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## Exploring an urban teacher's use of performance in fostering middle school students' moral awareness

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This study reports on how an urban teacher relied on herself and harnessed performance-based pedagogy in developing her students' moral awareness over one academic year. Drawing on qualitative analyses of the teacher and students' reflections, interviews, as well as students' performance, the study shows that the teacher's reliance on her own agency in designing a performance-based curriculum counteracted teaching constraints in her workplace. In addition, performance, enacted through engaging students in performing exaggerated bodily activities enabled them to critically reflect upon existing or potential moral issues in their lives and guided their follow-up behaviours. The study concludes the importance of synergising teachers' self-agency with arts-based education in raising students' moral awareness, especially in similarly constrained contexts.

**Keywords:** constrained contexts; moral education; performance; pre-tertiary level; teachers' self-agency

### Introduction

Moral education has been highlighted as a crucial component in pre-university education, in that this education takes place when teenagers are constructing their beliefs about society and themselves as social members (Cappy, 2016; Nishino, 2017). This is especially important given that today, children devote considerable time to social media, which is populated with different cultural beliefs and values, leaving them with "less and less time to spend on introspection, reflection and careful decision making" (Bajovic & Elliott, 2011:27). Unfortunately, many pre-service and in-service teachers in constrained contexts (e.g., China, and South Africa) do not have access to effective teacher education or school support (Liang, 2016; Rens & De Klerk, 2003). As a result, moral education in these contexts has been mainly focused on using the traditional method of textbook reading-based teaching or talk-based instruction (Schuitema, Ten Dam & Veugelers, 2008). This mode of teaching has lost its attraction among students, failing to engage them in reflecting upon moral issues and effectively gaining moral awareness (Narvaez, 2002; Nishino, 2017).

To counteract the constraints, teachers could rely on themselves (i.e., self-development) and implement more attention-grabbing pedagogical praxis, such as performance-based pedagogy, to encourage teenagers to express their inner thoughts or reflect upon moral issues (Cappy, 2016; Gervais, 2006). However, almost no such research has been conducted, which involves teachers' self-development, performance-based pedagogy and students' moral awareness. To fill the research gap, as well as to reveal areas of curriculum innovation for educational contexts where limited teacher education is available, this study is guided by the following two questions: (1) in a constrained educational context, how do teachers rely on themselves to conduct performance-based moral education? (2) how does teachers' self-development impact their students' moral awareness development?

### Literature Review

#### *Moral education in constrained contexts*

Indeed, juvenile adolescence is connected with social crimes, such as drug addiction, campus bullying, and theft (Rens & De Klerk, 2003). To help rectify or prevent youngsters' inappropriate behaviours, much research has highlighted the importance of implementing moral education and disciplining youngsters into civilized citizens (e.g., Cappy, 2016; Rens & De Klerk, 2003). However, for a lack of external support, such as school assistance or governmental policies, teachers often struggled with enacting moral education (Narvaez, 2002; Nishino, 2017; Schuitema et al., 2008). To illustrate, using a survey-based quantitative study in Dutch pre-college vocational schools, Leenders, Veugelers and De Kat (2012) revealed that while teachers all believed about the importance of moral education in shaping students' moral awareness, and their teaching mostly relied on teacher-student discussions (i.e., moral dialogues in school), which was constrained by school policies. Similarly, Sekiwu's (2013) study conducted a case study on pre-university students in the Kampala district, Uganda. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews and documents, Sekiwu concluded the dynamic relationship between moral education and external governmental policies, where the latter seemed to dilute school power in enacting moral education, calling for curriculum reform of moral education and effectively raising students' moral awareness.

As seen above, despite the importance of moral education, limited support is provided to teachers. In response to this, teachers' themselves (i.e., self-development) seem a crucial source of power in challenging

their existing beliefs and innovating practices (Francis & Le Roux, 2011). As Mushayikwa and Lubben (2009:378) have noted, the power of self can be particularly exemplified in “environments in which teachers work in isolation and with minimum support from the education system.”

#### *Self-development*

When a teacher undergoes self-development, they are empowered to challenge normative educational conventions, including discovering existing educational issues in his/her classroom, looking for solutions, and implementing pedagogical actions (Cappy, 2016; Keogh, Garvis, Pendergast & Diamond, 2012). Indeed, as Bray-Clark and Bates (2003:14) point out, current teacher education ignores actual classroom needs, while self-agency provides teachers opportunities that “address their genuine needs in the classroom, make them better teachers, and that improve student outcomes.”

While research on teachers’ self-development in the field of moral education is limited, a large body of research in other fields has illuminated how teachers’ self-development has improved other educational issues (e.g., Keogh et al., 2012; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009). For instance, Keogh et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative analysis of a group of novice Australia middle school teachers’ discussions on their first-year experiences shared via email. Their study showed that these novice teachers, through relying on themselves, along with email exchanges with their peer colleagues from other schools, overcame first-year teaching challenges (e.g., adaptation to school system) and intensified their confidence in being self-reliant teachers. Among the few studies in the field of moral education, Cappy (2016) illustrated how a South African teacher relied on herself in instructing moral ethics to her students in a South African high school through connecting moral education with students’ personal experiences. In sum, studies from cross-disciplines (including the limited research available in moral education) have vigorously demonstrated teachers’ self-empowerment to improve their classrooms in diverse disadvantageous contexts.

However, among the few studies (e.g., Cappy, 2016) that focused on teachers’ self-agency in the field of moral education, the teaching of moral education in these studies was still limited to verbal talking between teachers and students. To enact effective self-development, there is a crucial need for an innovated pedagogical tool so as to effectively address current problems in the classroom (Zhang, 2017). Indeed, given young students’ receding interests in traditional methods of reading-based or teacher talk-based moral education (Liang, 2016; Narvaez, 2002), it is imperative to grab young students’ attention and provide accessible means of student reflection.

#### *Performance as a Pedagogical Praxis*

Performance-based pedagogy includes pre-performance rehearsal (story-telling), performing, and post-performance (students’ reflection or discussion) (Perry & Medina, 2011). The pedagogy fits well with young students’ preference for bodily activities in school contexts (Harman & Varga-Dobai, 2012). Indeed, unlike traditional reading-based moral education, in a performance-based curriculum, participants are able to embody and reflect upon their verbal and non-verbal experiences, thus invigorating themselves through comparing their performance to their actual self, allowing them to make changes to their actions (Perry & Medina, 2011). As Perry and Medina (2011:63) further noted, embodiment in performance is “a representation of self as well as mode of creation in progress.” In other words, performance-based pedagogy is an optimal praxis for teachers’ self-development, with which teachers can enable students to project their lived experiences, release their repressed or hidden self through an exaggerated performing discourse, and adapt to social-cultural contexts (Harman & Zhang, 2015).

Indeed, while almost no study has emerged on teachers’ self-development in using performance-based pedagogy, many studies have examined the role of performance in transforming students’ original perception of the world, guided by the help of an expert in performance-based pedagogy. For example, in Harman and Varga-Dobai’s (2012) study, through Harman’s guidance (the first author of the study and also an expert in performance-based pedagogy), Varga-Dobai (the second author and a middle school teacher), enacted a performance-based reflective pedagogy in her language arts classroom in the United States. Through thematic and discourse analysis, the study showed that immigrant students became more agentively reflective of the issues they faced (deportation, job discrimination) and were emboldened to challenge social issues through actions (e.g., they wrote poems criticising the social policies). In terms of moral education (see Schuitema et al., 2008 for a review), Gervais (2006) explored how performance-based pedagogy improved American junior high school students’ moral awareness, noting that students became more caring, respectful, and committed. These cross-disciplinary studies show the role of performance-based pedagogy in transforming students into reflective individuals through creating near-authentic contexts and engaging them in embodying their emotions and multimodal meaning-making resources. In other words, in educational contexts where there is a lack of expert guidance on the implementation of performance-based pedagogy curriculum, it is promising that teachers can

harness their self-agency in learning and enacting this curriculum.

In sum, given the importance of self-development and performance-based pedagogy as well as constrained moral education, one important gap has emerged in the field of moral education. That is, almost no research has reported how teachers rely on themselves in a constrained context to develop performance-based pedagogy and enact moral education among teenagers.

## Method

### Research Context

The study was conducted in a middle school in Beijing, China. The school also offered vocational education. At the vocational school, the students, who are between the ages of 12 and 17 years old, are required to live on campus during the week. These students come from diverse areas in China, and most of the students have parents who are extremely busy. The students spend about six years at this vocational school, completing junior- and high-level education. Apart from studying subject courses, students are also expected to study dancing, martial arts, or acrobatics as potential future careers.

### Research Design

A case study approach was adopted for this study, because it, through multiple ways of data collection, enables an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon in a particular context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Silverman, 2015). Indeed, the research purpose of this study was not to make a generalised finding, but to investigate how performance-based pedagogy impacted a middle school teacher's self-development in raising students' moral awareness in a constrained workplace. In addition, purposive sampling is a useful method that helps answer a research question embedded in a particular context, among others, through focusing on typical participants (Silverman, 2015). Informed by a typical case sampling, participants, Anna and her two students, were selected for this study, whose profiles were elaborated below.

Indeed, Anna was a typical middle school teacher who lacked external support in developing students' moral awareness; she had no alternative but to rely on herself. Besides doing her role of a head teacher, Anna teaches English and does counseling work. As a counselor, she is responsible for helping students manage their daily lives. During the students' first year in school, Anna had noticed that students failed to behave in a morally upright way. For instance, there were students who lied to teachers, failed to return borrowed money to their classmates, and disrespected their parents. As such, she tried traditional methods of moral education, such as face-to-face education or reading moral stories, but all these methods were unsuccessful. Starting from the students' second

year, Anna boldly decided to empower herself by searching for new ways to foster her students' moral awareness. She decided to use a performance-based pedagogy. The themed performance topics, such as loving their parents, self-esteem, and honesty, were all based on moral issues Anna found among her students.

Peter, the first author of this paper, knew Anna as they attended the same graduate school in China. A year ago, Anna shared with Peter that she was undergoing self-development and using performance with her students, which coincides with Peter's research interests. Anna's pedagogical interest came as a surprise to Peter, given that performance-based pedagogy in China is still in its infancy. Given Peter's interests in performance, social justice, and teachers' agency, Anna offered to use her experience to provide any data needed for this research project. During the process, Peter avoided any intervention so that Anna could harness her own agency in solving the issues in her classroom. For example, when Anna was stressed with dealing with her students, Peter would share with her useful journal articles rather than telling her directly what she should do. This approach was taken because the research project was more interested in investigating teachers' self-agency when challenging normative curriculum and changing pedagogy in educational contexts where no external assistance is available.

Both Anna and her students agreed to be involved in this study and were willing to share their thoughts over the academic year. To further reveal the intricacy of this case study, two focal student groups were selected (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The students were chosen because they were representative of the whole class who had never been exposed to performance-based pedagogy. Additionally, the students became the focal groups as they felt comfortable sharing their performance and responding to interviews. To protect students' privacy, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

### Data Sources and Analysis

The data was collected over one academic year. Data was mainly shared by Anna, who conducted audio-visual taping of students' performance. In addition, every time students finished performance, Anna also had students write reflections and interviewed with students in terms of their experience with performance-based pedagogy. Meanwhile, Peter conducted interviews with Anna and collected her reflections over the academic year.

The study mainly analysed data in an inductive manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Particularly, content analysis was conducted on the interview and reflection data. That is, they were read many times, which involved comparison and condensation before establishing categories and

themes. Meanwhile, preliminary codes were used with reference to the two research questions as well as relevant literature (e.g., Cappy, 2016; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Schuitema et al., 2008; Sekiwu, 2013). These initial codes included challenges/gains the teacher experienced, efforts the teacher made and students' reactions and moral awareness. Later on, all codes were reviewed to reveal themes pertinent to this study. For students' performance episodes (e.g., parent-child relationships), they were selected in comparison with students' post-drama interviews or reflections. That is, based on students' report, moments that involved their natural and comfortable interactions were chosen. This was followed by a multimodal discourse analysis of critical moments of illustrative excerpts that involve the important conflicts between participants in order to show how the students embodied the meanings in context (Eggin & Slade, 1997; Harman & Zhang, 2015; O'Halloran, 2004). The analysis was combined with a content analysis of students' post-drama reflections and interviews to show students' moral awareness development. To ensure the reliability of data analysis, an experienced qualitative researcher also reviewed the analysis and agreed with the results reported below.

## Results

### The Tortuous Journey of Anna's Self-Development Self-development motivated by internal and external factors

Anna's self-development was doubly triggered by her experiences with her students' misconduct and her disappointment with using traditional verbal education with her students. As she said,

*I noticed some students lying, not returning borrowed money, or being rude to their parents [...] I felt bad. As their teacher and supervisor, I have the obligation to educate them [...] I just feel face-to-face education does not work ... my teaching method is also limited ... I really needed a new method that could be accepted by these teenagers [...] It is not easy for them to follow my instructions. (Interview excerpt 1)*

As shown in interview excerpt 1, Anna's self-development emerged from the educational dilemma in which she found herself. That is, she was unsatisfied with the moral behavior among her students. But at the same time, constrained by the in-service and pre-service education she had received, she had only used the traditional method of face-to-face education and failed to engage her students in changing their moral behaviours. Facing this dilemma, Anna had no alternative but to explore a new pedagogy on her own that could galvanise students' interactions with her in the process of moral education.

Anna's initiative to effect change in her students' behavior is also due to her professional ethics and care for her students:

*I really want to them to grow up in a healthy way, not just at the level of academics. It is a time that teenagers are rebellious ... I have been told explicitly how to make them do well in academics by the school, but not moral education [...] just to ensure they are morally okay in a visible way. I cannot do [only this]. I do not want them to go on to become socially unacceptable people after graduation. (Reflection excerpt 1)*

As illuminated in reflection excerpt 1, the school setting gave priority to students' academic achievements rather than students' moral awareness. Moral education is placed in a lesser role—that is, teachers are only required to ensure that students are disciplined in the classroom as the bottom line, with no explicit guidelines provided. Not satisfied with this, nor turning a blind eye to students' misconduct, Anna felt determined to radically help these students become better individuals both in and out of the classroom.

### Anna's determination to teach non-traditionally as a result of challenges

Her determination was challenged by administrative factors, which nonetheless motivated her to explore a flexible solution to students' moral education:

*I also cannot affect my students' academic studies. If they do not do well in their academic studies, I would be in trouble. I would be blamed for doing anything unrelated to their studies in class [...] It is like I am expected to teach regular classes in class, not anything else [moral education] [...] This means I have to use other time slots to help my students. (Interview excerpt 2)*

As shown in this interview excerpt, administrative demands and potentially punitive measures meant that Anna could not violate any school rules, including engaging in academically irrelevant education in the classroom. Because of this administrative factor, she utilised her agency in developing her curriculum and sought to apply it in out-of-class activities, where teachers had more freedom in their teaching activities.

In addition, Anna was also faced with an additional challenge from her students' parents, who completely relied on her to educate their children. As Anna said,

*I tried to talk to their parents, but they either have no time or do not know [how to teach their children] [...] They [the students] are mostly only children in their families [...] They spend most of their time in school, only spending weekends with parents. Parents do not notice misconduct or do not like to discipline them. I had to rely on myself to figure out solutions. (Interview excerpt 3)*

As shown in her interview excerpt, Anna was faced with another disadvantageous scenario, where there was a lack of support externally from students' parents. This, however, encouraged Anna's exploration into forging her own path of searching pedagogical strategies suitable for her students.

### *Anna's resilience in engaging in reflective practices and out-of-class education*

Indeed, to solve her dilemma, she started to engage in constant reflection and assessment of her students, reading research journals, and attending academic conferences. As Anna said,

*I always keep a close eye on any possible activities in this city [...] I think a teacher has to be open-minded to any helpful method [...] I went out and attended lectures organised by different universities and educational institutions [...] I feel these are opportunities for me to become a better teacher and benefit my students. (Reflection excerpt 2)*

In other words, in a disadvantageous school context, where the administrative focus is on students' academic achievements and there is a lack of support from students' family, Anna kept reaching out, exploring potentially useful pedagogy outside of her original research scope through diverse academic endeavours.

### *Anna's critical understanding of performance as a potential praxis*

Because of her continued efforts, Anna ultimately made a bold attempt to enact performance-based pedagogy based on her thorough exploration of relevant research and after careful analysis of her students' patterns. As she said,

*I realised performance is a really great way to grab students' attention. My students like to move around [...] they cannot sit quietly and listen to me ... Based on what I have learned from lectures and my own readings of research papers [in Chinese and in English], I felt this is what I needed to do. The tenets of performance-based pedagogy, though I had never encountered them during my pre-service or in-service education, are what my students potentially needed. (Interview excerpt 4)*

As shown in the interview excerpt, during the process of self-exploration, Anna did not just passively accept any new knowledge. Instead, she actively reflected upon her experiences with her students and selectively linked new information with her students' characteristics. As a result, Anna made the decision to use performance as a teaching praxis for conveying moral knowledge to her students.

Anna's self-agency was well-balanced between the tenets of performance and her intended purpose. As Anna recalled,

*I first introduced performance (the components of performance and what performers can do in the performance) [...] In order to genuinely benefit them from performance-based pedagogy, I only gave students topics relevant to their life (e.g., lending money, parent-child relationships) and asked them to write their own script and do whatever they wanted for the major components of the performance (orientation, climax, and code). Following the performance, I asked the performers and audience to engage in discussions and reflections. (Reflection excerpt 3)*

As shown in this excerpt, though Anna wanted her students to behave in a morally acceptable way, she patiently tried performance-based pedagogy in a theoretically strict way. That is, she adopted the performance-based pedagogical cycle and gave the students freedom to write a performance script that embodied themselves as well as time to reflect upon their experiences.

### *Anna's self-development interacting with students' reactions*

Most importantly, Anna's confidence in self-development was enhanced by her students' positive feedback that she collected in the meantime.

*I also had my student write reflections or interviewed them [...] I read them [interview excerpts and reflections] carefully before I moved on to other topics [...] Their [post-performance] reactions gave me the confidence to keep going, as I saw how they were inspired [...] In addition, I also went great lengths to observe problem students and noticed gradual changes in their behaviors. (Interview excerpt 5)*

As shown in this interview excerpt, during her enactment of performance-based pedagogy, Anna was not completely confident in the effects of performance. However, through constant analysis of students' feedback, Anna was amazed by the educational praxis and gained more confidence as a moral teacher. In other words, students' response as an external factor, integrated with Anna's analysis, fed into the enhancement of her self-agency in the process of implementing performance-based moral pedagogy.

In sum, Anna's self-development was not smooth. Anna, however, was able to emerge from the constant battle with diverse external and internal obstacles, pleased with her adaptation of performance-based pedagogy as praxis for the moral education of her teenage students. As Anna also reflected, "It is tough, but once the first step is made, the rest just flows, as I could see the ongoing positive feedback from my students" (Reflection excerpt 4). In the process of self-development, Anna shuffled among the role of teacher, reflective researcher, and facilitator, which prepared her well into transition to a successful teacher of moral education.

### *Embodied selves and moral awareness development*

Through a pedagogical cycle (preparing a story, performing, and reflecting upon performance), the students gained moral awareness both in and outside of their performance. The following two sections illustrate how students performed mother-daughter relationships and how to be a trustworthy person, respectively.

#### *Moral awareness of being a good daughter*

The topic of the performance assigned to students was prompted by Anna's observation of her stu-

dents: (1) some parents complained to Anna that their children kept asking for extra money to buy luxurious things that they saw their classmates had; (2) Anna also observed that some students did not show respect to their parents. As such, Anna decided to have students vicariously feel their parents' role. With Anna's topic on how to be a

good and frugal child, the students made their own decision about the detailed content of the performance shown in Excerpt 1–3 below (see Appendix A for transcription conventions), in which a girl from a poor family came across her mom near campus, as she was picking up bottles to sell them for money.

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#### Excerpt 1

**Mom:** 1. Xiaolan? ↑(mom speaks with happy voice) [Question]

**Xiaolan:** 2. You...you! (stepping back)[refusal]

3. Why do you come here?↑[question]

4. Why do you come here? ↑(with louder voice)

5. I have told you not to be here↓[command]

**Mom:** 6. I just want to pick up some bottles and sell them for money ↓(Mom speaks in a weak voice) [statement]

**Xiaolan:** 7. Go away! ↓Go away!↓ (Xiaolan raises her voice and tries to push her mom)[command]

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#### Excerpt 2

**Teacher:** 8. How much did you earn?↑ [question]

**Xiaolan:** 9 It is a little bit.↓[statement]

**Teacher:** 10. Do you know how hard it is to earn this amount of money for parents?↑ [question]

11. What did you give to your parents↑[question]

**Xiaolan:** 12. I did the wrong thing.↓ [statement] (lowering her head)

**Teacher:** 13. Do not apologise to me.↓[command]

14. I think you know who you should apologize to. ↓[statement]

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#### Excerpt 3

**Xiaolan:** 15. (Sees her mom) (crying)

**Xiaolan:** 16. I was wrong.↓[statement]

17. It's so difficult for you to earn money.↓[statement]

18. I did not understand.↓[statements]

19. But I felt ashamed of you.[statement]

20. I know you are the best mom.↓[statement]

**Mom:** 21. Don't cry↓. (mom hugs Xiaolan).[command]

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As shown in these three discourse excerpts, the participant, Xiaolan, used multiple semiotic resources in showing the students' embodiment of transforming themselves from being ashamed of their poor family to being reflective of their parents' love. For example, at first, Xiaolan being taken aback when seeing her mom picking up trash bottles near campus showed her disdain or shame for her mom, as did her sudden yelling (*you* [...] in line 2) as a way of refusing to respond to her mom. At the same time, Xiaolan also used two interrogative sentences (*why* ... ?) to question her mom's presence on campus, along with increasing volume (line 3 and 4), even when her mom weakly answered: "I just wanted to earn some money for you" (line 5). Despite this, the daughter pushed her mom away, saying she was ashamed of her presence on campus (line 6).

However, as the performance went on, Xiaolan learned how hard it is to earn money when her teacher assigned her to pick up bottles and sell them for money herself, as community service. In excerpt 2 and 3, Xiaolan lowered her head, indicating her shame in her previous way of treating her mom (line 12). In the end, Xiaolan cried (line 15) when she once again saw her mom

picking up trash bottles near campus and hugged her mom.

In the post-performance reflection, the student who played the role of mom reflected,

*I could vigorously feel I was there. And I felt how I was hurt when "my daughter" was not respectful. And the play lets me better understand my real life. We should love [our parents] and be proud of them. (Reflection excerpt 5)*

Echoing her, Xiaolan, the daughter, also reflected:

*Being a mom is difficult. But we sometimes just turned a blind eye to it [...] Through the performance, I feel I know better how to respect our parents in real life [...] It enhanced my awareness of being a better daughter [...] and not letting my mom be hurt because of any of my inappropriate behaviors. (Reflection excerpt 6)*

The students' exaggerated yet authentic self in the performance showed that in the drama, the students were able to experience feelings associated with the roles and better understand social roles/relationships (i.e., the role of the daughter) or vicariously understand what they cannot experience in their current life context (i.e., the role of mom).

**Be a trustworthy friend**

This performance prompt that Anna assigned to her students aimed to showcase the feelings of

borrowing money and not returning it as promised. In Anna's class, a few students borrowed money from classmates and did not repay them. Although the students (lenders) were angry and would complain to their parents, they felt awkward asking their classmates to return the money. Anna had once tried telling students the importance of

returning things, but this was in vain. Following Anna's prompt, the students made their own decisions regarding the detailed content of the performance shown in Excerpt 4-6 below (see Appendix A for transcription conventions), in which Li experienced being both a borrower and a lender in school.

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#### Excerpt 4

**Li:** 22. I have a delivery. . (lowering hand and wearing a sad facial expression) ↓ [statement]

23. We are such good friends ↑ [statement]

24. But I don't have money for the delivery. ↑ [statement]

**Wang:** 26. When will you give me the money back? ↑ [question]

**Li:** 27. Very soon (speaks loudly) ↓ [answer]

28. I cannot return the food. ↓ [extend]

**Wang:** 29. = (.) OK. ↓ [compliance]

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#### Excerpt 5

**Li:** 30. They owe me money. ↓ (speaks in a loud volume and unfolded her arms) [extend]

31. That is the money my mom earned. ↓ [extend]

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#### Excerpt 6

**Classmate 1:** 32. How about the money you owe to us? ↑ [question]

**Classmate 2:** 33. You must keep your promise. ↓ [statement]

**Wang:** 34. If you cannot keep a promise, how can you expect others to do so. ↑ [extend]

**Li:** 35. (Li became silent with a lowered head) [compliance]

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In these three performance excerpts, the participants also embodied themselves with added-on elements, showing conflicts among each other in the process of lending money and borrowing money. As shown through multimodal analysis, when she wanted to borrow money, Li reached out her hands and held her friends' hands to symbolise an intimate relationship. At the same time, Li had a sad expression and used a chain of statements (line 22, 23, 24), showing how financially miserable she was and promising to return the money to her friend soon (line 27). However, Li never returned the money as she promised. In the second excerpt, Li was caught in a situation where her classmates did not return money to her on time, despite Li asking several times. Seeing her classmates who owed her money on campus, Li shouted angrily, stretched out her arms ready to argue with them, showing her anger and desperate need to get her money back (line 30). In this scenario, Li's classmates both asked questions, prompting her to reflect upon her previous behaviours in not returning money as promised (line 33–34). Li was ashamed and became silent, which suggested her awareness of the double standards she adopted in the process of interpersonal relationships (line 35).

The students' follow-up reflection illuminated how learned more about being a trustworthy and considerate person. As one participant reflected,

*The performance enhanced my awareness of being an honest and reliable person in this society. While I did not do this [not return money], it helped me realise the consequence to people [...] In our society, we must be honest (Reflection excerpt 7).*

Similarly, Li, in the capacity of both borrower and lender reflected,

*I began to feel how miserable the person who cannot get her money back is. Through the drama performance, I become more considerate and able to know the feeling of others who are suffering because they cannot get their money back [...] I now know the importance of returning the money back to our friends. (Interview excerpt 6)*

In sum, because of the performance-based pedagogy Anna enacted in the process of self-development, students were able to vicariously experience the role of exaggerated self or other in the process of bodily performance. In addition, the interconnection between performance and post-performance reflection further helped students develop or enhance their moral awareness, which was also exemplified in their actual moral behaviors. As Anna, later on, reflected, "I observed that these problems [moral issues] all became better in school over time [...] thanks to the power of performance" (Reflection excerpt 8).

#### Discussion

This study reveals that teachers' self-agency was a crucial factor in counteracting undesirable constraints. In this study, Anna was frustrated with her students, yet was constrained by a lack of external help (e.g., limited pre-service or in-service teacher education and lack of help from school or her students' parents) (c.f., Leenders et al., 2012; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Zhang, 2017). To challenge herself and improve her students' moral awareness, she boldly harnessed her self-agency on the journey of self-exploration, and ultimately adopted performance-based pedagogy based on her consideration of various contextual factors in her class (e.g., students' preference for bodily actions

and the existing literature on performance-based pedagogy). The findings of this study further complement our understanding of self-agency as a crucial option for those teachers who aim to improve their teaching and students' learning when combating constraints in a school context (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003; Francis & Le Roux, 2011), especially where teacher-education models still need further development for guiding students' moral development (Cappy, 2016).

Anna's decision to use performance-based pedagogy also adds to the literature on the tools available for teachers' self-development. Previous performance-based pedagogy literature, in the field of moral education (e.g., Gervais, 2006) or other disciplines such as language arts classes (e.g., Harman & Varga-Dobai, 2012), used this approach by experts who are well trained or through an alignment between performance experts and teachers. However, in this study, without external assistance, Anna empowered herself in turning into a full-fledged expert in arts-based moral education, though it was not an easy path. Given teenagers' decreasing interest in reading-based moral education (Bajovic & Elliott, 2011), the findings in this study highlighted that the synergy between the power of self-agency and performance-based exploration in constrained contexts appears to be an excellent praxis for promoting moral education among teenagers.

Implications of the study include that in constrained contexts, teachers use self-agency in the process of moral education, especially through integrating self-agency with a thorough understanding of students' learning styles. In other words, self-agency is anchored in a chain of contexts, where it includes teachers' evaluation of students' current situation, research-based attempts in changing students' issues, and redesigning their curriculum. More importantly, self-development also involves teachers' attention to the latest research that may support their innovation in education, such the use of poem or dance (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010; Klein & Miraglia, 2017) to engage teenage students in expressing their emotions or bodily activities and transforming them into reflective social beings.

To conclude, the study reveals the dynamic relationship among teachers' self-development, performance-based pedagogy and students' moral awareness. That is, teachers' self-development is a useful way for teachers to reflect upon students' moral issues and take pedagogical action, raising students' moral awareness; especially in constrained contexts, where external support is limited. Moreover, the self-development, when combined with performance-based pedagogy, further galvanised teachers' confidence in relying on themselves, facilitating teachers in making innovative practices beyond textbook-based education,

and engaging students in critically understanding the importance of being a moral citizen.

However, limitations of this study have to be acknowledged. As a case study, its generalisation can only be extended to similar research contexts (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Additionally, this study was only focused within one academic year; follow-up research is still needed in order to reveal how students' newly gained moral awareness affects their behaviors when exiting the school. It has also to be noted that teachers' agency and identity reconstruction are intertwined (c.f., Francis & Le Roux, 2011). Future studies on teaching social justice could also zoom in on the relationship between the two when investigating pre-service or in-service teachers' development.

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### Note

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#### Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

- = Latching
- (.) Short pause
- () Silence
- ( ) paralinguistic features
- ↓ falling intonation
- ↑ rising intonation
- [ ] speech function