RESEARCH BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF MALAYSIAN INDEPENDENT CHINESE SECONDARY SCHOOL (MICSS) TEACHERS

FAHAMAN DAN AMALAN KAJIAN DI KALANGAN GURU SEKOLAH TINGGI PERSENDIRIAN CINA MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Teachers in Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS) struggle with their professional development due to limited opportunities caused by individual and institutional financial constraints. A proposed solution to encouraging professional teacher development is encouraging classroom research in schools. However, the research beliefs and practices of teachers in MICSS remain unclear. A mixed-method study sought to identify the current research beliefs and practices in MICSS. In the first phase, online questionnaires were distributed to MICSS teachers (n =116). The responses indicated that the respondents are substantially knowledgeable in various research practices, although they have very little research output to show for it. In the second phase, a follow-up interview session was conducted, where respondents (n =13) cited a lack of incentives and support to pursue research projects and a lack of clearly defined research policy in schools as the main obstacles to a more productive research output. Hence, MICSS need to craft greater academic connectivity with various educational institutions beyond their own and formulate clearly elucidated and calculated research policies that can promote research activities among their academic staff.

Kekangan kewangan adalah antara faktor yang menyukarkan usaha peningkatan profesionalisme keguruan di sekolah-sekolah tinggi persendirian Cina Malaysia (MICSS). Profesionalisme keguruan di sekolah boleh ditingkatkan melalui kajian bilik darjah dalam kalangan guru. Namun, kefahaman dan amalan kajian bilik darjah dalam kalangan guru MICSS adalah terhad. Oleh itu, satu kajian campuran telah direka untuk mengenalpasti cara-cara pembudayaan kajian bilik darjah yang efektif dengan: (i) merungkaikan kefahaman and amalan sedia ada, dan (ii) mengenalpasti faktor-faktor kekangan dalam melaksanakan kajian bilik darjah. Dalam fasa pertama, satu borang soal selidik dalam talian telah diedarkan kepada responden. Tinjauan awal menunjukkan responden (n =116) mengetahui kebaikan kajian bilik darjah, namun pelaksanaannya adalah terhad. Ini menunjukkan MICSS tidak membudayakan kajian bilik darjah dan seterusnya memberi kesan terhadap perkembangan profesionalisme keguruan di sekolah. Selain itu, faktor-faktor kekangan dalam melaksanakan kajian bilik darjah di sekolah telah dikenalpasti dalam fasa kedua melalui sesi temu bual dengan beberapa responden (n =13). Dua faktor penghalang yang dikenalpasti adalah: (i) insentif dan sokongan kajian bilik darjah yang tidak mencukupi, dan (ii) tidak terdapat dasar pelaksanaan kajian bilik darjah. Sehubungan itu, MICSS perlu merangka dasar yang holistik bagi mempergiatkan lagi usaha kajian bilik darjah dalam kalangan guru-guru dan mengalakkan

pembentukan komuniti pembelajaran profesional yang berpaksikan kajian bilik darjah bagi meningkatkan profesionalisme keguruan.

***Keywords**:* Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools, research philosophies, research practice, classroom research, research policy

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS) are [Mandarin] Chinese medium schools that are privately funded (An et al., 2022; Collins, 2006; Ong et al., 2020; Siah et al., 2018; Thien et al., 2021; C. Wong, 2007; V. Wong, 2018). They are established in Malaysia as early as the 19th century, predominantly operating with minimum government assistance in terms of building maintenance and teacher recruitment. The main objective of these schools is to "consolidate the mother tongue education" and "ensure the continuity of the Chinese culture" (C. Wong, 2007, p.20). Bereft of financial support from the government, the MICSS struggles to attract quality teachers. Current teacher training programmes in Malaysia, which fall under the purview of the Ministry of Education, mainly cater to public and government-funded primary schools (Siah et al., 2018; Yu, 2017).

Consequently, MICSS have to recruit teachers from other institutions of higher learning like any other private business entity, which translates into greater competition for academic staff. They mainly recruit untrained or temporary teachers (Raman & Tan, 2015; Yu, 2017), so MICSS constantly deal with low teacher quality and high teaching staff turnovers (Ong et al., 2020; C. Wong, 2007), which is why teacher shortage in these schools remains a salient problem to this day (Wang & An, 2023; Yu, 2017). With fewer teachers available on the market, MICSS rely on a smaller number of teaching staff who are often overworked and saddled with long working hours (An et al., 2022; Ong et al., 2020; Ooi, 2016; Pau et al., 2022), indirectly leading to burnout among teachers as they experience depersonalisation and low self-esteem due to harsh working schedule (Ooi, 2016; Pau et al., 2022).

Considering the financial constraints in MICSS, one suggestion to improve teaching quality is through classroom research. Research plays crucial roles in the professional lives of an educator, from informing practice (Adler, 1993) to inducing change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Rust, 2009) and addressing the theory-practice gap (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Korthagen, 2007). Nonetheless, these discussions mainly revolve around how teachers in a standardised or systematic education institution benefit from classroom research. To date, there is very little literature devoted to this issue in private/independent schools, especially the MICSS, let alone classroom research among the teachers working in these organisations. This article will examine how MICSS teachers perceive the importance of classroom research and how it may transpire in their professional practice.

In short, this study seeks to answer three main research questions:

i. What are the current research practices and beliefs of MICSS teachers?
ii. What are the factors that can encourage research practice among MICSS teachers?
iii. What are the factors that can discourage research practice among MICSS teachers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The longstanding interest in teachers' research beliefs and practices is due to their potential to professionalise education as a data-driven profession (Good, 1989). Though once considered a needless luxury that most teachers lack the time or energy for, research has become integral to

the profession. In primary and secondary education, however, it is heavily propagated as a key anchor for teacher professional development. Regardless of the educational context, the purpose of all educational research, as Joram et al. (2020) argued, is to provide teachers and educators with empirical direction to guide decision-making in their professional practice.

Equipping teachers with the mental and professional faculty to make sound decisions guided by data was not only desired but embraced wholeheartedly in Malaysia, at least in the initial stages of its introduction into the education system. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, began promoting action research as the "go-to" mode of classroom research (Bahagian Perancangan dan Penyelidikan Dasar Pendidikan [BPPDP], 2008). Numerous action research symposiums and conventions aside, the notion of "teacher-as-research" was introduced into the pre-and in-service teacher training/education curriculum. Though initially a substantial investment, its influence thus swiftly waned in lieu of tightened governmental coffers and significant changes in educational policy, especially in light of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.

MICSS, being a network of secondary education providers largely independent and isolated from the mainstream, government-run/public-funded schools, did not directly benefit from the aggressive introduction and push for action research. They received next to no financial and professional support in upskilling their academic staff. Teachers were heavily reliant on conventional pedagogical approaches with little room for classroom innovation and breakthrough (Ooi, 2016; Wang & An, 2023; V. Wong, 2018), hence leading to stunted professional development among MICSS teachers. By large, These teachers were largely perceived as faithful implementors of the syllabus rather than creative and critical interpreters of the curriculum.

Therefore, this study hopes to highlight the importance of centralising classroom research as a key driver in teacher professional development. This is critical to the survival of MICSS as they have limited funds and capacity to train and retain academic staff. For as long as MICSS have yet to formulate a means to sustainably recruit and retain quality academic staff, upskilling teachers and promoting aggressive professional development through classroom research is quintessential.

METHODOLOGY

This study closely replicates a previous study carried out among in-service English language teachers operating in Malaysian government schools (*see* Teh, 2020), although this study examines the research beliefs and practices of teachers from MICSS using a mixed-method approach. Because the "school climate is a group phenomenon" (Cohen et al., 2009, p.182), examining how classroom research is practised and maintained in schools allows us a better understanding of its impact on the teachers' professional practice.

In the first phase of the study, online questionnaires via Google Forms were administered to teachers with consent from the school principals. The questionnaire contains three major sections: (i) the respondents' demographic information, (ii) teaching practice, and (iii) their existing research beliefs and practices.

Table 1 presents a succinct summary of the questionnaire items.

Table 1
Questionnaire Sections

Section	Description
Basic Personal Information	Basic information regarding respondents' teaching profession
Research Culture and Environment in Existing Schools	Information about respondents' experience in research
Common Research Practices	Respondents' preferred manner of conducting research

When answering the questionnaire, respondents were given the option to provide their contact details if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. The information collected and analysed from the online questionnaire is used to create the interview schedule. Generally, the follow-up interviews focus on three broad themes, as indicated in

Table ***2***.

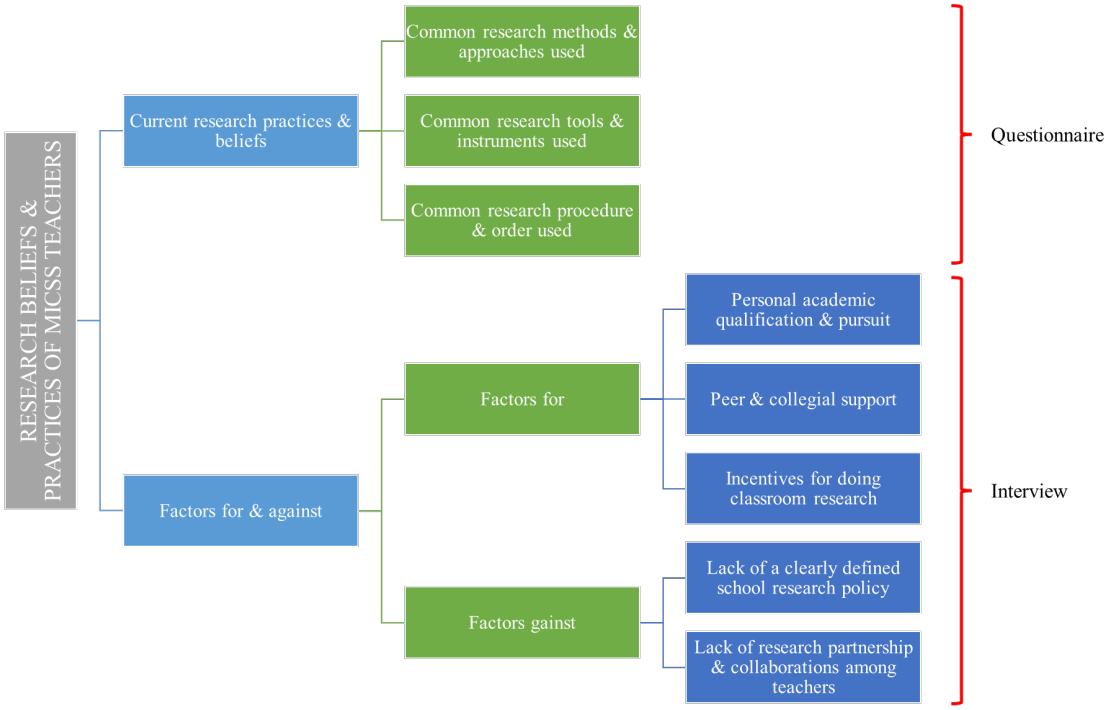
Table 2
Interview Schedule Outline

Section	Description
Teaching experience	Basic information regarding respondents' teaching experience
Research culture and environment Research experience Peer support School climate	Respondents' anecdotal experience in conducting research Respondents' views and opinions about research in the current school
Common research practices	Respondents' preferred manner of conducting research

The interview sessions were conducted individually. A total of 36 respondents indicated their willingness to be interviewed, but only 13 respondents agreed in the end. The interview sessions were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis, from which the following key findings emerged.
Figure ***1*** illustrates the coding framework that emerged from the interview sessions.

Figure 1

Coding Framework



RESULTS

By examining how classroom research is practised and maintained in schools, we can better understand its impact on the teachers' professional practice. These respondents range from various disciplines, with a small number undergoing part-time studies in higher institutions of learning, mostly in pursuit of an education degree. A total of 116 responses were received. The sampling profile is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Sampling Profile

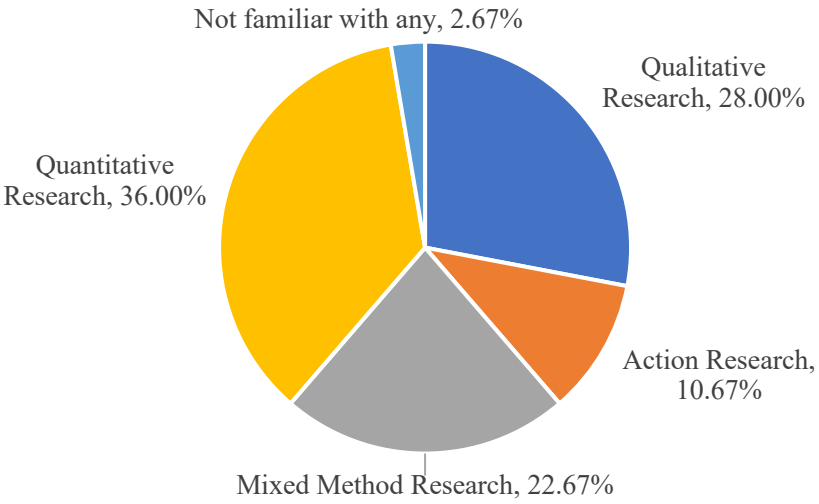
Demographic Variables	Min. value	Max. value	N	Mean	Interpretation
Teaching experience	-	-	116	11.37	11.37 years
Teaching experience [with experience in classroom research]	-	-	52	11.25	11.25 years
Number of research [in the past ten years]	-	-	52	2.450	2.45 research projects per recent ten years
Number of research publications [over the past ten years]	-	-	52	1.99	1.99 publications per recent ten years
Research enjoyment, "*I enjoy conducting research.*"	1 Strongly Disagree	6 Strongly Agree	52	4.08	Slightly agree
			Total number of respondents, n = 116		

Based on the descriptive statistics obtained from the questionnaire responses, the respondents (n = 116) have logged very low rates of research participation (M =2.45) and research output (M =1.99) over a decade-long teaching career (M =11.25) despite claiming that they enjoy classroom research (M =4.08). These findings were further explored with a correlation analysis. Most prominently, the respondents' teaching experience bears no significant relationship with their research participation (r =.226, p >.05), output (r =.097, p >.05) and enjoyment (r =.103, p >.05), and the correlative strength of these corresponding relationships are weak. The only significant finding from this analysis is that the number of research projects that the respondents participated in strongly correlates with the number of research publications produced in the past ten years (r =.675, p <.01). This is a worrying observation that reflects how research may be absent in the respondents' professional practice. This observation also foregrounds the data presented in the subsequent sections (and sub-sections), which will be ordered according to the research questions of this paper.

RQ1: What are the current research beliefs and practices of Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) teachers?

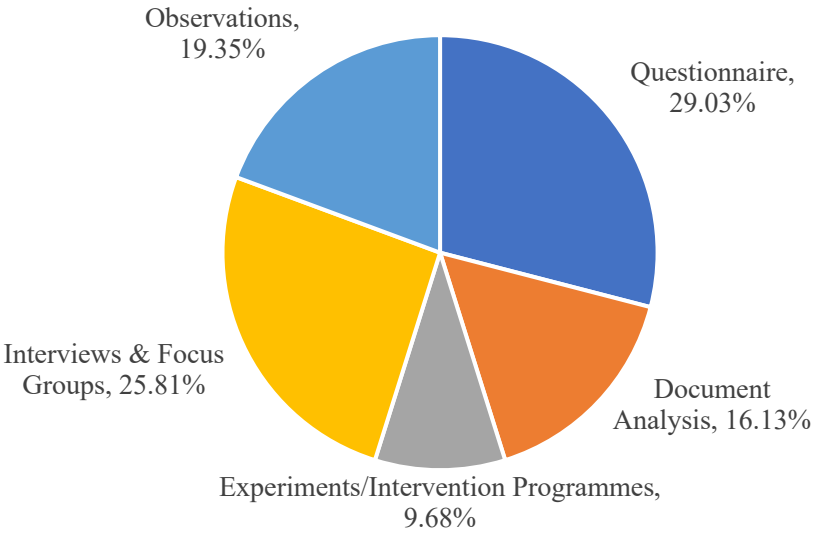
This section reports the respondents' familiarity with research practices according to three domains: (i) research methods, and (ii) research tools and instruments. It is noteworthy that respondents with experience in classroom research may have provided more than one response concerning their research practices, hence why the total number of responses for each aspect varies. Figure 2 and Figure 3 present the research methods and tools that the respondents commonly use.

Figure 2
Common Research Methods/Approaches Used



There are two main observations presented in Figure 2. Firstly, only 2.67% of responses indicated that they were not familiar with any research methods. This signifies that respondents with experience in classroom research are largely familiar with at least one research method. This raises the question of why they were not more encouraged or motivated by their existing knowledge to be more active in classroom research. Secondly, the respondents were least familiar with action research (10.67%), which could explain the low research participation and research output among MICSS teachers. Action research seemed to have received little emphasis compared to other research methods (*cf.* quantitative method, qualitative method, mix-m1ethod) in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, despite it being popularised and promoted as a go-to classroom research approach in mainstream government/public schools (BPPDP, 2008). This observation reinforces the assumption that the action research initiative by the Ministry of Education failed to reach the MICSS teachers.

Figure 3
Common Research Tools and Instruments Used



Among the five different options that the respondents were given, data-gathering techniques like questionnaires (29%) and interviews/focus groups (25.8%) are the most popular. Coherent

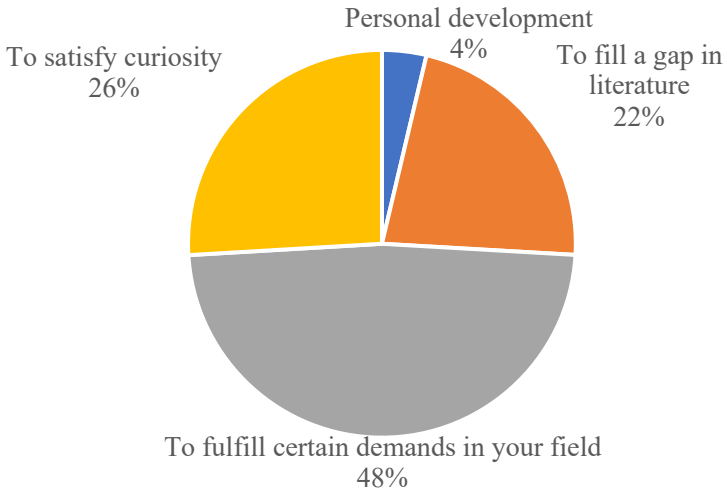
with the findings presented in Figure 2, the top two dominant methods are quantitative and qualitative methods, whereas the respondents were least familiar with experimental and intervention-based research tools (9.68%). Regardless, the respondents were fairly familiar with most conventional research methods; nobody stated that they were unfamiliar with any of the options given. This confirms that the respondents, to a large extent, were exposed to different data-gathering techniques at different stages of their professional practice as teachers.

RQ2: What are the factors that can encourage research practice among MICSS teachers

Figure 4 presents a breakdown of reasons and factors why the respondents carry out classroom research. The primary motivation for conducting classroom research is to address existing problems in the classroom (40%). In this sense, the respondents are very pragmatic in their utilisation of research, which is consistent with the principles of action research (Creswell, 2002; Oancea & Punch, 2014).

Figure 4

Common Reasons and Factors for Implementing Classroom Research



However, as mentioned in earlier sections, only 10.67% of the respondents were familiar with action research. This incongruence between the respondents' need to implement classroom research and their existing skills and knowledge regarding classroom research is intriguing. The follow-up interviews further yielded four main factors that may encourage or discourage teachers from engaging in classroom research, which are: (i) personal academic qualification and pursuit, (ii) support from peers/colleagues, and (iii) incentives for doing classroom research.

Personal Academic Qualification and Pursuit

The findings suggest that respondents' academic qualification strongly correlates with experience in classroom research (r =.424, p <.01). Only 10% of respondents with postgraduate qualifications reported no experience in classroom research, whereas this figure ballooned up to 43% when they attained a master's degree or higher. Consequently, respondents with higher academic qualifications have produced more research articles in the last ten years (r =.449, p >.05). 94% of the respondents who have published a research paper over a decade hold at least a Bachelor's degree. These observations were also reflected in the interviews. Many respondents indicated that pursuing a more advanced academic qualification provides a concrete purpose for conducting research, especially when classroom research becomes the go-

to assignment for research courses in postgraduate programmes – the minimum exit requirement for most Master's or doctoral degrees would be extended classroom research.

Unsurprisingly, teachers with higher academic qualifications reported higher levels of enjoyment in classroom research (r =.397, p <.05). Conducting classroom research becomes an individual initiative often motivated by teachers' pursuit of higher academic qualifications. One respondent added that her colleague, though already having obtained several Master's degrees, was still working hard to obtain another out of his own initiative (Joanne, Interview). Therefore, it is possible for teachers to be driven by a strong personal desire to attain higher academic standards. Such desire often translates into stronger classroom research practice, which leads to more effective continuous professional development.

Support From Peers and Colleagues

Figure 5 and Figure 6 present the frequency in which the respondents engage in research projects and produce research publications over the past 10-year period with or without peer and collegiate support. Teachers who feel supported by their peers and colleagues are also more likely to participate in classroom research (r =.588, p <.05). Without support, only 12.50% of the respondents participated in more than three research projects in the last ten years. In contrast, up to 30% of respondents who enjoy support from their peers and colleagues participated in at least four projects over the same period.

Figure 5

Research Projects Participated in the past ten years

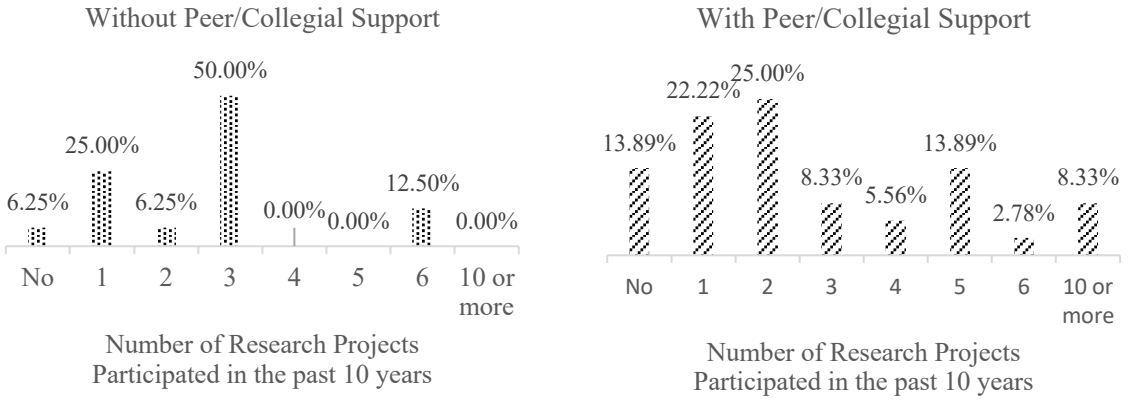
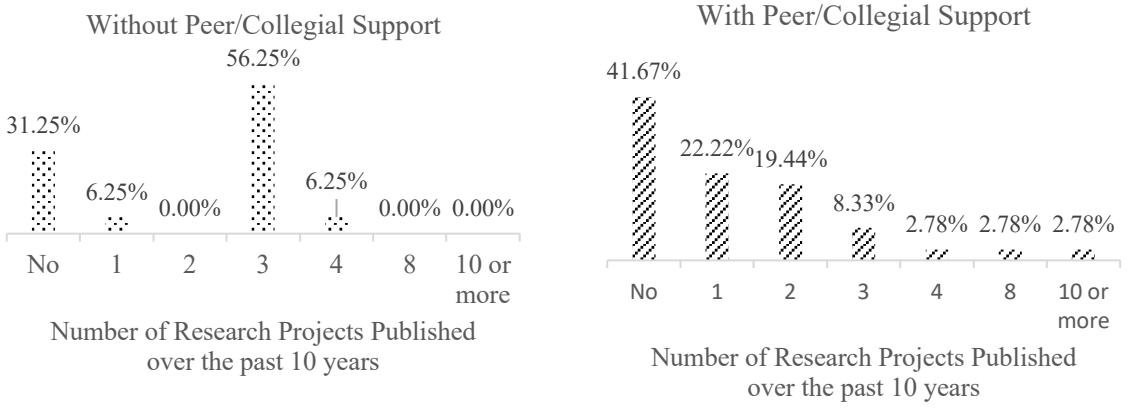


Figure 6

Research Published over the past ten years



Unsurprisingly, their research output also increases drastically when the respondents feel supported. They were twice as likely to produce at least one research article compared to those who do not feel supported within the same time frame (r =.577, p <.01). Generally, this phenomenon can be understood as attempts by the respondents to collectively distribute the physical and mental workload associated with classroom research. Collaboratively, respondents can "solve problems easier" and find themselves more motivated to engage in research (Chansey, Interview). Furthermore, working in a research team facilitates quality idea generation that is far surpassing those conceptualised individually (Sally, Interview). However, there is also danger associated with working with others. If research collaboration can lighten the workload and motivate teachers to be more active in classroom research, the opposite can also happen. One respondent lamented that working with other teachers can be extremely challenging, especially if they do not share similar views about classroom research (Tracy, Interview).

Nonetheless, it is also apparent that teachers who are situated in a supportive working environment will be more likely to pursue higher academic qualifications. There were twice as many Master's degree holders who felt supported when doing research compared to those who did not (r =.314, p <.01). Concurrently, there is an indication that teachers welcome collaborations in classroom research (r =.310, p <.01), with only 8 out of 52 are against the idea of partnering with others. These can be attributed to the respondents' belief that constructing and maintaining a professional network in school is beneficial, as Wang and An (2023) attested in their study. For instance, a respondent suggested that teachers should be more forthcoming and open to their peers and colleagues so that they regularly "share expertise and academic findings" and thus improve each other's practice (Valerie, Interview). Ben, on the other hand, believes in the need to publish [research articles] because immortalising these expertise and findings in academia will do a lot of good for beginning teachers (Ben, Interview). In other words, classroom research serves as an important source of advice to teachers who recently started teaching in MICSS, becoming a buffer for them to fall back upon when encountering challenges in their professional practice. This is crucial as MICSS heavily relies on temporary and untrained teachers (Wang & An, 2023; Yu, 2017).

Incentives for Doing Classroom Research

Somewhat surprisingly, the respondents noted that they are open to conducting classroom research even in the absence of financial funding and support. Financial constraints are unlikely to deter teachers from classroom research (r =.316, p <.01). This can be explained in three main aspects, namely: (i) fulfilling the practical needs of the classroom, (ii) ensuring continuous professional teacher development, and (iii) attaining recognition and acknowledgement.

Firstly, the respondents carried out classroom research to address some of the classroom's pedagogical needs. One respondent was tasked to teach Islamic Studies despite being a Malay language teacher. Her classroom research, therefore, involved a lot of "trial-and-error" techniques and approaches in her lesson delivery (Siti, Interview). Secondly, the respondents also used classroom research to identify the means to address disciplinary issues in their classrooms. One respondent, who was also the class teacher, attempted various interventions in managing her students' less desired behaviours, such as tantrums and temper outbursts. One of the more successful interventions is what she terms a "conduct mat", which is a tabletop portfolio containing all the critical information pertaining to a student. Teachers then use the "conduct mat" to map a student's conduct and suggest further actions to address said conduct (Chansey, Interview). These examples are evidence that teacher resorts to classroom research to fulfil a practical need in their practice. Through this, they can improve professionally as teachers and progress in their careers. This explains why teachers are receptive towards conducting classroom research even without financial support/incentives.

Furthermore, some respondents also believe classroom research to be a good measure of a teacher's ability and professionalism. For instance, schools ought to reward teachers who actively conduct classroom research with better working benefits, such as sponsoring them for further academic studies and bonding them to long-term contracts (Chansey, Interview). This is particularly motivating to MICCS teachers as they do not enjoy pension schemes like those afforded to state-employed teachers. Compounding this is using classroom research as an evaluative metric for academic promotion and enhanced staff benefits. For example, annual assessments of teachers' performances can be based on the quantity and quality of classroom research conducted (Chansey, Interview), whereas teachers with better research profiles may obtain financial sponsorship or stipends to participate or present in academic conferences (Jack, Interview).

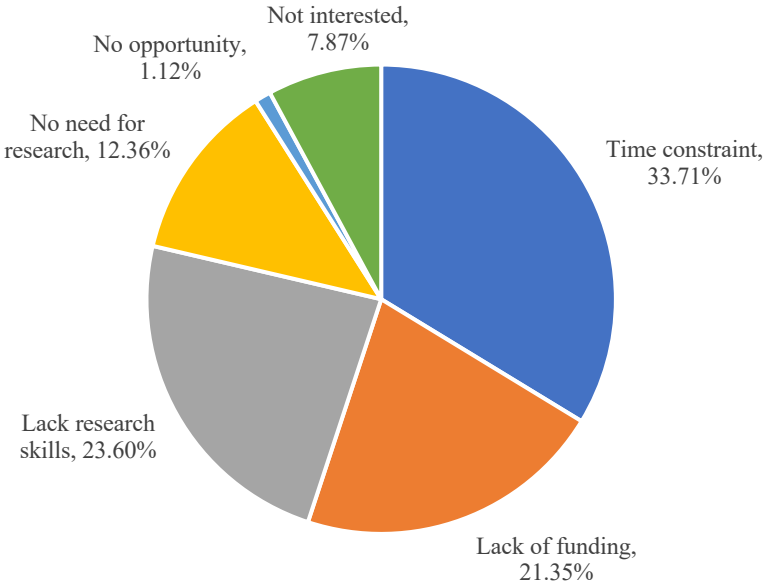
Some respondents also believe that teachers could benefit from sabbatical paid leaves or time off to carry out classroom research, although this may pose significant financial and personnel obstacles to MICSS, further straining their already limited resources. Ultimately, what matters most to the respondents, especially to those who actively engage in classroom research, is the "recognition and appreciation" of their efforts and contribution to their practice and to the school (Tracy, Interview). In one specific case, a respondent described how his school rewards teachers who pursue further studies or demonstrate exemplary contributions to the school financially. The financial reward will be subject to the school's financial capacity, but there were instances where the school alumni provided the necessary funding to reward these teachers (Tim, Interview).

RQ3: What are the factors that can discourage research practice among MICSS teachers?

Figure *7* depicts a simple breakdown of factors that may discourage respondents from engaging in classroom research. When asked why the respondents stayed away from classroom research, time constraint was cited as the largest obstacle (33.71%). This reaffirms Adler's (1993) belief that lack of time is the main reason why teachers are reluctant to conduct classroom research. The second obstacle to research culture in school is the lack of research skills (23.60%), followed by the lack of research funding (21.35%). Ironically, 7.87% indicated that they are not interested in classroom research, which explains why participation in classroom research and research publication remains quantitatively negligible (Table 3).

Figure 7

Common Factors that may Encourage Classroom Research among MICSS Teachers



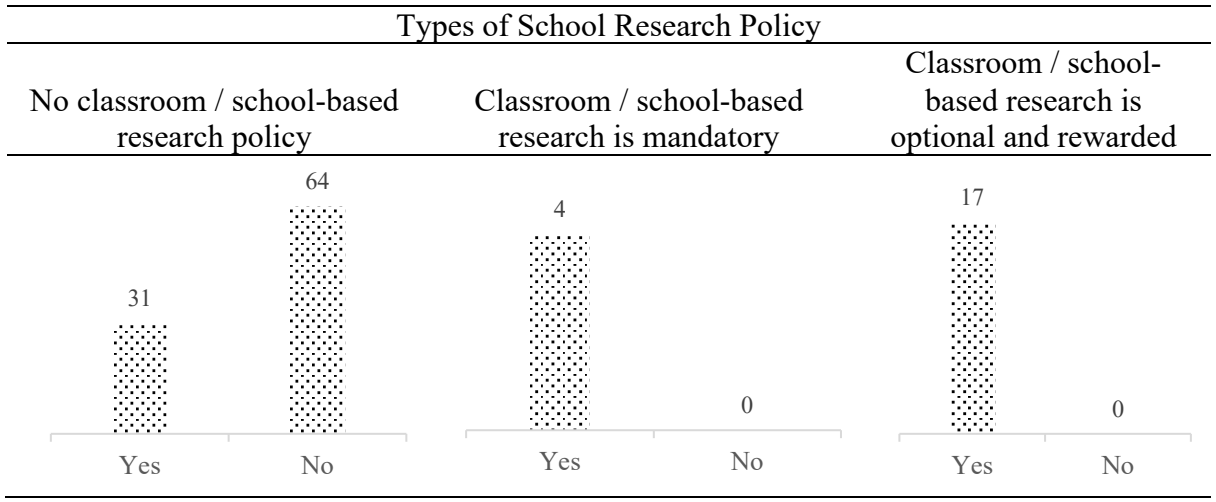
Digging further, the follow-up interviews revealed some interesting findings. Factors that seemingly discourage teachers from classroom research are two-fold: (i) lack of a clearly defined school research policy and (ii) lack of research partnership amongst teachers. The following section presents findings concerning these two factors.

Lack of a clearly defined school research policy

Figure **8** illustrates the types of school research policies that were available in MICSS as reported by the respondents. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to indicate whether their schools maintain a research policy of any form, which could be mandatory, optional, or non-existent.

Figure 8

Types of Classroom Research Policy in MICCS as Reported by Respondents



Interestingly, 31 respondents had actually conducted or participated in research regardless of the school's research policy, although only 21 respondents reported that their school installed a formal research policy (
Figure **8**). Among these, some respondents reported that classroom research is compulsory for all teaching staff (n =4), whereas research is optional for others (*n* =17). Nevertheless, this represents a fairly low percentage (18.1%) of respondents compared to those who operate without any research policy (*n* =64). These observations highlighted that the effects of the classroom research policies in MICSS are somewhat limited and ineffective, if any. Clearly, the lack of a clearly defined school research policy severely impedes a competitive research culture among the teachers, so further investigation is needed to fully understand why. One respondent even remarked that she last participated in action research almost ten years ago, although classroom research is supposedly mandatory in her school (Sally, Interview). Understandably, the lack of classroom research means that there were no concrete efforts leading to research output among the respondents, even though classroom research was made mandatory via school research policy.

When asked, respondents blamed their indifference towards classroom research on the lack of exposure to and understanding of classroom research, which severely hindered a healthy research culture among the respondents. One respondent cited the bad impression that classroom research has; research is seen as "time and energy-consuming with no tangible rewards" (Joanne, Interview), a phenomenon exacerbated by a lack of clearly defined school research policy. Even in schools that do encourage classroom research, their existing policy fails to account for the teacher's workload. Respondents lamented the long classroom contact hours (Tracy, Interview) and long school day in MICCS [school day generally ends at 3.30 pm] (Mike, Interview). This leaves the respondents with little time for classroom research, especially when "teachers are forced to work beyond schedule" (Ooi, 2016, p.47). Even respondents who do have free time devote their school hours to generating side income. This is despite the efforts to improve teacher welfare and remunerations in MICSS (Ong et al., 2020; Yu, 2017), both of which remain relatively low compared to other educational sectors.

From an institutional perspective, schools were not able to provide additional financial and technical support to cultivate a research culture in schools. There were no excess resources that school heads could direct into encouraging classroom research among their academic staff, as MICSS could barely survive on public donations, limited government grants, and relatively low student tuition fees (Tim, Interview). While a clearly worded school research policy may not address these financial and technical constraints, it would go a long way in encouraging teachers to engage in classroom research more actively.

Lack of Research Partnerships and Collaborations among Teachers

The findings emerging from the follow-up interviews showed that MICSS teachers have far more limited networking opportunities as they are generally isolated from the mainstream school communities (government-run/public schools). This also means that they do not have a tangible need to forge partnerships with teachers from other schooling systems. Without teacher networking as the foundation, teachers are unable to forge closer ties and engage in research collaboratively. The data indicates that their willingness to cooperate with others in research projects is independent of their research participation (r =.416, p >.05) and research output (r =.324, p >.05) in the past ten years, suggesting that the research culture in MICSS does not encourage or cultivate research collaborations among their academic teaching staffs.
Upon further probing during the follow-up interview sessions, the respondents were clearly unaware of any avenues or academic platforms, such as conferences or journal publications, to encourage networking and dissemination of classroom research in the broader MICCS community. They have never been approached for any public learning communities,

conferences, and workshops that are organised by bodies or individuals external to the MICCS community (Tracy, Interview). Being isolated from the wider educational community had severely impeded efforts for professional and academic upskilling.

With little involvement in classroom research, the respondents were unaware of the latest pedagogical and research trends. The findings of the questionnaire (Figure 2) also showed that the respondents were least familiar with action research (10.67%) despite its prominence among teachers in public/government-run schools. Being unaware of how classroom research can be conducted and reported effectively, research participation and publication among MICSS teachers were low. There was not a consultation body that could advise these teachers on matters relating to innovation and research (Sally, Interview). Cumulatively, these findings suggest that MICCS teachers suffer from the absence of a platform on which they can collaborate in research and share their knowledge with others within and outside the MICSS community.

Also, without integration with teachers from other school systems, MICSS teachers are bereft of training and networking opportunities to develop and improve. Evidently, MICSS have not been very successful in providing effective in-house training to their teachers, as Yu (2017) criticised the "lack of planning in the in-service education of teachers in school" (p.617). Calls for better in-service training and workshops for teachers (Ooi, 2016; Raman & Tan, 2015; Wang & An, 2023; C. Wong, 2007) have spurred the MICSS to remedy this shortcoming, although arguably more still needs to be done. Being isolated from other communities, whether by design or by choice, as what most MICSS schools are currently experiencing, impacts how teachers perceive their own practice. A lack of networking with the greater teaching community means that teachers often do not need to step beyond their comfort zone, resulting in a lack of personal interest or direction to improve professionally.

Another reason that discourages the respondents from engaging in classroom research more actively is poor working relations with their peers and/or colleagues. The majority of the interview respondents were frustrated by the lack of effort and commitment demonstrated by their collaborators, which is a reason why many research collaborations fizzled out over time. Their reticence towards future partnerships is also heightened, especially when they feel they are being taken advantage of by irresponsible and abusive collaborators. This is apparent in working groups with clear hierarchical power dynamics; school leaders may delegate most of their research duties to the collaborators, who may end up doing all the work and yet still having to share credit.

In summary, the data collected through the questionnaire and interviews present a colourful depiction of the respondents' existing research beliefs and practices, which are influenced by a myriad of external and internal factors. Encouraging greater participation and engagement in classroom research, therefore, requires extensive efforts in re-imagining how MICSS teachers can overcome these factors to embrace classroom research for the betterment of their own practice as well as the schools.

DISCUSSION

The current research practices and beliefs of MICSS teachers in Malaysia are fairly conventional. Their current research procedures and data collection methods are limited by their awareness of and exposure to school-based or classroom-oriented research. One suggested solution to this is to provide action research workshops to the teachers, with extra emphasis on eclectic and iterative data collection methods. It can serve as a "powerful vehicle to bridge the dichotomy of theory and practice" (Rust, 2009, p.1885), hence helping teachers to make sense of their theoretical understanding with practical classroom application. Also, factors that could encourage classroom research among the teachers are personal, interpersonal and professional

factors. Their motivation towards classroom research is driven by their desire to attain higher academic qualifications, better collaborative relationships with peers and address needs in their professional practice. This can be substantially reinforced by promising better career pathways and performance-related pay should teachers invest time and money into obtaining postgraduate degrees.

Concurrently, teachers should be encouraged to engage in more collaborative research projects with their peers, both within their own department or with others from other departments. By doing so, teachers can expand their understanding and grasp of their own teaching via interaction with others. With more cross-disciplinary research projects, teachers are more likely to share and exchange insights about different teaching methods and practices, thus leading to more learning and teaching that transcends the conventional boundaries of the curriculum, especially in Malaysian where language and education policies are top-down (Abdul Aziz, 2021; V. Wong, 2018) and highly centralised (Hussan Sahib & Stapa, 2022; Siah et al., 2018). To better facilitate these processes, each department can appoint a teacher to be the designated research advisor or liaison. His/her primary role is to advise teachers about planning and executing a research project, how teachers can collaborate with others and how research findings can be effectively disseminated on various platforms and networks. A teacher who has extensive experience in classroom research or one who has completed a postgraduate education degree is a prime candidate for such a role.

Moreover, the lack of a clearly defined school research policy and the lack of research partnerships among teachers restrict efforts to cultivate a research culture in schools. To address these, schools can set up a research advisory committee whose objectives are to encourage, oversee and regulate classroom research in schools. These can be achieved by formulating a tangible research policy document that stipulates research-related issues such as establishing research ethics and ensuring academic rigour. Also, it will be very encouraging for teachers if the time spent on conducting a research project contributes to their total working hours.

Hence, MICSS need to urgently forge relations with other schools and educational institutions. Granted, organisations such as the *United Chinese School Committee's Association of Malaysia* (UCSCAM) and *United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia* (UCSCTAM) often liaise with teacher training and education institutions from mainland China and Taiwan to provide short to medium-term in-service training to MICSS teachers (Ong et al., 2020; Yu, 2017). However, MICSS must not solely rely on these organisations to establish and maintain working relations with potential collaborators. For example, inter-school public learning communities would present opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, especially if both schools operate in different educational systems. Echoing the call by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) to provide teachers with platforms to disseminate teacher research, MICSS can collaborate with local universities, colleges and polytechnics to set up school-based educational research journals. Senior academic staff from partner institutions may sit on the editorial board and serve as advisors, editors and reviewers. In essence, classroom research is "systematic self-critical inquiry made public" (Stenhouse, 1985, as cited in Fries & Cochran-Smith, 2006, p.814), where teachers hold themselves accountable to the education and wider community which have continuously supported and ensured the survival of MICSS. With these as the core driving factors, teachers may work on classroom research and disseminate them more aggressively.

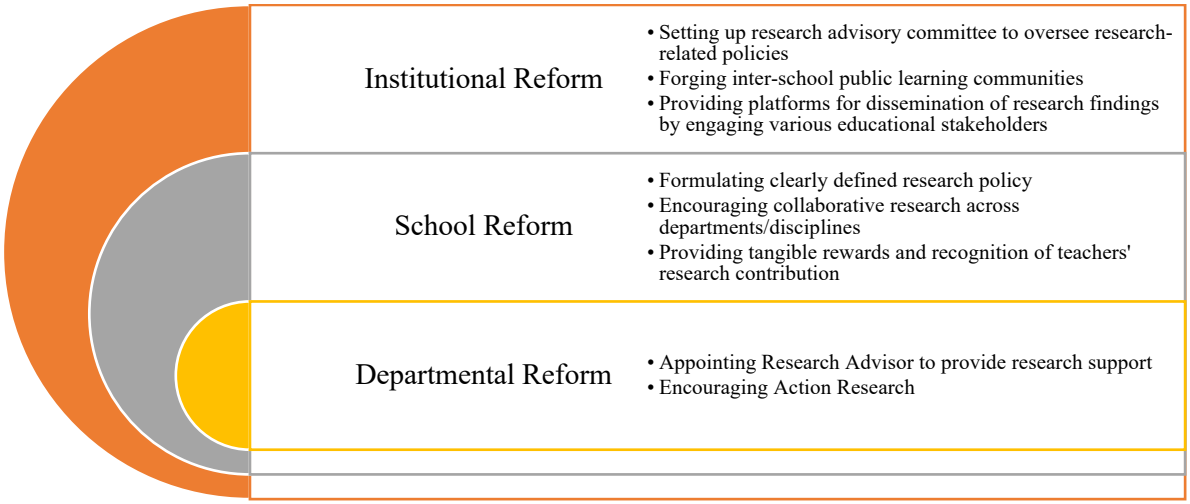
CONCLUSION

Present literature has suggested focusing on the well-being of the academic staff to address concerns about teachers in MICSS. Reducing burnout among MICSS teachers becomes

imperative, which is reflected in a three-stage reform (Figure 9) in relation to the respondents' research beliefs and practice.

Figure 9

Suggested Educational Reform Pertaining to Research Beliefs and Practices among MICSS Teachers



Educational reform, according to Rust (2009), is a deeply rooted change that requires time. Through classroom research, teachers are expected to be an "integral part of the process" towards a "critical inquiry stance" (p.1886). At the departmental level, teachers need to develop closer working relationships with their peers. More effort must be devoted to critically examining and improving individual teachers' understanding of classroom research and the related methodologies so that they are better equipped to balance and manage research projects with other responsibilities. It is likelier that teachers, as a collective, can be "successful at substantially changing practice" (Rust, 2009, p.1889), allowing teachers to bring their voice to the policy arena using classroom research as the platform for action and change. The main objective of this reform is getting teachers to see teaching and classroom research "as part of the same whole" instead of "conflicting" or "different" (Adler, 1993, p.160). By extension of this idea, MICSS should assist beginning teachers that they employ.

The findings of this study indicate that reform can also occur school-wide, as the principles that Wong (2007) proposed overlap with those propagated in Figure 9. School-wide reform emphasises the formulation of an official document documenting how classroom research can be formally integrated into schools. At this stage, teachers are encouraged to work on cross-disciplinary research projects with others from different departments, with their efforts officially recognised and rewarded by the school through various channels (i.e. *Board of Governors*, *Parent-Teacher Association*, *School Alumni*). This reflects the belief that classroom research "should not be an individual endeavour" but an attempt to engage "peers in a scholarly, conscious and thoughtful manner" (Adler, 1993, p.161). Likewise, Wong (2007) also calls for more school-based in-service training to be provided to teachers, focusing on more classroom observation, discourse, and exchange with experienced teachers and appointing experienced teachers as mentors.

However, it is insufficient to only focus on reform in the school itself. MICSS must forge and maintain communication with other institutions beyond their own. Institutional reform concerning classroom research in MICSS may focus on expanding existing school networks and strengthening inter-school relations. To achieve this, setting up an institutionalised body that governs and regulates research projects occurring in schools will ensure that standards are observed by the school community. Said practices can then be

recognised by other academic institutions, MICSS notwithstanding, thus enhancing stronger ties with academia. With this as a foundation, public learning communities involving other institutions can be forged to promote better collaboration. These create various platforms and opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development that transcends the limitations of a conventional school system.

To conclude, despite the odds stacked heavily against the MICSS, they have persisted and persevered through various challenges that threatened their survival (Siah et al., 2018; Wang & An, 2023). Issues of teacher quality have persisted and continue to beleaguer many. Nevertheless, MICSS can ensure their survival and relevance in an ever-changing world via proper policy planning and emphasis on classroom research, with a vision towards greater cooperation with others.

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