

# TEACHER TRAINEES' RESPONSES TO ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED DURING CHARACTER BUILDING FOR TEACHERS (BINA INSAN GURU – BIG)

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this research is to examine the responses of teacher trainees towards activities carried out during Character Building for Teachers (Bina Insan Guru – BIG) Phase 1. This research involved 66 Program Ijazah Sarjana Muda Pendidikan (PISMP), Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) Cohort 3 teacher trainees. In Phase 1, the teacher trainees are required to undergo a four-day camping programme. During the camp they are involved in a variety of activities which help to build and develop teacher attributes. The teacher trainees are assessed on their capabilities, abilities, attitudes, contributions, collegiality, and team spirit. This assessment was carried out in three different stages – before, during and after. The first stage involves the planning and preparations for the camp while in the second stage, trainees are observed for their involvement in the activities carried out. For the third stage, the teacher trainees are required to compile materials, documents, evidence and written reflections about the camp. The data for this research was collected using post-its and written reflections. It is perceived from the trainees' responses that the BIG activities have helped to develop teacher attributes as stipulated in the PISMP (TESL) programme learning outcomes and specifically the BIG course learning outcomes. The responses support the fact that the BIG activities conducted outside the classroom are essential in enhancing character building in teacher trainees.*

**Key words:** *attributes, character - building*

## Introduction

The Character Building for Teachers (Bina Insan Guru – BIG) course is compulsory for all Program Ijazah Sarjana Muda Pendidikan (PISMP) teacher trainees. This is a three-credit course which is carried out in six phases throughout six semesters at institute level.

Phase 1, which is carried out during the first semester, consists of a 45 hour programme in which teacher trainees attend a four-day camp. Throughout this camp, the trainees are exposed to various activities that indirectly inculcate and develop teacher attributes. During the camp, trainees are required to participate in all indoor and outdoor activities. The activities include setting up camp, group dynamics, orienteering, water confidence, moral and spiritual sessions, group presentations, and reflections. These activities help to instil good values such as patriotism, spirituality, honesty, accountability, resilience, creativity, and innovativeness. These in turn help to propagate other important ethics including teamwork, co-operation, leadership, integrity, determination, and time management, among others. In addition, the element of fun allows them to think out of the box and do things differently from their usual learning environment on campus. This process will enable the trainees to make connections with the real world and the demands of the teaching profession.

## **Background of Study**

BIG has been an integral part of teacher training programmes in all teacher training institutes. It is aimed at developing wholesome future teachers through various fun and purposeful activities. These activities function to bridge the gap between the academic and non-academic domains thus directly moulding teacher trainees into well balanced individuals.

## **Research Objective**

This study aims at examining the teacher trainees' responses towards the activities conducted during BIG Phase 1 focussing on the development of teacher attributes.

## **Research Questions**

Based on the objective above, this study addresses these research questions:

- i. What are the teacher trainees' responses on the activities conducted during the BIG programme?
- ii. How do the activities conducted during BIG (Phase 1) help develop teacher attributes?

## **Literature Review**

The goal of the BIG programme is “to produce teachers who are knowledgeable, progressive and resilient...[focussing] on the development of the teachers holistically and contextually” (Pro-forma Kerja Kursus Bina Insan Guru (BIG), 2007). This honourable aim is deeply embedded and evident in all the activities that were planned for the teacher trainees during the camp. Teacher trainees gained and developed these values by exploiting their personal resources which included their minds, personalities, actions, thoughts, beliefs, and strengths. The Phase 1 programme conducted outside the institute campus in an informal, non-threatening fun way which had a mixture of adventure and educational elements allowed the teacher trainees to build and exhibit their personal resources naturally.

This combination of adventure and education as evident in the BIG programme is vital in providing exciting wholesome experiences of various activities that brought about positive effects in the behaviours of the teacher trainees. As reiterated by a Cottone and Tarvydas (2007, p. 20), “values arise from individuals’ experiences and interactions with their culture, the world and the people around them....” Besides, a camp that has activities that inspire excitement and constructive growth in a challenging way, acts as an avenue in preparing these teacher trainees for the practicality of the real world. Consequently, it is undeniable that Phase 1 of this programme provides essential exposure in building implicit and explicit values that are reflected through actions during the camp.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This research employs a qualitative method approach in collecting data. The teacher trainees are to write their spontaneous feedback regarding the camp on post-its after the closing ceremony of the camp. In addition, they also have to write a reflection about their experience and responses towards the activities carried out during the BIG.

## **Population of Study**

Sixty-six Cohort 3 PISMP (TESL) teacher trainees are involved in this research. They have been selected because the BIG is a compulsory component in their programme structure.

## **Instrumentation**

Qualitative procedures were used to collect data for this research. Two instruments were used, namely:

- i. brief responses on post-its
- ii. written reflections

These two instruments were coded to facilitate the analysis and discussion; R1 to R66 for the written reflections and P1 to P66 for the brief responses on the post-its.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

At the end of the camp, the teacher trainees were asked to write brief, spontaneous responses about their four-day camping experience on post-it slips. They were given ten minutes to write their thoughts down. The size of the post-its was 7.5cm by 7.5cm. Hence, the trainees had to be concise and precise about what they wrote thus capturing the essence of their experiences.

In addition, the teacher trainees had to write an individual reflection of about 250 words after they returned from the camping trip. They had to write about their experiences covering the various activities they participated during the four-day camp. This enabled them to express themselves more explicitly.

## **Data Analysis Procedure**

The written reflections and post-its done after the camp were carefully examined and analysed. These responses will provide useful information to substantiate the findings of the study.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Data obtained from the written reflections and post-its were analysed qualitatively.

### **Post-its and Written Reflections**

The 66 teacher trainees gave their feedback about the four day camp in written reflections and post-its. These written reflections and post-its were analysed and most of them rendered the six emerging themes that are directly related to the learning outcomes of BIG Phase 1 namely, self-discipline and independence, spirituality and teacher ethics, knowledge and good practice, accountability and trustworthiness, resilience as well as creativity and innovation. Hence, for the purpose of this study, the written reflections and post-its are examined and discussed according to the six themes mentioned above.

### **Self discipline and independence**

Self-discipline and independence is one of the six main learning outcomes of the BIG camp that promotes individual growth amongst the teacher trainees. The majority of the teacher trainees reflected that the activities in the camp indirectly instilled self-management

skills, self discipline and the ability to be independent. According to (R32), *“... self-discipline is one of the important assets that is important in my journey as a future teacher. Thus, I tried to practice it during the camp. Not only that, I learnt to be grateful with all the things around me including facilities, food and not to forget to appreciate the scenery of our nature.”* R12 and R6 also gave similar responses. The learning experiences gained through the camp is further emphasised by (R2) who states that *“...lessons such as the need to be responsible and how to solve problems (problem solving skills) were also picked up...”* It is therefore obvious that the camp has provided opportunities for the teacher trainees to explore their potentials in becoming future teachers. Hence, it is not surprising that many of the teacher trainees have actually asked for the camp to be prolonged as mentioned by P14 that the camp also doubles up as *“a place and time where I can be myself”*. In addition for P25 the camp was *“an opportunity (rare, in fact) that allows us to break out of our shells, step out of our comfort zones and be who you would like to be”*. This opportunity to exercise independence is important as it encourages decision-making and self-discipline.

### **Spirituality and teacher ethics**

Another learning outcome of the BIG camp is instilling the importance of spirituality and teacher ethics among teacher trainees. It is hoped that the participants of the camp will realise their individual potential as well as celebrate the differences among them. This consciousness is lucidly reflected by (R26), *“I have learnt that being adventurous and positive in facing all matters in life is important to gain the best experience.”* Furthermore, by embracing virtues through spirituality and understanding the fundamental role of teacher ethics, teacher trainees will be able to discover and accept changes in them optimistically. This is voiced strongly by (R41) who claims, *“I have gained insight on my ability and personality during the camp that can serve as a referable point for me to obtain more personal development in future to become an ideal teacher figure.”* In fact, R2, R53 and R35 also related the same sentiment in their written reflections. One teacher trainee (P42) stated that, the *“BIG make me realise the values that I have to instill in myself to be a teacher”*. Yet, another (P18) saw it as *“A new experience that helps me understand myself better as well as the others, and how to use our ability to become good teachers in the future”*. Such positive thinking augers well for the teaching profession. Hence, the goal of the BIG camp in providing various prospects for teacher trainees to discover and improve their personalities professionally and personally has indeed left an indelible mark in fostering worthy attributes among the participants.

### **Knowledge and good practice**

It is undeniable that knowledge and practice which is also one of the six themes is an essential ingredient in moulding wholesome teacher trainees that are capable of accepting and facing diverse challenges as future educators. The various activities in the camp allowed them to display their abilities to take on responsibilities, emphasising team spirit and cooperation. This is noted in one of the reflections whereby a teacher trainee (R41) affirms that *“I realized that teamwork is highly important in order to sustain the good momentum in a group.”* Moreover, the camp indirectly advocates the importance of team among the teacher trainees. This is further reiterated by another teacher trainee (R37) who asserted that *“...I learnt that teamwork is very important in every activity that requires people to work in a group...”* This awareness is also evident in the responses given on the post-its whereby (P8) jotted *“The unity between us is super awesome”*. In addition (P35) wrote, *“It stimulates us teachers to be to know the real meaning of creativity and teamwork”*. The impact of these findings certifies how real experiences are necessary to prepare teacher trainees for different learning environments.

## **Accountability and trustworthiness**

From the responses, it was clear that the teacher trainees had built upon good values from their involvement in the various activities during the camp. These are recorded truthfully, for example (R21) relates that *“...There were many positive things that I had gained throughout this camp. I hope to practice these positive values in my daily life so that in the future and be an excellent English teacher at one blow...”* Furthermore, the following extract (R63) reiterates that the impact of the activities goes beyond the boundary of the stated objectives of this outdoor programme. The teacher trainee states that *“...BIG camp has played a very important role in building and sharpening us to be good future teachers....to prepare the future teachers with the elements and things that they need to know, learn and practice before going out to teach the young people in school soon...”* This sense of awareness was also displayed in the reflections of R18 and R22. Furthermore, (P60) truthfully claims, *“BIG program helps me to manage my discipline and I learn many new skills after expose to the outdoor activities. Honestly, I gained a lot through this program.”* These responses are significant in relating how the camp activities have given the teacher trainees invaluable experiences in enhancing their awareness how good values and good practices are vital in their growth as future teachers.

## **Resilience**

As a future teacher in a highly modern and ever changing world, resilience is the core value in sustaining the ability to face the demands of progression in society. Accordingly, (R45) reflects how *“... this camping was indeed a new and enriching experience for me. It did not just open up my mind about trusting and collaborating with others but also taught me that everything can be overcome with a strong determination.”* The growth of this motivation to maintain and build one's resilience through exposure of the BIG camp is further reiterated by the following teacher trainee (R1) *“...The character building camp for teachers had given me insights to life experiences, own strengths and weaknesses. I am thankful for the camp activities had contributed in moulding myself for the better, physically, spiritually and mentally...”*. Similar awareness is experienced by (P10) who states that *“BIG teaches me never to give up until you reach the end no matter how hard it is”*. This was supported by another teacher trainee (P58) who realised that, *“To be a great teacher, you need to be strong physically and mentally”*. Indeed, such attributes will undeniably spur their mental, physical, emotional, spiritual and social development.

## **Creativity and innovation**

Creativity and innovation are essential tools in adapting to the inevitable changes, particularly in the education sphere. In view of this constant development, the activities during the camp enabled the teacher trainees to explore and exploit their abilities creatively and innovatively. This was made apparent as the teacher trainees had to work together in various situations that required their resourcefulness in planning, participating and completing the activities. This particular experience is aptly described in a teacher trainee's reflection (R18) *“...Therefore, as a future teacher, I must be ready at all time to adapt and handle sudden changes in plans. I also need to be creative and innovative to use the sources around me to come up with solution.”* Besides activities that tested the teacher trainees' physical and mental endurance, the inclusion of a cultural night in the programme allowed these participants to engage with aesthetic values that encourage creative thinking as expressed by (R1) explicitly *“...I learnt to be creative and innovative when preparing for the cultural night...”* Moreover, another teacher trainee (P46) responded how *“It stimulates us teachers to be to know the real meaning of creativity...”* The challenging yet fun activities brought the best out of the teacher trainees. They had to be creative and innovative in completing the various activities collaboratively. The activities boosted their morale as they had the opportunity to showcase their individual potentials.

The analysis of the written reflections and post-its offered pronounced understanding in measuring the extent of the BIG activities on the teacher trainees especially in developing teacher attributes.

### **Conclusion**

Data and analysis from this study reveal that the activities in BIG Phase 1 have been an immense catalyst in helping the trainees to take their first step in the right direction as future teachers. The responses from the written reflections and post-its stand as invaluable evidence into the efficacy of the four-day camp in helping to develop teacher attributes among the 66 teacher trainees.

### **Limitations**

This study only examined activities carried out during Phase 1 of BIG of a particular cohort. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalised for all the other BIG phases and PISMP cohorts.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study help to create awareness among teacher educators and teacher trainees about the vital role of BIG on teacher trainees. As evident from the study, BIG serves as a platform that can mould these future teachers to become individuals who are balanced, wholesome and bearing noble qualities befitting that of a true teacher. Based on the positive responses, the camp had undeniably left a great impact on these future teachers because the varying activities carried out allowed each of them to experience moments which were novel, challenging, exciting, and heart-warming. This study, indirectly reminds us, especially teacher educators not to take lightly the usefulness of outdoor activities.

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