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The Intention of Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School Teachers to Implement Professional Learning Communities for Professional Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors influencing Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) teachers' intention to implement Professional Learning Community (PLC)as a means to achieve their professional development. The study also aims to discover the targeted factors experienced by MICSS teachers whichhad hindered or facilitate their learning and implementation of PLC. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and PLC theory wereused as the theoretical bases of the study. Qualitative data was collected through several semi-structured interviews with eight MICSS teachers. Interviews were transcribed. Coding and constant comparison were adopted during data analysis.The findings of this study indicated that MICSS teachers appeared to have relatively strong intention to learn and applyPLC. The results also indicated that poorly planned teacher training activities, heavy workloadsand unsupportiveschool administrators hadhindered MICSS teachers' learning and applicationof PLC as a means to achieve their professional development.

Keywords: MICSS teachers' professional development; Professional learning community (PLC); teachers' training; heavy workloads; unsupportive administrators

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the intention of MICSS teachers to learn and implement PLC in order to satisfy their professional development requirements. This study was designed in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of MICSS teachertraining and professional development, in addition to examining the factors that may influence MICSS teachers' engagement in PLC, and which may help them leverage PLC more effectively in order to fulfil their professional development needs.

There is a general consensus on the understanding of what teacherprofessional development encompasses; it is considered to bestructured, formal or informal professional learning activities that aim to change teachers' attitudes, update their occupational skills, enhance their related professional knowledge (Vangrieken et al., 2017), and enable them to be more effective in helping their students achieve higher academic performance (Gaines et al., 2019; Santos & Miguel, 2019; Wasserman & Migdal, 2019), as opposed to intermittent, seemingly aimless, or poorly planned training activities (Cocal, 2019; Patton & Parker, 2017; Soini et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, it seems to be the case that MICSS teachershave beenmarginalized by the Malaysian government's conventional education system, which means that they are deprived of access to government-funded teacher training. As a result of this situation, they are required to independently

seek appropriate resources from local or foreign educational institutions on their own or with the assistance of Malaysian Chinese community(Chin-choy, 2016; Tey, 2016). Short-term workshops, lectures, and inter-MICSS exchange forums are the primary methods (Huey, 2015)employed by MICSS to support their teachers in improving their professional knowledge and teaching skills.

The aforementioned training methods conducted in MICSS are all short-term training activities, which are not adequateto achieve meaningful and lasting professional improvement for the teachers(Bowe & Gore, 2017; Rodgers et al., 2019), and they cannot equip teachers adequately to face today's ever-changing educational environment (Piyaman et al., 2017; Vangrieken et al., 2017). Scholars have also recognized that it is no longer feasible or beneficial to help teachers reimagine teaching methods and design innovative teaching practices through short-term professional development strategies (Somprach et al., 2017; Vanblaere & Devos, 2018).

In addition, the lack of appropriate professional training may be one of the significant factors leading to the diversification of MICSS teachers' responsibilities(Peng, 2019; Tey, 2016), and it is therefore critical to discoveran appropriate and practical method for MICSS teachers' professional development. Any such training method needs to be rooted in the status quo of MICSS teachertraining, and needs to cater to the challenges that these teachers face: disparate teacherprofessional qualification (Huanzhi, 2014; Tey, 2016), high teacher-turnover rate(especially in small-scale MICSSs) (Huey, 2015; Ling, 2017), the unattractiveness of a teaching career at MICSS as compared to other options (Chin-choy, 2016; Peng, 2019; Tey, 2016), and heavy teaching and non-teaching workloads.

In order to address thesechallenges faced by MICSS teachers, instead of inducing them to participate in self-enrichment activities independently, researchers and policy-makers propose bringing teachers together, so that they may learn from one another, and such a collaborative atmosphere mayensure that no teacheris left behind (Bocala, 2015; Patton & Parker, 2017).PLC is one such collective learning platform that may meet these needs, and more researchers are advocating that school administrators adopt PLC in their schools, as it may enhance the overall quality and performance of teachers (Liou & Daly, 2014), and may supportMICSS teachers in becomingeffective and qualified educators.

Before conducting PLC to help MICSS teachers achieve professional enhancement, it is necessary to explore their intention (Dunn et al., 2018; Shaoan et al., 2020), which is an essential predictor of MICSS teachers' acceptance or rejection of PLC and its various professional development activities (Hodge et al., 2018). Since there is no assessment mechanism for MICSS teachers' professional development, nor a well-developed teacher evaluation and motivation system, MICSS teachers' intention and willingness to learn and apply PLC may, to a certain extent, influence whether PLC may contribute positively to their professional development.This paper highlights the factors that set the environment for PLC and also present the hindrance of implementing PLC for teachers' professional development.

Literature Review

Professional Learning Community (PLC) is an effective, economical and widely-accepted strategy for theprofessional development of teachers(Hord & Sommers, 2008; Roy & Hord, 2006; Valckx et al., 2018), and has become a new paradigm for teachers' professional development since the mid-1990s.Both teachers and school administrators are becoming increasingly aware of PLC (Battersby, 2019; Park et al., 2019),the major contributions it has made towards teachers' professional development (Sun-Keung Pang & Ting, 2016),and the significant impactsit may have on enhancing teaching effectiveness (Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikhahmadi, 2016).

PLC has become a familiar name in the education sector in recent years(Hord, 1997; Hord & Tobia, 2012), and to do justice to its success, scholars and

researchers have analyzed it from various perspectives in order to fulfill diverseeducational requirements (Ting, 2015; Valckx et al., 2020). For instance, Dufour and his colleagues (2004) established a PLC model focusing on enhancing students' learning outcomes (Chang-Seo, 2018; Saidin & Kong, 2018); Hord and her colleagues formulated a PLC model (2012) that focuses on helping teachers achieve their professional development (Chang-Seo, 2018; Daly, 2018); and Olivier and his colleagues created a PLC model (2016) that highlights school reform(Daly, 2018). Although the different PLC models target different educational groups, in general, all PLC models emphasize teachers' collaborative learning (Hongbiao & Zheng, 2018; Saidin & Kong, 2018). Hord, in particular, has conducted extensive research on PLC and her findings on the topic are highly significant, and this is the rationale for selecting Hord's PLC theory as the theoretical guideline for this study.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)as defined by Ajzen (1991)is another theoretical basisfor this study.Teachers' intention to engage in professional development activities is the most prominent of the many influencing factors (Richter et al., 2019), and intention is an important predictor of teachers' acceptance or rejection of various professional development activities (Hodge et al., 2018). Accordingly, a person's intention may be estimated through their attitude to the targeted behavior, subjective norms regarding the behavior, and perceived control over the behavior(Lavelle, 2019; Scherb& Nitz, 2020). From among the three elements, attitude is the most significant predictor of teachers' intention to attendvarious training activities (Seufert et al., 2021). The evaluation of the attitude object includes three types of responses: feelings or evaluation towards the attitude object; knowledge and beliefs about the attitude object; and intended behavior towards the attitude object (Krischler & Pit-ten Cate, 2019; Markova et al., 2016; Scherb & Nitz, 2020).

The subjective norms regarding behavior are defined as the "perceived social or external pressure to encourage someone to implement or not to implement some specific events" (Ajzen, 1991). This means that various types of external pressuremay motivate teachers to continuously pursue their own professional development and stay abreast of current developments in related subject content knowledge, in addition to pedagogical content knowledge, through regular participation in professional learning activities (Richter et al., 2019; Syed et al., 2021). The perceived control over behavior is partly based on previous experience (Sadaf & Johnson, 2017; Scherb & Nitz, 2020). This means that strategies used to promote teachers' professional development in the past, teachers' feelings about previous training activities, and the expertize they acquired, often tend to be key influences on teachers' requirements for future professional development (Allen & Penuel, 2015), in addition to the more advanced training they may subsequently attend (Zein, 2017).

Methods

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study design to identifythe factors that may facilitate or hinder MICSS teachers' intention to learn and apply PLC as a means to achieve their professional development at two MICSSs of different scales. Semi-structured interview was the main data collection method employed to collect the data to needed to address the research purpose. Interviews were transcribed. Coding and constant comparison were adopted during data analysis. In the following sections, detailed information on the methodology employed in this study is presented.

Research Setting

TwoMICSSs of different scale were selected to conduct this study. MICSS-1(M1) is a large-scale school with approximately 158 (2020) full-time teachers and nearly 2900 students. This complete middle school, with a six-year schooling system, from form one to form six, was built in 1923 and has had a history of 97 years. The second school, MICSS-2(M2) is a medium-scale school with 50 (2020) full-time teachers and 684 students, and is similar to M1;as it also possesses a six-year

schooling system, from form one to form six. M2 was founded in 1914, and has been in operation for 104 years.

Respondents

For this qualitative comparative case study, based on the purposive sampling strategy, two MICSS administrators (M1: R1; M2: R5) in charge of teacher training events and six MICSS teachers (M1: R2, R3, R4; M2: R6, R7, R8) with varying levels of teaching seniority were selected as the final research respondents.They were selected because of their ability to offer an insider's perspective, in addition to providing in-depth information (Given, 2008)on their intention to learn and apply PLC in order to advance their professional development. It was also taken into consideration of the respondents' understanding of PLC and the previous training activities they have attended. In order to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used for each of the respondents.

Results

The central finding of this study was that all the respondents hada relatively strong intention to learn and apply PLC in order to achieve their professional development. The reason for this desire as the teachers believed that PLC is capable of meeting the status quo of MICSS teachertraining, and may help them to overcome the challenges they encounter.The respondents reported that teachers, per se, and school leaders need to cooperate to ensure that PLC is conducted effectively.

Eight respondents achieved a consensus of the opinion regarding the intrinsic factors that may influence MICSS teachers' intention to learn and apply PLC; however, they offeredvarious reasons for this. Among them, R3reported that the lack of external constraints in MICSS required MICSS teachers to be sufficiently motivated to implement and learn PLC. R1, R3, and R4 believed that only PLC which is based on MICSS teachers' internal motivation could effectively and consistently support themin their pursuit of their professional development. The four M2 respondents all agreed that PLC could only be conducted at MICSS if MICSS teachers were enthusiastic about its implementation.

Although M1 and M2 were different in terms of their scale, the external factors reported by respondents asinfluencing teachers' intention to learn and apply PLCwere similar. Respondents reported three main targeted factors that they believed could decrease MICSS teachers' intention to adopt PLC: lower emotional evaluation of previous training activities, heavy teaching and non-teaching workloads, and unsupportive administrators. Until such time that these obstacles are removed, MICSS teachers may obtain significant benefits throughthe implementation of PLC.

Heavy teaching and non-teaching workloads

Heavy teaching and non-teaching workloadsare the first significant external barrier that may reduce teachers' intention to learn and apply PLC. R4 reported that:

> **R4**:"At M1, each teacher has 24 classes per week, and they are also required to be the instructor of co-curricular activities. I am also a form teacher…need to deal with classroom matters. After that, I have to prepare lessons and check assignments. I have the drive to learn and apply PLC, but I do not have enough energy…"

ConfirmingR4's statement, R3 added that it is challenging for M1 teachers to allocatesufficient time to their various duties, due to their heavy workloads, as M1 operates on a dual-track system, in which both the content of SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) and UEC (Unified Examination Certificate)need to be taught; she remarked that:

> **R3**: "…In M1, some teachers are responsible for four classes with a total of 200 students, and they will spend much time correcting the students' essays…there is not enough time, and no way to solve this; maybe the teacher can squeeze in a bit of time to complete it, but the results may not be good…"

R1 and R3 also proposed that teachers' heavy workloads may reduce their intention to learn and

apply PLC. Despite the scale of M2 being different from M1, R8 also agreed that as a result of the school's various administrative tasks, the already heavy teaching workload added to the level of stress suffered by teacher; she provided an example:

> **R8:** "In M2, there are only 55 classes a week and the teachers use 32 classes to teach…preparing lessons, correcting assignments, and completing various administrative tasks…make teachers who are initially full of motivation have little intention to learn and apply PLC..."

R6 pointed out that there is no difference between the numbers of students (40 students per class) in M2 and other large-scale MICSSs; she offered an example:

> **R6:**"…Each Chinese teacher is required to teach four classes, meaning that in addition to the daily teaching tasks, they also need to check the homework and essays of 160 students…all the Chinese teachers are form teachers…and need to spend time on administrative tasks."

According to R5 and R7, all of the teachers in M2 have a high number of classroom teaching tasks now (each teacher is required to complete 14 teaching hours per week), and the amount of classroom teaching combined with other non-teaching duties causes M2 teachers to feel overwhelmed.

Lower emotional evaluation of previous training activities

Teachers' lower emotional evaluation of previous training activities was the second significant external barrier reported by respondents that may reduce teachers' intention to learn and apply PLC. "Non-coherent and unsystematic"wasR4's personal evaluation of M1's teacher training; she recalled that:

> **R4:** "…over the past few years, I have participated in various school-based or off-campus training, and in my opinion, all of them were intermittent, with the trainer occasionally coming for a day or two to instill their training content in a very general way, and when he or she is invited again, the training content may be different ... in fact, this training system does not have a substantial positive effect on teachers' professional development…"

R3, too felt that the M1's previous teachertraining was not systematic. According to R1, teachers' lower evaluations are due to the lack of corresponding local trainers, and the environmental mismatch between trainer and trainee may be the reason for the lower evaluation among MICSS teachers; he explained that:

> **R1:** "…We lack local trainers and engage more foreign trainers from mainland China or Taiwan, the trainer's training content is based on their local environment. Therefore, the previous training was challenging for MICSS-1 teachers, and they had to be creative to mix and match what they had learned with the MICSS system, which in turn took a lot of teacher time, so it can be expected that MICSS teachers will not have a high intention to participate…"

He then described thatPLC had emerged in western countries, and that it was a new term for Malaysian secondary school teachers, and that even though it had been adopted and applied in many eastern countries or regions, according to the local context, it did not mean that these transformed PLC may be fully applied to MICSS. In his view, when suitable Malaysian local PLCtrainers could be invited, M1 teachers wouldhavestronger intention to learn and apply PLC to achieve their professional development.

R2 and R6 also argued that the difference in educational fields between trainers and trainees created cognitive differences, requiring trainees to spend extra time adjusting what they had learned about PLC in order to apply it. R6 further pointed out that modifying training content obtained from foreign sources may inadvertently increase MICSSteachers' workloads and if not handled properly, might fail to achieve the purpose of helping teachers achieve professional development, and this could lead to a waste of teachers' time, and

thereby lead to a reduction in their intention to continue learning and applying PLC. The respondents' low evaluations of the previous training activities arranged by MICSS may also influence MICSS teachers' intention to learn and apply PLC. R4, in particular, reported:

> **R4:** "For me, I am not expecting much. MICSS is not subsidized by the government, which is the monetary aspect, and the time that can be spent on teachers' professional development is limited, so even though M1 introduces many kinds of training, there is almost nothing beneficial for me…"

The phenomenon described by R4 often occurred in M2 as well. According to R8, the training activities in M2 were scheduled so intensively that teachers did not have time to absorb the content, let alone to apply what they have learnt to their classroom teaching practice, which directly ledto teachers losing the motivation to continue learning. She explained:

> **R8:**"Much of the training I have participated in are "non-stop" types, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, never allowing the trainees to give feedback…In fact, in my opinion, the main reason is that the trainer did not plan their training contents, and this problem has persisted untilnow, but there has been no improvement, so for the next training on PLC, I think it will still be so…"

Based on R8's response, R6stated that the previous teachers' training in M2 was not systematic, mainly due to the administrators in-charge of teacher training lacking understanding of the discipline of teacher professional development. Interestingly, during the interviews with the other three M2 respondents, it was also revealed that the administrator in charge of teacher training in the school was also critical of the implementation of various types of teacher training activities, and that whether they had a clear understanding and orientation of PLC as a teacher training model would also be a significant external factor determining whether teachers would learn and apply it. They explained that they held this opinion because they believed that the reason for the lack of significant results in M2's teacher professional development was the low level of awareness of the administrator in charge. Therefore, they advocated that before conducting training in order to introduce PLC to M2 teachers, it would be necessary to increase the knowledge and cognition of the administrator on "PLC and teacher professional development," otherwise, all training activities would likely be as ineffective as had been the case in the past.

Discussion

This study aimedatexploring the factors that may influence MICSS teachers' intention to learn and apply PLC as a means of pursuing their professional development. From the two elements defined by Ajzen (1991) in her theory of planned behavior: subjective norms regarding behavior, and perceived control over behaviours, three sub-themesemerged to address the research purpose of the current study, which are, unplanned teacher training, heavy workloads, and unsupportive administrators.

MICSS teachers actively participate in various school-basedor off-campus training activities arranged by their schools, and they generally view off-campus training sessions as opportunities to cooperate and communicate with teachers from other MICSSs, which may help to broaden their understanding of the discipline content knowledge and help raise their awareness of different teaching methods that they may choose to adopt. Regardless of their teaching seniority, teachers may also digest and absorb the content of training sessions, and apply it to their classroom teaching practice as a way to enhance their interaction with students and increase their interest in learning, thereby improving students' academic performance, while simultaneously enhancing their professional satisfaction.

The findings as mentioned above that arose from this study were inconsistent with the findingsof Hoque et al.(2020), Nocetti et al. (2020), and Otara et al. (2019), who propose that teachers' attitude to professional training activities varied based on their

teaching experience. According to Admiraal et al. (2015), teachers' regular behavioral responses to training may be the central mediating factor in determining teachers' intention to engage insubsequent training activities; the current study concludes that MICSS teachers possess relatively strong intention to pursue their professional development through engagement with PLC, and that this may be due to their less optimisticbehavioral responses to previous training activities that were provided in order to satisfy their professional development requirements.

Despite theinconsistent findings concluded by Şahin and Han (2020), this study has discovered that teachers' attitudes towards attending professional development activities are closely related to their school working environment, and that a positive school-based learning environmentmay motivate MICSS teachers to attend various activities as a means to achieve their professional development. Compared with M1, the learning environment for teachers in M2 was less satisfactory (the school leaderships' attitude towards and cognition of teachers' professional development are the primary factorsleading to the less than ideal learning environment in M2), and this may reduce teachers' intention to learn and apply PLC for their professional development.

Apart from the learning environment, teachers' emotional response towards previous teacher training activities seems to be positively correlated with their intention to participate in subsequent professional development activities. Consistent with the views held by Bostic (2019), deVries et al. (2013), and Darling-Hammond (2006), this study similarly discovered that when MICSS teachers felt that much of the professional development they had participated in had little impact on their daily routines, duties, and mandated responsibilities, they were significantly less motivated to participate in professional development activities.

According to the respondents, compared to M2, M1 teacher training was on the correct track. However, it was still evaluated by respondents as being poorly planned, and this resulted in low teacher evaluation of its effectiveness; and M1 teachers reported that they hoped that teachers' future training would be more focused and purposeful in order to help them overcome theteaching challenges that they faced on a daily basis. The teacher training at M2 was even evaluated as a failure, because it only introduced a variety updated teaching methods, but did not confirm or assess the teachers' learning outcomes, and as a result, the training was viewed as highly ineffective.

MICSS teachers faced challenges and obstacles to their applicationand implementation of PLC, namely, heavy workloads and time constraints. This finding was consistent with those reported by Peng (2019), Tey(2016), Kuo-Liang and Yet-San (2020). Furthermore, one of the significant barriers that may obstructMICSS teachers from implementing PLC was the highturnover rate of teachers, most notably in small-scale MICSS, and in some medium-scale MICSS located in more remote rural areas, and this factor may lead to the implementation of PLC beingunsustainable.

MICSS teachers were keenly aware that they were role models for their students, and they generally believed that only by improving their teaching skills and abilitiescould they help their students improve their academic performance. MICSS teachers were likely to continue to develop their learning and understanding of their subject knowledge and teaching methods through formal collective learning and informal exchanges among teachers who teach the same subjects, even though the previous training activities introduced by their schoolswere not perceived as having helped them achieve visible professional growth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to explore the factors that influenced MICSS teachers' intention to learn and apply PLC as a means of pursuing their professional development. The study revealed that the intention among the MICSS teachers in implementing the PLC is relatively high. However, certainpoorly planned teacher training activities, heavy workloads, and unsupportive school administrators had hindered MICSS teachers' learning and application

of PLC as a means to achieve their professional development. Despite of all, the MICSS teachers were likely to continue to develop their learning and understanding of their subject knowledge and teaching methods through the implementation of PLC. The findings demonstrated the significant desire of the teachers to upgraded themselves to be more effective. The information yielded from the study can be integrated in teachers' training programs and policy making for professional development. It is recommended that every effort to be made by the professional development in educational policy to promote the best practice for teachers' development to enhance professional growth and better quality of the teaching and learning process. Additional research about the implementation of PLC needs to be pursued. Such research could confirm further test the factors and provide modifications and refinements for teachers' professional development. Further research is needed to determine these aspects or issues of PLC to ensure teachers' professional advancement.

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