

TEACHER'S UNDERSTANDING OF COLLECTIVE LEARNING IN MALAYSIAN INDEPENDENT CHINESE SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Abstract: Collective learning is viewed as a cost-effective strategy for teachers to realize their professional development and is also widely used in Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) of different scale. This study was conducted in order to make collective learning to better assist MICSS teachers' professional development based on Misami's understanding of it. Specifically, this study adopted a qualitative descriptive single case study design by collecting data through semi-structured interview which was then analyzed through a thematic data analysis approach. Ultimately, Misami's definition of collective learning, her gains from collective learning, and the supportive conditions needed to better implement collective learning in MICSS are presented, as well as suggestions for future related research based on the research limitations of this study.

Keywords: Collective Learning, Teachers' Professional Development, MICSS Novice Teachers

INTRODUCTION

The plural society in Malaysia denotes the multi-linguistic nature of its people, and this has resulted in several types of secondary school in the country (Hoque et al., 2020). The Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS), which primarily use Mandarin in teaching and daily communication, is a unique secondary educational system in Malaysia. However, it seems that MICSS teachers are being marginalised by the Malaysian government's education system which deprives them of government-funded teacher training (Lee, 2011, p. 178). Therefore, MICSS may assist their teachers to achieve professional development through lectures or collective learning among teachers of the same department (Yen & Foo, 2020).

Regarding lectures, researchers (Huijboom et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2019; Tarnanen et al., 2021) mention that traditional formats such as lectures and workshops, may only have a minimal positive impact on the professional development of teachers. Analysts (Zahedi et al., 2021; Zimmer & Matthews, 2022) have been critical of such conventional training activities, arguing that they tend to take a one-size-fits-all approach that is weak in terms of the differentiation of teacher requirements of professional development, may not fully consider teachers' teaching experience, and that these programs may not support on teachers' professional development.

In the aspect of collective learning, researchers generally believe that such professional development strategy may bring teachers together for them to learn from one another and ensure that 'no one gets left behind' (Harvey & Nilsson, 2021; Zimmer & Matthews, 2022). This is because learning was viewed as a social process dependent on group interactions, where knowledge is socially constructed and are more productive in social settings with their peers (Patton & Parker, 2017; Stoll et al., 2017). Teachers too, tend to achieve more when they engage in active professional development with their peers (Valckx et al., 2020), simply because they may learn more with and from each other, seek direction from their peers, and provide support to each other (Cheah et al., 2019).

With the above aspects in mind, this study aims to explore teacher's personal experience of collective learning through the qualitative descriptive single case study design. To be more specific, this study was conducted to summarise MICSS teachers' understanding of collective learning, namely, the role of head, participants, school leaders of collective learning, suggestions to promote effective collective learning in MICSS, as well as the benefits obtained from collective learning.

To achieve the research purpose, this study is organized as follows: research background, and literature review to outline the necessity for conducting this study as well as provide explanation on the purpose that this study may

achieve. The methodology section describes the research design, context, respondents, in addition to the data collection and analysis strategies employed in the study. The final two sections present the findings of the study, followed by the discussion and conclusions, in addition to recommendations for future research based on the limitations of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accordingly, collective learning may involve teachers from the same or different disciplines coming together to collaboratively select and discuss learning topics, learning materials, and learning plans; to decide what new knowledge is relevant to their classroom teaching practice, and how it is applicable to their teaching context (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The teachers will then be able to collaborate to find teaching methods that are appropriate for the targeted teaching topics, as well as to save and promote examples of effective classroom teaching (Jensvoll & Lekang, 2018). Based on the above views, collective learning was regarded as a strategy and a proven practice to improve teacher's teaching practices (Zonoubi et al., 2017), and its benefits to teachers' professional development have been widely researched (Miquel & Duran, 2017).

For instance, the cultivation of collective learning atmosphere among teachers and school leaders may enable them to focus on improving teaching skills (Luyten & Bazo, 2019), and to make joint contributions towards improving teaching practices. Similarly, Sadler et al. (2020) suggests that collective learning is an effective way to help teachers learn and create resources that are appropriate for their classroom teaching. It has commonly been assumed that the role of collective learning in teachers' professional development is pivotal to say the least, as teachers are required to pay more attention to the acquisition and implementation of new content knowledge, new teaching skills, and new teaching methods during their collective learning (Chaaban et al., 2021; Foong et al., 2018).

In addition, when teachers are provided more opportunities to achieve their professional development through their collective learning, it tends to increase the flow of knowledge required in the teaching profession (Roy & Hord, 2006), allowing the effective exchange of teaching ideas, subject knowledge, and teaching strategies among them (Popp & Goldman, 2016; Schildkamp et al., 2016). With the help of collective learning, teachers, especially the novice teachers, may gain more confidence and develop the essential skills of classroom teaching to solve the series of difficulties they met (Hoque et al., 2020), and may ultimately empower them to become more effective teachers (Qingli et al., 2019).

Therefore, in order to make collective learning more effective in teachers' professional development, teachers and their leaders should be collectively responsible for the teaching quality and the effectiveness of students' learning (Pang & Marton, 2017). This means that instead of being passive receivers and executors of pre-packaged knowledge provided by their peers or seniors, all teachers may require to become co-producers of knowledge (Harvey & Nilsson, 2021), and through collective and reflective learning of new content, strategies, designs and methods, enhances the effectiveness of their teaching, especially in those problem areas where students are underperforming. In this way, teachers may maximize the benefits of collective learning for their professional development.

More specifically, several critical issues need to be addressed for the success of teachers' collective learning, namely, how collective time is used (Cravens & Drake, 2017; Saborit et al., 2016), what steps should be conducted (Qingli et al., 2019), the role of teachers with different years of teaching experience (Bocala, 2015), the goals of each collective learning period (Calderón & Tannehill, 2021), what content should be learned (Groves et al., 2016; Probst et al., 2016), what students should learn, be able to do and understand at the end of each class period (Jensvoll & Lekang, 2018), and the types of supportive conditions school leaders should provide (Qingli et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative descriptive single case study focuses on the understanding of a lower secondary school teacher in MICSS who had three years of collective learning experiences. The single case study design was chosen because it allowed the researcher to summarize respondent's perspectives on specific events, without being limited by specific data collection methods (Yin, 2003). The current section begins with a detailed description of the research context and respondent, followed by an explanation of the data collection and analysis approach that was applied.

Context and Respondent

This qualitative single case study was conducted in a MICSS located in the urban region of Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. This MICSS is a medium-scale school with 55 (2022) full-time teachers and 790 students. In 1962 MICSS insists on self-reliance, continues to follow Chinese language education, and does not conform to the government's national secondary school model (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan). In 1967, with the graduation of the first group of senior students enrolled in 1964, the sample MICSS became a six-year educational system from Form One to Form Six and has gradually improved teachers' professional development through the efforts of the school board. Since 2015, the sample MICSS has gradually introduced collective learning strategy to improve all teachers' teaching quality and their students' learning outcomes.

Based on the purposive sample selecting strategy (Merriam, 2009), a female teacher at the sample MICSS, here referred to by the pseudonym "Misami" for the purpose of confidentiality, was the only respondent in this study. Misami began teaching Bahasa Cina (BC) to lower secondary school students at the sample MICSS in 2018; in addition to this, she also taught Mandarin Chinese History (MCH). She had a total of four years of teaching experience and three years' experience of collective learning with her peers and different seniors.

Data Collection

This qualitative case study used semi-structured interviews as its major data collection method, and these were performed and recorded using the web-based video teaching tool ZOOM. Misami's experiences, understanding, and suggestions of collective learning in MICSS, were all discussed in interviews and conversations with the researcher. The detailed explanation on the steps of data collection is as follows:

Detailed description of this study, the rights of Misami, and the planning time at which the researcher conducted this interview, as well as the use of data, were communicated to Misami before the interview. In addition, Misami was informed that she could reject to answer any questions that made her feel uncomfortable and could also withdraw from this interview at any time.

During the interview, the researcher asked Misami nine research-oriented, open-ended, and straightforward interview questions, such as, how may you define collective learning among teachers and what role of organizer, teachers, and school leaders should be played? What words would you use to summarize your journey of collective learning? It is critical to point out, however, that Misami was not required to answer all nine questions, and the researchers listened carefully in order to decide what to ask and what not to ask in-depth.

The interview was ended with the probing question, namely, what else do you wish to add? Finally, a total of 40 minutes' video recordings were obtained and saved by a password for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis approach defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was implemented to fulfill data analysis of this study. Given that the interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, data analysis began by transcribing and translating the video recordings, and this was accompanied by multiple readings to discover themes within the data. The detailed descriptions of data analysis are as follows:

During the process of familiarization with data, the video recordings of the semi-structured interview were transcribed, which was followed by data translation. Before multiple readings were done, all data were passed to Misami for member checking in order to improve the trustworthiness of this study. Next, three rounds of reading were performed to thoroughly immerse the researcher in the data and familiarize him with it, and to also ensure that the themes could emerge from the data.

After obtaining the overall understanding of the data, the coding procedure was performed manually. In the first round of coding, open word-by-word and line-by-line manual coding were conducted in order to conclude themes. In the second round of coding, the researchers continuously moved back and forth between reading the data as well as rereading codes emerged within the first round of coding with the aim of determining the final codes. In this process, by comparing codes frequencies, the researcher also determined the decisive themes used to achieve the research purpose.

Table 1

Themes and its Codes

Themes	Codes
Procedure	Teaching Demonstration; Teaching Imitation; Searching; Summary; Assessment; Feedback; Reflection;
Related Persons	Novice Teacher; Veteran Teachers; School Leaders; Organisers; Administrators;
Learning Contents	Teaching Methods; Classroom Management; Instructional Design; Course Interpretation; Motivating students to learn; Updated Teaching Instruments; Play-Based Learning; Students;
Learning Outcomes	Sense of Competition; Colleague Motivation; Students' Learning Interest will be Stimulated; Students' Trust in Novice Teachers is Raised;
Supportive Conditions	Learn from One Another; Trust; Open-Minded; Encouragement; Time; Space

The final process of data analysis was defined by each theme guided by the research purpose, which was presented in the Table 2.

Table 2

Themes and their Definition

Themes	Codes
Procedure	How MICSS teachers conduct collective learning;
Related Persons	Who would be involved in collective learning;
Learning Contents	What might be learned within collective learning;
Learning Outcomes	Why collective learning is necessary;
Supportive Conditions	How ensure collective learning being conducted.

FINDING

The current section presents the findings based on information gathered through interviews and personal conversations with Misami, including how she defined collective learning, the supportive conditions it required, the benefits she got from collective learning, and her suggestions to make collective learning more effective in MICSS.

Misami's Definition of Collective Learning

In Misami's view, collective learning is a method that may help novice teachers achieve their professional growth within a short period in which the veteran teachers share their teaching experiences through teaching demonstration and the novice teachers require to search their own teaching method by listening, reflection and imitation. With her own experiences, she explained:

Misami: I am a novice teacher with only three years of teaching experience, therefore, within collaborative learning, I studied all the teaching methods provided by the senior teachers and applied what I learned, reflecting meanwhile finding a more suitable teaching method. Compare with when I first enrolled in this MICSS, I now know how to use appropriate methods to stimulate students' learning interest and improve their learning efficiency. I think my professional growth is closely related to the collective learning with my peers and seniors.

It is clear from Misami's definition that collective learning is a platform for senior teachers to assist novice teachers in their professional development, in which teachers of different teaching seniority are required to complete different tasks. The senior teacher's task is to demonstrate and instruct, while the novice teacher's task is to imitate, apply and reflect on the skills they have learnt. In the view of Misami, collective learning must be a combination of experienced and novice teachers, with the experienced teacher being the main giver and the novice teacher being the main receiver. Guided by this definition of collective learning, the next section presents the benefits of collective learning for her.

Benefits of Collective Learning for Misami

The first benefit that collective learning gave Misami was that it assisted her to adapt to the teaching environment as quickly as possible and get out of a confused mindset of teaching, given that she had no prior teaching experience. Misami's professional development was realized possible by her insistence on combining collective learning with her personal reflection to accumulate her teaching experience, especially in classroom management and instructional design, and stimulate students' learning motivation, thus improve her teaching effectiveness.

The second benefit that collective learning gives her is that it assists her in deepening her interpretation of discipline content knowledge and transmitting this knowledge to her students in the most direct and simple way possible. For this point, she shared :

Misami: Compared to novice teachers, experienced teachers are more able to circle the key points of a particular topic in a short period of time and choose the right method to teach the series of key points to their students quickly and effectively, based on their years of teaching experience.

A third benefit that collective learning has given her is the flexibility to use various teaching aid web-based software in her classroom teaching practice, which was achieved based on:

Misami: Novice teachers are more receptive to new things and the use of new teaching tools than more experienced teachers. In order to continue assisting in improving student learning effectiveness, the experienced teachers around me would often ask me for advice on these digital devices within collective learning, and in order to better assist my seniors, I would ask myself to operate these applications until I became proficient, which in effect also assisted me to use these tools better.

A final benefit of cooperative learning is that it enhances her self-efficacy by increasing students' confidence in her teaching ability, thus allowing her to conduct her daily teaching with more confidence. This benefit has more important positive implications for her than the other three, as she explains:

Misami: ...teacher's self-efficacy has a direct impact on students' trust in the teacher, the advance definition of the content in cooperative learning allows students to recognize that a young teacher can teach in tandem with a senior teacher, reducing their rejection of young teachers.

Therefore, in her opinion, collective learning among teachers is essential, especially for the professional development of novice teachers. However, she believes that collective learning conducted in the MICSS working need more supportive conditions in order to sustain its positive effects on the professional development of novice teachers more effectively.

Supportive Conditions of Conducting Collective Learning in MICSS

In the view of Misami, among the many factors that influence the effectiveness of teachers' collective learning in MICSS, human factor is the most important, especially the leadership of the school. The leadership is required to lead the members of the collective learning team to establish clear goals, in which leaders can either directly lead or monitor the members to achieve the goals and must assess the effectiveness of the teachers' collective learning through random classroom observations.

In addition, encouragement from school leaders is important, especially for novice teachers, as it can inevitably boost their confidence and give them the courage to innovate, thus injecting new blood into collective learning and increasing their motivation of engagement. In addition to this, physical support is also important, such as a regular time and a suitable place for teachers to conduct collective learning.

For those involved in collective learning, Misami suggested that they be more open and honest, give their opinions directly, and keep the discussion focused on the course itself, without getting involved in personal grudges. In addition, they should trust each other more and believe that they will be more able to develop professionally through the collective learning of their peers in MICSS.

DISCUSSION

According to this research, the reason why conducting collective learning in MICSS is essential is that it helps novice teachers to realise their professional development through an in-depth understanding of discipline content knowledge and the corresponding teaching skills, this finding is in line with the findings reported by Hallam et al. (2015) and Ronfeldt et al. (2015). Akiba et al. (2019) and Sutton and Shouse (2019) confirm that teachers may strengthen their reasonable interpretation of curriculum standards to update their knowledge of the discipline, instructional methods and other practical tacit knowledge of the teaching profession directly related to their daily teaching. The function of collective learning mentioned above is consistent with the findings of this study, which indicate that collective learning may help MICSS teachers, especially for the novice teachers, enhance their knowledge of discipline and pedagogy, in addition to other related skills.

Goddard et al. (2015) and Hoque et al. (2020) highlight that collective learning may be an important way to develop teachers' internal qualities, and they may gain confidence based on collective learning in order to address the series of challenges they encounter in their daily teaching practice. This is also consistent with the findings of this study, which conclude that one important function of collective learning is the improvement of MICSS teachers' teaching confidence and thus their self-efficacy, and particularly that of novice teachers.

Although this study has concluded that conducting collective learning at MICSS was necessary, whether collective learning may be conducted effectively at MICSS, and the extent to which collective learning can assist MICSS teachers in realising professional development are dependent on a number of emotional and physical supportive conditions, with leadership perceived as having a significant influence on it. This finding is consistent with the overwhelming majority of scholars, who have identified a strong link between leadership and the implementation of collective learning in various studies, and who have pointed out that leaders in various positions should provide a range of supportive conditions to promote the implementation of collective learning.

More specifically, this study has also concluded, in line with Zahedi et al. (2021), Harvey and Nilsson (2021), Johnson and Voelkel (2021) that school principals should ensure that adequate meeting space and sufficient time, in addition to the technology necessary to facilitate collective learning, and if possible, principals should also participate in collective learning, providing frequent communication and encouragement. In addition, this study has revealed the role of facilitator of collective learning in understanding members' backgrounds, listening to their voices, and increasing their self-esteem, all of which are considered critical to implementing collective learning in MICSS, which was also reported by Gonçalves et al. (2020).

Furthermore, consistent with Ranellucci and Bergey (2020), it is necessary for both school leaders and direct leaders of collective learning to embed motivational and emotional support into the implementation of collective learning, so that it is possible to promote MICSS teachers who have a high level of self-efficacy, and who understand how to stimulate students to learn with the support of collective learning. This study has also concluded that ensuring effective application of collective learning in MICSS requires that leaders at all levels focus on issues of teachers' professional development rather than others unrelated to teaching.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to discover a teacher's understanding on collective learning in MICSS, and to summarise its implications on MICSS teachers' professional development, and the topic addressed in this study may be considered meaningful for MICSS, because it attempted to help MICSS teachers outline collective learning and its function on their professional development, taking their perceptions into account, in order to promote their confidence in collective learning conducting. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that MICSS teachers require a basic body of knowledge for collective learning, because they appear to be relatively knowledgeable regarding collective learning and its function on their professional development. Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, in general, it seems that this study may present an alternative method closely related to MICSS teachers' daily teaching practice, which may be applied to help MICSS teachers achieve continuous professional development. Further study could assess the implications of collective learning based on an increased number of respondents from different subject, in addition to other research designs in order to make collective learning a more robust strategy for helping MICSS teachers of different teaching seniority realise their professional development.

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