education institutions in West Java, Indonesia and 2) the identification of teaching materials that have been and are being used by teachers in early childhood education institutions in West Java, Indonesia.

2. Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to obtain the description on early child teaching material development in the Indonesian context. The research objectives in this study is 1) to

identify the need for teaching materials for character education and the context of character education in early childhood education institutions in West Java, Indonesia and 2) to identify teaching materials that have been and are being used by teachers in early childhood education institutions in West Java, Indonesia.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Teaching Materials Development for Early Child Education

The materials development referred in this context can be defined to all processes that occur in the development and use of learning materials that occur in the learning process. These include a coursebook, a CD rom, a story, a song, a video, or even a picture to encourage learners' motivation to the learning. According to Tomlinson and Masuhara (2018), the nature of these teaching materials can be informative, instructional, experiential, or exploratory. The consideration lies on the teacher's discretion, where he/she has the authority to choose which will best help achieving learning outcomes.

The selection of learning materials cannot be separated with the curriculum. Even the best curriculum design will be ineffective if the curriculum or teacher as the implementer at the lowest level does not pay much attention to how teachers teach and how students learn (Diamond, 2008). In the implementation, teachers must use teaching materials, such as textbooks, instructional media, visual aids, and so forth, to be able to internalize the learning objectives intact to the learners. Teaching materials themselves can be provided by the institutions, bought by the learners, or provided by the teacher. Yet, it remains a question as to whether the learners need to buy the materials by themselves until now. Moreover, despite the benefits offered by the ready-to-use materials, these materials are often not in line with the aims of the curriculum in the institution. Thus, there is a need to develop learning materials by themselves. It is important to develop own materials because the needs of the learning materials themselves have evolved into more complex objects (Rubdy, 2014). The complexity of teaching materials to meet the increasingly complex learner needs requires the teacher's participation as the spearhead of learning in the classroom to be more creative in helping to achieve learning objectives better.

In general, in the preparation of instructional materials for use in the classroom, Jolly and Bolitho (2011) suggest to consider five points in learning: 1) identification by teachers or

students about the needs that need to be met in learning; 2) exploration of required areas related to learning objectives, learning process, and evaluation of learning; 3) contextual realization of instructional material by finding appropriate ideas or contexts; 4) material-related pedagogical realization by finding training and learning activities and writing appropriate instructions for use; and, 5) production of physical learning materials, related to layout considerations, size, visual, reproduction, page thickness, and so on.

In relation to thematically character-based learning, selected teaching materials must be able to condition learners to be able to reach the curriculum targets in the forms of feasible, interrelated themes, which will be broken down into coherent learning units. Unfortunately, although teachers are asked to actively develop teaching materials, learners are less able to respond enthusiastically about teaching materials provided by teachers (Block, 1991). Block mentions that less interesting teaching materials, both in terms of layout, content, and other supporting materials, cause the lack of enthusiasm of learners in response to teaching materials made by the teacher themselves.

3.2 Thematic Character-Based Learning for Early Child Education in Indonesia

Early childhood education in Indonesia has become an educational concept that is expected to prepare learners below elementary school age, which is before coming to seven years. In its implementation, Sujiono (2013) mentions that an early childhood education program in Indonesia itself adheres to a systematic approach, in which learners are regarded as input and outcomes of coaching; various agencies or related institutions that determine their policies, programs and implementation; and, early childhood education institutions (general kindergartens, Islamic kindergartens, playgroups, and others). Curriculum should remain as the basis to reflect the needs of teachers and society (Lao, 2015). As such, due to the needs reflected in the policy, where the development and the implementation of the learning program are determined by the relevant government agencies (in this case, the Directorate General of Early Childhood Education and Community Education, under the Ministry of Education and Culture), the curriculum has been developed to adapt to the pattern of the curriculum development based on the characteristics of early child development that includes aspects of religious and moral values, physical-motor, cognitive, language, social-emotional, and art. Aspects of religious and moral values mentioned in Education and Culture Ministerial Decree no. 137 of 2017 refer to the

formal values of religion and some characters, such as honest, helpful, polite, respectful, and tolerant of others.

The application of character education, as one reference to the developmental scope of the learners, becomes the benchmark in curriculum development. It is highly potential for early child's natural potentials to be developed (Genc-Kumtepe, Kaya, Erdogan, Alan, & Tolga Kumtepe, 2017). As Diamond (2008) comments, the resulting statements on the curriculum will be the basis on which the main objectives of each subject in the curriculum will be determined. Furthermore, the objectives of each subject will be solved into specific units in the class. The thematic curriculum development becomes one of the patterns in curriculum development in early childhood education (Sujiono, 2013). In thematic instruction, learners will benefit much as they will not learn lessons separately. Yorks and Follo (1993) investigated the engagement rate of 25 students of third- and fourth-graders and by the use of thematic instruction, learners enjoyed the learning as there was no separateness in the lessons they got. Thematic learning process also will assist creative and critical thinking and also allows learners to enjoy their learning independently (Min, Rashid, & Nazri, 2012).

Learners can be invited to interact with moral learning and character through a variety of ways, such as through games and stories. Especially in the use of stories, learners can be invited to better understand and interpret the story by incorporating their moods exactly at the right time and in the right way when learning (Harrison et al., 2016).

4. Research Design

The method used in this research is case study method. This method is chosen to meet the research needs that require the process of developing and collecting data in various aspects as the final outcome is developing the model of learning materials of early child education. In addition, this method is very supportive of the development process of teaching materials model. In the first part, needs analysis is the main instrument by which the data to be developed. The focus were three early child education institutions that were selected purposively by the ranking of A to C based on the accreditation criteria set by BAN PNF (Indonesia National Accreditation Institute for Non-Formal Education). The institutions observed were in Cimahi, Bandung, and Garut, West Java, Indonesia.

The instruments used for needs analysis were document analysis, questionnaire, and observation. Document analysis was to analyze the current teaching materials used by the teacher and the students, the lesson plans, learning media, and assessment tools. The questionnaire contained 38 questions, combining closed-ended and open-ended types of question. For the observation, it was recorded in a single learning session for each institution. The recordings were transcribed to allow the interpretation towards the use of thematically character-based learning materials in context. The length of each recording ranged from 45 minutes to 60 minutes. The recordings were conducted during August 14, 2017 to August 16, 2017.

The participants were three teachers from three different institutions. The pseudonym was used to identify the three teachers by which the data were taken from. Ms. Ana from an A-rank institution was a 35-year woman, graduating from a private teacher preparatory institution in Jawa Barat. Fahira in the B-rank institution was a 32-year woman, graduating from a state teacher preparatory institution in West Java. For the last teacher in the C-rank institution, Elisa, a 35-year old teacher, is graduating from a private teacher preparatory institution in West Java. All of them had at least five-year experience in teaching early child in their respective institutions.

5. Findings & Discussion

This study focuses on identifying two things, namely the analysis of educational needs of character education materials and the context of character education in early childhood education institutions in West Java and teaching materials that had been used and are being used by teachers in early childhood education institutions in West Java. In analyzing the need for the development of character-based thematic learning materials, a 38-item questionnaire was developed and administered to early childhood education teachers. The contents in the questionnaire focused on teacher's knowledge and perceptions related to characteristic teaching, thematic teaching, and the concept of teaching materials that teachers knew; teaching and learning materials (related to using teaching and learning materials, material to be revealed, supporting media, and layouts); and, the evaluation tools needed to assess the learners. The

In the knowledge of understanding of character education, all teachers have good knowledge about the application of character education in early childhood education. They are able to recognize six characters in general, namely trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship, promoted by the government in early childhood education in the

field. Furthermore, one of the teachers, Ms. Ana, was able to add some characters specifically explained in Education and Culture Ministerial Decree no. 137 of 2017, which is honest, respectful, tolerant, and helpful. All teachers agree on the application of learning by integrating characters. One of the teachers, Fahira, argues that the characters will be able to help shape learners to better promote social competence for the better. Ms. Ana argues that learners who are taught about characters are implicitly able to show a more tolerant personality in the classroom than those who are poorly given activities that are integrated with the characters.

The implementation of character education has been quite a while, despite it being implicitly expressed by the governments in the curriculum documents (UNESCO, 2014). This case also happens in many countries, as what Harrison, Morris, and Ryan (2016) state in their book. Characters to be educated to the learners through the hands of an educational institution should be explicitly reflected in the learning process (Arthur et al., 2017).

In terms of thematic learning, teachers are able to demonstrate their ability to identify learning. They are able to distinguish which is the theme and which are the units. They also feel happy when learners taught using thematic instructions are able to contribute more in classroom activities. They are able to formulate learning objectives, themes / topics that are interesting to discuss, and consider background knowledge of learners with brainstorming at the beginning of the activity. It may be seen that thematic learning has already been implemented in the learning process, despite the characteristics of all learners are not yet fully considered in the assessment (Seefeldt & Wasik, 2008).

Related to the conceptual framework of learning materials, all three teachers used the ready-to-use, commercial learning materials from local publishers. Despite the mention of character-infused activities in the books, they could not find it explicitly stated in the objectives of the lesson. They all shared the same thought that learning materials to be used in the classroom were similar with textbook. They also could not think that any explicitly-stated information about character-infused activities was not of the same with what they thought it would be. These books indeed mentioned that these activities reflected characters implemented in the activities. The lack of information on the explicit information about character-infused activities was mostly found on the commercial textbooks. Ms. Ana and Fahira supplemented the activities with information in the Internet, where their institutions provided Internet for use to the

staffs. Elisa could not do the same due to the absence of Internet connection in her institution, yet she still sought the other ways to connect to the Internet.

Curriculum, as what Crosse (2007) suggests, should consider four main principles, namely a unique child, positive relationships, enabling environment, and learning and development. In its application, the learning environment adopting these four principles should "have resources which are relevant and familiar to the children's cultures … and … have sufficient resources to enable the curriculum to be offered at different levels" (Crosse, 2007, p. 61). The materials development allows the teacher to adjust how the learning will be delivered to the learners.

In terms of the content of learning materials, all teachers were found to have difficulties in explaining which learning materials are best provided to the learners in terms of using teaching and learning materials, materials to be used in the classroom, supporting media, and layouts. All teachers had confidence in selecting and using which materials are best for their thematic learnings, but for choosing supporting media and layouts, they lacked of confidence to assume that they could do it. Since they can only perform simple modifications to the learning materials, complex modifications, such as finding other media or modifying layouts, were generally out of the question for them. The thematic learnings conducted by the teachers sufficiently provided the learners with appropriate amount of playing in the learning process, but it lacked on strengthening academic competences. Ms. Fahira integrated thematic learnings mostly with the local contents provided from the institution, while Ms. Ana and Ms. Elisa integrated thematic learnings with materials from the Internet and the local contents from the institution. The local contents in this case refer to particular materials adapted or adopted from other sources to promote the local values nurtured from the institution and the local cultures in the region.

From the findings, materials development is still an exclusive environment for early child teachers, though it is still acceptable to adapt materials from other resources (Islam & Mares, 2014). While the social aspects of learning are promoted, Pianta and La Paro's (2003) study argued that most schools fail to promote adequate academic competences, such as literacy competences, while staying on promoting the social aspects. It is similar in that the Indonesian contexts of early child learning environments are socially positive but instructionally passive. Ms. Ana commented that it was quite possible to do developing materials, however the tight

teaching schedule and the administration stuffs did not allow the teachers to have sufficient time to modify the materials. As what Muchtar, Yanuarsari, and Lestari (2016) found, time allotment for the classroom is often violated due to insufficient knowledge and preparation by the teacher.

Evaluation, according to the responses in the questionnaire, was still a limited term for the teachers. All teachers agreed that evaluation was a crucial part of the learning process, but they all tend to avoid individualized assessment for each learner. They took for granted that all learners were able to achieve the learning objectives, though at some times, they still did the individualized assessment. The evaluation that they could think of was in the forms of multiple choices as it was mostly adopted from the commercial learning materials. Self-made evaluation was still a rare concept for them, yet they still adopt it with some minor modifications. It is of the case for Ms. Elisa's class, where she mainly assessed her students' activities from the group works, different with the other two teachers. She commented that it was relatively easier to perform group assessment as it may help her to take care of the instructional time more effectively.

Yet, in the attempt to create a friendly student-centered learning, assessment is an integral part of which the whole characteristics of the child can be seen through in the classroom which further allows the teacher to provide appropriate teaching method (Miller, 2015). Individualized assessment thus allows the teacher to identify the learners in such a way that the learners are given rooms to engage in the learning activities provided by the teacher. Ms. Ana admitted that she rarely assess students in group work, where it was rather difficult to assess which participated more. She commented, "having to assess all students, I'd rather come to each student individually, one by one, even if it takes more time." Additionally, self-assessment may be introduced to the learners, despite many criticisms towards it (Butler, 2016). It was only done by the comments of Ms. Ana and Ms. Fahira, where both admitted that their students were often asked to indicate how well they performed in the class. In an observation, Ms. Fahira explained her method that after her materials had been given, students were asked to fill on a very simple questionnaire containing three smileys representing from happy to sad, according to what they had learned in the class. However, due to some students often refusing to express it, it was not quite successful. In fact, due to the lack of understanding on the teachers' part regarding how the assessment is done, the learners are also often not introduced to self-assess their achievement in the classroom.

For the learning materials they had used and are using now, there had not been any change in the past five years. Some modifications were made to allow the learners not to feel bored. Yet, the books were still the same, taken from the commercial sources. All books being used were from different authors and publishers, published on the last ten years with the oldest being published at 2008. However, despite the learning materials coming from the commercial sources, the learners were not told to buy it. The institutions had already bought in bulk so that all learners could enjoy it by being lent from the school library. The students were given the materials and they were to return it in the end of semester.

Regardless of the sources of the learning materials, it is mandatory for the school to provide textbooks and additional resources in the school (UNESCO, 2016). In the report, UNESCO recommends the school to allocate more funds for textbooks and manage as well as report the distribution of the textbooks in a transparent way. It is clear that the importance of the learning materials needs to be considered. Even if there is no significant change on the books, modification on the learning contents to adjust the learners are recommended (Rubdy, 2014).

While in many aspects the early child teachers were able to sufficiently maintain the classroom environment in a positive manner, the lack of some important points, such as the lack of abilities in modifying the learning materials as well as to plan a well-designed instructional lesson plan, may disrupt the learning process. The school needs to promote their teaching staffs' capabilities in preparing the instructional designs before they start the learning process. Otherwise, learners may suffer from the inadequacy of the goals that they will be able to survive in the later time.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify two focuses, namely identifying the needs of character education materials and the context of character education in early childhood education institutions in West Java and exploring teaching materials that had been used and are being used by teachers in early childhood education institutions in West Java, Indonesia. Character-based thematic learning materials can be found in the ready-to-use, commercial learning materials, but it hardly accommodates the institution's missions as it only allows ready-to-use materials. Teacher's awareness towards materials development should be promoted to enhance the quality of the learning process. The materials development to accommodate character-based thematic

learning is still an exclusive competence for the teacher as it requires the support of technologies and external assistance.

This study is currently limited to the involvement of potential early child education institutions, where more potential teachers may be available to provide further details on developing children materials. Furthermore, more instruments could be utilized to obtain more detailed data on how early child teachers should develop their capabilities to modify their materials integrating moral education in a thematic manner. Future studies are hoped to explore more details on the institution policies for teacher's professional development and material development.

7. Acknowledgement

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