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Effectiveness of the Teaching-Learning Process of Buddhism Subject in Homagama Zonal Secondary Schools

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Abstract: This study explored the way Buddhism is taught in upper secondary schools in the Homagama education zone, Sri Lanka and the teaching methods, the students' involvement and their perception of the effectiveness of learning Buddhism. The method used was convergent mixed methods that consisted of questionnaires distributed to 125 students of five schools and interviews with 10 Buddhism teachers. Storytelling and recitation continued to be common, and group discussion was less common. Pupil engagement was rated as moderate and attitudes to learning were generally good. Strong correlations were found between perceived effectiveness and teaching methods and engagement. Its observed variation was accounted for by a multiple regression model with 83.3%, with limitations in interpretation due to shared measures on the questionnaires and the cross-sectional design. Teacher interviews revealed that lack of training, time and resources are obstacles to more participatory instruction. Results indicated that a combination of culturally embedded teaching with guided discussion, reflection and practical examples should be used. The evidence only relates to the schools in which it is found and is largely perception-based rather than being measured against the moral and spiritual development of the school.

Keywords: Buddhist education, student engagement, teaching methods, perceived learning effectiveness, Sri Lanka.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The Educational system of Sri Lanka Buddhism has evolved through more than 2000 years. Study of doctrine, ethics, language and reasoning was carried out in monastic institutions like Mahavihara and Abhayagiri, and the scriptural interpretation and dialogue were continued by the pirivena tradition (Rahula, 1978; De Silva, 2005). This inheritance provides Buddhism with a unique role in education within schools, namely: it is the only religion that can be taught as a curriculum subject and as a source for cultural and ethical teaching. For this reason, its aims are not only in terms of examination attainment, but also in terms of students' understanding and reflection/statement of the use of Buddhist values. In the present-day, however, the learners are exposed to more interactive and digital modes of communication and the role of discussion and active learning in the regular classroom is questioned (Karunanayaka et al., 2021). Constructivist theories imply that learners' understanding is enhanced when they reflect on the experiences they have and discuss ideas, not receive them passively (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). This study attempts to investigate those questions in the context of the classes of Buddhism in the upper secondary in the Homagama Education Zone, without taking the newer methods as better than established ones.

1.2. Problem Statement

Although Buddhism is a culturally valued faith, it seems that the teaching and learning in the chosen schools rely heavily on explanations, storytelling and recitation. There is no clear evidence of the consistency of links teachers make between these traditions and dialogue, participation and reflection. Local evidence is also poor in relation to the links between students' perceptions of the quality of learning and teaching methods and engagement and their own evaluation of the effectiveness of learning. They are not to be confused with satisfaction with lessons, or independent evidence of moral behaviour change.

1.3. Significance of the Study

The teaching of Buddhism aims to foster knowledge, moral decision making and contemplation. In this regard, an analysis of classroom practices can provide an input for teacher development and improvement in the classroom in the Homagama Education Zone. The study also offers an example of culturally situated learning that can be used in the discussion of the possible co-existence between established religious teaching and participatory pedagogy. Its outcomes are based on the students' own perceptions, and not changes that have been verified in character or spirituality.

1.4. Objectives

The study aimed to identify common approaches in the teaching of Buddhism, gauge students' motivation to participate in the lessons, gauge the perceived effectiveness of the learning, explore relationships between these factors and to reveal teachers' experiences, training needs and perceived constraints to participatory teaching.

1.5. Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following questions: What are the teaching methods in Buddhism class in the selected schools? What are students' levels of engagement and effectiveness of learning? What is the relationship between teaching and students' engagement and perceived effectiveness? What are some of the teachers' obstacles and opportunities?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Buddhist Education in Sri Lanka

Traditionally, Buddhist education in Sri Lanka has been connected with the development of sīla (ethical discipline), samādhi (mental cultivation) and paññā (wisdom) in addition to knowledge of the Buddhist doctrine. Memorisation and interpretation, discipline and reflection (pirivena scholarship and monastic instruction) were the elements inculcated (Rahula, 1978; De Silva, 2005).

This is a mix that sets the present context apart from other school subjects and from religious education contexts that differ with regard to their doctrinal and institutional traditions. Meanwhile, the desire to inculcate values and responsible attitude is common to all types of moral education. The difference is important in selecting outcome measures examination

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confidence cannot be used as a measure for ethical change as can only be enjoyment of lessons.

2.2. Religious and Moral Education Pedagogy

Narratives, recited and memorised texts pass on religious traditions or provide memorable forms of ethical ideas. Storytelling can help to encourage moral reflection in pupils as they interpret situations and relate them to their choices (Al-Hawamleh, 2019; Huth, 2021). Repetitions that do not include dialogue can also provide less scope for evaluating and assessing comprehension or contrasting interpretations. Thus, in a comparative perspective on religious and values education attention should be given to the ways in which methods are applied, not to a dualism of traditional and modern methods. Passive recall or active reflection may be made possible by classroom questioning in the same story. Respect for doctrinal and cultural meanings is crucial in Sri Lankan Buddhism lessons, as is the opportunity to allow students to raise ethical issues of their daily life.

2.3. Contemporary Learning Theories

Constructivist explanations of learning involve an actively reorganising process whereby learning takes place through experience-based understanding (Piaget, 1970). Social constructivism places importance on dialogue, language and guided participation in the process of understanding construction (Vygotsky, 1978). Reflective learning is a dimension of moral education as students have to consider choices and consequences, rather than just repeat rules (Dewey, 1933).

Similarly, Schön (1983) views professional reflection as a way that teachers reflect and make adjustments to practice. The research literature on active learning suggests that structured discussion and small group work may have significant benefits, but results do not necessarily carry over in the same form in all religious subject areas and with all cultural groups (Prince, 2004). These views collectively imply that storytelling/recitation may continue to be a way of teaching Buddhism, but discussion/reflection might provide space for interpretation. This is a theoretical idea that was explored based on classroom observations, not a causal mechanism that was determined in the current design.

2.4. Student Engagement and Outcomes

Student engagement refers to behavioural, emotional and cognitive involvement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engagement has been linked to teacher support and classroom structure and opportunities for student choice (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). These dimensions are important in Buddhist education as a student may appreciate the subject and not listen attentively while the explanations are going on and are long in nature. The current research, therefore, disentangles students' engagement and their evaluations of the teaching method and the learning outcome. Its effectiveness is evidenced in terms of: understanding perceived, examination performance, daily application, and personal development. While these indicators are helpful to provide a student's perspective, they are not actually observed behaviors of moral conduct or spiritual achievement. Judicious interpretation of the statistical relationships that are unusually strong is important as correlation among the measures is expected conceptually.

2.5. Technology and Interactive Teaching

Technology can help with digital storytelling, guided inquiry, discussion and reflection when it is appropriate to the content and the way the content is taught (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). One Sri Lankan study points to an increase in teachers' and students' digital expectations and a gap in their experiences and access to digital resources (Karunanayaka et al., 2021). However, an electronic presentation can be teacher-directed, and a discussion, based on a traditional story, can be participatory. The ability to question and to organise the class and to choose appropriate resources may, therefore, be as important as the equipment itself. The barriers reported in the process of teaching ICT also indicate that teachers require more hands-on assistance than just devices (Soratha, 2024). Any decisions made in the context of Buddhist education should be sensitive to the correctness of the doctrine, the local school context and respect for religious practices.

2.6. Research Gap and Contribution

There is existing research that connects engagement to classroom experience and Buddhist education focuses on ethical development and maintaining the transmission of the Buddhist teaching. Much less is recorded of the interplay of those concerns in the real-

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life of the Homagama Education Zone. Especially the relationship between positive attitudes of the students towards the subject and the results of their learning and active participation needs to be studied. The current study combines the questionnaire data with the teachers' accounts of the practice and constraints. It is contextual and conceptual by examining the usefulness of differentiation of the teaching methods, engagement and perceived outcomes in a culturally specific religious subject matter. The nature of the data is observational at a single point in time, so that the proposed relationships are understood as associations, rather than evidence of a cause-and-effect relationship.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Setting

A convergent mixed methods approach was used, involving a student questionnaire and semistructured interviews with teachers. The two strands were focused on current teaching practices and engagement and perceived measures of the effectiveness of learning and were interpreted together. The respondents for the data collection were five upper secondary schools in Homagama Education Zone.

Selections were made based on school access and suitability to the research topic. Due to a lack of a complete sampling frame of schools in the source manuscript and detailed selection thresholds, the five schools should be considered as an accessible sample for the study of the zone and not as a representative sample.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

There were 125 Grade 10 and Grade 11 Buddhism students as Quantitative sample. The interviews were carried out with 10 Buddhism teachers. The school recruitment was access based and teachers were selected purposively, as well as eligible student groups present in the school. The study was not intended to provide any estimate of the outcome that may be expected for all the schools in Sri Lanka. This means that there is a lack of a documented probability sampling frame that can be used to make broader generalisation.

3.3. Instruments and Data Collection

The questionnaire included the following: Demographic characteristics, reported use of storytelling, chanting, questioning, group work and activities, reported student engagement, and perceived learning outcomes. The items engaged with were in areas of interest, participation, attention and motivation. Outcome items covered perceived examination performance, conceptual understanding, values and use. Interviews with teachers investigated teachers' instructional decisions, limitations in time and resources, teachers' training and potential improvements. The process of item development as well as the utilization of previously validated scales and the formal adaptation protocol was not documented in these domains. The instrument should therefore not be regarded as a valid scale without any further evidence. It was reported that Educational and school permissions were granted and questionnaires and interviews were carried out in the school environment.

3.4. Analysis and Quality Considerations

Student responses were summarised using frequencies, means and standard deviations. Bivariate associations were explored using Pearson correlations and joint statistical relationships of teaching methods and engagement with perceived effectiveness were explored using multiple linear regression. Teacher interviews were analysed and compared thematically and quantitatively. The manuscript provided does not include any numerical Cronbach's alpha, information about the pilot sample, or a formal ethics committee approval number or validity results for items. These cannot be reconstructed from the results of the summaries and must be checked from the original results. Similarly, no residual diagnostics or common method bias test or common method overlap audit was provided. Consequently, results are presented as exploratory associations and the statistical limitations are clearly noted.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Education authorities and school authorities have permission; voluntary participation, confidentiality and right to withdraw written in the manuscript. Procedures for guardian consent and student assent are important as participants included school students. If an institutional ethical clearance is required, this will be

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cited as the actual committee and approval number. These details have not been provided, nor have they been assumed.

4. Results and Findings

4.1. Participant Profile

A survey was conducted with 125 students in 5 schools. Ages were 14 (10.4%), 15 (62.4%) and 16 (27.2%) years. The male and female students' numbers were 72.8% and 27.2%, respectively. Reported school categories were 1AB (37.6%), 1C (32.8%), provincial (21.6%) and national (8.0%). Only 100 students (55 Grade 11 and 45 Grade 10) are mentioned in the original manuscript. Therefore the distribution of the figures is not given here completely, but must be compared with the original data set before being published.

4.2. Reported Teaching Practices

Students used some conventional and some interactive strategies. Storytelling (M = 2.98, SD = 0.735) and chanting or recitation (M = 2.98, SD = 0.756) were familiar practices. Group work and discussion was rated lowest (M = 2.89, SD = 0.732), while opportunities to ask questions and share ideas was (M = 3.11, SD = 0.764). Real life examples (M = 2.96, SD = 0.745) and activities (M = 3.00, SD = 0.596) appeared moderately often. These are figures of ratings given by the pupils and not of frequencies in which teachers were observed.

4.3. Student Engagement

The range of engagement scores was between 2.92 and 3.22. The mean scores for personal connection to the content of the lessons (M = 3.22, SD = 0.779), discussion participation (M = 3.18, SD = 0.673), and motivation to learn beyond the classroom (M = 3.15, SD = 0.636) were the highest.

Enjoyment was rated M = 3.02 (SD = 0.735), while attention during explanations was lowest (M = 2.92, SD = 0.768). Teachers also reported increased interest during storytelling and in practical examples and decreased interest during longer explanations of the texts.

4.4. Perceived Learning Outcomes

This range for students' perceived outcome is from 3.13 to 3.30. The highest score was related to perceived examination performance with M = 3.30 and SD = 0.721. The understanding about central concepts of Buddhism was M = 3.20 (SD = 0.672) and self rated moral values & ethical thinking was M = 3.20 (SD = 0.730). Daily application scored M = 3.18 (SD = 0.817), perceived usefulness of teaching methods M = 3.18 (SD = 0.734), and perceived spiritual and intellectual growth M = 3.24 (SD = 0.745). The lowest was the item, "To become a better person" (M = 3.13, SD = 0.672). No single one of these questionnaire ratings provides evidence of behaviour change.

Table 1. Selected descriptive statistics

Item	Mean	SD
Storytelling	2.98	0.735
Group discussion	2.89	0.732
Lesson connection	3.22	0.779
Attention	2.92	0.768
Exam performance	3.30	0.721

4.5. Correlation Analysis

There were strong associations between all three composite variables (reported $p < .01$, N = 125). There was a strong correlation between teaching methods and engagement (r = .888) and teaching effectiveness (r = .884). There was a correlation between engagement and perceived effectiveness (r = .890). These correlations do not necessarily indicate direction of causal influence. Their magnitude also poses concern of conceptual/item overlap and responses obtained via one questionnaire.

Table 2. Pearson correlations

Variable pair	r	Significance
Teaching methods and engagement	.888	$p < .01$
Teaching methods and effectiveness	.884	$p < .01$
Engagement and effectiveness	.890	$p < .01$

4.6. Multiple Regression

The two predictor model reported R = .913, R^2 = .833 and adjusted R^2 = .830, with F(2, 122) = 303.791 (reported p = .000, conventionally written $p < .001$). Teaching methods (B = .490, SE = .089, β = .443, t =

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5.505) and engagement (B = .512, SE = .083, β = .496, t = 6.171) both had positive reported coefficients ($p < .001$). The Durbin-Watson statistic was found to be 1.566. As reported the R2 reveals that the predictors statistically explained 83.3% of the variance of the questionnaire outcome in this sample. It does not imply that those outcomes were because of instruction. In this case, two predictors were used, and the intercorrelation as reported was .888, which means the variance inflation factor of each predictor is about 4.72 ($1/[1 - .888^2]$). This indicates considerable commonality, and analysis of the items is warranted. No residual plots, linearity, heteroscedasticity, outlier or common method bias diagnostics were provided, thus the validity of these assumptions cannot be established.

Table 3. Multiple regression results

Predictor	B	SE	β	t
Teaching methods	.490	.089	.443	5.505
Engagement	.512	.083	.496	6.171

Note. Outcome: perceived learning effectiveness. N = 125. Model $R^2 = .833$, adjusted $R^2 = .830$, $F(2, 122) = 303.791$, $p < .001$. Both coefficients were reported at $p < .001$. Approximate VIF = 4.72.

4.7. Interview Themes

Four common themes emerged from the teachers' interviews. First, storytelling, reciting and textbook explanation were old and familiar methods of achieving the syllabus, particularly in the lead up to exams. Secondly, teachers mentioned the problems of inadequate technology, shortage of time, training and large classes as barriers to discussion and activity-based work. Thirdly, they felt that students' interest was more when lessons employed narratives and examples in everyday life than when they were treated to prolonged lectures. Fourth, there was a preference for more practical and interactive ways to put the Buddhist principles into practice by teachers and students.

Although the ten teachers interviewed provide interpretations of the patterns in the questionnaires, it is too small a sample to reflect all teachers in the zone.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation and Theoretical Contribution

The results identify what seems like a tension that is common to RE: the importance of passing on a tradition and the educational importance of giving learners the opportunity to make meaning of it. The participating Homagama schools showed that the students were having positive association with Buddhism, and the ratings of attention and collaborative activity were lower. This distinction is important because enjoyment does not necessarily lead to classroom participation and moral development, and classroom participation does not necessarily lead to enjoyment and moral development. A learner can appreciate without necessarily being observed in the class, and reported understanding does not show behaviour outside of the school.

This is consistent with a constructivist perspective which sees reflection, guided participation and discussion, along with learning content, as key elements in the pattern. (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). It also aligns with engagement research, which differentiates emotional engagement with behavioral/cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). But it is not possible to prove, through the present questionnaire, that group work is more effective than for moral results. The high inter-correlations may be due to the similar wording of the items or common response styles as well as true conceptual similarity of the three self-reported measures. For this reason, the high R^2 should be interpreted as a within-sample statistical association and not as particularly strong evidence of the impact of the instruction.

Such issues have special significance in the Sri Lankan context. Storytelling and chanting are part of the history of Buddhist education and can have doctrinal authority and cultural meaning (Rahula, 1978; De Silva, 2005). Unselective replacement might lead to a reduction in valued modes of learning. A more important question is what teachers do with them: a story with questions about compassion or conduct could be both transmission and reflection. Such possibilities are suggested by research on storytelling and active learning, but it is difficult to make direct comparisons due to differences in content and the educational context (Huth, 2021; Prince, 2004). Religious education should also be aware of the diversity of the children's backgrounds and should not set out to achieve a universal measurable outcome that is based on one model of spiritual development.

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Alternative explanations also need to be taken into account. Pressure for the exams can lead to a focus on reciting and teacher explanation when the teacher is interested in interaction. The frequency of group work might be influenced by class size, lesson time, training and materials. Pupils who like their teachers can give a high score for all questionnaire domains, irrespective of the effectiveness of the classroom. Furthermore, technology does not guarantee participation: it needs to be coupled with content and pedagogy (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). The interviews corroborate the significance of these practical restrictions, but do not enable the individual effects to be quantified.

5.2. Educational Implications

Schools could hold onto the story and recitation and include short opportunities to explain their meaning, discuss a moral choice or to write a personal reflection. Discussion, use of practical examples, and a concise summary by students could be feasible even in situations where technology is scarce. Teacher development should emphasise teaching through questioning, discussion, planning and culturally competent approaches to teaching that are related to day-to-day decision making. Simple media can be used, if they are suitable for the lesson and accessible for all students. These actions are suggested based on local perceptions and not tested by this study. Their effects need to be assessed through direct classroom observation, learning assessed independently and longer follow up.

5.3. Limitations and Further Research

A single educational zone, and 5 of the available schools were included in the research. The ten teacher interviews provide valuable experiences, although lacking in scope. Social desirability, common method bias and construct overlap are potential problems with the cross-sectional student survey, which uses self-reported measures. The manuscript reviewed did not provide pilot details, information about scale reliability, extensive regression diagnostics or verified ethical clearance records. Future research needs to include documentation of scale development and Cronbach's alpha for each construct, a more expansive sampling, observation design, and longitudinal or intervention design. Direct measures of knowledge and ethical thinking might be able to capture, without over-simplifying, student's accounts of personal development.

6. Conclusion

The Buddhism lessons in the participating Homagama secondary schools were modeled after the existing practices which students continued to appreciate. But there was relatively low reported use of group discussion and the lowest engagement score was for sustained attention during explanation. There were strong associations between teaching methods and engagement and perceived learning effectiveness; however, as this was a study design with a common questionnaire, causal inferences cannot be drawn. Training, time and resource constraints were identified in teacher interviews. There is a culturally sensitive mix of stories, discussion, reflection and practical examples, which provides a reasonable way forward to improvement. These findings are relevant to the schools that participated and do not confirm moral/spiritual changes. Instruments need better documentation and the independent outcome measures are priorities for future research.

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