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Professional Development of Instructional Coaching for Middle Leaders in Malaysian Secondary Schools: A Need Analysis

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 28 Feb 2023 Revised: 1 March 2023 Accepted: 15 March 2023 Published: 1 April 2023</p>	<p>Instructional coaching is a vital professional development strategy to be mastered by middle leaders (ML) in facilitating teachers' pedagogical improvement and professional growth as well as enacting effective instructional leadership collaboratively with other leaders in schools. The main aim of this study is to determine the need for the implementation of instructional coaching professional development specifically for ML in Malaysian schools. Utilising a convergent mixed method research design, the effectiveness of ML's instructional coaching practice was examined from the perspectives of 377 academic teachers in Selangor (representative samples) via a statistical survey (Survey A) and thirteen School Improvement Specialist Coaches Plus (SISC+) officers nationwide via an open-ended survey (Survey B) respectively. The descriptive data findings of Survey A generated by Statistical Package for Social Science Version 26 (SPSSV26) reported that the level of ML's instructional coaching in secondary schools is at moderate level with the average mean value of 3.69 (SD.781) while the qualitative findings of Survey B analysed via Atlas.ti Version 9 revealed that instructional coaching practice of ML is ineffectively practiced by ML due to the lack of knowledge and technical skills in applying the approach during coaching sessions with teachers. Both findings have demonstrated the critical necessity for the implementation of instructional coaching professional development specifically tailored to ML in Malaysian schools in order to empower and equip them with the essential knowledge and skills for supporting and fostering continuous pedagogical improvement among teachers in schools.</p>
<p>Keywords: Professional-development, Middle leaders, Instructional coaching, Need analysis</p> <p></p>	

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INTRODUCTION

In the presence of the Covid-19 outbreak, in which the entire world is in a state of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), school leaders and educators must remain steadfast in order to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning for future generations is not jeopardised. Among the issues confronting school leaders in this challenging circumstance is ensuring constant effective teaching and learning by incorporating a firm grasp of knowledge and skills in curriculum content as well as a broad and balanced use of ICT among teachers. To satisfy the intense expectations and fulfil the list of difficult obligations, a collaborative leadership network comprised of all school leaders, including ML must be in place. In fact, since the beginning of this century, the paradigm shift in educational leadership toward distributive leadership has resulted in rapid collaborative efforts among all layers of school leaders to improve and sustain various educational improvement strategies for the benefit of teacher professional growth and student outcomes. Moreover, many international and domestic academics have recognised the critical functions of ML as mediators of teaching and learning improvement, owing to their closer proximity to teachers and students in comparison to principals and senior assistants in schools (Bryant, Wong & Adames, 2020; Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Hardy & Ronnerman, 2019; Javadi, 2018; Lavorato, 2017). In Malaysia, the newest national education policies (PPPM 2013-2025 and the New Narrative of Educational Practices 2019) requires middle leaders to function as learning catalysts and mediators in all aspects of school operations. This acknowledges the critical role of ML such as Head of the Department (HOD) in influencing pedagogical reform among teachers in schools since they are in a better position to address pedagogical issues, facilitate the elevation of teaching and learning via coaching as well as supervising professional growth among teachers and students compared to other school leaders.

Nonetheless, there is a plethora of studies which show multiple scenarios that make it challenging for ML to accomplish their varied responsibilities in schools. For instance, some Western and Eastern scholars have agreed that ML, unlike principals, do not have direct authority over teachers (Bryant, 2019; Lillejord & Børte, 2020; Lokman, Lee & Mohammed, 2016) and therefore need to rely on their abilities to influence and motivate teachers to undertake pedagogical improvements (De Nobile, 2018a; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020). However, since ML are also identified as lack of strategies in forming collaborative efforts and establishing networking, they tend to be ineffective to convince teachers to engage in meaningful learning as well as lack autonomy to make a difference in continuing pedagogical practice (Cridge, 2019). Moreover, throughout many years, a number of middle leadership scholars around the globe unanimously agreed that there is still a lack of effort and attention on ML's professional development in empowering their school leadership when compared to their principals and other senior leaders (Abang Adam, 2018; Bryant, 2019; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014; Wan Fadhlurrahman & Al-Amin, 2020).

In fact, the conflict of cross-responsibility between upper school leadership and peers frequently causes them to be cautious in carrying out the obligation of driving pedagogical reform and enhancing teacher performance in schools (Grootenboer, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2017). Moreover, there is currently a dearth of explicit guidelines or frameworks that clearly characterised intermediate leaders, the requirements and functions of their job, as well as their areas of professional growth (Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017; Lipscombe, Grice & Tindall-Ford, 2020). Therefore, these circumstances to certain extent have built up a considerable gap in knowledge, skills and attributes of school leadership between ML and their superiors which making it very difficult for them to have mutual understanding and coordinate efforts in continually improving the performance of teachers and students. With that, more extensive explorations are needed to gain a better understanding of the requirement for ML's empowerment so they will become more effective collaborative partners of school leadership while also having the capacity to mediate pedagogical improvement among teachers in their departments.

In this respect, many well-known Western middle leadership scholars such as Edwards-Groves et al. (2019) and Lipscombe et al. (2019) have stressed the necessity for specific professional development to empower and support ML to have capacity in enacting instructional leadership collaboratively with their senior leaders and also be able to mediate the process of teaching improvement effectively within school's context. In this regard, numerous school improvement scholars have empirically demonstrated that instructional coaching is one of the most successful professional development approaches that all levels of school leadership, including ML, must grasp in order to drive pedagogical capacity enhancement and teachers in the twenty-first century (Campbell &

van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Desimone & Pak, 2017; van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). This is because as prescribed by Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018 and Otter (2017), instructional coaching is a professional development approach that not only enables ML to mediate pedagogical changes and professionalism among teachers through learning partnerships, but its practice over time will also consolidate ML's leadership capabilities. Moreover, instructional coaching has been incorporated into school leadership trainings and professional developments in developed countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, as well as neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Singapore since it is widely recognised as an effective approach in developing overall leadership capacity among all layers of school leaders. Hence, all of these developments suggest that instructional coaching is a strategy that ML in Malaysian schools should embrace in order to successfully facilitate high-impact outcomes in teaching and learning.

In Malaysia, school leaders and MOE's officers are strongly encouraged to lead and support pedagogical improvement and continuous professional development among teachers in schools through the application of instructional coaching approach (Kho, Saeed & Abdul Rashid., 2020; Ministry Of Education Malaysia, 2013). This is because instructional coaching has been adopted as a type of effective professional development approach to support teachers in improving their pedagogical practices as part of the implementation of the District Transformation Program (DTP) under the MEB 2013-2025 (Ministry Of Education Malaysia, 2013). It is seen to grow progressively through the School Improvement Specialist Coaches Plus (SISC+) programme. Among some of the empirical studies on instructional coaching that have been undertaken are studies on SISC+ reflection on the function of their guidance, the influence and link between SISC+ teaching guidance and teacher teaching effectiveness, as well as student performance and teachers' impressions of SISC+ instructional coaching as a professional development strategy (Balang, Mahamod & Buang, 2020; Kho et al., 2020; Salefah & Norasmah, 2019; Salwati, Zuraidah & Ghavifker, 2019; Wan Fadhlurrahman, Al-Amin & Azian, 2020). Hence, since local academics are more focused on the implementation of the SISC+ programmes, this latest study attempts to focus on the development of ML instructional coaching in schools, which is seen as more relevant in enhancing and maintaining the dynamic of school leadership and school improvement results.

Furthermore, despite suggestions from local scholars for employing instructional coaching as a professional development approach for building and enhancing middle leaders' instructional leadership (Siaw, Khemanuwong & Shaik Abdul Malik, 2019; Wan Fadhlurrahman et al., 2020), the empowering efforts of ML to undertake instructional coaching are not as great as its implementation to prospective principals and thus leads towards a lack of knowledge, abilities and proper attitude and confidence to conduct instructional coaching strategies effectively. This factor has been one of the key issues contributing to the decline in the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom since erroneous feedbacks on teachers' actual performance leads to imprecise and inadequate instructional assistance provided to the teachers (Abdullah, Supramaniam, Mohamed & Yusof., 2020; Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2010). Hence, the absence of empirical research connecting local ML to instructional coaching leads to a lack of knowledge and awareness of the important features and effective professional development strategies of instructional coaching required to empower ML with instructional leadership efficacy as well as failure in identifying variables impacting the efficacy of instructional coaching of ML in elevating teachers' pedagogical performance.

Therefore, based on the description above, this current study is conducted to examine the need for the implementation of Instructional Coaching Professional Development specifically for ML in Malaysian secondary schools. The gaps and needs of ML's current instructional coaching practice are empirically identified by analysing statistical and qualitative data from two distinct groups of participants closely related to the execution ML's instructional coaching. Hence, the following questions are addressed in this study:

1. What are the teachers' perspectives on the level of instructional coaching provided by the middle leaders in facilitating teachers' pedagogical enhancement and professional growth in Malaysian secondary schools?
2. How the SISC+ officers view the level of instructional coaching provided by middle leaders in facilitating teachers' pedagogical enhancement and professional growth in Malaysian secondary schools?

3. Is there a need to implement instructional coaching professional development specifically for middle leaders in building their capacity to support and facilitate teachers' pedagogical enhancement and professional growth in Malaysian secondary schools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses the following aspects:

Need Analysis

According to McKillip (1987), needs analysis encompasses precise and systematic knowledge gathering strategies to assess the gap between the current state and the expected or ideal condition. It is strongly connected to the creation and design of knowledge material with the goal of enhancing the quality of learning and teaching via the process of identifying and assessing in order to meet the demands of stakeholders in research (Martins, 2017). For instance, McKillip's Discrepancy Need Analysis Model (1987) has been used as a reference model in conducting a systematic needs analysis study involving three stages namely; i) the goal setting; where the desired performance expectations for the research dimension are derived from a comprehensive literature review, ii) level of performance measurement analysis; where the actual outcome for the target population on each dimension of performance to be identified is determined through a survey method and iii) the degree of discrimination between the actual outcomes and the goal-setting results is assessed to see whether a gap exists between the two analyses. This eventually resulted in an accurate needs identification, which served as the empirical foundation for further actions in the planning and the implementation of ML's instructional coaching professional development in the future.

Professional Development of Middle Leaders

The rising prevalence of distributive leadership in schools is a result of changes in the educational environment in the 21st century. According to Bryant et al. (2020), the increased accountability for school governance has resulted in an increase in the obligations of school principals, which contributed towards further distribution of leadership tasks to ML. They are better positioned to drive teaching reform in the school system than their senior colleagues because they are closer to teachers in the school social setting. It gives them greater accessibility and solidarity influence to generate productive and meaningful connections, which many global educational scholars considered as an important feature of creating collective relationships that enhance teachers' professional growth (Li, Poon & Tam, 2018; Lipscombe et al., 2019).

Accordingly, to enable them to shoulder this complex responsibility, the enhancement of knowledge, expertise, skills and fostering appropriate attitudes for the development of leadership capacity for middle leaders through various professional learning mediums is critical and needs to be implemented continuously according to the school context. ML, like teachers, need to have their professional development entrenched in the context of their job, incorporating the joint efforts of stakeholders such as school top leadership to shape collective learning and focus on creating meaningful learning experiences among students in the classroom (Hammond & Moore, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Moreover, several study findings underscore the necessity of empowering school leaders, particularly those who lead from the middle level, in guiding and supporting teachers' continued professional development in schools (Bryant, 2019; Liljenberg & Wrethander, 2020; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford & Lamanna, 2021; Lucas, 2017; Netolicky, 2016). This is because ML's professional development will give continuing assistance in strengthening their capacity in leading and supporting sustainable educational reform, enhancing their collective learning capacity, and enabling their ability and confidence to cooperate with other school leaders. As a consequence, ML will have a greater capability for not only assisting teachers in becoming autonomous learners and continually enhancing their profession, but also for improving the entire quality of their instructional leadership.

Instructional Coaching

Coaching is one of the professional development strategies that employs systematic and meaningful conversation processes to enhance human internal progressive growth capacity to promote positive and meaningful improvement in knowledge, skills, and performance (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Ellinger & Kim, 2014; Shoukry & Cox, 2018; van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2018). In education, instructional coaching is a conversational strategy used to generate continuous professional development dialogues in between school leaders and teachers that emphasises on togetherness and equality in order to form collective learning in the school community. It entails a flexible and holistic collaborative learning cycle that fosters an individual's self-awareness for constant professional growth (Knight, 2019; Siaw et al., 2019; van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2018). This may result in the development and maintenance of enhanced pedagogical practices and greater educational leadership, which can contribute to higher levels of student and school performance (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Lofthouse, 2019; Otter, 2017). As a result, middle leaders who grasp this approach will be able to help teachers undertake pedagogical reform while simultaneously boosting their leadership ability and credibility.

METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the following aspects:

Research Design

Adopting the convergent mixed- method approach, the study was carried out by employing quantitative and qualitative surveys to get comprehensive perspectives from two distinct groups of participants closely related to the execution ML's instructional coaching. Two sets of survey questionnaires were used: i) Survey A - 5-point Likert scale questionnaire to collect statistical data on the level of implementation of instructional guidance in six aspects that had been determined from teachers under the guidance of the ML in schools; and ii) Survey B - a questionnaire with open-ended questions designed to allow expert respondents, School Improvement Specialist Coaches Plus (SISC+) officers, to express their professional opinions in depth manner based on their experience serving as instructional coaches for middle leaders. Hence, adapting the Creswell & Creswell (2018) Convergent Mixed-Methods design, the details on the study procedures are illustrated in Figure 1.

Participants

In Survey A, considering the recommendations of Sekaran & Bougie (2016), the researchers had chosen the teachers in the state of Selangor as samples because they represent the same population characteristics specified in the study. The Krejcie & Morgan (1970) Sampling Table was used to estimate the sample size from the entire population of ordinary academic teachers in the state of Selangor (representative population state), which was at 22,615. Hence, 377 teachers were selected by the researcher through a simple random sampling method. Meanwhile, for Survey B, by taking into account the views of Creswell & Poth (2018) and Merriam & Tisdell (2016) to establish the appropriate number of respondents in effectively represents the views of experienced experts, the researchers purposively selected thirteen SISC+ officers, who served as district instructional coaches and leadership specialists, in order to reflect expert opinions from all state zones in Malaysia, The demographics of the expert respondents are as shown in Table1.

Figure 1: Details of the study procedures

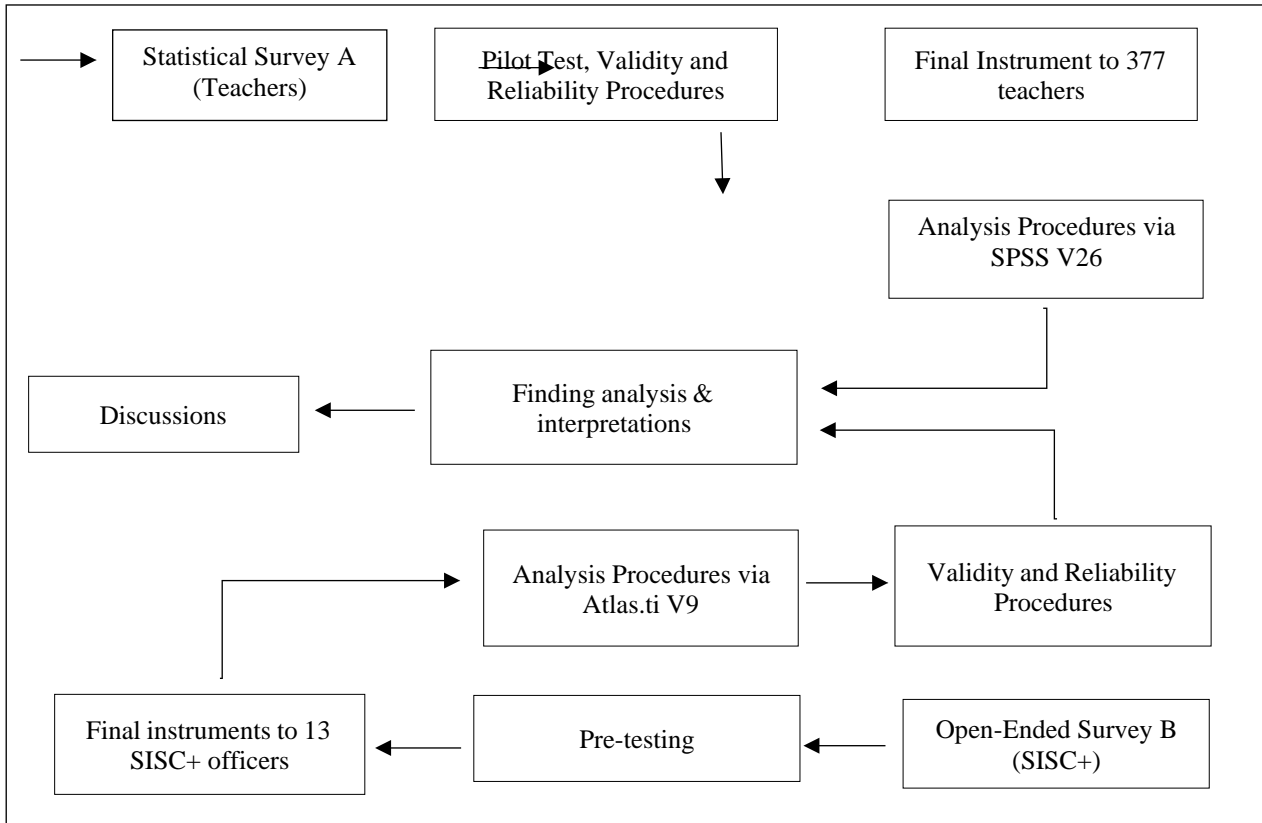


Table 1: Demographics of Expert Respondents

Code	State	Working Experience
E1	Pahang	19 years
E2	Sarawak	25 years
E3	Sarawak	23 years
E4	Sabah	15 years
E5	Terengganu	32 years
E6	Perak	19 years
E7	Johor	30 years
E8	Kelantan	25 years
E9	Negeri Sembilan	19 years
E10	WP Kuala Lumpur	30 years
E11	WP Putrajaya	32 years
E12	Selangor	31 years
E13	Pulau Pinang	30 years

Instrumentation

Survey A employed a 5-point Likert scale instrument adapted from the SISC+ Programme Implementation Evaluation Instrument created by Salefah & Norasmah (2019). The instrument was utilised in examining the teachers' perspectives towards ML's instructional coaching implementation in six dimensions which include: i) roles of instructional coaching (5 items), ii) knowledge of instructional coaching (4 items), iii) feedbacks in coaching (6 items), iv) coaching operational practice (14 items), v) instructional coach qualities (12 items), and vi) coaching role modelling (9 items). Four experts were consulted for validation in terms of its content and

language and this resulted in the S-CVI/Ave at the value of 1 for all dimensions stipulated in the Survey A questionnaire. The instrument was then evaluated in a pilot study after the adaption and validation procedures and had an Alpha reliability score of 0.987 which indicated high internal consistency values (Cohen et al., 2018; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

The instrument for Survey B encompassed open - ended questions that served to elicit expert judgments on matter under the study. The items were constructed in parallel with the literature review and arranged accordingly to the research questions in the needs analysis phase. The validity of content and language of the instrument was determined with reference to four experts. The pre-test questions were also conducted with three SISC+ officers to test the effectiveness of the questions. Details for Survey B's open - ended questionnaire are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Details of Survey B Questionnaire

Section	Item no.
A) Demography	Q1 – Q5
B) Experts' view on:	
i. the level of ML's instructional coaching implementation	Q6
ii. the need to implement instructional coaching professional development specifically for ML in Malaysian public secondary schools.	Q7

Research Analysis Procedures

The data gathered in Survey A was analysed through descriptive statistics using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26. Respondent demographics were examined using frequency and percentage statistical units while the aspects of ML's instructional coaching were examined using a mean score and standard deviation analysis unit. The mean score interpretation in this study was based on the modified value interpretation from Nunnally & Bernstein (1994), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Interpretation of Min Score

Mean Score	Interpretation (Level)
1.00 – 2.00	Very low
2.01 – 3.00	Low
3.01 – 4.00	Moderate
4.01 – 5.00	High

Meanwhile, the data from Survey B was analysed using Atlas.ti V9 software using content analysis procedures. The Cohen Kappa Index (CKI) of the emerged themes in the survey was established at the value of K=0.93 which according to McHugh (2012) indicates a very good agreement in between consulted reliability experts.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings are discussed as follows:

Survey A - Teachers' perspectives

The findings analysis of Survey A are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Teachers' Perceptions on the Practice of ML's Instructional Coaching in Accordance to the Evaluated Dimensions

Aspect	Description	Mean Score (MS)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
1	Instructional coaching roles of ML	3.69	.931	Moderate
2	Instructional coaching knowledge of ML	3.58	.899	Moderate
3	Instructional coaching feedback of ML	3.71	.974	Moderate
4	Instructional coaching implementation of ML	3.37	.973	Moderate
5	Instructional coach qualities of ML	3.85	.955	Moderate
6	Instructional role modelling of ML	4.02	.984	High
Average		3.69	.781	Moderate

Teachers' perceptions on the overall level of ML's instructional coaching practices is at moderate level, as indicated in Table 4, with an average mean value of 3.69 (SD.781). Five out of the six aspects of ML's instructional coaching evaluated, namely coaching role, coaching knowledge, coaching feedback, coaching implementation, and personal qualities of coaching had only recorded moderate results, with an average mean score of 3.69 (SD.931), 3.58 (SD.899), 3.71 (SD.974), 3.37 (SD.973), and 3.85 (SD.955) respectively. In this regard, the data analysis had revealed that the respondents perceived ML as not fully capable to employ instructional coaching strategies at the estimated level in facilitating pedagogical improvements in schools. The analysis had also shown that ML should improve their instructional coaching practice in order to offer greater facilitation and assistance to their instructors.

In particular, the aspect of ML's instructional coaching implementation had recorded the lowest mean value when compared to the other aspects, with an average mean value of 3.37 (SD.786). Primarily, the aspect represents the ML's capacity in building partnership communication, steering dialogical conversation, posing effective questioning, offering explicit modeling and providing continuous supports. As a consequence, the lowest mean score denotes the respondents' perceptions of the ML's inability to execute technical strategies of coaching activities/procedures effectively and confidently during coaching sessions. This can severely impede ML's functions as the key drivers in leading, supporting and sustaining instructional improvement in schools.

Moreover, the level of ML's instructional coaching knowledge which comprised of core knowledge in curriculum and instructions, thinking skills, assessment and evaluation and information, computer and technology (ICT) literacy, has been noted as the second lowest with average mean value of 3.58 (SD.899). This may illustrate that ML lack critical knowledge for assisting and supporting teachers' pedagogical and professional development, resulting in the coaching process not being executed as accurately and comprehensively as expected.

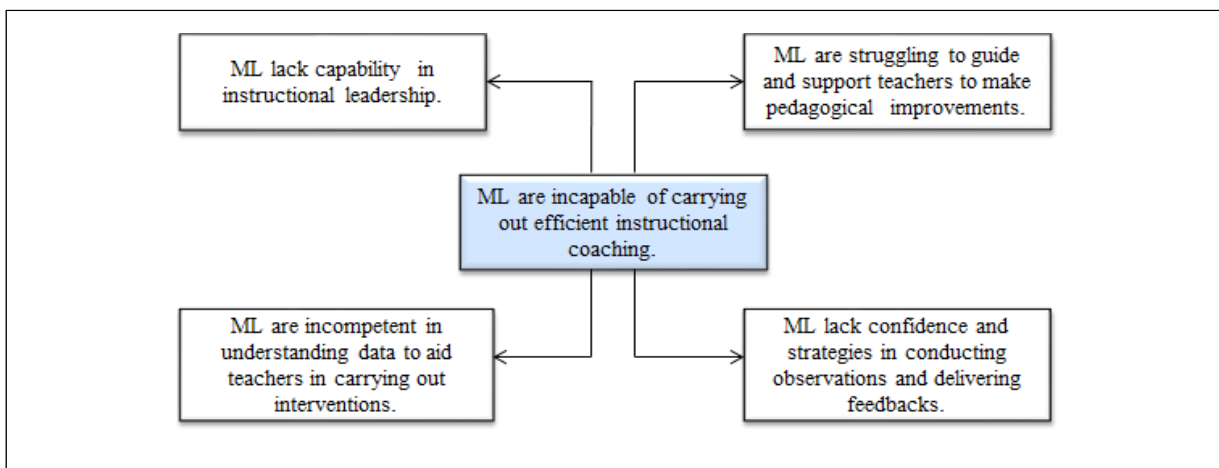
Meanwhile, with the average mean value of 3.71 (SD.974), the capacity of ML's feedback during coaching sessions has been recorded slightly higher than mid moderate level. This shows that the respondents' perceived ML's feedbacks level during the coaching sessions is yet to be effective to enable them to accurately implementing pedagogical improvements in classrooms but may progressively heading towards betterment if ML are working on providing feedbacks in specific, in-depth and constructive manners.

The ML's instructional role modelling aspect which defined ML as excellent pedagogical practitioner had recorded a high level performance with a mean value of 4.02 (SD.889), demonstrating ML as exemplary role models in instructional practices from the respondents' perspectives. This is followed by the instructional coach attributes with an average value of 3.85 (SD.955). The outcome is predictable considering that ML are frequently selected by the MOE among teachers with extensive experience and pedagogical expertise, as well as embodied characteristics of good instructional practitioners. This immediately enables them to be great instructional role models for teachers under their leadership.

Survey B - Expert respondent perspectives (SISC+ officers)

The analysis on the expert responses towards question number 6 in Survey B revealed one significant theme that is: **ML are incapable of carrying out efficient instructional coaching**. This theme is reinforced by four sub-themes related to expert observations of ML's instructional coaching practices as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Theme and Sub-themes on the Expert Perspectives of ML's Instructional Coaching Practices



Through the analysis findings, the experts have posited that though the ML were appointed based on their vast experience and knowledge in pedagogical field, they lack leadership capability and charisma in leading others for pedagogical enhancements. This is illustrated well from the statements of E5 and E8.

"I noticed that many of the HODs were portraying characteristics in which they were not much difference in terms of knowledge and achievement compared to teachers under them"

(5:19 ¶ 119 E5)

"HODs are appointed based on seniority, experience and their performance. Therefore, most HODs are relatively knowledgeable and skillful in their own subjects. However not all are skillful and knowledgeable in areas such as coaching and mentoring as well as approaches in interventions. As a result, some may not be effectively capable in guiding their teachers for instructional improvement"

(8:17 ¶ 121 E8)

Moreover, expert comments such as E7 and E12 revealed that ML were struggling and were not focused on their jobs of assisting and supporting teachers in developing pedagogical reforms. This could have an impact on the quality of their instructional coaching, leaving teachers unable to make precise and consistent improvements.

“I find that most of the GKMPs that I have coached are more focused on routine curriculum –related work such as the dissemination of curriculum documents, placement of language teachers in classrooms and examination classes and the committee’s annual program planning. In my opinion, the implementation process of instructional coaching should be implemented by GKMP in a more in-depth and appropriate manner than it is currently done”.

(17:2 ¶ 120 E7)

“...learning partnership skills and knowledge are not communicated effectively and this results in quality teaching and learning not being practiced by teachers”.

(18:2 ¶ 119 E12)

In addition, as E4 and E6 have clearly mentioned, this scenario may be attributed to a lack of knowledge and skills in performing instructional coaching. This inhibits the ML's ability to provide effective pedagogical facilitation and assistance to teachers.

“HODs that are under-developed in instructional coaching may struggle to manage their teams to bridge the gaps faced by both students and teachers. They may struggle to provide guidance, feedback and leadership needed to improve situations faced”.

(4:4 ¶ 126 E4)

“I see most GKMPs still do not understand their role in coaching teachers. The instructional coaching that is carried out in their respective fields should not be limited on subject content only”.

(16:3 ¶ 123 E6)

Besides, experts observed that most ML lacked confidence and skills for providing precise and in-depth feedback, as well as being ineffective in creating reflective dialogues to prompt teachers' inner awareness to adopt pedagogical adjustments independently and consistently. The views of E2 and E6 aid in clarifying this idea.

“They had expressed lack of confidence in recording and giving marks as well as justifying the marks given. Despite having experience in observation, they acknowledged they still needed guidance in translating the score rubric in the context of teacher practice, identifying areas in need of improvement, how to provide feedback to teachers and so on”

(14:5 ¶ 121 E2)

“They were seemed unable and lacked in - depth knowledge to explain to the observed teachers on improving their lessons. The feedbacks were given only at the ‘surface level’ and therefore not enough to help teachers improving their T&L”.

(16:7 ¶ 137 E6)

Furthermore, the experts acknowledged that ML lack the expertise and abilities to efficiently and systematically analyse datasets in order to assist their teachers in refining the relevant pedagogical skills and developing powerful interventions to enhance student achievement. This is notably stated by E2 and E7.

“GKMP do not use the available data to plan teacher quality improvement programmes. In fact, the existing professional learning community (PLCs) and in service trainings are implemented based on what is assumed necessary”.

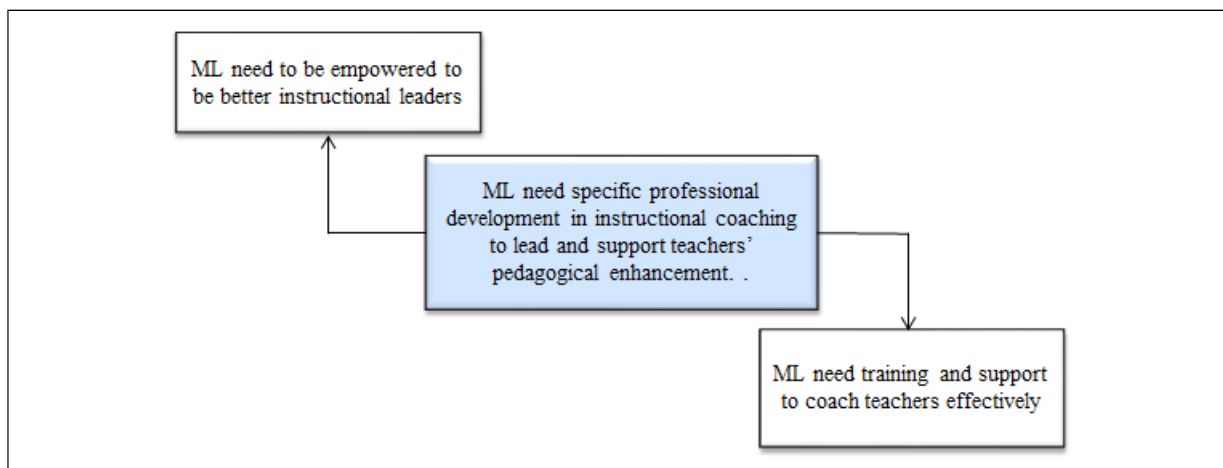
(14:8 ¶ 127 E2)

“There is a need to identify and analysed issues/problems and root causes so that the structured planning of instructional coaching can be carried out effectively. GKMP need to review the initial status of knowledge level, skill level, and attitude level of professionalism of his/her teachers. These status are very important if we want to implement more needs -focused coaching”.

(17:9 ¶ 122 E7)

On the other hand, the expert responses towards question number 7 in Survey B have also yielded a significant theme which is: **ML needs specific professional development in instructional coaching to lead and support teachers' pedagogical enhancement.** This theme is substantiated by two sub-themes as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Theme and Sub-themes of the Expert Perspectives on the Need to Implement Instructional Coaching Professional Development for ML



Based on the findings, the experts believe that instructional coaching professional development for ML is critical in empowering them to be effective instructional leaders. This sub-theme is evident in the assertions made by E1 and E12.

“Their roles have become more important as they are the ones who will lead others and co-manage the school to realise the school aspiration and strategic plan. They need to be empowered in order to empower other people”.

(1:5 ¶ 125 E1)

“Professional development in the field of instructional coaching, to strengthen the capacity of GKMP at schools is needed. Continuing Professional Development or CPD has very high impact on GKMP's instructional leadership based on my observation”.

(18:4 ¶ 123 E12)

Moreover, the expert respondents also noted that ML lacked the knowledge and abilities needed to be effective instructional coaches for teachers in their departments. This is indicated clearly by E8, who mentioned that while MLs are expected to lead and support their teachers' pedagogical improvement, they presently do not get appropriate professional development in instructional coaching, resulting in their being unable to successfully facilitate pedagogical enhancement among teachers.

“Definitely. Instructional coaching is perhaps the one area which is not practiced by HODs because they are not trained to be coaches. HODs are not given the opportunities to learn skills related to instructional coaching as part of their own Continuous Professional Development (CPD). HODs need knowledge and skills to be instructional coaches so that they can guide and develop their own teachers through coaching”.

(8:4 ¶ 126 E8)

The statement of E5 further reinforced the claim by expressing that instructional coaching professional development specifically for ML will help them to empower their capability as confident and professional instructional coaches in the application of effective instructional coaching.

“So, for HODs to take their coaching position, seriously there's a need for a more structured PD to develop HODs. Yes, I feel that there's a need for that.

(5:11 ¶ 161 E5)

Thus, based on the findings discussed above, all experts in Survey B agreed that ML were having a tough time implementing the instructional coaching approach during instructional mediation sessions with teachers due to a lack of understanding and expertise in applying various strategies of the approach. This situation has caused them to be inefficient in practicing the approach and therefore there is an urgent need to implement instructional coaching professional development specifically for ML in Malaysian secondary schools.

DISCUSSIONS

Instructional coaching is ineffectively practiced by the ML in Malaysian public secondary schools.

In this present study, the researchers employed Creswell & Creswell's (2018) Convergent Mixed-Methods design by employing two types of statistical and open-ended surveys to perform a need analysis for the implementation of instructional coaching professional development among ML in Malaysian secondary schools. The statistical survey (Survey A) has examined the teachers' perceptions towards the level of ML's instructional coaching practice across six dimensions: namely: roles of instructional coach, knowledge of instructional coaching, feedbacks in coaching, instructional coaching implementation, qualities of instructional coach and instructional role modelling. Meanwhile, the open-ended survey (Survey B) has extracted professional evaluation from thirteen SISC+ officers nationwide on the ML's capacity in handling instructional coaching sessions as part of their middle leadership responsibilities in schools.

Despite daily communications and work engagements with teachers in their department, the findings of this current study indicate that the teachers and experts perceived ML's instructional coaching practice still falling short of the desired efficiency and effectiveness in inspiring their subordinates to consistently undertake pedagogical and professional improvements. The descriptive findings of Survey A have revealed that the level of instructional coaching practice among ML was only viewed as moderate by teachers who had been coached by them when five of the six dimensions being assessed recorded moderate average mean values. The most troubling fact is the teachers regarded the ML's instructional coaching implementation to be at a nearly low level of practice, demonstrating that ML still lacks solid knowledge and expertise in employing instructional coaching strategies to assemble the pedagogical and professional enhancement of teachers under their supervision in an efficient and systematic manner.

Accordingly, the findings of Survey A are corroborated by the findings of Survey B, wherein SISC+ officers whom are responsible for ML's growth as instructional leaders equally believed that ML encountered numerous obstacles in executing the instructional coaching process owing to a lack of in-depth understanding and technical expertise on the strategy. Essentially, the findings of this study are consistent with the findings of middle leadership academics who indicated that ML encounters challenges in persuading, motivating, and inspiring their colleagues to work cooperatively and continuously towards professional improvement because they lack collaborative and networking strategies (Cridge, 2019) and do not have strong leadership skills to lead their fellow teachers to execute pedagogical innovation (Bryant, 2019; Fluckiger et al., 2015).

In addition, the data findings of Survey B showed that ML are unable to employ various data application knowledge and expertise to assist teachers in implementing targeted interventions and lacking confidence and appropriate attitudes in performing instructional observations as well as providing in-depth and accurate feedbacks. This finding affirms the findings of the previous quantitative studies conducted by local scholars such as (Mislinah, Zuraidah & Salwati (2018) and Salwati et. al. (2019), who established that local school leaders are perceived as experiencing technical difficulties in delivering observation reflection and feedbacks during supervision and coaching sessions. In fact, the current study reinforces further understanding of the challenges faced by the ML as the expert responses analysis had revealed that technical knowledge and skills of instructional coaching such as in-depth feedback procedures, data support strategies for teachers to implement targeted improvements, appropriate interpersonal attributes, conversational tactics, encouragement strategies to initiate critical and continuous reflections, and procedures for creating relevant challenges for teachers to improve their educational practice through the integration of ICT and HOTS are seriously lacked in the ML's instructional

coaching practice and therefore should be considered as the central aspects in the planning of ML's instructional coaching professional development. Conclusively, the quantitative and qualitative findings of the current studies demonstrate ML's ineffective instructional coaching practice which would eventually compromise the effectiveness of school performance.

Instructional coaching professional development is needed by the ML for better performance in facilitating teachers' pedagogical and professional growth.

Evidently, instructional coaching professional development for ML is viewed as highly crucial for ML in Malaysian secondary schools since they are the key drivers in establishing and sustaining continuous pedagogical and professional growth of teachers in schools. This is because five of the six instructional coaching constructs tested in Survey A were only perceived at a moderate level, whereas expert responses in Survey B revealed a significant theme that ML require specific professional development to improve their instructional coaching knowledge, expertise, and appropriate attributes in order to implement high impact instructional coaching and increase their leadership capacity in leading and facilitating pedagogical improvements. These findings obviously demonstrate the necessity for ML to have a distinct professional development in order to do such intricate responsibilities efficiently in school. Hence, the findings of the current study are consistent with the viewpoint of Abang Adam (2018), who noted that although ML are experienced, knowledgeable, and excellent teachers, they still require specific competences in carrying out their roles of facilitating and assisting teachers in undertaking instructional reform.

Although instructional coaching is deemed as one of the best professional development strategies to be employed in promoting teaching improvement in schools by global scholars (Abdullah et al., 2020; Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Knight, 2019; van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2018; Wan Fadhlurrahman et al., 2020; Wan Norhasma & Nurahimah, 2019), the experts of Survey B pointed out that the inefficiency of instructional coaching practice among MLs may be related to the fact that the majority of MLs in Malaysian secondary schools are still not receiving specific and appropriate instructional coaching professional development. Based on the findings, the lack of exposure and insufficient expertise are the primary reasons for ML to be incapable to execute the strategy effectively as expected. This resonates the previous findings of the Western and Eastern scholars who have discovered that ML's capability to drive and perpetuate pedagogical improvement effectively in schools are determined heavily by the extent of their mastery on relevant knowledge, skills, and personal attributes that promote pedagogical change such as instructional coaching approach (Balang et al., 2020; Bryant, 2019; Fluckiger et al., 2015; Wan Fadhlurrahman & Al-Amin, 2020).

In addition, the current study indicates that ML are in need of specific instructional coaching professional development to equip themselves with essential knowledge, expertise and proper attributes in maneuvering facilitation and critical engagement for instructional improvement as well as simultaneously boost their collaborative leadership capacities in working with other school leaders. Therefore, this study is seen to coincide with the findings of previous studies by Cridge (2019), Fluckiger et al. (2015) and Harris, Jones, Ismail & Nguyen (2019) who had observed that lack of specific knowledge, essential competence in professional development strategies and supportive attitude for personal growth engagement among ML are barriers towards their emergence as key drivers in driving and sustaining teachers and students' performance effectively. Hence, professional development to develop their competency in mediating instructional enhancement and leading teachers' professional growth need to be carefully planned and developed.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The implementation of professional development in elevating ML's instructional coaching capacity is seen consistent with the goals established in the 5th shift of the Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025, which is to ensure high-performing school leaders in every school (Ministry Of Education Malaysia, 2013) and the New Narrative of Educational Practice 2019, which prompted on the establishment of an instructional support team made up of middle leaders in schools (Head of Department/*Guru Kanan Mata Pelajaran – GKMP*). Therefore, the current study is practically attempting to identify the existing level of ML's

instructional coaching in mediating instructional enhancement among school teachers in order to determine if there is a need for ML to improve their ability in the application of the approach via specific professional development.

In this regard, the current study's findings have indicated that the implementation of a specific instructional coaching professional development for ML in Malaysian secondary schools is viewed as a crucial endeavour to provide empirical direction to those associated in designing and implementing professional development programmes or training for school leaders so that ML can receive adequate and on-going support. It also provides a strong signal to the leadership policy makers and leadership trainers that there is an urgent need in the implementation of instructional coaching professional development for ML to reinforce their understanding and technical expertise of instructional coaching in performing instructional coaching activities and processes in schools effectively so they can effectively lead, engage, and facilitate teachers for pedagogical improvement.

Moreover, the findings of this current study suggest that the mastery of instructional coaching could well be considered as one of the factors that may help to improve the performance of ML's instructional leadership and this may also provide further knowledge to the current literatures of professional development of ML and middle leadership in Malaysia as well as within the South-Asian context. It also parallel to the Korotov (2016) and Otter's (2017) findings which implied that mastery of coaching strategies in education is very appropriate for enabling other leaders in schools with less executive authority, such as ML, to navigate collaborative learning effectively while simultaneously developing their leadership.

Besides, this study has some limitations in its implementation that need to be acknowledged. The study had been designed as preliminary phase in multiple phases of a more complex study. It had employed quantitative and qualitative survey methodology, with the data collected from 377 secondary school teachers in the state of Selangor (as representative state) and thirteen SISC+ officers from practically all states in Malaysia as the surveys' samples. As a result, the findings of this study are subject to the contexts and methodologies chosen in completing the study. These findings may not reflect the view on ML's instructional coaching practices from all teachers and SISC+ officers population in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In recent years, schools have progressed into organisations which demand that instructional leadership responsibilities to be distributed among all layers of school leaders (De Nobile, 2018b; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2020). This condition necessitates ML employing instructional coaching approach to enhance their ability to lead, facilitate and encourage teachers' pedagogical improvement in a collaborative manner while also elevating their instructional leadership capacities to be at par with other school leaders. The findings of this study suggest that ML require particular professional development programmes such as instructional coaching to completely comprehend and master the knowledge and implementation strategies of instructional coaching, as well as recognising and practicing the instructional coach attributes for greater capabilities in leading and facilitating teachers' pedagogical and professional advancement in schools. Overall, this study is considered as crucial not only for assessing the actual degree of instructional coaching performed by ML in Malaysian secondary schools, but also for gathering empirical evidences in understanding reasons for the implementation of specific instructional coaching professional development professional for ML in empowering their abilities to lead and facilitate instructional improvement in schools.

In addition, the convergent mixed-method design was used solely in this study. In this regard, we strongly encourage researchers to conduct quantitative research with a larger sample size of teachers spanning the entire states of Malaysia and the adoption of in-depth interviews among SISC+ officials for qualitative research in order to provide a more detailed and in-depth understanding of this occurrence. This is because a larger sample population in quantitative surveys produces more generalizable conclusions, while more detailed and rich data may be retrieved from the expert panel through the use of in-depth interviews.

Furthermore, this study exclusively focuses on ML who are serving as Head of Department in Malaysian government secondary schools. Future researchers can perform studies on other ML, such as heads of panels in secondary or primary schools, private schools, institutions of higher learning, or education officers in district

and state educational agencies, who are also held accountable for empowering teachers' pedagogical and professional growth. This would improve the current understanding on the quality of instructional coaching among individuals participating in middle leadership in schools, as well as allowing better planning and execution of more specific and high-impact professional development for them.

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