

STUDENT TEACHERS' INSIGHTS ABOUT A CURRICULUM FOR MORAL EDUCATION IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to explore what student teachers think about moral education in the context of the assessment of the new curriculum 'e-TAP+' for secondary education pupils (Year 10 to 12). The research questions were: What was student teachers' overall opinion about the moral education curriculum? Which aspects of moral education at high school were most important for student teachers? This mixed-method survey research used an online questionnaire. In March-April 2023 89 first year student teachers assessed the 36 lessons of the curriculum, filling 169 questionnaires. Participants' overall opinion about the curriculum was very positive. The curriculum potential to prompt discussions and to promote pupils' reflection was highlighted, as well as the usefulness of the lesson plans and presentations, and the lessons' fit to pupils and topicality. The aspects of moral education at high school highlighted by participants were a pupil centred approach (fit to pupils' age, importance of engagement and dialogue, pupils' comfort and well-being), the quality of the content (its relevance, depth, contemporariness, connections with other subject areas, national (Latvian) dimension), and the technical quality of educational materials. The results will be useful for initial teacher education trainers and for moral education researchers.

Keywords: curriculum assessment, moral education, upper secondary education, student teachers.

Introduction

Moral education in Latvia

Moral education is accepted as an essential part of 21st century school education (e.g., Rubin, 2017; Retnowati et al., 2018; Singh, 2019, Kristjánsson, 2019, OECD, 2021, The Jubilee Centre, 2022). Moral education is outlined in the three most important normative acts regulating education in Latvia. The Education Law (Saeima, 1997), in its

formulation of the purpose of education (article 2, paragraph 3), states that moral development of the learner shall be ensured. The article 10 of the Education Law states that the education system shall ensure the moral development of the learner [...] in accordance with the values enshrined and protected in the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia: life, human dignity, freedom, family, marriage, work, nature, culture, the Latvian language, and the State of Latvia.

The Cabinet of Ministers (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016) Regulation No 480 (part I, paragraph 3) defines moral education as the formation of a system of values and the cultivation of virtues for the formation of relationships, cooperation, civically responsible and successful life in society. The document specifies (in paragraph 7) the virtues to be developed in the process of moral education: responsibility, diligence, courage, honesty, wisdom, kindness, compassion, moderation, self-control, solidarity, justice, and tolerance.

The moral aspect of education is regulated in the State Basic Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2018) and in the General Secondary Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019), in reference to the Cabinet of Ministers (2016) Regulation No 480. In those standards, some of the learning outcomes in several learning areas refer explicitly to the development of virtues, albeit inconsistently and incompletely (for example, the virtues of wisdom, diligence, kindness, moderation, compassion, self-control and solidarity are not mentioned in any of the sections of the learning outcomes of the standards).

The above suggests that the need for ethical and moral education is theoretically guaranteed by the State, but, unfortunately, the specific way and time at which this could take place in schools is not clearly defined. In addition, in the newly reformed education curriculum (Skola2030, 2017), there is no separate subject 'Ethics' in either primary or secondary general education (as there was before 2017): Ethics is integrated into the subject 'Social sciences' in the Basic education curriculum. Philosophy as a specialised course with only 35 teaching hours is not compulsory, although it is mentioned in the General Secondary Education Standard: it is only actually offered in some secondary schools. Some philosophy topics are mentioned in the Basic Education Standard, e.g., reasoning about existential questions ('Expected outcomes in social and civic area of learning', point 6.1). However, there is nothing similar in the Secondary General Education Standard.

Given the limited opportunities for moral education in the areas of learning and in the subjects of the current education curriculum, the main place and way of pursuing moral education as an aim of education and of cultivating virtues is during the homeroom lessons. Homeroom lessons can also partially compensate for the lack of philosophy and ethics in the secondary school curriculum by encouraging students to understand themselves, their relationship to society and the cosmos, to be aware of universal human values and ideals, and to seek a mission in life. While there are homeroom lessons for every class, the most recent programme that offers teachers a sequence of how they could organise these lessons was developed in 2016 by the National Centre for Education (2016). Enough time has passed, so it is advisable to offer teachers a newer and more up-to-date approach to moral education.

Moral education in secondary school

From a developmental perspective, the secondary school marks the transition from adolescence (15–18) to emerging adulthood (19–29), in which autonomous identity formation is a fundamental process. The need for autonomy could be said to develop at an accelerated pace in high school, fostered by cognitive and physical development, the complexity of social relationships, and increasing rights, responsibilities, and choices such as those related to further studies, career, romantic relationships (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). Cognitive development in this age is characterised by a recently acquired capacity for metacognition and abstract thinking, which in turn actualizes the search for identity, moral reasoning, and the formation of a belief system (Padilla-Walker, 2016). Thus, there is a new necessity to search for meaning and a heightened openness to different possible answers to life's big questions and decisions (McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014). This search is named the moratorium stage, which is seen as necessary for identity formation and, if experienced fully, is associated with higher levels of cognitive ability, ego development, moral judgement, relationship skills and more mature personality (Kroger, 2007). Moratorium is positively associated with openness of mind and curiosity (Schwartz et al., 2005, 2013). Hence, there is a necessity for open-minded moral inquiry at high school.

The developmental process of identity formation is characterised by 'separation' and 'individuation' (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2014). On the one hand, high school age is associated with a growing need for freedom: separation from the authority of parents and teachers and a desire to define oneself outside of relationships with them. A high need for a sense of freedom implies a low tolerance of adults 'moralising' about life or giving ready-made worldviews. On the other hand, the search for identity (individuation) and the construction of the self (which are linked to the 'big questions' raised by moral philosophy about human nature, relationships, the meaning of life and values) are becoming increasingly important and require a social context: Healthy development through late adolescence and emerging adulthood consists of the integration of these forces for a person to fully develop their individual identity *within* relationships with others (Lapsley, 2010).

The process of individuation requires a reassessment of one's beliefs about oneself and others to be able to function as an autonomous individual in the context of different life relationships and to take responsibility for one's own life (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2014; Magolda & Taylor, 2015). The ability to understand and integrate one's own and others' perspectives in a social setting, rather than imposing one's own worldview on others or sacrificing it to the desires of others, is one of the key aspects that social-cognitive development strives for (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2014). Such a skill requires a shift from hierarchical (parent-child, teacher-student) to equal (two adults) relationships. An educational environment in which the young person is perceived as an equal and which is emotionally supportive for expressing and reflecting on one's experiences, but also challenges the complex search for meaning and becoming the author of one's life, is important for identity development (Magolda & Taylor, 2015). Listening to and discussing peers' experiences and ideas can help one to see new perspectives or understand

one's own (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2001; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Thus, a dialogical approach to moral education emerges as supportive of a high school pupil's identity formation and stabilisation.

Framework of the research

These national and developmental challenges for moral education are addressed by one of the activities of the recent project 'e-TAP+' (2022–2024), during which a set of materials for discussing values and virtues in the classroom (Year 10 to 12) is being elaborated. The curriculum addresses existential questions mostly in a dialogic form, as advised in recent international education policy documents: as the OECD report on values-education states, it is important to “ask ourselves about what it is to be a human” and to “support students to ... find a sense of purpose with their own moral compass” (OECD, 2021, Executive summary). Also, the UNESCO guidelines for education insists on the relevance of a dialogical group context for individual learning (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021).

The curriculum 'e-TAP+' is based on the theory of the 'person of moral growth' (Fernández González, 2019a, 2019b), which proposes a synthetic approach to pupils' moral growth through four components: 1) understanding of moral growth; 2) commitment to moral growth; 3) practical involvement in moral behaviour; and 4) personal and social recognition/identity. Those four components were operationalized in the structure of the questionnaire used for this research.

The goal of this paper was to explore what student teachers think about moral education in upper secondary education in the context of the assessment of this new curriculum. First year student teachers were chosen as participants for this research because they constitute a group with a unique two-sided perspective. Since the majority start their undergraduate studies right after high school graduation, they are still emerging adults (similar to the curriculum target group: high school pupils), yet their choice to study pedagogy accounts for a deeper perspective on education. Therefore, at the same time they provide a young person's (pupil's) perspective on the content of the lessons and a teacher's perspective, able to provide a deeper and more nuanced reflection on the pedagogical aspects of the curriculum. Two research questions were formulated to guide the research process:

- RQ1. What was student teachers' overall opinion about the curriculum? This question was split in two sub-questions.
- RQ1-a: How did they rate the usefulness of the lesson plans, the fit of the curriculum topics to pupils' needs and Latvian context, and its usefulness for developing each component of moral growth?
- RQ1-b: Which lessons corresponded best to these criteria? Which lesson topics attracted student teachers more?
- RQ2. Which aspects of moral education at high school were most important for student teachers?

Methodology

A summary description of the curriculum assessed is presented first, which may be useful for better understanding the methodology and results of the study.

Description of the curriculum

Description of the curriculum. The curriculum consists of four modules for each Year: ‘Flourishing personalities’, ‘Flourishing relationships’, ‘Flourishing society’ and ‘Flourishing in the digital world’. Each module contains three lessons (40 minutes each), and each lesson has an introductory activity, several activities (discussions in pair or groups, individual work, quotes to discuss, moral exemplars, moral dilemmas, etc.) and a final reflective activity. A PowerPoint presentation and eventually a worksheet are also included. The lesson topics are, for example: ‘What makes me valuable?’, ‘Me and my values in the digital environment’, ‘What could be my life project?’, ‘Generosity and gratitude’, ‘Is there a meaning to life and what is it?’, ‘Why is life hard and worth living?’, ‘Romantic relationships’, ‘The search for meaning and happiness in the digital age’ (see details in Table 1).

Table 1 Curriculum: lesson topics, lesson codes, sets of lessons and number of assessments per lesson

| Module | Module topic | Lesson code | Lesson topic | Set | Assessments |
|----------------------------------|---|-------------|---|-----|-------------|
| <i>Year 10</i> | | | | | |
| Flourishing personalities | Who am I? What am I like? | 10-1-1 | • Who am I? | X | 8 |
| | | 10-1-2 | • What am I like? | X | 11 |
| | | 10-1-3 | • What makes me valuable? | X | 12 |
| Flourishing relationships | With whom am I? (non-chosen relationships) | 10-2-1 | • My relationships with my classmates | Y | 4 |
| | | 10-2-2 | • My relationships with teachers | Z | 5 |
| | | 10-2-3 | • My family relationships | X | 10 |
| Flourishing society | “Me” within society, the world and the universe | 10-3-1 | • Me within society | Z | 1 |
| | | 10-3-2 | • Me within my community | X | 10 |
| | | 10-3-3 | • The Universe, the world and I | X | 10 |
| Flourishing in the digital world | “Me” in the digital world | 10-4-1 | • Me and my values in the digital world | Z | 1 |
| | | 10-4-2 | • Unchosen relations in the digital world | Y | 3 |
| | | 10-4-3 | • Happiness and digital world quality | Z | 1 |

| Module | Module topic | Lesson code | Lesson topic | Set | Assessments |
|----------------------------------|--|-------------|--|-----|-------------|
| <i>Year 11</i> | | | | | |
| Flourishing personalities | What do I want to be like? | 11-1-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What could be my life project? • What to do with my free time? • School: struggles or opportunities? | Y | 6 |
| | | 11-1-2 | | Z | 1 |
| | | 11-1-3 | | Y | 6 |
| Flourishing relationships | What am I like and what do I want to be like in relationships? | 11-2-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication culture • Generosity and gratitude • Attitude towards things and life events | Z | 1 |
| | | 11-2-2 | | Y | 2 |
| | | 11-2-3 | | X | 10 |
| Flourishing society | Relationships, society, and justice | 11-3-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My relationships and society • Growth, change and travel • On social justice | Y | 3 |
| | | 11-3-2 | | Z | 1 |
| | | 11-3-3 | | Z | 1 |
| Flourishing in the digital world | Growth in the digital world | 11-4-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who to become in online world? • Me and my digital relationships • Digital world and citizenship in the future | X | 11 |
| | | 11-4-2 | | Z | 1 |
| | | 11-4-3 | | X | 10 |
| <i>Year 12</i> | | | | | |
| Flourishing personalities | Why do I exist? In search for meaning and happiness | 12-1-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there meaning to life? What is it? • Why is life hard yet worthwhile? • Why is it worth doing good if not easy? | X | 8 |
| | | 12-1-2 | | X | 8 |
| | | 12-1-3 | | Z | 2 |
| Flourishing relationships | Who would I like to be with? (chosen relationships) | 12-2-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendship • Romantic relationships • Stable relationships | Z | 1 |
| | | 12-2-2 | | Y | 2 |
| | | 12-2-3 | | Y | 2 |
| Flourishing society | The local and the global | 12-3-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On local society: my country • On global society: Europe and the world • Local vs global: opposite or complement? | X | 8 |
| | | 12-3-2 | | Y | 1 |
| | | 12-3-3 | | Y | 1 |
| Flourishing in the digital world | Meaning, relations and globalisation on the internet | 12-4-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning and happiness in the digital age • Friendship and romance online • Ideal digital state and ideal digital world | Z | 1 |
| | | 12-4-2 | | Y | 3 |
| | | 12-4-3 | | Z | 3 |

Research design, instruments, and methods

This exploratory study adopted a survey research design, using mixed methods. The main research instrument was an online questionnaire with closed and open questions.

Data collection instrument and participants

The questionnaire had three sections: the section A contained 9 items that addressed the usefulness, user-friendliness, attractiveness and layout quality of lessons materials, including the lesson plan, presentations, and additional materials (e.g., 'Is the proposed lesson plan useful?', item code A_Plan_useful); the section B contained three items that addressed the fit of the lesson topic to pupils' needs and to Latvian context (e.g., 'Does the topic of the lesson correspond to the developmental characteristics and needs of secondary education pupils?', code B_topic_fit to pupils); and the section C contained 7 items about the usefulness of materials for enhancing moral growth in each of the moral growth components, i.e. understanding, commitment, practice, identity (e.g., 'Does the lesson help secondary education pupils understand that they can morally improve and how to do it?', code C_understanding) and for promoting reflection and discussion in the classroom. Participants rated each item in a 4-point Likert scale ('No', 'Rather no', 'Rather yes', 'Yes'), with an additional option 'I cannot answer'. After each section, an open question prompted participants to comment particularly on the lowest ratings of the section (questions O1, O2 and O3). At the end of the questionnaire two additional open questions were added: 'What do you think is good, not so good or could be improved in this lesson?' (O4) and 'Is there anything else you would like to add?' (O5). The questionnaire was available online in a Microsoft form (see item details in Table 3).

Data collection happened on March (groups 1a to 1d, see Table 2) and April (groups 2 and 3) during six lessons of the study courses 'Class management' and 'Organisation of the educational process in basic education' for 1st year undergraduate student teachers of the professional bachelor's degree programmes 'Teacher' and 'Basic education teacher' offered by the Department of Education, Psychology and Arts of the University of Latvia. At the beginning of the lesson the project leader presented the program to participants for 15–20 minutes, emphasizing the importance of their contribution for enhancing its quality and explained more in detail the four moral growth components that the program intends to develop, which were included in the questionnaire. After that, the course teacher shared the link to the set of lesson materials and to the assessment form. Participants from groups 1a to 1d had a set of 12 lessons to assess (lesson set X, see Table 1), participants from group 2 had 11 different lessons (lesson set Y) and participants from group 3 had 13 different lessons (lesson set Z). The teacher assigned each participant one lesson to assess and, after assessing it, they could choose freely another one to assess from their lesson set. Participants worked on the lesson assessment for environ one hour.

Overall, 89 student teachers participated in lesson assessment: 16 were males (18%) and the rest females. 31 participants were part-time students (35%) and the rest full-time students. 169 questionnaires were collected (see Table 2). All 36 lessons were assessed.

Table 2 Participant groups, questionnaires per group, lesson sets, questionnaires per lesson

| Student group | Number of students | Study program | Study form, modality | Questionnaires | Set of lessons (N) | Mode (range) of questionnaires per lesson |
|---------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------------|---|
| 1a | 12 | Teacher | Full-time, presence | 25 | X (12) | 10 (8–12) |
| 1b | 11 | | | 21 | | |
| 1c | 17 | | | 34 | | |
| 1d | 18 | | | 36 | | |
| 2 | 17 | Basic education teacher | Part-time, online | 33 | Y (11) | 3 (1–3) |
| 3 | 14 | | | 20 | Z (13) | 1 (1–6) |
| Overall | 89 | | | 169 | 36 | |

However, there was an unequal number of questionnaires per lesson: e.g., 12 lessons were assessed once, other lessons – ten, even 12 times (see Table 1, last column). The reason was that the four participant groups working in March (groups 1a to 1d) assessed the lesson set X, due to the non-availability of the other lessons. The average was 4.5 questionnaires per lesson. When reporting participants' opinion about the concrete lessons, to avoid bias in the analysis, only the lesson assessed 3 times or more were retained (i.e., 20 lessons out of 36).

Data processing and analysis methods

The primary data were collected in an Excel file. It contained 2902 ratings of the 19 items. Participants wrote 10223 words answering to the 5 open questions: 1824 words about the lesson materials (question O1), 492 words about the topic fit (O2), 1179 words about the program ability to enhance moral growth (O3), and 5091 words about the general assessment (O4) and 1637 words as additional comments (O5). The amount of qualitative data denotes the quality of the data collection process and the involvement of participants.

Quantitative analysis was done using SPSS 22 for descriptive analysis of frequencies, Means and Modes, and MS Excel (with pivot tables). After data cleaning and anonymisation procedures, each lesson was given a code referring to the Year, the module, and the order of the lesson in the module for facilitating the analysis. For example, the code 11-2-3 means that it was in the Year 11, module 2 ('flourishing relationships'), lesson number 3. The Cronbach's Alpha test indicated a very high reliability of the data set ($\alpha = 0.870$).

For making sense of the amount of qualitative data, thematic analysis was implemented. Two researchers read all participants' comments, looking for themes and relevant quotations revealing participants' concerns and understanding of moral education in high school. The preliminary themes and quotations were collected using MS Word files, which were jointly discussed for defining the main qualitative findings and structuring them.

Results

The presentation of results was structured according to the research questions.

RQ1: Student teachers' overall opinion about the curriculum

The analysis of quantitative data provided a general overview of participants' rating of the different aspects of the curriculum (Table 3).

Overall, participants rated very positively the compliance of the curriculum with the criteria used for analysis (see Table 3): out of 2902 ratings, only eight ratings were 'No', only 3% ($n = 100$) were 'Rather no', 35% ($n = 1010$) were 'Rather yes', and 61% ($n = 1784$) were 'Yes' (65% for section A (about the lessons), 66% for section B (about the fit of the lesson topic), and 53% for section C (about the usefulness of materials for enhancing moral growth)).

Within this very positive landscape there were some nuances. The curriculum ability to promote discussions in the classroom (criterion C6) received the highest number of 'Yes' ($n = 129$, 80%). All answers ($n = 165$) regarding the usefulness of the lesson plan (A1) were 'Yes' or 'Rather yes'. The usefulness of presentations (A6) and the topic fit to law (B3) also received a high percentage of 'Yes' (respectively, 72%, $n = 118$; and 71%, $n = 120$).

Table 3 Participants' overall opinion about the curriculum

| Item code | 'No' | | 'Rather no' | | 'Rather yes' | | 'Yes' | | Total | |
|-------------------------|----------|---|-------------|---|--------------|----|----------|----|----------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| A1_Plan_useful | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 36 | 22 | 129 | 78 | 165 | 100 |
| A2_Plan_easy | 0 | 0 | 8 | 5 | 61 | 37 | 96 | 58 | 165 | 100 |
| A3_Activity_number | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 57 | 34 | 105 | 63 | 166 | 100 |
| A4_Activity_content | 0 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 60 | 36 | 101 | 60 | 167 | 100 |
| A5_Activity_interesting | 0 | 0 | 9 | 6 | 51 | 32 | 101 | 63 | 161 | 100 |
| A6_Presentation_useful | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 43 | 26 | 118 | 72 | 165 | 100 |
| A7_Presentation_layout | 3 | 2 | 11 | 7 | 57 | 35 | 92 | 56 | 163 | 100 |
| A8_Worksheet_useful | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 29 | 33 | 56 | 64 | 87 | 100 |
| A9_Worksheet_layout | 0 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 25 | 29 | 56 | 66 | 85 | 100 |
| B1_Topic_fit to pupils | 0 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 61 | 36 | 102 | 60 | 169 | 100 |
| B2_Topic_topicality | 0 | 0 | 8 | 5 | 50 | 30 | 111 | 66 | 169 | 100 |
| B3_Topic_fit to law | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 47 | 28 | 120 | 71 | 169 | 100 |
| C1_Lesson_coherence | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 66 | 43 | 84 | 55 | 153 | 100 |
| C2_Lesson_understanding | 0 | 0 | 11 | 7 | 77 | 50 | 65 | 42 | 153 | 100 |
| C3_Lesson_commitment | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 80 | 52 | 68 | 44 | 153 | 100 |
| C4_Lesson_practice | 0 | 0 | 8 | 5 | 65 | 42 | 80 | 52 | 153 | 100 |
| C5_Lesson_reflection | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 54 | 35 | 94 | 61 | 153 | 100 |
| C6_Lesson_discussion | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 27 | 18 | 123 | 80 | 153 | 100 |
| C7_Lesson_satisfaction | 1 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 64 | 42 | 83 | 54 | 153 | 100 |
| Overall % mean | | 0 | | 4 | | 35 | | 61 | 2902 | 100 |

Two criteria received slightly less than 50% of 'Yes': the curriculum ability for promoting of understanding (C2; $n = 65$, 42%) and for promoting pupils' commitment to moral growth (C3; $n = 68$, 42%). The quality of the presentation layout (A7) received the highest, but still negligible low number of 'No' ($n = 3$, 2%) and of 'Rather no' ($n = 11$, 7%).

RQ1-a: Student teachers' rating of the lessons

This section presents the lesson ratings for the most relevant criteria. As mentioned in the methodology, given the unequal number of questionnaires per lesson, only the lessons rated by 3 or more participants were considered for this analysis.

Regarding the lesson materials, according to participants, the most useful lesson plans (code A1) were 'Who am I?' (lesson code 10-1-1), 'My relationship with teachers' (10-2-2), 'Attitude towards things and life events' (11-2-3), and 'My relationship and society' (11-3-1). All participants who rated the usefulness of these lesson plans chose the option 'Yes' (Mean = 4 out of 4). The lessons whose the activities were most interesting (A5) were 'Friendship and romantic relationships online' (code 12-4-2; $M = 4$ in a 4-point scale), 'Ideal digital state and ideal digital world' (12-4-3; $M = 4$) and 'What makes me valuable?' (10-1-3; $M = 3.92$).

The lesson that proposed the most appropriate topics for pupils (B1) were 'What makes me valuable?' (10-1-3; $M = 4$), 'Is there meaning to life? What is it?' (12-1-1; $M = 3.88$) and 'On local society: my country' (12-3-1; $M = 3.88$). The most topical lesson topics (B2) were 'Who am I?' (10-1-1; $M = 4$), 'Who do I want to become in the digital environment?' (11-4-1; $M = 4$), 'Friendship and romantic relationships online' (12-4-2; $M = 4$) and 'Is there meaning to life? What is it?' (12-1-1; $M = 3.88$).

As regards the lesson impact on pupils' moral growth, according to participants the lessons most apt for developing pupils' understanding of moral growth (C2) were 'My relationship with teachers' (10-2-2; $M = 3.80$) and 'Attitude towards things and life events' (11-2-3; $M = 3.75$). The lessons most apt for promoting pupils' commitment to moral growth (C3) were 'Attitude towards things and life events' (11-2-3; $M = 3.88$) and 'My relationship with teachers' (10-2-2; $M = 3.80$). The lessons most apt for promoting pupils' practice of virtues (C4) were 'Attitude towards things and life events' (11-2-3; $M = 4$) and 'Who do I want to become in the digital environment?' (11-4-1; $M = 3.89$). The lessons most apt for enhancing pupils' satisfaction with moral growth (C7) were 'My relationship with teachers' (10-2-2; $M = 4$) and 'Attitude towards things and life events' (11-2-3; $M = 3.75$).

Regarding the lessons that better prompted pupils' reflection (C5), seven lessons got a mean of 4 out of four for this criterium (all participants chose the option 'Yes'): 'Who am I?' (10-1-1), 'My relationship with teachers' (10-2-2), 'School: struggles or opportunities?' (11-1-3), 'Attitude towards things and life events' (11-2-3), 'Digital environment and citizenship in the future society' (11-4-3), 'Is there meaning to life? What is it?' (12-1-1) and 'Why is life hard yet worthwhile?' (12-1-2). The lesson that better prompted pupils' discussion (C6) were 'What makes me valuable?' (10-1-3; $M = 4$) and 'Is there meaning to life? What is it?' (12-1-1; $M = 3.83$).

Only some lessons received an average rating below 3 (out of 4) in some criteria: ‘My family relationship’ (10-2-3) $M = 2.80$ in the ‘Topicality of the topic’ (B2); ‘Why is life hard yet worthwhile?’ (12-1-2) $M = 2.83$ in the criterium ‘Enhancing pupils’ satisfaction with moral growth’ (C7); ‘My relationship with my classmates’ (10-2-1) $M = 2.75$ in the criterium ‘Promoting pupils’ commitment to moral growth’ (C3) and ‘The Universe, the world and I’ (10-3-3) $M = 2.89$ in the criterium ‘Developing pupils’ understanding of moral growth’ (C2).

RQ1-b: Which lesson topics attracted student teachers more?

As explained above, after assessing the first lesson assigned to them, participants could choose other lessons to assess from the lesson set provided to them. This free choice was considered as an indicator of which topics attracted student teachers more. Within the lesson set X (free choices $n = 68$), the most often chosen lesson were ‘What makes me valuable?’ (code 10-1-3; $n = 8$, 12% of choices in the group), ‘What am I like?’ (10-1-2; $n = 7$, 10%) and ‘Who to become in online world?’ (11-4-1; $n = 7$, 10%). Within the lesson set Y (free choices $n = 22$), the most often chosen lesson were ‘What could be my life project?’ (11-1-1; $n = 5$, 23%), ‘School: struggles or opportunities?’ (11-1-3; $n = 5$, 23%) and ‘My relationship with my classmates’ (10-2-1; $n = 3$, 14%). And within the lesson set Z (free choices $n = 7$), the most often chosen lesson were ‘My relationship with teachers’ (10-2-2; $n = 5$, 57%) and ‘Ideal digital state and ideal digital world’ (12-4-3; $n = 2$, 29%).

Summarizing this section, while most of the lessons received very high ratings in most of the criteria, some of them were massively rated very high. The lessons ‘Attitude towards things and life events’ (11-2-3) and ‘My relationship with teachers’ (10-2-2) were the best rated for promoting practically all the aspects of moral growth, and both also for proposing a useful lesson plan and promoting reflection. The latter (10-2-2) was also one of participants’ preferred ‘free choice’. The lesson ‘Is there meaning to life? What is it?’ (12-1-1) was the best rated for promoting both pupils’ dialogue and reflection; it was also outstanding rated for its topic fit to pupils’ needs and topicality. Finally, the lessons ‘Who am I?’ (10-1-1) and ‘What makes me valuable?’ (10-1-3) were also massively rated high in 3 criteria: usefulness of materials, topicality, and promoting pupils’ reflection (the former) or discussion (the latter, which was also one of participants’ preferred ‘free choice’).

RQ2: Aspects of moral education at high school were most important for student teachers

Student teachers’ answers to the five open questions in the survey (O1 to O5) were analysed to determine what aspects of moral education at high school were most important to them in relation to the curriculum they assessed. Three main themes (with several sub-themes) emerged from the thematic analysis of their opinions: pupil centred approach, content quality and technical quality.

Pupil centred approach

Fit to pupils' age

Participants rated the fit of topics and activities to high school age as one of the most important aspects to consider. They appreciated the use of “*real-life stories*” and thought-provoking questions, as well as age-appropriate topicality (e.g., the use of cartoon characters to illustrate temperament types or use of language appropriate for high school pupils) as valuable aspects of the curriculum.

Doubts were expressed as to whether a particular activity will either be too difficult or too easy and child-like for pupils of the given age. For example, one student teacher was sceptical about reading a fairy tale to raise the topic of life's difficulties. They also commented on the relevance of the topic to the age group, for example, “*I don't think pupils will be directly interested in the topic of family relationships, I think they will feel that they are still perceived as small children*”, whereas the topic on the meaning of life seemed relevant because “*at that age most people face this question*” and the lack of an answer “*might result in depression*”.

Participants also stressed that there were differences within high school age groups. They paid attention to whether a lesson was suitable for Year 10 or Year 12. According to student teachers, Year 12 pupils are “*already practically adults*” and should be spoken to as such.

As participants were first year university students, they have only recently graduated from high school themselves and accordingly also assessed the lessons through the prism of their own experience. For example, they said that the topic ‘What makes me valuable?’ was still relevant to them personally or that it was interesting for them to learn more about themselves by finding out about their temperament while they were assessing an activity on this topic.

Pupil engagement and the importance of dialogue

Student teachers expressed support for the engagement of pupils in the lesson process (e.g., “*it is good to ask for pupils' opinions and their thoughts*” or “*I really liked that the lesson starts with an activity where all pupils are involved*”). Participants stressed that it is a good idea to have ‘discussion time’ during the homeroom lesson instead of a traditional, hierarchical lesson where the teacher alone speaks.

Student teachers emphasized that sharing their problems and reflections with their classmates can help pupils both to understand themselves better and to “*realize that they are not alone*”. They appreciated that the lessons asked thought-provoking, ‘tricky’ questions, which can sometimes lead to “*more questions than answers*”.

Yet concerns were also expressed regarding pupils' engagement in discussions about big questions: “*I see a risk that pupils who do not communicate with each other on a daily basis will not want to discuss in class*” and “*the key is not to force pupils to answer questions, but to make them want to join in and participate*”.

Pupils' comfort and well-being

When assessing the lessons, student teachers placed great emphasis on pupils' well-being, so that nobody feels excluded and there are no uncomfortable situations. For example, assessing an activity where pupils had to name an association they have with a classmate, student teachers stressed the need to specifically instruct pupils not to say anything offensive. Measures should be taken to prevent bullying. Sometimes, situations where pupils were asked to talk about their problems were questioned – there was a worry that a pupil might not open up “*because s/he is afraid that his/her openness will be turned against him/her and the problem will get worse*”. Hence, to some participants the classroom does not seem like a safe space of open-hearted conversation.

Student teachers also underlined the necessity to be inclusive. For example, in activities about mobile phone use, they pointed out that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds could be excluded from the conversation if they do not have such a device.

Participants also stressed that activities should be cognitively accessible for pupils, for example observing that “*the questions are quite philosophical, not every pupil will be able to answer them*” and suggesting that pupils could be able to reflect better if given “*more time to think about the questions*”. Overall, student teachers expressed concern for pupils' well-being and comfort.

Content quality

Relevance and depth of content

In several participants' responses, there was a sense of satisfaction that philosophical themes were offered (“*I am happy to see philosophical topics*”). Among the values offered to work on in the curriculum, cultivating compassion, humanity, and overcoming suffering were positively valued. Other topics appreciated in the comments were: awareness of the links between the different aspects of life, life in a technological environment, the problems of digitalization, finding out one's temperament, developing character and virtues, and the problem of procrastination. Commenting the lesson ‘What could be my life project?’ a participant said: “*I was very surprised that such a thing could be done in a class lesson. Interesting and useful*”. Participants also appreciated that interesting personalities and their life experiences were explored in the lessons, noting that the pupils might not have known about them before.

Contemporariness

Student teachers also assessed the content of the lessons in terms of their relevance to their understanding of a modern worldview. For example, one participant commented that “*it is not worth focusing too much on religious values*”, but rather on “*developing the values of modern society*”, offering as moral exemplars not religious figures like Mother Teresa, but secular ones like Princess Diana. Specific comments were also made on whether the cartoons chosen, such as *The Powerpuff Girls*, which participants remember from their childhood, would be familiar to young people at present and in the future. There was also a general concern about whether young people will be interested in the big

questions raised in the lessons, “because today’s generation does not always like to open their souls and discuss spiritual, human topics”. They also emphasized the need to discuss various newest technologies (including Artificial Intelligence) in depth.

Connections with other subject areas

Several student teachers noted as positive the connection of the lesson plans with different school subjects (they found connections with geography, cultural studies, literature, history, natural sciences). For example: “It is great that the story about Dante and Beatrice is given, can also be used in language or history lessons”. The opportunity to work with teachers from different subject areas to coordinate topics was noted.

Local (Latvian) dimension

Some student teachers suggested to deepen the local culture aspect, the Latvian component within the various topics. One of the suggestions was “to include images of various traditional celebrations (family at the table on Christmas Eve, Summer Solstice (Jāņi), other family gatherings)”. Student teachers were also interested in Latvian pre-ancient culture: “Among the things that still need to be improved – maybe we could include something related to how our ancestors perceived the Universe”.

Technical quality

Student teachers were very concerned about the feasibility of the whole lesson plan within the 40 minutes of the lesson: “a bit too many activities, it could be very difficult to do everything in one lesson”. There were specific comments on whether a particular lesson will be too long, and which activities could be taken out or left as optional. Several comments also referred to the use of technical tools. It was suggested that even more video materials should be used. Several student teachers commented on the design of the presentation materials, printable materials for pupils’ independent work, the text layout, and the use of illustrative images. Participants also appreciated the logical structure of the lessons. They commented on the internal and thematic coherence and the logical connections of the activities (e.g. “the lesson is very well structured and interesting”). Some analysed the sequence of activities and suggested possible changes to it. Participants stressed the importance of using a clear and comprehensible language: “It is good that the references and language used can be very well understood by which young people”. Moreover, language related mistakes and typos were carefully pointed out for correction.

Discussion

In the results, some topics emerged as very topical for high school. Such was the case for the lessons ‘Is there meaning to life? What is it?’, ‘What makes me valuable?’ and ‘Who am I?’. This finding is in line with other recent research pointing to the actualization of existential questions (Rumianowska, 2020; Splitter, 2019) and the search for identity and one’s own worldview in adolescence and emerging adulthood (McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; Padilla-Walker, 2016).

Student teachers were also very appreciative of the discussion-based approach and the space given for pupils to explore and express their own thoughts, confirming the appropriateness of our proposition for a dialogical pedagogy for moral education at high school. However, they also voiced some concern about whether pupils who are not used to openly talk in class will be ready to do so, especially about philosophical questions that are quite personal. Student teachers emphasized there should be measures taken to prevent that what pupils say in class could be used against them – the class should be a safe environment. The issues they pointed out are important both in relation to a dialogical approach and to the exploration of one's identity in class. This highlights the necessity to support teachers in creating a suitable class environment and guiding such discussions. The authors of this paper have previously researched what support teachers need in implementing such an approach (Keiša & Fernández González, 2022) and this research should be furthered.

Another aspect worth of discussion is the existence of antinomies (contradiction between two opposing statements) that can be found in participants' assessments, and which have been identified as fundamental to education by several researchers (Winkel, 1988; Burbules, 1993; Jermolajeva, 1997). At least four examples of such opposing views can be found in participants' answers: 1) Some participants emphasised and recommended the deepening of the national, patriotic, Latvian, local aspects in the curriculum, e.g., looking for motivation for moral action in the examples of the past: Latvian history and culture. However, other participants stressed the need to address contemporary global issues. 2) On the one hand, there was a desire for modernity, including contemporary heroes, stories. On the other hand, there was a concern that current affairs change at a fast pace and what was relevant this year might not bear much meaning in the near future. 3) On the one hand, participants highlighted the need to use technology and adapt to the digital world of different media. On the other hand, they mentioned also the need to understand and manage oneself in order not to become addicted (mobile phones, social media, games). 4) On the one hand, participants were concerned about pupils' comfort and well-being at school. On the other hand, they recognize the need to talk about issues that are always difficult (suffering, violence, conflict, illness, death, procrastination, etc.), which can undoubtedly evoke different, not always positive emotions. All these trends will have to be considered in the further development of the curriculum, so as to achieve a balance and not lose the depth and relevance of the content, the emotional security and well-being of the pupils, the opportunity to help them prepare for the challenges of life, and both the local and the global components. A curriculum for moral education should highlight the contradictions that help to create an interesting discussion with secondary education pupils.

Another interesting finding was that participants valued the idea of curriculum integration and pointed out potential cross-curricular connections, which are fundamental in the current Latvian education reform (Skola2030). These qualitative data could be used to specifically highlight cross-curricular connections in the lesson plans, indicating in which subject matters they can be integrated.

Some directions for further research can be pointed to. As stated initially, student teachers simultaneously provided the perspective of a young adult, which is close to a high school pupil's perspective, and the perspective of a to-be-teacher, who can also assess pedagogical aspects of the curriculum. However, first year student teachers lack experience about what it is like to work with young adults as a teacher. Moreover, some of them are studying to become primary school teachers and admitted in their written responses that they lack the competence to evaluate what is suitable for high school. Hence, further research could focus on expert high school teachers for a deeper perspective on the pedagogical aspects and challenges of the curriculum.

A surprising finding was that the lesson 'My relationship with my classmates' scored relatively low in the criterium 'Promoting pupils' commitment to moral growth'. This lesson was of an unusual format where classmate pairs who usually do not communicate much were given a menu of big, personal questions to discuss together. A possible explanation to this could be that lessons that have a very open approach to the topic and promote exploration, by their nature cannot guarantee to result in very particular, strong commitment to an idea. Similarly, lessons based on open-ended questions might not strongly enhance understanding in the common sense of the word since there will not be one correct answer. This possible opposition between open-ended conversation on the one hand and understanding and commitment on the other could be addressed in future research.

Conclusions

This paper presented student teachers' insights about a curriculum in development for moral education in high school. Participants' overall opinion about the curriculum was very positive: they appreciated particularly the curriculum potential to prompt discussions in the classroom and to promote pupils' reflection. They also highlighted the usefulness of the lesson plans and presentations, the appropriateness and topicality of the topics. Some participants spontaneously said they would have liked to participate in such lessons. This fresh perspective of young participants, which was given without being asked, disclosed particularly well the meaningfulness of the curriculum.

While most of the lessons were highly rated, some of them were most massively rated very high, as, for instance, 'Attitude towards things and life events', 'My relationship with teachers', 'Is there meaning to life? What is it?', 'What makes me valuable?', and 'Who am I?'. The predominance of existential topics in the top rankings is worth to be explored further.

The aspects of moral education at high school which were most important for student teachers were a pupil centred approach (fit to pupils' age, pupil engagement and the importance of dialogue, pupils' comfort and well-being), the quality of the content (its relevance and depth, its contemporariness, its connections with other subject areas and its local (Latvian) dimension), and the technical quality of educational materials (timing of the lesson plans, use of technical tools, logical structure of the lesson, and clarity of

language). Participants' views reflect general educational issues present in Latvia and beyond. These insights on 1st year student teachers' views can be useful for initial teacher education trainers and for moral education researchers.

Authors' note

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