

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SPECIALIST COACHES PLUS (SISC+) TEACHER COACHING IN MALAYSIA: EXAMINING THE STUDIES

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Abstract

The teacher coaching program led by the School Improvement Specialist Coaches Plus (SISC+) has been suggested as an in-situ Continuous Professional Development (CPD) measure for improving teaching and learning in Malaysian schools. It has been more than five years now (2014-2019), since full-time SISC+ took on their roles and responsibilities and what we know about it is certainly much less than what we need to comprehend significance of the program for theory, policy and practice (Ansawi & Pang, 2016; Huong & Abdullah, 2018; Sarabiah, 2018). However, there is some preliminary work that has been completed. This paper aims to report an examination of the open-access studies on SISC+ teacher coaching program. A systematic review was conducted using the keyphrase 'SISC+ teacher coaching program'. The search resulted in 20 articles to be analyzed. Summary of the studies with details on the source of information, methodology, findings and focus of the studies are tabulated, continued by the presentation of the discussion of the key issues confronting the SISC+ teacher coaching program in this country. An important step taken in this analysis is the review and examination of the existing local literature on the SISC+ teacher coaching program. This analysis will inform the design and the gap for subsequent studies to be conducted in the following years.

Keywords: teacher; coaching; School Improvement Specialist Coaches Plus (SISC+); Malaysia; education

1. Introduction

To bring definitive transformation of teaching and learning in Malaysian schools, the Ministry of Education (MOE) launched the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 to set clear targets that need to be achieved in terms of quality, equity and access to education. It provides a complete plan for a workable and long-lasting transformation of the education system within 13 years. The Ministry outlined 11 shifts that will root the improvement on the quality of classroom teaching and learning (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). Under Sixth Shift: Empower the State Education Departments (*JPNs*), District Education Offices (*PPDs*) and schools to customize solutions based on need; four system outcomes were addressed for immediate action:

- a. accelerate school improvement through systematic, district led programs rolled out across all states by 2014;
- b. allow greater school-based management and autonomy for schools that meet a minimum performance criterion;
- c. ensure 100% of schools meet basic infrastructure requirements by 2015, starting with Sabah and Sarawak; and
- d. ensure all government and government-aided schools receive equitable financial support.

The first outcome defines the School Improvement Program where every District Education Office (*PPD*) will be empowered to tailor the support needed by schools, which includes the recruitment of full-time teacher coaches, the School Improvement Specialist Coaches Plus (*SISC+* henceforth). *SISC+* were assigned for the three critical subjects, English language, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) and Mathematics. These *SISC+* will provide in-situ support to the respective teachers in low performing schools categorized as Band five, six and seven¹. This is a strategy planned under the National Key Result Area (NKRA) that emphasizes the need to transform schools and to empower learning. At its best, teacher coaching should contribute to the intellectual development of the schools and hence, converting them to high performing schools ranked as Band one to Band four.

The *SISC+* teacher coaching program was piloted in Kedah and Sabah in January 2013, and by 2014 it was successfully implemented throughout the country. As mentioned in the MEB, it is inclusive of both concepts, coaching and mentoring; and is defined as a strategy to raise teaching standards by enhancing teachers' knowledge and skill, in understanding and executing the latest education reforms, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment strategies through job-embedded, on-the-ground CPD. It involves the transfer or acquisition of knowledge by assisting individuals to develop awareness in order to advance and grow. *SISC+* are required to fulfil both roles of a coach and a mentor. Almost 2,500

¹Malaysian education system had led to a uniform characteristic of schools in the system pertaining to their curriculum, design of buildings, teacher qualifications, and infrastructure. The school's performance will be assessed based on these characteristics, and the obtained scores will categorize schools from Band one to seven.

Lower band (one to four) refers to the high performing schools while the high band (five to seven) refers to the low performing schools.

SISC+ are employed and placed in all District Education Offices (*PPDs*), so that they can spend 60% of their time on teacher coaching activities and not hold responsible for daily classroom teaching and learning (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). They are required to provide teachers with greater, more direct on-the-ground continuous training to raise the level of professionalism that would give an impact on the students' achievements. SISC+ are given the chance to observe teachers in class and provide instant feedback with suggested interventions. The focus of these coaching sessions will be on the mastery of instructional practices that includes pedagogical skills such as developing higher order thinking skills, teaching children of different ability levels and assessing student effectively. SISC+ are expected to conduct regular monitoring routines to intensify support system for teachers to improve delivery of the curriculum in a manner that emphasizes skills and competencies critical for the 21st century (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

The effectiveness of any initiative mainly depends on several variables, including the stakeholders. Many facets of the implementation and planning need to be examined to ensure its success. Nevertheless, unlike many countries taking pride of a strong body of literature discussing the many aspects of coaching in education, Malaysia seems to be lagging. It has been more than five years now (2014-2019), since full-time SISC+ are appointed, yet not much is known about the program (Ansawi & Pang, 2016; Huong & Abdullah, 2018; Sarabiah, 2018). Hence, this review study aims to examine and comprehend the teacher coaching program in Malaysian education.

2. Research Aim and Methodology

This general aim of this study is to recognize, review and build up the key issues addressing the SISC+ teacher coaching program in Malaysian schools. Framed within the qualitative research paradigm, this study utilizes document analysis (Bowen, 2009) as its research methodology. It is an exploratory review study performed through analysis of open-access studies on the SISC+ teacher coaching program. It combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis procedures to systematically review and synthesize articles that examine SISC+ teacher coaching program in Malaysia from year 2014 till 2018. The question, "What has Malaysian literature presented on the SISC+ teacher coaching program?", formed the guide for this study. All open-access articles of all formats and disciplines were retrieved using the Google Scholar web search engine. The search was made by typing in the key phrase 'SISC+ teacher coaching program' in the search bar. At the point of writing this paper, the hit on Google Scholar found fourteen studies related to the search. However, through Google web search engine, six more studies that addressed the proposed theme and whose full version was available were retrieved. Most of them were papers presented in conferences and one student working paper. All these studies (n=20) are reviewed in this study.

3. Findings and Discussion

There are eleven journal articles, eight conference articles, and one working paper that investigated or reviewed the SISC+ coaching program in Malaysia. A review of the studies reveals out of the 20 articles, five studies were on SISC+' perceptions of their roles (Ahmad Syahiran, Radzuwan, Kamariah, & Safawati Basirah, 2016; Kaur, 2017; Ng, Choong, Norizan, Lam, & Siti Mariam, 2014; Raman, 2015; Rozita Radhiah, Abdul Rashid, & Azhar, 2016), three studies on the impact of coaching and mentoring by SISC+ on teachers (Eow,

2015; Nor Fatin Afiqah, 2016; Rozita Radhiah, Mohamad, & Azhar, 2016), five studies on teachers' perceptions on SISC+ / teacher coaching (Huong & Abdullah, 2018; Mohd Hilmi & Jamil, 2017; Noel Jimbai & Zamri, 2017; Sarabiah, 2018; Sarabiah & Zamri, 2016), six studies on Professional Learning Community (PLC) practices with SISC+ (Aini Haziah & Zanaton H, 2018; Ansawi & Pang, 2016, 2017; Rajaratnam, 2015; Suzalin, Ilda Salwani, & Noorazam, 2014; Wong & Ching, 2015) and one review of the SISC+ coaching program (Noel Jimbai, 2017). Five of the studies employed a qualitative method, nine used a quantitative method, one employed a mix method, one was a self-perspective write-up, two were review papers and two others did not specify the adopted method. This proves that issues of how SISC+ teacher coaching is conducted in Malaysian education context, and the fundamental conditions to creating an effective coaching process amongst the SISC+ and coached teachers as people who need to cooperate for the execution of this CPD model have yet to be addressed. There is a paucity of research in this area that affects teacher quality.

3.1 *Teacher Resistance*

In the early years of the coaching program, when the SISC+ went down to schools, they faced resistance from the teachers with whom they intended to collaborate (Ng et al., 2014). This was supported by another study which stated that although the SISC+ tried to throw a light on, the teachers were still unhappy and felt intimidated especially whenever the SISC+ visited their classrooms (Ahmad Syahiran et al., 2016). One of the major responsibilities of the SISC+ is to conduct regular classroom visits and to debrief teachers to reflect on the lessons, and plan intervention strategies (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2015, 2017). Neither of these classroom visits are meant to discredit nor assess teachers, but such kind of visits were not practiced in Malaysian schools. The norm is where school inspectorates, head of departments, senior assistants or principals would enter a teacher's class to assess them using the competency and performance-based teacher evaluation instrument (*SPI Bil. 3/1987*). Hence, although the SISC+ were not functioning as evaluators, it was difficult to shed the evaluative feel of any formal observation. As a result, teachers in Malaysia were unhappy whenever they get to know someone may be walking into their classes even if it was the SISC+, as these sorts of visits are often seen as evaluative (Eow, 2015).

In a semi-structured interview carried out with two SISC+, one of the them said that "teachers started to feel anxious when they know someone is coming to their classroom." (Ahmad Syahiran et al. 2016, p. 266); another SISC+ added that, "sometimes there are teachers who have a 'negative attitude' when it comes to change." (Ahmad Syahiran et al. 2016, p. 267). These responses imply that although teacher coaching is believed to have the potential to support teachers make changes to their practice in a nonthreatening manner by facilitating reflection (Knight, 2009a), there are still many Malaysian teachers who have not embraced the culture of welcoming constructive criticism for continuous improvement (Britton & Anderson 2010). The SISC+/teacher relationship seems to be more complicated than expected. It seems that working one-on-one with teachers and guiding conversations about teachers' instructional practice turned out to be very challenging for the SISC+ (Aguilar, 2013; Knight, 2009b; Matsumura, Garnier, & Resnick, 2010; Neufeld & Roper, 2002). However, this has changed over time. Where, Noel Jimbai & Zamri (2017) employed a 22-item questionnaire found that the teachers agreed that the communication with their SISC+s was a two-way process which gave them the freedom to voice their views and ideas. Two other recent studies by Huong & Abdullah (2018) and Sarabiah (2018) also reported that the teachers' perspective on the SISC+ professionalism was positively high. The teachers

agreed that the SISC+ was able to build a good rapport with them which eventually embraced them to the coaching culture (Huong & Abdullah, 2018; Sarabiah, 2018). This proves that not only the teachers have finally accepted the coaching practice but also the SISC+ themselves have eventually mastered their interpersonal and coaching skills, though learnt the hard way. The SISC+ are now seen as the role model for the teachers. Strong alliance with the teachers seems to ease the coaching process, bringing about the desired outcome.

3.2 *Impact on Teacher's Practices*

In discussion of the effectiveness of the coaching program, one qualitative study that interviewed three coached teachers found that the classroom methodologies applied by coached teachers were the same as those who were not coached (Nor Fatin Afiqah, 2016). The study also reported that the coached teachers showed some improvements on the methods used in class and concluded by stating that the coaching program was able to support the teachers in implementing new instructional practices (Nor Fatin Afiqah, 2016). In addition, seven other studies on teachers' perspective of SISC+ and SISC+' perception of their roles, reported the coaching sessions were effective in helping them improve their instructional practices (Ahmad Syahiran et al., 2016; Huong & Abdullah, 2018; Mohd Hilmi & Jamil, 2017; Ng et al., 2014; Noel Jimbai & Zamri, 2017; Sarabiah, 2018; Sarabiah & Zamri, 2016). This was also confirmed by Rozita Radhiah, Mohamad, et al.'s 2016 study on the impact of coaching and mentoring by SISC+ on teachers. By observing 22 coached teachers' lessons in a few cycles, it was evident that the quality of the teachers' teaching improved gradually. Similarly, Chandrakala (2015) who presented her writing on her personal perspective as an SISC+ in a conference too stated that despite the challenges she faced in supporting the teachers, she witnessed improvements in the coached teachers' classroom practices. She then concluded by saying that these improvements prove that the designation of the SISC+ position was an impactful education initiative. Ahmad Syahiran and colleagues (2016), administered a face-to-face interview with two SISC+ from the state of Sabah and Kedah to examine the views of SISC+ on their roles in coaching EL teachers in Malaysian primary schools. The study too found that coaching, as part of a professional development program, is perceived by the SISC+ to have a significant impact on their teaching practices and professional development. Another recent study on PLC practices with SISC+, confirmed that teachers' skills, expertise and confidence level developed through the discussion and lesson review sessions (Aini Haziah & Zanaton H, 2018). The distinct findings of these studies call for future studies to look deeper into this matter and recommended future research to also include views of coached teachers, to make further comparisons of the findings (Ahmad Syahiran et al., 2016; Huong & Abdullah, 2018; Sarabiah, 2018). Sarabiah (2018) also suggested future studies to analyze the conference sessions between the dyads.

3.3 *SISC+ Expertise*

The findings of four studies on PLC practices with SISC+ stated that the teachers who were also involved in the coaching program, perceived PLC practices positively (Aini Haziah & Zanaton H, 2018; Ansawi & Pang, 2016, 2017; Suzalin et al., 2014). In addition, Bitty Ansawi and Vincent Pang (2017) stated that such change of attitude in teachers may contribute to the success of the coaching program. This aligns with the Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching [PIIC] findings where the teachers reported that coaching stimulated their interests in other forms of Professional Development (PD) conducted by the coaches (Charner & Medrich, 2017). According to Rajaratnam (2015), SISC+ can scaffold

teachers' learning by taking up the role as a resource provider, critical friend, learning facilitator and classroom supporter. However, to be able to scaffold learning, SISC+ are expected to have high content knowledge and teaching expertise, as evident in a quantitative study on 180 SISC+ nationwide. This study found that 81% of the SISC+ had a high level of knowledge and comprehension on the teaching and learning skills and this was an important element for them to be effectively coaching teachers (Rozita Radhiah, Abdul Rashid, et al., 2016). Meanwhile, teachers in Mohd Hilmi and Jamil's (2017) study, perceived their SISC+ to be very knowledgeable but not having sufficient knowledge in assessment techniques, which was also a factor on why they did not receive much support in that area of teaching. Assessment is an essential component in the teaching and learning process which allows the teacher to determine how much the students have learnt and how much guidance is still needed. Failure to conduct proper classroom assessment could contribute to the failing standards in the quality of English language teaching and learning (Black & William, 2005). Hence, teachers should be given on-site support to this classroom task to advance student learning. According to Aguilar (2013a), effective coaches (SISC+) should not only have a thorough understanding of all the different areas of teaching and learning but should have also exhibit achievement in the classroom as this will advance teachers' acceptance and support towards the coaching program, and hence accelerate the impact. So, were the SISC+ in Mohd Hilmi and Jamil's (2017) study lacking in the readiness of supporting teachers on the assessment techniques? This remains a concern that should be further explored into.

3.4 *Qualified SISC+*

The SISC+ in Ng and colleagues (2014) study perceived that the coached teachers have placed very high expectations on them. The coached teachers in Sarabiah's (2018) study confirmed that their SISC+ have teaching expertise and are able to support them with classroom issues. The same findings were recorded in another study where the teachers felt that their SISC+ are not only pedagogical experts but also have vast knowledge in the latest education initiatives (Noel Jimbai & Zamri, 2017). The majority of SISC+ employed were either senior teachers or '*guru cemerlang*' (master teachers) who have demonstrated mastery of content and pedagogy with commendable experience in schools, and who were encouraged or self-motivated to be SISC+. This proves that the responsible authorities had appointed the right people for the position because the success of coaching also depends on the attributes of the individual in that role (Knight, 2012). Finding the right person for the position is the most important key as an excellent teacher may not necessarily make an effective coach. The technical skills and knowledge about coaching can be learnt, but people skills, communication skills, listening skills and high emotional intelligence are merely impossible to be learnt (Aguilar, 2013). Thus, the responsible authorities need to ensure that the appointed SISC+ have the empathy, foundation knowledge and understanding that teachers need to make coaching work.

3.5 *Principal Support*

The pilot study on the SISC+ perception of their role revealed that when the SISC+ were challenged with reluctant teachers, they had to seek help from the principals, though, it was like *talking to a brick wall* (Ng et al., 2014). One of the SISC+ in this study even said that there were some principals with negative impression on the SISC+ and claimed that the SISC+ added burden on the teachers by suggesting instructional changes (Ng et al. 2014, p. 7). This was justified by lack of communication between the SISC+ and the principals. This was also due to the SISC+ time spent in school supporting teachers and not making an effort

to talk to the principals (Ng et al. 2014, p. 7). Literature dictates that supportive principals are critical in establishing successful teacher coaching initiative (Aguilar, 2013; Ng et al., 2014; Sarabiah, 2018; Sarabiah & Zamri, 2016; Taylor, Zugelder, & Bowman, 2013; Vikaraman, Mansor, & Hamzah, 2017) and they have great influence on teacher professional development or teacher learning (Bredeson, 2000; Smith, 2009; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). According to Tung and colleagues (2004), when principals are not supportive, or even resistant to coaching, it becomes difficult for the coaches/SISC+ to build relationship with the teachers whom they intend to work with (Tung, Ouimette, & Feldman, 2004). Principals are urged to promote teacher acceptance towards the coaching program by welcoming the coaches/SISC+, providing a safe working environment, allocating the necessary teaching facilities and time, taking into account of the coaching sessions and valuing the knowledge shared by the coaches/SISC+ (Bredeson, 2000; Knight, 2009a; Ng et al., 2014; Sarabiah, 2018; Sarabiah & Zamri, 2016; Taylor et al., 2013; Tung et al., 2004; Vikaraman et al., 2017).

3.6 CPD for SISC+

Struggling to overcome all the obstacles, the SISC+ later discern that to be effective, they themselves are in need of on-going high-quality professional development on coaching and mentoring skills as working with adults needed a new approach which they were unfamiliar with (Ahmad Syahiran et al., 2016; Vikaraman et al., 2017). The SISC+ employed were among the in-service teachers with exceptional teaching expertise, content knowledge and experience in schools. It is obvious that throughout their career as teachers, they have no experience handling adult learners. The literature points to the importance of a coach to have communication skills, relationship building skills, professional knowledge and understanding of effective practices, knowledge of adult learners and resources that are available to teachers (Feger, Woleck, & Hickman, 2004; Kowal & Steiner, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Thus, the SISC+ seek for appropriate professional development in order to learn all the massive coaching skills. According to (Heineke 2013), coaches need to be given the opportunities to gain a better understanding of the practices or content knowledge that they share with teachers as well as the coaching practices and communication skills that are necessary for effective coaching.

3.7 What Else is Missing?

By examining the 20 studies above, there were similar positive remarks given on the SISC+ coaching program but not many of these studies talked on the scores of actions that SISC+ did that accelerated teacher learning. Besides the PLC practices, only Kaur (2017) in her review paper mentioned that as an SISC+, she supported teachers to differentiate their lessons in content, process, product and learning environment. Further research is needed to explore the best practices of SISC+ that make teachers changed their practices and how did they collaborate in reality? Furthermore, leaving aside Chandrakala's (2015) and Kaur's (2017) insights of their own role as SISC+, only two other studies investigated the coaching program specifically on EL subject matter. The former is a study by Ahmad Syahiran and colleagues (2016), a study on two SISC+' perceptions of their roles coaching EL teachers. The latter is a study by Bitty Ansawi and Vincent Pang (2016), a study on PLC practices with SISC+ where the participants were 30 coached EL teachers. While six studies focused on the Malay language (Noel Jimbai & Zamri, 2017; Nor Fatin Afiqah, 2016; Rozita Radhiah, Abdul Rashid, et al., 2016; Rozita Radhiah, Mohamad, et al., 2016; Sarabiah, 2018; Sarabiah & Zamri, 2016), two on Mathematics (Aini Haziha & Zanaton H, 2018; Eow, 2015) and eight

others did not specify to any subject matter (Ansawi & Pang, 2017; Huong & Abdullah, 2018; Mohd Hilmi & Jamil, 2017; Ng et al., 2014; Noel Jimbai, 2017; Rajaratnam, 2015; Suzalin et al., 2014; Wong & Ching, 2015). This indicates that the concept of teacher coaching in is still not explored in the local literature for EL teaching.

In addition, there are so many other issues not covered in the studies. For example, when the SISC+ went to schools, they not only faced skeptical teachers (Ahmad Syahiran et al., 2016; Ng et al., 2014), but also equally negative principals (Ng et al., 2014). Why was it such? Were SISC+ roles not clearly defined or the SISC+ themselves were not capable of building the relationship? Did they embrace and portray the required qualities as listed in literature? Were they given appropriate support and knowledge before they stepped their foot into schools? Furthermore, literature confirms that time is the greatest hindrance to coaches as they do spend time on important purposes, but it is not link with supporting teachers in changing classroom practices. The MEB details that SISC+ are supposed to spend 60% of their time on coaching and mentoring activities (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). The question is whether the SISC+ maximize their time in supporting teachers? Is time an obstacle for them? The Blueprint also suggests that the existence of SISC+ are supposed to reduce the five tiers in curriculum and assessment delivery to three where the SISC+ will be the single point of contact between the stakeholders and teachers (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). Is this is being visualized in reality? If yes, did it solve the issue of diluted information and knowledge? If not, why? All these questions will not be answered without exploring the real experiences of the SISC+ and teachers in their context. There is still room for many more aspects of the coaching program to be explored which shall provide a clearer understanding of it as implemented in the Malaysian schools. There might be no simple answers or even solutions to the many arising questions, but they do raise the need for further study.

4. Conclusion

The SISC+ teacher coaching program in Malaysia functions as a model for improving student achievement by redesigning the way teachers teach. Sisson and Sisson (2017) state, in recent years, teacher coaching has become the best platform for teacher learning and a highly workable channel for education reform. This is a clear indication that the Malaysian education authorities have placed great importance on improving teachers' CPD programs that would create opportunities for teachers to grow and develop in their practice, so that they in turn can help students grow, develop their knowledge, be creative and think critically.

The effectiveness of any initiative mainly depends on several variables. According to Noel Jimbai (2017), although the SISC+ teacher coaching program has been accepted by the teachers and other education authorities, there are other matters and challenges that requires the stakeholder's immediate action. To ensure the success and sustainability of any reform, many facets of the implementation and planning need to be continuously examined. The 20 preliminary studies discussed in this paper have laid a foundation in understanding what SISC+ teacher coaching can be, and it has also provided a road map for future research. Thanks to their work as although to date too little is known about SISC+ teacher coaching in Malaysia (Ansawi & Pang, 2016; Huong & Abdullah, 2018; Sarabiah, 2018), we are better informed as we tackle this exceptionally challenging and promising approach for accelerating teachers' learning.

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