Examination of the Moral Curriculum in Iranian Schools in Dubai and the National Curriculum of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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A r t i c l e I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Article type:
Original Research

Purpose: This study aims to examine the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai, assesses its alignment with the National Curriculum Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and proposes strategies for optimization.

Methodology: A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative methodologies. Content analysis was conducted on moral education textbooks from grades one to nine used in Iranian schools in Dubai and the National Curriculum Document of Iran. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 teachers and 5 curriculum planners to gain insights into teaching methods and evaluation practices. Colaizzi's phenomenological method was used to analyze interview data, and thematic analysis was performed using qualitative data analysis software.

Findings: The content analysis revealed that the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai follows a Western framework compatible with Islamic principles, emphasizing cultural studies, individual and social development, character-moral education, and civic studies. However, significant discrepancies were found when compared to the National Curriculum Document, which emphasizes virtues such as patience, courage, respect, empathy, chastity, trustworthiness, justice, and honesty. The Dubai curriculum focuses more on secular ethics and civic responsibilities. Proposed strategies for optimization include incorporating content aligned with the National Curriculum, enhancing cultural and recreational activities, organizing book reading competitions, and providing professional development for teachers.

Conclusion: The study underscores the complexity of delivering moral education in a transnational context, where curricula must balance national values with the multicultural environment of the host country. The findings highlight the need for a more integrated approach that incorporates Islamic values while addressing the diverse backgrounds of students. By adopting the proposed strategies, Iranian schools in Dubai can enhance the moral and ethical development of their students, aligning more closely with national educational goals and effectively promoting Islamic ethical principles alongside necessary civic and social competencies.

Keywords: Moral education, national curriculum, Iranian schools in Dubai, curriculum alignment, ethical development, multicultural education, teacher training, educational strategies.

1. Introduction

The importance of moral education in fostering ethical behavior and personal integrity among students has been widely recognized. Alwadai and Alhaj (2023) emphasize the role of values education in shaping the moral compass of students, highlighting the perspectives of high school teachers on its integration into the curriculum. They argue that values education is not only about teaching specific moral values but also about cultivating a supportive environment that encourages students to internalize these values and apply them in their daily lives (Alwadai & Alhaj, 2023).

In a comparative context, Bamkin (2020) explores the moral education curriculum in Japanese elementary schools, noting the significant role of class time in delivering moral education. This study underscores the importance of a structured curriculum that integrates moral education into the broader educational framework, ensuring that students receive consistent and comprehensive moral instruction throughout their schooling (Bamkin, 2020).

The global perspective on moral education is further elaborated by He (2023), who examines the curriculum of elementary schools under various worldwide systems. He argues that while the specifics of moral education may differ across cultures, the fundamental goal remains the same: to develop individuals who can navigate complex ethical dilemmas and contribute positively to society.

In the context of character education, Hodhod, Cairns, and Kudenko (2011) discuss the potential of interactive story generation and games in fostering character education. They suggest that innovative approaches to teaching moral values can engage students more effectively and enhance their understanding of ethical principles (He, 2023).

The necessity of aligning moral education with cultural and national values is highlighted by Sancho (2022), who examines the educational trajectories of Dubai Indian families. Sancho's study reveals the challenges and opportunities associated with delivering moral education in a multicultural and transnational context, emphasizing the need for curricula that reflect the diverse backgrounds of students while maintaining a coherent ethical framework (Sancho, 2022). Starratt (2007) argues for the importance of leading a community of learners, where moral education is integrated into the overall learning environment. He suggests that school leaders play a crucial role in fostering a culture of ethical behavior and mutual respect, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of moral education programs (Starratt, 2007).

The psycho-didactic approach to religious and moral education, as discussed by Steć and Kulik (2021), focuses on personal growth and positive mental health. This approach emphasizes the holistic development of students, integrating moral education with psychological and emotional well-being (Steć & Kulik, 2021). Unar and Hussain (2021) apply Moral Foundation Theory to examine the development of morality in primary public schools in Sindh province. Their study highlights the importance of early moral education and its impact on students' ethical development, suggesting that foundational moral values should be introduced at a young age (Unar & Hussain, 2021). Zhang, Saharuddin, and Aziz (2022) analyze teachers' perceptions of the moral education curriculum, revealing diverse views on the effectiveness and implementation of moral education. Their study underscores the need for teacher training and support to ensure the successful integration of moral education into the curriculum (Zhang et al., 2022).

The theoretical underpinnings of moral education are further explored by Bebeau (2002), who discusses the Defining Issues Test and the Four Component Model. Bebeau's work provides a framework for understanding how moral reasoning and ethical decision-making can be cultivated through targeted educational interventions (Bebeau, 2002).

Hedayati et al. (2017) investigate the life purposes of Iranian secondary school students, providing insights into their moral and ethical aspirations. Their findings suggest that students' life purposes are closely linked to their moral values, highlighting the importance of integrating moral education with broader life goals (Hedayati et al., 2017). In a subsequent study, Hedayati et al. (2019) examine moral conflicts in Iranian secondary schools, revealing the complexities and challenges associated with delivering moral education in a context marked by diverse ethical perspectives. Their work underscores the need for curricula that address these conflicts and provide students with the tools to navigate ethical dilemmas (Hedayati et al., 2019). Osbeck et al. (2018) identify the ethical competences highlighted in educational research journals, offering a comprehensive overview of the competences that should be aimed at in ethics education. Their study provides a valuable reference for curriculum designers seeking to develop effective moral education programs (Osbeck et al., 2018). Thornberg and Uz (2013) explore teachers' views on values education in Sweden and Turkey, highlighting the cultural

differences and commonalities in the implementation of moral education. Their study emphasizes the importance of context-specific approaches to values education, tailored to the cultural and societal norms of each country (Thornberg & uz, 2013).

The moral education curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai presents a unique case, situated at the intersection of Iranian national values and the multicultural environment of Dubai. This study seeks to examine the current state of the moral curriculum in these schools, assess its alignment with the National Curriculum Document of Iran, and propose strategies for its optimization. By analyzing the objectives, content, teaching methods, and evaluation practices of the moral education curriculum, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how moral values are taught and integrated into the educational experience of students in these schools.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the ongoing discourse on moral education in transnational contexts. As the number of Iranian students in Dubai continues to grow, understanding how their moral and ethical education is being shaped is crucial for policymakers, educators, and researchers. Moreover, the findings of this study can inform the development of more effective and culturally relevant moral education programs that align with both national standards and the diverse backgrounds of students.

To achieve these objectives, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis of moral education textbooks and the National Curriculum Document with semi-structured interviews with teachers and curriculum planners. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the moral curriculum, providing both qualitative and quantitative insights into its design, implementation, and effectiveness.

In conclusion, the integration of moral education into school curricula is a complex and multifaceted endeavor, influenced by cultural, national, and global factors. By examining the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai, this study aims to shed light on the challenges and opportunities associated with delivering moral education in a transnational context. The findings will not only contribute to the academic discourse on moral education but also provide practical recommendations for enhancing the moral and ethical development of students in these schools.

2.   Findings and Results

The present study aimed to examine the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai, assess its alignment with the National Curriculum Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and propose strategies for its optimization. This section details the findings and results derived from the content analysis of moral education textbooks, the analysis of the National Curriculum Document, and semi-structured interviews with teachers and curriculum planners. The findings are presented in accordance with the research questions.

2.1.   Status of the Moral Curriculum in Iranian Schools in Dubai

Objectives and Content of the Moral Curriculum

The content analysis of the moral education textbooks revealed that the objectives and content of the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai follow a Western framework that is compatible with Islamic principles. The textbooks from grades one to nine emphasize various dimensions of moral education, including cultural studies, individual and social development, character-moral education, and civic studies. The key objectives and content areas are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Objectives and Content Areas of Moral Education in Iranian Schools in Dubai

Grade Level	Key Objectives	Content Areas
Grade 1-3	Familiarity with ethical laws, responsibility, empathy	Stories emphasizing honesty, respect, and sharing
Grade 4-6	Critique of global ethics, understanding cultural heritage	Lessons on UAE heritage, ethical dilemmas, and personal integrity
Grade 7-9	Active citizenship, federal system structure in UAE	Topics on civic responsibilities, legal systems, and ethical debates

The objectives are tailored to different educational levels, with a specific focus on fostering cultural, individual, social, and civic competencies. Notably, some of the most prominent goals include introducing ethical laws and responsibilities, critiquing global ethics, understanding and preserving the cultural heritage of the UAE, and fostering active and responsible citizenship.

Interviews with teachers indicated varied instructional methods across different educational stages. In the first grade of primary school, about 45% of teachers reported using storytelling alongside the lecture method, leveraging the narrative elements present in the textbooks. However, in the second grade of primary and secondary school, more than 85% of teachers predominantly used traditional lecture methods. Some educators also incorporated project-based learning and student-led conferences, particularly in higher grades. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the teaching methods used at different educational levels.

Table 2

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Teaching Methods in Iranian Schools in Dubai

Educational Stage	Primary Teaching Methods	Percentage of Use (%)
Grade 1-3	Storytelling, Lecture	45% Storytelling, 55% Lecture
Grade 4-6	Lecture, Project-Based Learning, Discussions	85% Lecture, 10% Project-Based, 5% Discussions
Grade 7-9	Lecture, Project-Based Learning, Student Conferences	85% Lecture, 10% Project-Based, 5% Student Conferences

The evaluation of moral lessons was traditionally conducted through written questions and exams at the end of each term. This method was consistently reported across all educational levels, indicating a preference for conventional assessment techniques.

2.2. Alignment with the National Curriculum Document

The comparative analysis between the moral education textbooks used in Iranian schools in Dubai and the National Curriculum Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran highlighted significant discrepancies. While the National Curriculum Document emphasizes virtues such as patience, courage, respect, empathy, chastity, trustworthiness, justice, and honesty, the textbooks in Dubai schools appeared to diverge considerably from these Islamic ethical standards. Instead, the textbooks were more aligned with Western secular ethics and focused extensively on preparing students for active citizenship and social responsibilities.

Table 3 presents a summary of the alignment between the moral curriculum in Dubai schools and the National Curriculum Document, highlighting the key areas of divergence.

Table 3

Alignment of Moral Curriculum in Dubai Schools with National Curriculum Document

Component	National Curriculum Document	Dubai Schools Moral Curriculum
Virtues Emphasized	Patience, Courage, Respect, Empathy, Chastity, Trustworthiness, Justice, Honesty	Responsibility, Ethical Laws, Active Citizenship, Cultural Heritage
Ethical Sources	Quran, Traditions, Life of the Prophet (PBUH)	Secular Ethical Framework, Civic Duties
Focus	Relationship with God, Spiritual Development	Relationship with Society, Social Responsibilities
Role Models	Imams, Ahl al-Bayt (AS)	Secular Figures, Civic Leaders

The results indicated that the moral curriculum in Dubai schools placed substantial emphasis on students' relationships with society and their civic duties, rather than on their spiritual relationship with God. Additionally, role models presented in the curriculum were secular figures rather than religious leaders from the Islamic tradition, which contrasts sharply with the approach in the National Curriculum Document.

2.3. Proposed Strategies for Optimization

The study identified several strategies for optimizing the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai to better align with the National Curriculum Document and enhance its effectiveness. Key recommendations include:

Incorporating Desired Moral Content: It is essential to integrate content that aligns with the National Curriculum Document into the moral education textbooks. This includes emphasizing virtues such as patience, courage, and honesty, and using religious texts and traditions as primary ethical sources.

Enhanced Cultural and Recreational Activities: Providing culturally relevant and recreational extracurricular activities can support the moral curriculum. Activities such as cultural

festivals, ethical debates, and community service projects can reinforce the values taught in the classroom.

Book Reading Competitions: Organizing book reading competitions focused on ethical and moral themes can encourage students to engage with the content more deeply. These competitions can be aligned with the objectives of the National Curriculum Document and promote a broader understanding of moral education.

Professional Development for Teachers: Continuous professional development programs for teachers can help them adopt innovative teaching methods and assessment techniques that align with the moral education goals. Training workshops and seminars on integrating Islamic ethical principles into teaching practices can be particularly beneficial.

3.   Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai, its alignment with the National Curriculum Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and potential strategies for optimization. This section discusses these findings in the context of existing literature, offering explanations and aligning the results with previous studies.

The content analysis revealed that the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai predominantly follows a Western framework that is compatible with Islamic principles. The curriculum emphasizes cultural studies, individual and social development, character-moral education, and civic studies. Specific objectives include introducing ethical laws and responsibilities, critiquing global ethics, understanding and preserving the cultural heritage of the UAE, and fostering active citizenship.

These findings align with Bamkin's (2020) study on moral education in Japanese elementary schools, which also emphasizes the integration of moral education into the broader educational framework. Both studies highlight the importance of structured curricula that ensure consistent and comprehensive moral instruction (Bamkin, 2020). Similarly, He (2023) discusses the global perspective on moral education, noting that while the specifics may differ across cultures, the fundamental goal of developing individuals who can navigate ethical dilemmas and contribute positively to society remains consistent (He, 2023).

The use of storytelling and project-based learning in the lower grades, as identified in this study, reflects innovative approaches to teaching moral values. Hodhod, Cairns, and Kudenko (2011) support this approach, suggesting that interactive story generation and games can effectively engage students and enhance their understanding of ethical principles. The limited use of traditional lecture methods in higher grades indicates a need for more interactive and student-centered teaching approaches (Hodhod et al., 2011).

The comparative analysis between the moral education textbooks used in Iranian schools in Dubai and the National Curriculum Document of Iran revealed significant discrepancies. While the National Curriculum emphasizes virtues such as patience, courage, respect, empathy, chastity, trustworthiness, justice, and honesty, the textbooks in Dubai schools focus more on secular ethics and civic responsibilities. This divergence highlights a fundamental difference in the moral education objectives of the two curricula.

Sancho (2022) discusses similar challenges in the context of Dubai Indian families, where the multicultural environment necessitates a curriculum that reflects diverse backgrounds while maintaining a coherent ethical framework. This study's findings echo Sancho's observations, emphasizing the need for a curriculum that balances the multicultural context of Dubai with the Islamic values central to Iranian education (Sancho, 2022).

The emphasis on secular ethics and civic responsibilities in the Dubai schools' curriculum suggests a focus on students' relationships with society rather than their spiritual development. This approach contrasts sharply with the National Curriculum of Iran, which prioritizes the relationship with God and spiritual virtues. Starratt (2007) supports the integration of moral education into the overall learning environment, arguing that school leaders play a crucial role in fostering a culture of ethical behavior and mutual respect (Starratt, 2007).

The role models presented in the Dubai schools' curriculum are secular figures, whereas the National Curriculum of Iran uses religious leaders from the Islamic tradition. This difference in role models highlights the broader cultural and ethical divergence between the two curricula. Osbeck et al. (2018) identify ethical competences in educational research, suggesting that role models play a significant role in shaping students' moral development. The reliance on secular figures in the Dubai curriculum may reflect the need to cater to a more diverse student population, but it also underscores the challenge of aligning with the religiously oriented National Curriculum of Iran (Osbeck et al., 2018).

To address the identified discrepancies and enhance the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai, several strategies were proposed. These include incorporating content that aligns with the National Curriculum Document, providing culturally relevant and recreational extracurricular activities, organizing book reading competitions, and offering professional development for teachers.

The incorporation of desired moral content is essential for aligning the curriculum with the National Curriculum Document. Bebeau (2002) discusses the importance of targeted educational interventions in cultivating moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. By integrating virtues such as patience, courage, and honesty, and using religious texts and traditions as primary ethical sources, the curriculum can better reflect the values emphasized in the National Curriculum (Bebeau, 2002).

Enhanced cultural and recreational activities can support the moral curriculum by providing students with opportunities to engage with ethical principles in practical and meaningful ways. Sancho (2022) highlights the importance of culturally relevant activities in reinforcing the values taught in the classroom (Sancho, 2022). Similarly, Unar and Hussain (2021) emphasize the impact of early moral education on students' ethical development, suggesting that foundational moral values should be introduced through engaging and interactive activities (Unar & Hussain, 2021).

Book reading competitions focused on ethical and moral themes can encourage students to engage more deeply with the content. This approach aligns with Steć and Kulik's (2021) psycho-didactic approach, which emphasizes personal growth and positive mental health. By promoting reading and discussion of ethical literature, these competitions can enhance students' understanding and internalization of moral values (Steć & Kulik, 2021).

Professional development for teachers is crucial for the successful implementation of the moral curriculum. Thornberg and Uz (2013) discuss the importance of teacher training and support in values education, highlighting the need for teachers to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively deliver moral education. Continuous professional development programs can help teachers adopt innovative teaching methods and assessment techniques that align with the moral education goals (Thornberg & uz, 2013).

The study's findings underscore the complexity of delivering moral education in a transnational context, where curricula must balance national values with the multicultural environment of the host country. While the moral curriculum in Iranian schools in Dubai follows a Western framework compatible with Islamic principles, it lacks alignment with the National Curriculum Document of Iran. The divergence in ethical focus and role models highlights the need for a more integrated approach that incorporates Islamic values while addressing the diverse backgrounds of students.

The proposed strategies for optimization, including the incorporation of desired moral content, enhanced cultural and recreational activities, book reading competitions, and professional development for teachers, offer practical solutions for aligning the curriculum with national standards and enhancing its effectiveness. By adopting these strategies, Iranian schools in Dubai can foster a holistic development of students that aligns with both national and local educational goals.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on moral education in transnational contexts, providing valuable insights and practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and researchers. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these strategies on students' moral and ethical development, furthering our understanding of effective moral education in diverse educational settings.

Authors' Contributions

The first author was responsible for conducting the interview and collecting data, and the other authors were responsible for analyzing the data and writing the article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethics Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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