

Coaching Across Cultures:
A Narrative Inquiry of Instructional Coaching in Rural Sarawak

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Abstract

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While much has been written about the advantages of instructional coaching in the education leadership literature (Knight, 2007), little is known about the experiences of coaches who support teachers in rural schools. They rarely consider the complex rural cultural context and other rural realities such as accessibility, funding, and a shortage of teachers of specialized subjects (Shan & Abdul Aziz, 2022).

In multicultural Malaysia, the education ministry introduced instructional coaches in 2014 to support both urban and rural teachers. Almost all initial preparation and ongoing training for coaches focus on general coaching and mentoring skills, pedagogical content knowledge, and curriculum. Given the complexity rural teachers face in addressing their students' multiple cultural beliefs and practices, home languages, and worldviews, coaches should also be equipped to help teachers become aware of the cultural dynamics in their classrooms. However, no training to date has prepared the coaches for meaningful discourse surrounding the diverse cultural experiences of teachers and students.

This qualitative research seeks to understand the experiences of rural English instructional coaches in Sarawak, Malaysia through culturally relevant pedagogy and the three-

dimensional narrative inquiry framework. Sarawak, the largest Malaysian state, is home to 27 main ethnic indigenous groups and over 40 ethnic subgroups, most of which reside in rural areas. Yet, conversations and research around race and culture in Malaysian educational spaces are limited and focus mostly on dominant ethnic groups while sidelining ethnic indigenous groups (Embong, 2018).

Using narrative case study, this research adds to the racial discourse in Malaysian education by first exploring the complexities and subtleties that shape coaches' experiences within rural Sarawak. It seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) In the context of a multicultural rural setting, how do instructional coaches narrate their experiences of supporting rural English teachers? (2) What can we learn from the narratives of instructional coaches regarding their roles and responsibilities of coaching English teachers in a multicultural rural setting? (3) What changes or adjustments need to be made in the preparation and professional development of coaches in a multicultural setting?

Three instructional coaches were involved in 60 to 75-minute open-ended interviews as well as classroom and field observations over 3 months. Findings suggest the following themes: (a) making "ruralness" work, (b) the coaches' perceived understanding of "culture", and (c) missing pieces in the preparation and support of coaches. The findings highlight the importance of understanding how the nuanced experiences of coaches are shaped by their past and present, interactions, and the rural context. The in-depth and context-specific information has important implications for stakeholders and policymakers in reforming the preparation and support of instructional coaches toward being culturally relevant.

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List of Abbreviations

EL	English Language
MOE	Malaysian Ministry of Education
PD	Professional development
SISC+	<i>School Improvement Specialist Coach Plus</i> , the formal title for instructional coaches or teacher coaches in Malaysia
SIPARTNER+	<i>School Improvement Partner Plus</i> , the formal title for school leaders assigned to coach and mentor other school leaders.

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When I left home in the island of Borneo 4 years ago to pursue my PhD, I carried with me the hopes, dreams, prayers, and resilience of family, relatives, and friends who make up my community. They helped see and carry me through my entire journey, and I would not be where I am today without their support. I am grateful to my parents, siblings, nephews, niece, in-laws, relatives, and friends for believing in me and cheering me along the way.

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Above all, I am grateful to my Heavenly Father for His blessings throughout this journey and beyond. All this is possible because of His grace and mercy. To God be the glory.

Dedication

To mummy:

This work is dedicated to the little girl who had to hide under the blankets with a torchlight to read and study 50 years ago, for fear of being told off. Despite your hardships, you excelled at everything you did. This work is inspired by you.

To daddy:

This work is dedicated to the little Iban boy more than 60 years ago who had to spend days trekking barefoot through the jungles of rural Sarawak and setting up camp just to get to school. That journey culminated in this Iban girl's doctoral journey on the other side of the world. Thank you for taking that first step.

To Greg:

For putting everything on hold for me to pursue my dreams. For being my strength and motivation when I needed it the most.

I love you all.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Dinga crita aku lok. Listen to *my* story. That line in my native tongue is a common phrase exchanged between teachers during workshop break times or informal meet ups at local coffee shops. I cannot speak for every teacher, but I know that at least among my fellow teachers, we seem to enjoy sharing our experiences of teaching in the rural areas of Sarawak, so much so that it may feel like a competition sometimes. It is not uncommon for teachers from all over the country who are new to the field to be stationed in rural schools. Almost every teacher you meet will have a story or two that captures their first few years of teaching in a run-down school somewhere in the interiors of Sarawak. Yet, even in the similarities of having these experiences, the experience of one individual teacher can still be set apart from another. And this, I realize, is what makes stories so captivating: That even in the monotony of images that seem to be conjured up when one mentions “rural Sarawak”, when you pay attention to the stories behind each image and experience, you’ll realize how distinct each one is.

There really isn’t one “best” way to truly portray the ruralness of Sarawak schools. However, when thinking about what generally counts as “rural”, the experience of my first visit as an instructional coach comes to mind. This is by no means an attempt to write a blanket description of what “rural” looks like, but more of a start that will hopefully pique your interest in reading more about rural schools in Sarawak.

As I recall my first experience of visiting schools as an instructional coach, I can still hear the rumbling sound of the boat engine that was going to transport us to the school. The sound of the boat engine caught my ears as I approached the rickety wooden jetty it was docked at. My colleagues and I were on our way for our first visit as instructional coaches to a primary school in our district, and the only way to travel there was by boat. Imagine the disappointment

my city girl heart felt when I saw it. It was a small *sampan* or Malay wooden boat with what seemed to be a haphazardly built half-covered area at the back of the boat to shelter passengers from the rain or scorching sun. The *sampan* was modeled after well-known traditional passenger boats in Sarawak made out of timber with thatch leaf roofs. These traditional boats are called *perahu tambang*, literally translated as “fee boats” because one needs to pay a fee of usually 50 cents or more, depending on the distance, in order to get a ride.

My colleagues and I exchanged looks with each other and burst out laughing. One look at the whole group was enough to know that we were simply unprepared for the journey! The post of instructional coaches was newly introduced in the Malaysian education system that year, and as newly appointed coaches, we were eager for our inaugural school trip. We looked sharp (and overdressed) in our typical office wear: blouses or crisp shirts and neckties, slick ironed pants, and leather shoes or flats. It was hardly the ideal getup for a 45-minute wooden boat ride on a warm and humid day.



Figure 1: A photo with my colleagues before our wooden boat left the jetty. Having learnt our lesson from our first trip, we were better prepared for this trip and dressed down.

One by one, we carefully stepped off the creaky wooden jetty into the *sampan*. It wobbled and swayed with our weight, and I was genuinely worried about how safe the *sampan* would be. There were six of us including the boatman, but my anxious eyes could only spot four life jackets tucked in a discreet corner of the boat. The 45-minute boat ride to the school felt much longer than it was, or perhaps it was because I felt the time stop when I caught sight of a congregation of crocodiles lounging along the riverbanks as we approached the jetty near the school.

If you thought getting on a boat is tricky, getting off a wobbling wooden boat is equally challenging. The boatman had one foot on the jetty and another on the boat as he attempted to secure it onto a wooden pole on the jetty. We dared not make a move while he did this, for fear that we would tip the boat over. Once he was done, we clumsily hopped off onto the jetty, relieved that the boat portion of the journey was over. I may have looked composed on the outside, but in my mind, I was dramatically on my knees and kissing the ground. At the entrance to the jetty, an old minivan was waiting to transport us to the school. There were no other vehicles to choose from because the road leading to the school was narrow. Some of my colleagues offered to walk to the school instead, but after being told that the drive alone would take more than half an hour, they happily packed into the minivan with the rest of us. We all laughed as we looked at each other, crammed into the minivan, trying to enjoy the bumpy ride due to potholes in the road. Little did we know that the journey would soon become a metaphor of our coaching journey in rural Sarawak.

1.1 Understanding the Landscape: Why Sarawak is Different

Physical ruralness aside, another distinct characteristic of rural schools in Sarawak is the demographic of each school which is made up of diverse cultural and ethnic groups. Malaysia is

generally divided into two: Peninsular or West Malaysia and East Malaysia, where Sarawak is (see Appendix A for detailed maps of Malaysia and Sarawak). Malaysia has a total of 13 states and 3 federal territories, with 11 of the states and 2 of the federal territories located in Peninsular Malaysia. The remaining two states and federal territory are in East Malaysia: Sarawak, Sabah, and the federal territory of Labuan. Despite this, the size of Sarawak covers 124,449.51 square kilometers (Sarawak Government, 2018) which is over 90% of Peninsular Malaysia's total land size, making it the largest state in the country. This fact is essential in understanding why Sarawak is so different from the other states in Malaysia: Having a large land size also means that there are more ethnic groups in Sarawak than any other state in the country.

In Peninsular Malaysia, the population typically consists of four groups: Malay, Chinese, Indian, and the Orang Asli ("Original People") or natives of Peninsular Malaysia. Out of these four groups, Malays make up the largest percentage of the population on the peninsula. In fact, combined with the population of Malays in East Malaysia, in general, they make up the majority population in the country which gives them a political advantage over the other races or ethnic groups in the country (Gabriel, 2021; Joseph, 2014).

Sarawak, on the other hand, is more diverse and complex than Peninsular Malaysia, with 27 ethnic groups and over 40 ethnic subgroups constituting the state's overall population (Malaysian Department of Information, 2016). Indigenous Ibans (Sea Dayaks) make up the largest ethnic composition, followed by the Chinese, Malays, Bidayuh (Land Dayaks), Melanau, and Orang Ulu. Each of these ethnic groups have subgroups scattered across Sarawak such as the Remun, Selako, Kenyah, Kayan, Murut, Punan, Bisaya, Kelabit, Penan, and Berawan, just to name a few. Since Sarawak is generally divided into the Southern, Central, and Northern regions,

the dialects and some cultural practices of the ethnic groups and subgroups are usually distinctly different depending on which region they are located in¹.

Members of the ethnic groups speak their own languages and dialects but receive compulsory education in Malay language which is a language different from the one they mainly communicate with at home. This is due to the centralized system of education in Malaysia where education and language policies come directly from the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the country's capital, Kuala Lumpur (Kral & Smith, 2017). Through this top-down approach, most schools in the country use the Malay language as their medium of instruction, with a small number of schools using English (mostly private international schools) or vernacular language (mostly Chinese or Tamil medium schools). In the case of Sarawak, Malay has been the medium of instruction in all secondary schools and in 1,030 of the state's 1,242 primary schools since the mid-1980s, while the remaining number of schools use Mandarin as their medium of instruction (Sarawak Education Department, 2015). What this means, unfortunately, is that Sarawak's ethnic and linguistic diversity are not represented in the centralized approach to education that favors a Malay-dominant education culture practiced by MOE (Kral & Smith, 2017).

In addition to ethnic and linguistic diversity, Sarawakian teachers would have to tackle geographical challenges that come with the job. With 25 out of 33 districts in Sarawak being rural, those serving in the remote areas spend most of their time traveling by water or through rough terrains to go to schools. Mostly running on generator sets for electricity and water pumps to get water, these schools also have poor internet connectivity and thus have limited connection

¹ The Iban language that my father speaks (central region) differs slightly from the one that my mother speaks (southern region). For example, for the phrase "I don't know", he would say "Enda ku nemu" (*Enda* means 'no', *ku* refers to 'I', and *nemu* means 'know') while my mother would say "Adai ku tauk" (*Adai* means 'no' and *tauk* refers to 'know'). A speaker of another dialect of the Iban language called the Remun Iban would say "Entau ku badak" (*entau* means 'no' and *badak* means 'know').

to the outside world, and teachers have to come up with creative ways to bring the outside world into their rural classrooms.

It is also important to note that indigenous communities make up an important part of the school community, especially in East Malaysia. In fact, 80% of the overall population of indigenous students in the country are in rural Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia (Ong et al., 2019). A 2011 Human Rights Commission of Malaysia report highlighted that many indigenous children dropped out or did not attend school at all. Malaysia's Ministry of Education (MOE) also highlighted this issue in their 2013-2025 Education Blueprint, citing economy, geography, and culture as factors affecting indigenous children's education (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOE], 2013). Issues of equitable education have long been associated with Malaysian indigenous communities, so schools should ideally be better prepared to support them by now. However, existing training and professional development programs are still insufficient in preparing teachers, and, relatedly, those who support them, for the complexities of working with indigenous communities (Ong et al., 2019).

Current literature on Malaysian indigenous communities is scarce and limited to the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia, and the Penan, which makes up only a small percentage of approximately 27 indigenous groups in Sarawak. Although MOE recently introduced plans to improve educational equity for indigenous communities in Sarawak (MOE, 2013), little is known about the specific experiences of teachers and coaches who serve these communities. If we fail to take into account the experiences of diverse indigenous communities in Sarawak, how can we expect educational policy reforms to truly address their needs?

Teaching in Sarawak requires more than just having sound pedagogical content knowledge, even more so for English language teachers. Teachers that serve in rural Sarawak,

particularly, come from various Malaysian states, bringing their cultural wealth and biases into already culturally diverse communities. Apart from having strong pedagogical content knowledge, these teachers need to be equally aware of power, language, and cultural issues to adequately support indigenous children. They need to be fluent in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to meet these needs and avoid viewing indigenous students with a deficit lens. Thus, teachers can benefit from being supported to reflect on their practices and bring new understandings to their teaching contexts (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). They need to be equipped and supported with the right skills and knowledge to establish cross-cultural understanding and build on their students' cultural strengths to engage them meaningfully in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Reliable and continuous support for teachers, especially those serving in rural Sarawak, have always proved to be challenging due to the limited workforce in district education offices that oversee schools located in their respective districts. Seeing the need for continuous professional support among teachers, MOE introduced instructional coaching as a teacher support program where subject-based coaches are placed in education districts nationwide. Given the complexity rural teachers face in addressing their students' multiple cultural beliefs and practices, home languages, and worldviews, coaches should also be equipped to help teachers become aware of the cultural dynamics in their classrooms. A more culturally responsive approach to coaching, which emphasizes improving the teaching and learning experiences of minoritized communities while building their cultural competence and awareness of social issues (Ladson-Billings, 1994) should therefore be employed by coaches who work with teachers serving these communities. In reality, however, the coaches are not well prepared in attending to the diverse cultural experiences of teachers and students, especially in rural Sarawak. Almost all

initial preparation and ongoing training for coaches focus on general coaching and mentoring skills, pedagogical content knowledge, assessment, and curriculum. Thus, future policy reforms should consider unique experiences of those serving rural communities to facilitate culturally responsive coaching. However, there is still much to learn about how best to maximize and contextualize teacher support in the multicultural settings in rural Sarawak, particularly in complex matters beyond the curriculum.

1.2 Instructional Coaching in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the official term for instructional coaches is *School Improvement Specialist Coach Plus* or SISC+ (hereafter referred to as coaches or instructional coaches in this study). Instructional coaching is still very much in its infancy in Malaysia and has been constantly revamped ever since its full roll-out to all states in the country in 2014. In the 9 years since its implementation, it has undergone two major revamps specifically in the coaches' scope of work, with the latest change implemented in 2019. Instructional coaching began as a teacher support pilot program for low performing schools in selected states in the country. Under this pilot program, instructional coaches were selected among subject specialists or teachers who achieved above 80% in their annual teaching assessments. These teachers were then assigned to monitor, coach, and mentor teachers part-time in nearby schools while simultaneously holding functional academic teaching roles in their respective schools.

When MOE launched the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) for 2013 – 2025 as part of the country's large-scale education reform, the post of instructional coaches was made permanent with appointment of coaches among various experts in the education field such as Excellent Teachers or *Guru Cemerlang* (one of the career pathways available for teachers in Malaysia), lecturers, existing literacy coaches in the district education offices, and state or

district education officers (Kho et al., 2020). The coaches were subsequently placed in education districts nationwide and work as full-time instructional coaches. As the main liaison between ministry stakeholders and teachers, appointed coaches have four main responsibilities: coach and mentor teachers based on their needs, deliver up-to-date curriculum and assessment approaches, plan and monitor implementation of intervention and remedial programs in schools, and organize professional development programs for teachers in their district (MOE, 2015).

The percentages of their main responsibilities are outlined in MOE's District Transformation Program (DTP) 3.0 Management Guideline as follows: i) 60% of face-to-face and on-the-ground teacher coaching and mentoring; ii) 20% of teacher professional development and professional learning (PLC) activities; iii) 15% of post-mortem reports and teacher intervention planning; and iv) 5% of administrative work at the district education office (School Management Division, 2017). Stories from most coaches, however, will show that their actual work does not reflect the ideal percentages outlined in the guidebook, due to the revamps that MOE has gone through the past few years. These revamps (or "restructuring", as MOE calls them), saw many departments under state and district education offices consolidated, which meant that the number of posts were reduced and coaches had to take up additional portfolios that were once held by officers in these posts, in addition to their main responsibilities as coaches.

Currently, coaching is also geared towards middle leaders in the school: teachers who are head of departments in schools (MOE, 2019). However, compared to their previous work procedure which specifically required coaches to work with 25–30 teachers of specific subjects per year, the current coaching procedure for middle leaders is still vague. Kho et al. (2020) point out that the new operative instructions for coaches have not specified how many teachers each

coach should work with and how frequent the coaching support should be given at a minimal level. In addition, coaches are sometimes given ad-hoc administrative roles in the office, which are mostly roles outside the scope of coaching and mentoring. This puts them in a difficult situation because they have to take up the identity of higher administration when dealing with schools (e.g. when collecting school data for district-wide intervention planning or monitoring and assessing schools' implementation of programs), which contradicts their identity as a coach or mentor.

This situation is amplified by the limited amount and scope of training and professional development workshops designed to prepare and support instructional coaches in their role. To prepare them for their role, Malaysian coaches only attended induction training for a week before setting out to schools. Subsequent training workshops focus mostly on equipping coaches with coaching and mentoring skills as well as pedagogical content knowledge in order to achieve MOE's main goal of introducing instructional coaching: to provide instruction and support in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment aspects to teachers in low-performing schools towards improved student outcomes (MOE, 2013).

The heavy attention on student outcomes implicitly places a burden on these coaches to turn things around in schools that are deemed as low performing. With so much focus on academic performance, issues or concerns beyond the curriculum are usually not considered during coaching. Although coaches are encouraged to adapt the training they receive to the context of the individual teachers that they coach, the demand and expectations placed on them remain the same: The teachers that they coach, along with the classes that these teachers teach, should show improvement in terms of their academic achievements.

More often than not, issues related to cultural differences and beliefs in a multicultural classroom do not get addressed as they should. Ladson-Billings (1995) used the term “cultural mismatch” when talking about the cause of failures in schools. She highlights how schools shortchange students by trying to force a square peg through a round hole: that these students are forced to “fit” into the expectations of meritocracy regardless of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class. She further suggests employing a culturally relevant pedagogy that acknowledges and makes the most of students’ cultural strengths to bridge the gap between home and school, which will ultimately lead to increased student achievement.

For instructional coaches in Malaysia, however, no training to date has prepared them for meaningful discourse surrounding teachers and students’ home or community culture and school culture. Yet, they are still faced with the challenge to address these issues without ample training to do so and expected to deliver excellent student outcomes by the end of the coaching cycle in each academic year. For coaches in rural districts, the challenges are amplified by the complex rural cultural context and other rural realities such as accessibility, funding, and a shortage of teachers of specialized subjects (Shan & Abdul Aziz, 2022). What these coaches truly need is a more nuanced approach to their initial preparation into coaching and their on-going professional development. Thus, it will be helpful to unpack actual coaching experiences that encompasses all aspects, specifically on how they address coaching in a multicultural setting, in order to identify what their needs are. In the following section, I articulate the need of highlighting coaching narratives in order to improve instructional coaching in the country.

1.3 Coaching Narratives: Why We Should Care

Picture an aging, untended building with an atmosphere as grey as its walls hidden behind a busy main office building and a bright primary school building filled with lively chatter

of school children. That is the building where my colleagues and I eventually set up our office in when we were first placed as instructional coaches in the district. It is a lonely building that has not been used for years, so much so that the officers in the main office of our district called it the forgotten building. “No one has been up there for years. You’ll be the first ones... hopefully there’s nothing waiting for you there,” one of the officers joked, referencing an old supernatural Malay belief of how spirits tend to haunt abandoned buildings.

My old office was just that—old. When instructional coaching was officially introduced as a post in Malaysian education districts, many districts in Sarawak like ours did not have the office space for additional officers. In our case, our district office was lucky because it shared grounds with a local primary school that was recently downsized, so the top floor of a semi-abandoned building block that housed additional classrooms, a science lab, and a music room for the school became our office space. With no additional expenses to accommodate new coaches in the district, the main office was still able to furnish our office with desks, office chairs, and cabinets, even though they were all used furniture that were discarded by both the main office and the school when they got their furniture replaced. The furniture weren’t the only things that were second-hand. Air-conditioning units—life-saving items for us in the tropics— were second-hand as well. To our dismay, they turned out to be defective units and didn’t do a good job at cooling down the office when the temperature rose above 100 F outside.

It was one of those typical hot and humid days in the office when the 12 of us, all instructional coaches tasked with coaching over 100 schools in the district, were in the office. The air was still and silent, filled with only the hum of the old air-conditioning units we inherited from the main office, which they insisted were still working. They were barely doing their job and didn’t do much to cool the office which felt like it had turned into a steam room. I pulled my

hair into a tight bun to keep them off my sweaty face and looked around: Everyone had their sleeves rolled up, and the men had either loosened or taken off their neckties. One of my colleagues brought her standing fan from home and placed it directly in front of her desk. I think it hardly helped: Her face was flushed red from the heat. Then, the sound of clicking keyboards, buzzing printers, and paper files dumped on top of desks pierced the air and broke the monotonous mood in the room.

“I feel like I’m a doctor, looking through all my patients’ files,” my colleague, Ken (all names are pseudonyms), joked, trying to lighten the mood in the room as he loosened his necktie further for some relief from the humid weather. A wry smile was on his face as he sifted through his stack of paper files where he kept the coaching records, lesson plans, and classroom data of the 20 teachers he coached that year. Ken had just turned 50 and recently suffered a minor heart attack due to being overworked. He had spent the previous months staying past the required working hours in the office and had even come by the office during the weekends to catch up with sorting out his coaching documents. And just a couple of months before that, we lost one of our colleagues, Raymond, to heart attack as well. Raymond, who too was known to put in extra hours in the office, was driving to school to coach when it happened. While he enjoyed coaching teachers, he often lamented how overwhelming it was to catch up with the often ridiculous demands of paperwork attached to the job, just to prove that we were “doing the job right”.

Just like others who serve in the Malaysian education field, instructional coaches in Malaysia undergo yearly performance reviews at their respective district education offices. These reviews are carried out by the head and deputy of the district education office as well as senior management officers in the office. During the yearly performance review, coaching records and numerical evidence such as students’ achievement data, exam passing rates, literacy data, and

even student attendance data are analyzed to assess and evaluate the impact of each coach in their district. Data on teachers and students' race and ethnicity are recorded as part of their demographic information but are rarely considered in coaching interventions.

The fact that these yearly performance reviews are focused on outcomes of elements that coaches have very little immediate interaction with is highly debatable. Since the coaching structure in Malaysia requires coaches to work with only a handful of teachers in their respective districts based on their needs analysis, it would not be fair to hold coaches accountable for the overall achievement of classes that most coaches can only observe for a maximum of three times per academic year.

Sadly, regardless of the complex human interactions that happen in the classrooms and during coaching sessions, numerical data and chart progressions are seen as the "solid" evidence of a coach's ability and effectiveness in coaching and mentoring the teachers they work with. The "audit culture" (Taubman, 2009) permeates every nook and cranny of the education system in Malaysia, and despite being touted as "individualized" support for teachers, instructional coaching is not exempt from having to produce quantifiable outcomes.

This becomes even more problematic when research that focuses mainly on measurable outcomes is given precedence over qualitative research. With most research focusing on using numerical data to generalize findings, multilayered experiences that are unique to individual schools, teachers, and classrooms are somewhat undermined. When these experiences are not taken into account and the complexities of classrooms are reduced to numbers on paper, education reforms unfortunately take only the numerical data into account and neglect what makes each classroom, teacher, and therefore instructional coach, contextually and uniquely different from each other.

All the above, along with my own experiences of coaching teachers in semi-rural Sarawak, hugely contributed to my decision of entering into research that is centered on narrative inquiry of instructional coaches' experiences as well as beliefs and values that guide their practice. Clandinin (2013) encourages looking at the practices and lived experiences of others as a source of knowledge and understanding, and Savin-Badin and Van Niekerk (2017) reiterate the importance of doing narrative inquiry because it focuses on stories that are collected as a way of understanding the way experiences are constructed, lived, and told. I believe highlighting the practices and lived experiences of instructional coaches in rural Sarawak would be the essential initial step when planning educational reforms that would take a wider array of educational experiences in Malaysia into consideration in order to ensure everyone's needs are catered to, regardless of the space they inhabit.

The complexities of the Sarawak rural context are not new to me because I taught in the rural areas during my earlier years of teaching and have had the experience of coaching rural schools in my capacity as an instructional coach. However, the rural schools that I have coached were not as remote as the ones in other education districts. Thus, I am interested in understanding the experiences of those coaching in the deeper interiors of Sarawak to answer the following questions: (1) In the context of a multicultural rural setting, how do instructional coaches narrate their experiences of supporting rural English teachers? (2) What can we learn from the narratives of instructional coaches regarding their roles and responsibilities of coaching English teachers in a multicultural rural setting? (3) What changes or adjustments need to be made in the preparation and professional development of coaches in a multicultural setting?

I raise these questions because I am interested in exploring how coaches in rural Sarawak speak about their experiences of working with primary and secondary school teachers in the

interiors of Sarawak, and relatedly, in unpacking how the coaches speak of and understand the ways in which they navigate coaching teachers from multiracial backgrounds who are tasked to teach in cultural settings that are different from theirs. I believe these questions are essential to ask to aid our understanding of the nuances of coaching in the context of Sarawak, particularly in rural Sarawak classroom settings that are made up of varying indigenous and ethnic groups. I argue that a deeper understanding of coaching experiences in rural Sarawak will provide a basis for improved preparation and professional development for coaches, thus addressing the challenges and opportunities they face when working with teachers in a rural setting.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

My interest in highlighting the contextually different experiences of coaches in rural Sarawak play a huge role in my decision of centering my research on the narratives of instructional coaches. This literature review provides the landscape on which my research rests upon. It is divided into four main components that cover the aspects of my research interest: Narrative inquiry, professional development or teacher support programs, instructional coaching, and the Malaysian educational context. My research is largely influenced by the works of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), thus a deeper dive into what narrative inquiry is and how it has evolved over the years is pertinent in helping me position it as the foundation for my study.

In what follows, I offer an in-depth discussion of the Malaysian education system to set the contextual stage for my research. This discussion will begin with a historical overview to unpack the historical path of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Malaysia and its impact on the country as a whole, to elucidate why there continues to be a heavy focus on the English language in the Malaysian education setting. Building on this, I continue with a brief discussion of professional development or teacher support programs in Malaysia over the years and how the gaps in each program have culminated with the implementation of instructional coaching in the country. This leads to the next section which is an exploration of the foundations of coaching and how they evolved into instructional coaching. This is followed by a brief discussion on culturally responsive coaching. Then, an overview of narrative inquiry makes up the final section of this literature review.

2.1 A Historical Look at the Context of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Malaysia

For my research, I am interested in understanding the experiences of instructional coaches in working with English teachers in rural schools, particularly in Sarawak. I chose to focus on the work of coaches with English teachers because there is always discourse around English language teaching in the country. In order to understand the current position of the English language and why there continues to be a heavy focus on the English language in the Malaysian education setting, it is necessary to unpack the history of how the teaching of English evolved in Malaysia.

English is taught as a second language in all Malaysian public schools, primary and secondary, in line with its status as a second language in the country. In recent years, the focus has been mainly on the teaching of English and the roles of English teachers in the country have been redefined as efforts to improve English language learning in Malaysia increase. Despite these efforts, the general Malaysian public's concern remains fixated on the English proficiency of students (Ahmad Sukri & Yunus, 2018; Musa et al., 2012). Various efforts have been taken by the MOE to improve English language learning in Malaysia, but data show that Malaysian students continue to show poor performance in English language (MOE, 2015). Research that looks into the Malaysian English language instruction posit that the cause of this issue could be traced back to the shifting from the English to the Malay medium in public schools post British colonization (Sidek & Wahi, 2018).

As a result of British colonization in the country, English was gradually instilled as a status language which consequently made it a “language of power and mobility” (John Albury, 2020, p. 303), particularly among the Malays. John Albury (2020) wrote that during British

colonization, the English language was the medium of instruction in elite schools which were only accessible to upper-class Malay boys. They would then serve as local officers in the Malaysian public service under British rule or pursue higher education overseas upon completing their secondary education. He further wrote that education before independence was thus limited to a privileged few and not accessible to everyone across socioeconomic groups, and those without English education or proficiency, including the non-elite Malays, were left behind in the race for upward mobility as their education only focused on preparing them for employment in resource-based economic activities such as agriculture and mining. However, the Razak Committee report (1955), which was a proposal written to reform the educational system in independent Malaysia, argued for a single-system education made accessible for all and using Malay language as the standardized medium of instruction in schools for the purpose of national unity and nation building. This saw a shift in the position of the English language in the Malaysian education system.

When the country gained independence from the British in 1957, the Education Ordinance was implemented. With the Education Ordinance, the English language was phased out as the medium of instruction in public schools but was maintained as one of the five mandatory subjects in the Malaysian educational curriculum from elementary school to the university level. In 1971, the National Language Act cemented the leading role of the Malay language with the English language holding a secondary role in the Malaysian education system (Heng & Tan, 2006). Tupas (2018) suggested that establishing Malay language or *Bahasa Melayu* as the national language was a result of Malaysia's attempt in determining its postcolonial linguistic identity within a "political discourse which is sited in the processes, politics and discourses of globalization, nationalism, and multilingualism" (p. 150). Tupas

explained that despite having a “globalist outlook” (p. 150) that emphasized the learning of English for the advancement of its economy, Malaysia also struggled with the need to establish its identity as an independent, multicultural nation. Thus, in its move toward nation-building and away from English hegemony, Malaysia established the Malay Language as the national language, and questioning its supremacy is akin to challenging the special status of the *Bumiputra* (sons of the soil) or Malays in *Tanah Melayu* (Malay land) and can be perceived as seditious (Ali, 2013; John Albury, 2020; Tan, 2012).

As a result, the English language started losing its importance in the Malaysian education system, particularly because it is no longer a determinant for entry into tertiary institutions. In contrast, a passing grade in Malay language is required in the Malaysian Certificate of Education (known locally as *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* or *SPM*), which is the national pre-university entrance examination. This means that if students fail their Malay language exam, they automatically do not have access to tertiary education, and they will not be awarded the Malaysian Certificate of Education. With less emphasis given on English, its instructional time in schools was prominently reduced and its use amongst teachers and students inside and outside the class began to diminish as more focus was given on subjects that required a mandatory passing grade in the national-based examination, such as Malay language, Mathematics, Science, and History (Sidek & Wahi, 2018).

In 2013, MOE commissioned an English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) to produce a 10-year roadmap for English language education reform in the country. The roadmap provides a comprehensive framework for English language education reform from preschool to teacher education from 2015–2025. The roadmap outlines the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is the international

standard for describing and measuring language proficiency. The adoption led to changes in the Malaysian English language curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment at all levels of education, including teacher education and in-service support or professional development (Mohd Don & Abdullah, 2019). Among the professional development programs Malaysian teachers and instructional coaches had to undergo as a result of this major reform were training workshops related to CEFR teaching and learning as well as upskilling and professional development programs to improve their overall English language proficiency and pedagogy. A further discussion of teacher support programs in Malaysia will be presented in the following sections. I would like to begin, however, with a discussion that delineates what professional development is for teachers and sheds light on the background, concept, and elements of teacher professional development.

2.2 Professional Development for Teachers

Research has consistently attributed students' academic success to how much access teachers have to high-quality professional development (PD) activities (Akiba et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Guskey, 2002). On a broader scale, research has also identified teacher PD as an integral factor in determining the successful implementation of educational reforms (Desimone et al., 2002). As such, PD activities ensure that teachers are given on-going support to not only maintain good teaching standards and ensure a high-quality teaching workforce, but also to successfully implement reform initiatives in their classrooms. Both of these aim towards improving student outcomes.

PD is often described as processes or activities that encourage teachers to enhance their knowledge, skills, and learning, which ultimately culminates in improved student learning (Guskey, 2002; Gürgür, 2017). This definition is echoed in Desimone's (2009) interpretation of

PD, in which PD is defined as a process that encourages teachers to reflect on their pedagogical knowledge and beliefs, teaching practices, and how they work together to impact their students' learning outcomes. This process is complex because learning opportunities that are presented during PDs are interrelated and involve activities that are interactive, manageable, and measurable, and can be both formal and informal (Desimone et al., 2002; Desimone, 2011).

Avalos (2011) further expounds on the complexity of the process of PD by highlighting other components that are involved. She writes,

Teacher professional learning is a complex process, which requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively, the capacity and willingness to examine where each one stands in terms of convictions and beliefs and the perusal and enactment of appropriate alternatives for improvement or change. All this occurs in particular educational policy environments or school cultures, some of which are more appropriate and conducive to learning than others. (p. 10)

Literature on PD generally concur that a good PD model would work in engaging teachers to learn, unlearn, and relearn ways of teaching and refine their methods through collaborative means that are long-term and ongoing (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Zepeda, 2012). In addition, effective PD should be relevant to the needs of the teachers according to the contexts they serve in. They should also be sustainable and provide ongoing opportunities for teachers to engage in the following activities: reflecting and asking for feedback on teaching, keeping up to date with content and pedagogy, and engaging in collaborative active learning and experimenting with various ways to approach teaching (Evers et al., 2016; McComb & Eather, 2017; Rasmussen & Byrd, 2016).

These opportunities may be presented in a range of PD activities, from formal training workshops that are more traditional or lecture-style in nature to peer-focused PD like coaching and mentoring. In OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (2009) involving 96,000 lower secondary teachers and principals from 24 countries, they identified courses or workshops,

education conferences/seminars, continuing education programs, school benchmarking visits, participation in teacher networks, involvement in individual or collaborative research, and coaching and mentoring as common PD activities that teachers participate in. In addition to these formal or structured PD activities, OECD also included less formal types of PD in their list such as reading research or journal articles on teaching and learning as well as having informal dialogues that are centered on effective teaching. Whatever the form may be, PD is often embedded in schools to ensure that it is accessible to teachers throughout the school year. The shift towards this form of PD was most apparent in the early 2000s, where PD started to be incorporated into the teachers' day-to-day practices (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Covay Minor et al., 2016; Desimone, 2009). This was an important shift as teachers were seen as learners and schools as learning communities (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) that provided the opportunity for teachers to collaborate with each other and work towards improving their instructional practices for the benefits of their students.

Although PD has a common goal for schools and teachers, the form and implementation may differ from context to context. In a study of 139 government-funded PD programs in 14 low and middle-income countries, Popova et al. (2022) opened their discussion with a focus on what works in high-income countries like the United States. They highlighted several studies to show the impact of “general” PD which focus on classroom management or teachers' content knowledge versus “managed” PD which usually prescribes detailed classroom interventions and follow-up support. They found that managed PD yielded better student outcomes compared to general PD, especially when there is sustained follow-up support provided for teachers. This echoes what Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) concluded in their review of studies done in the U.S. They concluded that effective PDs are sustained, intense, and embedded as part of the

curriculum in schools compared to traditional, one-shot workshops. In fact, most of the literature on PD agree that embedded PD is the most effective in providing teachers with on-the-job feedback and opportunities for ongoing learning.

However, it is important to note that PD activities that are embedded as part of school programs may not be feasible for all. Popova et al. (2022) pointed out that the effectiveness of embedded PD is dependent on the environment that teachers are in. Further, Kraft and Papay (2014) suggest that because of the complexity of some school environments, having PD activities outside the school may actually be more helpful for teachers since that would allow them to focus solely on their practice. This is the case for Malaysia where PD programs are typically funneled to teachers through a cascade model of training—similar to a training of trainers model—because of how the education system is centralized at the federal government level.

Under the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE), the Teacher Education Division (TED) department is tasked with overseeing pre-service teacher training and in-service PD in the country. Apart from the TED department, other divisions within MOE such as the Planning and Policy division, the Curriculum division, and the Assessment division also play important roles in helping the TED plan data-driven pre-service teacher preparation and in-service PD programs (Jamil et al., 2011).

PD programs in Malaysia take many forms such as the ones outlined in OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (2009). The most common form of PD is one that is done through a top-down approach consisting of four phases, starting with the training of state trainers by MOE. After a week-long training, these state trainers will then be tasked to plan and implement the next phase, which is the training of selected teachers or education officers who will become the main resource person and trainer for each district. After the state-level training,

district resource trainers will cascade down the training to school representatives in district-level training workshops. During these workshop sessions, each school is typically represented by one teacher who will then be the school's resource person tasked with carrying out the school-level in-house training. In this top-down PD training approach, the first three phases are done outside of school while the final phase is a school-based workshop.

Through this centralized approach to PD, MOE sets out to ensure that there is little ambiguity in the information relayed in each phase of the PD training. This approach is also meant to guarantee that every teacher across the country gets equal access to the latest content knowledge, pedagogy, and interventions to help them deliver their lessons effectively. In reality, however, there are some challenges to this PD model. In OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (2009), Malaysian teachers noted that they spent 30% of their time on administrative tasks and other non-teaching duties or chores. Thang et al. (2010) added that with these additional duties, teachers rarely have the time to focus on matters related to their core business of teaching, including participating in PD programs.

The requirements outlined for PD also differ according to context. In the United States, PD requirements for teachers vary from state to state. The New York State Education Department (NYSED), for example, requires that in each five-year cycle, teachers must complete 100 hours of Continuing Teacher and Leader Education (CTLE) courses or take up academic credit courses offered by universities for salary advancement. This requirement is different for teachers in New Jersey where they changed the 5-year 100-hour cycle to only requiring teachers to earn a minimum of 20 hours per year (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2013). In contrast, it is mandatory for all Malaysian school teachers to fulfill a minimum of 5 days of PD for each school year, regardless of which state they teach in. This can be done through

attending in-person PD sessions, completing online self-learning e-modules, or submitting book or journal reviews to a centralized e-management system managed by MOE.

2.2.1 Issues in Professional Development of Teachers

In a study on teacher PD around the world, Wei et al. (2009) found common PD practices in countries that ranked top in either PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) or TIMSS (Third International Math and Science Study). They noted that the high-achieving countries shared the following key features in their PD practices: (1) extensive PD opportunities, (2) opportunities for PD and collaboration are embedded into teachers' work hours, 3) PD activities are ongoing and relevant to the teachers' school contexts, (4) teachers are involved in decisions related to curriculum and instructional practice, and (5) mentoring and coaching is provided for teachers, and mentors are provided formal training.

In addition, the research also revealed that a fundamental element in ensuring effective PD is time. Multiple research studies have shown that PD can only be effective if it lasts more than a single session. For example, Desimone (2009) and Covay Minor et al. (2016) noted that for PD to have a meaningful impact on teachers and students, teachers need to be provided with a minimum of 20 hours of PD spread over several months. In the same vein, Rasmussen and Byrd (2016) proposed that teachers need to be involved in a minimum of 40 hours of PD for their content and pedagogical knowledge to be effectively impacted. Certain high-achieving countries achieve this by embedding PD into their teachers' day-to-day work. OECD (2004) stated that 85% of schools in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland ensure consistency of PD by incorporating it into their teachers' workday and providing class coverage by other teachers when they need to attend any PD session. This

approach ensures that the teachers' professional learning can be sustained over a long period of time.

It might be ideal for all the above to be implemented in every school, but they may not be doable for schools that have concerns such as teacher shortage, a large student population, large class sizes, and context-specific issues. In addition to time needed for the actual training, PD sessions often involve new content or initiatives which require teachers to have enough time post training to reflect on their learning, implement their new learning, and collaborate with their colleagues (Akiba & Wilkinson, 2016; Liao et al., 2017). Restructuring the school schedule to make way for common planning and collaborating periods among teachers may not be feasible for every school. This leaves teachers without ample time to adjust to new knowledge and teaching strategies, thus reducing the impact that PD is meant to have on their teaching practice, and ultimately, their classrooms.

Another major issue that has been highlighted about teacher PD is its relevance. Ideally, the content and structure of PD should be relevant to the needs of teachers and the schools they serve in order to be effective. Evers et al. (2016) argue that for PD to be relevant, its content must be strongly connected to the daily work of teachers in their specific contexts. Kelly and Cherkowski (2015) further add that what is covered and how they are covered during a PD session and what is expected from teachers in their day-to-day teaching practice must be consistent and closely connected. Therefore, an effective PD not only needs to be relevant in terms of content, but in terms of the format it is presented as well. A good PD session should also model to teachers what is expected of them in their classrooms through the attitudes and behaviors of those leading the session (National Staff Development Council, 2001). This helps to strengthen the PD session and help teachers see practical teaching strategies that can be directly

linked to their actual classroom practice. When teachers understand and see the relevance of PD to their teaching practice and classroom needs, their motivation, engagement, and learning are positively impacted (Song & Choi, 2017; Williams, 2017).

Additionally, Hayward and Laursen (2018) posited that a good PD program should guide teachers in adapting the knowledge or strategies learned to suit their own teaching and school context. Failure to provide this opportunity will just result in teachers reverting to their old ways of teaching. Research has shown that one of the barriers to successful PD around the world is the lack of relevancy the PD sessions have to the teachers' needs and school contexts (Borko et al., 2010). This leads to resentment of PD in general, feelings of frustration or being "forced" to attend PDs, and passive participation from teachers who attend PD sessions (Kennedy, 2016; Powell & Bodur, 2019).

2.2.2 Overview of Professional Development for English Teachers in Malaysia

The context of Malaysian classrooms, particularly in the teaching and learning of English language, has long been known to be diverse and challenging. In a multicultural classroom with various learner needs, teachers are challenged to not only meet those needs but the demands of MOE to increase their learners' academic performance in standardized assessments as well. This requires teachers to juggle many responsibilities including shifting from traditional teaching methods to one where every learner's needs can be catered to so that each learner is given equal opportunity to achieve maximum levels of success in the classroom.

In order to help English teachers cope with these responsibilities, several strategies to upgrade teachers' skills and knowledge have been outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, including the 10-year English language education roadmap. On top of upskilling professional development programs such as one that requires over 60,000 English teachers to

undergo language training and pass the Cambridge Placement Test within two years, another strategy taken by MOE is to provide on-site teacher coaching through subject-specific instructional coaches called School Improvement Specialist Coaches Plus (SISC+, hereafter referred to as coaches).

This particular move proves that MOE recognizes the importance of creating ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers to continually grow in their craft in order to help their students develop their knowledge and skills. The coaches are placed in district education offices through the District Transformation Program (DTP), one of the key initiatives outlined in the 2013–2025 Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) that empower district education offices to make informed decisions tailored for the unique needs and contexts of schools under their jurisdiction (MOE, 2013), given that different districts with the diversified racial compositions will have their unique needs, constraints, and approaches to teaching and learning.

Although the introduction of instructional coaches in the education system was a novel move by MOE, the concept of coaching and mentoring is nothing new to education in Malaysia. Prior to the formal implementation of instructional coaches in the Malaysian education system, MOE mandated that schools implement the “Beginning Teacher Development Program Module”, a school-based induction program designed to support beginning teachers in the first three years of their career (MOE, 2015).

Mentoring is one of the three key components of the program along with orientation and professional development. Selected by the school administration, mentor teachers are experienced teachers who teach the same subject as the beginning teachers they are assigned to. Their role is to mentor and guide beginning teachers on professional conduct and teacher

competency (Paronjodi et al., 2017). Ideally, mentoring meetings take place weekly and two teaching periods are allocated weekly for in-class coaching. In reality, however, the mentors are not trained or equipped with coaching and mentoring skills in order to effectively guide beginning teachers. Consequently, the lack of training for mentors affects the successful implementation of the program and most mentors do not carry out the roles expected of them (Vikaraman et al., 2017).

In addition to the mentoring program for beginning teachers, MOE announced the implementation of the “Native Speaker Program” under the English Language Teacher Development Project which ran in two cycles: One from 2010–2013 and another from 2013–2015 (MOE, 2014). This program was aimed at developing the reflective practice and pedagogical skills of primary school English teachers. Selected English teachers from 1800 primary schools nationwide were given individual mentoring by native English speakers every two weeks and participated in training workshops conducted by their native speaker mentors. The mentors also facilitated classroom teaching and learning through co-teaching (Senom & Othman, 2014). The program was also designed to improve the capacity of English language lecturers in teacher training institutions throughout the country. To do so, native speaker mentors were placed in five institutions formally recognized by MOE for their niche in English, namely the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) and four teacher training institutes across the country (MOE, 2014).

However, a few factors hindered the successful implementation of the program. The Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA) reported that a major concern about this program was the qualifications of the native speaker mentors. The selection of the mentors was mostly based on their country of origin, and many did not receive any proper formal

training to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) and provide contextual support to ESL teachers in the Malaysian context (MELTA, 2010). Additionally, those in the teaching fraternity were concerned about the over-reliance on foreign teachers and critiqued this move as MOE's inability to recognize and draw on the expertise of local teachers. MELTA also reported that many teachers felt that MOE's high investment in the short-term program was costly and this money should instead be devoted to improving the professional development programs that are already in place for local teachers. As a result, most teachers in the country were resistant to the idea of having native speaker mentors and the negative reception of the program affected its implementation (Wan Abdul Halim, 2016).

In the state of Sarawak, the remote location of schools is just one of the many obstacles of the Native Speaker Program. Compared to the more urban regions in Peninsular Malaysia, the development in rural Sarawak still has much to improve. Most districts in the state are connected by road, but river transportation by ferry or boat is still the main mode of transportation for those who have to travel to the interior. Some rural Sarawak schools are only accessible by timber tracks and unpaved palm estate roads.

Sarawak has over 1,400 schools across 4 urban education districts, 4 semi-rural education districts, and 25 rural education districts. Due to the small number of mentors employed for the program, it was difficult to deploy them equally across the state. Only 85 native speaker mentors were employed for the program in Sarawak and each of them worked in a "sub-cluster" of five schools with a minimum of ten teachers across the five schools (British Council, 2020).

Although most of the mentors were posted in more remote areas, it was still not enough to ensure that equal support was given to all rural English teachers.

In addition to this, native speaker mentors had to face language and cultural barriers on top of different beliefs and ideologies about the teaching and learning process when working with teachers and students in the rural areas (MELTA, 2010; Kepol, 2017). With a lack of understanding of the culture, beliefs, and social backgrounds of the particular community they work with, native speaker mentors found it challenging to build rapport with their mentees and work together with them to ensure that the program was implemented successfully.

The Native Speaker Program unfortunately ended after only two cycles. Concurrently, seeing how the coaching and mentoring approach could benefit teachers, MOE implemented a pilot instructional coaching program in selected states. The instructional coaching model adopted by MOE is solely focused on academic coaching where coaches serve as experienced and knowledgeable on-site professional developers for teachers they work with individually or in groups. Scholars agree that instructional coaching is one of the effective ways of providing ongoing job-embedded support to teachers. Through instructional coaches, teacher behavior change is sustained because they are supported beyond one-shot workshops through conversations around practice with coaches, as well as through collective problem-solving on classroom issues with them (Hargreaves, 1995; Greene, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

2.3 Instructional Coaching: An Effective Approach to Professional Development

Instructional coaching can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s when educators realized the failure of well-funded programs in improving education (Joyce & Showers, 1996). A job-embedded peer-coaching model aimed to improve the transfer of pedagogical skills into classroom practice was then proposed by Joyce and Showers (1980). This peer-coaching model described productive training design for teachers as one that provides teachers feedback along

with the opportunity to practice under simulated conditions and in the classroom. In the early 1980s and 1990s, a new coaching model termed “technical coaching” emerged, and along with it came other teacher development practices that were also considered coaching: “collegial coaching”, “challenge coaching”, “team coaching”, and “cognitive coaching” (Cassidy et al., 2009, as cited in Ali et al., 2018).

The peer-coaching model evolved into instructional coaching, which is a more modern term for the previously mentioned model. Instructional coaching has since been identified as a promising element in “driving school reform and providing sustained, job-embedded, and individualized professional development” (Kurz et al., 2017, p. 66). There are several instructional coaching models that exist, namely curriculum-focused coaching models, subject-specific coaching models, mentoring models, and leadership coaching (Woulfin, 2018). In fact, the Ministry of Education Malaysia adapted the approaches from these models in their framework for instructional and leadership coaches.

The term “instructional coaching” may occasionally be used interchangeably with literacy or reading coaching and some of their roles and responsibilities may be similar, but they are not synonymous (Knight, 2011). Knight (2009) further explains that the literacy coach focuses on literacy issues, whereas the instructional coach “focuses on a broader range of instructional issues, which might include classroom management, content enhancement, specific teaching practices, formative assessment, or other teaching practices” (p. 31). Likewise, MOE’s instructional coaching model encourages coaches to focus on these issues when working with teachers.

Instructional coaching is different from traditional approaches to professional development. Crilley et al. (1997) define traditional approaches as one-shot training sessions,

presentations, or conferences where input is presented in a top-down approach and no follow-up is provided after the sessions. Generally conducted in large group settings without a specific focus on any grade or subject, traditional professional development sessions do not have a positive influence on teachers' productivity or classroom practice (Harris & Sass, 2011). In Malaysia, traditional approaches to professional development along with poor design, implementation, and monitoring have been proven to have little impact on improving the quality of teachers (Mansor et al., 2012).

Poorly designed sessions can impact teachers' willingness and enthusiasm to embrace new ideas as Knight (2007) found in his interview with more than 150 teachers across the United States. He concluded that teachers do not resist change but they oppose poorly designed change initiatives. Additionally, Abrahamson (as cited in Knight, 2007, p. 4) posits that failure of traditional professional development approaches could also be due to teachers being overwhelmed by "initiative overload", where they are expected to implement multiple interventions with little support in planning.

Compared to traditional forms of professional development where there is little sustainability, instructional coaching provides continuous, intensive, and differentiated support to teachers in implementing research-proven practices (Knight, 2007). Instructional coaches provide job-embedded, personalized, and sustained professional learning support to teachers on-site in schools (Zepeda, 2012; Desimone & Pak, 2017). They partner with teachers in incorporating research-based instructional practices into their classroom teaching, creating a plan to achieve their professional goals, and implementing research-based interventions to help students learn effectively (Knight, 2012).

Several studies have highlighted the strengths of instructional coaching in helping teachers improve their pedagogical knowledge and skills (Joyce & Showers, 1980; Knight, 2007; Walpole et al., 2010; Vanderburn & Stephens, 2010). Shorb (2021) posits that teacher agency is one of the key aspects that make instructional coaching so impactful on teaching practices. This agency is strengthened by a comprehensive coaching cycle comprising a pre-coaching discussion, a coaching model (i.e. observation, co-teaching, or modeling), and a post-coaching debriefing conversation, which allows coaches to guide teachers through self-reflection and observation on contextually effective best practices in teaching. In order to facilitate teachers through their process of self-reflection and observation, instructional coaches should be cognizant of the right questions to ask and the right decisions to make pedagogically. For instructional coaches in Malaysia, this is part of the focus in the training that they receive. The question is, however, is the focus holistic enough and does it take into account all aspects that make up multicultural classrooms in the country?

2.3.1 Culturally Responsive Instructional Coaching

Numerous research suggests that gaps still exist in student achievements, particularly across different cultures, despite evidence of the positive impact of instructional coaching on teacher practices (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Holliday, 2021; Knight, 2019; Shorb, 2021). Research further suggests that this is because pedagogical strategies employed by teachers rarely consider their students' cultural experiences and beliefs and cater to the needs of students from multicultural backgrounds. Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced culturally relevant pedagogy to help teachers address these issues by providing them with strategies that center on students' cultural capital. By understanding and integrating the multicultural experiences and beliefs of their students through culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers will be able to improve student

achievement while cultivating their cultural competence (Durden et al., 2014; Holliday, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

However, addressing needs that are unique to a multicultural student population is no easy feat. This is particularly true for rural Sarawak schools that are made up of multicultural indigenous student populations. For too long, indigenous student populations in rural Sarawak have experienced educational inequities that affect their overall academic achievement. In ensuring educational equity for their students, Gay and Kirkland (2003) argue that teachers need ample support to carry out the challenging task of developing racial and cultural consciousness. Thus, teachers can benefit from continuous, on-going professional support such as instructional coaching to help them make informed pedagogical decisions that also cater to building racial and cultural consciousness in their classrooms. This can be achieved through a coaching model or framework that incorporates thoughtful discourse and action towards creating equitable classroom environments through culturally relevant pedagogy.

2.3.2 How Have We Studied Coaching?

Despite findings of research that have shown the positive impact of instructional coaching on teaching practice and student outcomes (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Teemant, 2014; Knight, 2019) there is still a substantial gap in current research on instructional coaching. Several studies have added to the literature by focusing beyond the impact of instructional coaching on teachers and students. For example, recent research focused on the multiple roles of instructional coaches and found that they reduce face-to-face engagement time that coaches have with teachers (Heineke, 2013; Wang 2017). In addition, Knight (2019) conducted a study exploring the micro-elements of coaching and their roles in helping teachers make learning visible for their students based on John Hattie's list of best practices that improve student

achievement. Prior to this study, Knight (1999) also presented a paper comparing the partnership approach in instructional coaching versus the traditional approach to PD, which is mostly based on direct instruction to teachers. Knight found that participants were more engaged and happier in the partnership approach which is grounded in principles of equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity. This helped him to make a case for the important role of instructional coaches in supporting teachers.

Still, much of the research done on coaching is focused on its impact, especially in the earlier years of its implementation, as there was a need to produce impact-focused research to justify the need for instructional coaching. Therefore, there is a lack of qualitative research that dives deeper into the nuances of instructional coaching. Specifically, little research has been done to identify what really makes coaching work as well as the complexities that instructional coaches have to navigate in their work (Poglinco & Bach, 2004). This is especially true for coaches who have to work in education settings that are multicultural in nature, like Malaysia. For developing countries like Malaysia, most of their PD reforms are informed by what works in high achieving, developed nations like the U.S, Finland, and the U.K, just to name a few. Although there is an understanding that the best practices from these countries should be adapted to the specific contexts of one's country, there is unfortunately not enough research that unpacks the complexities and multifaceted nature of various education settings that may be in the country. Thus, more research that focuses on unpacking the nuances of coaching in specific settings need to be done in order for teachers, and ultimately, students in that particular setting to truly experience the benefit of instructional coaching. One such research approach that can do this is narrative inquiry, which I will delve into in the following section.

2.4 The Need for Narrative Inquiry for Educational Research in Malaysia

The primary strength of narrative inquiry is its focus on using stories to make sense of experiences from the perspectives of those who undergo a particular phenomenon (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Seeing that there is a dearth of research that focuses on the lived experiences of those teaching or serving in the educational field in Sarawak, it seems fitting that this project adapts the narrative inquiry approach as it allows the study of experiences that are “storied, both in the living and telling that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, writing and interpreting texts” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 42-43).

Outside Malaysia, narrative inquiry is firmly embedded in educational research because it allows researchers to delve deeply into the experiences of educational practitioners in their respective school contexts. Some of the common threads in these narrative research are teacher perception on particular experiences such as PD, school and curriculum reform efforts, teacher attrition and retention, and teacher identity (Clandinin et al., 2006; Craig, 2003; Lim et al., 2022; Martinie et al., 2016). To date, there have been several educational research done in Malaysia that used a narrative inquiry approach (Loo, 2018; Samah, 2019; Zainal & Zainuddin, 2021). However, when reading these research and thinking of the four narrative turns (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), some of the research that claim to use a narrative inquiry approach merely report interview data rather than unpack the nuances that shape the educational experiences of their participants. This illuminates the fact that even though narrative inquiry is emerging in Malaysian research, much still needs to be done to strengthen it. Narrative research still makes up a small percentage in the field of Malaysian education research, perhaps due to it being seen as not rigorous enough to be counted as ‘solid’ research. Because narrative inquiry focuses on the particular rather than the general (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), its findings cannot be easily

generalizable, making their adaptation into the country's educational policy-making more challenging.

In addition, there is still very little research conducted using the narrative approach when it comes to research focusing on instructional coaches in Malaysia. Most research studies mainly highlight the outcomes and impact of instructional coaching, which does not necessarily capture the complexity of coaching in a multicultural country. Research on instructional coaching in Malaysia generally still lags behind other countries that have a strong body of literature discussing the various aspects of coaching and mentoring in education (see Ali et al., 2018). Not much is known about the instructional coaching program in Malaysia despite already being implemented for almost 10 years (see Ali et al., 2018; Ansawi & Pang, 2016; Sarabiah, 2018). The existing research literature is limited to empirical research, with only a handful framed within the qualitative research design. Moreover, very few studies within this frame explore the nuances of coaching from the perspectives of coaches themselves, especially those who serve in remote areas. More needs to be done in terms of research on instructional coaching in Malaysia with a specific focus on those who coach and their stories rather than just the action and outcomes of coaching.

With all these in mind, I argue that a narrative inquiry approach is necessary to challenge the dominant research practice in Malaysian education which is heavily reliant on empirical methods to generalize and reduce educational experiences or issues to statistical figures. Undoubtedly, quantitative research does have its advantages, but it lacks the capacity to truly unpack complex human-centered issues in education (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry, on the other hand, is a valuable approach that rests on the assumption that "human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures" (Bell, 2002, p.

207). Bell (2002) explains that we choose elements of experiences to attend to and pattern them to reflect what constitutes stories to us in order to make sense of them. What constitutes as stories differ from culture to culture, making narratives an integral part of understanding experiences set in different cultures and contexts. With the lack of research focusing on Sarawak which has such a rich cultural context, I hope to capitalize on the strengths of narrative inquiry to unpack coaching experiences in Sarawak.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

In this chapter, I set out to describe my research in detail. I begin by reiterating why there is a need to carry out qualitative research focused on instructional coaching in Malaysia. This is followed by an overview of my research design, data collection methods, data analysis, and participant profiles.

Instructional coaches in Malaysia act as teacher support for pedagogy, assessment, and curriculum, as well as a medium between the Ministry of Education and schools in terms of curriculum and assessment implementation. The roles of coaches are therefore multifaceted and complex because they have to assume more than one role at a time (Kho et al., 2019). This complexity stems from having to face the challenges of shifting roles from being classroom teachers themselves to being instructional coaches as well as having to work on building rapport with teachers in various school settings, which means having to navigate diverse school and classroom cultures.

To truly be able to understand the multifaceted experiences of instructional coaches in Malaysia, and specifically, in rural Sarawak, I used a narrative inquiry approach to case studies. What drew me to narrative inquiry is that it not only allows me to center my research on the storied lives of the participants, but also gives equal opportunity to engage my own stories or experiences. And if one were to truly engage in research in education, one cannot separate experience—be it participants' or the researcher's—from education, because education, experience, and life are inevitably intertwined with each other (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

This was not something I thought was possible before because I grew accustomed to research in Malaysia which largely deems numerically driven research as rigorous. The research tradition in Malaysia is heavily influenced by positivism, and the ones done on education in

Malaysia focus more on standards, testing, and outcomes. What counts as good and effective is reduced to mere numbers and percentages, and abstract, decontextualized information (Polkinghorne, 1992, as cited in Goodson & Gill, 2011). This is largely due to what Taubman (2009) dubs as the “audit culture”, which is the race for accountability that has shaped the education landscape in Malaysia for the past few decades.

I acknowledge that quantitative research has its merits and place in education. More often than not, quantitative research collects empirical data to test hypotheses that are translated from theories to be tested in schools (Schwab, 1971). It becomes problematic when the grand narrative in education is shaped by such research that are “empirically supported” (Polkinghorne, 2010, p. 393), resulting in only numerical data being considered in major decision-making such as for policy and curriculum reforms, which is a common practice in Malaysia.

Because Malaysia practices a centralized approach to education, these reforms are then rolled out throughout the country and every school is expected to implement them (Joseph, 2014). Over time, the implementations face a roadblock and schools get the blame for failing to implement these reforms. However, a common grievance among teachers reveals that reforms often do not work because they are not suitable for the context of their school and students. Such reforms are often a blanket type approach because “observers” or “researchers” tend to be positioned outside and thus detached from the reality that they are trying to understand (Goodson & Gill, 2011). What isn’t taken into account is the context that shapes the experience of individual teachers and students. Numerical data simply isn’t enough to capture the multilayered complexities and subtleties that make up the unique experiences of teachers and students in different Malaysian states.

This is where narrative inquiry comes in. Webster and Mertova (2007) argue that narrative research can capture the multiple facets of human experience in teaching and learning the best because of its ability to allow researchers to focus on specific life events while allowing them to explore more holistic views about those life experiences. Most importantly, exploring narratives of those directly involved in teaching and learning captures the teaching and learning context, which leads to a better, more holistic understanding of a particular context. The understanding of experiences set in particular contexts is what sets narrative inquiry apart from quantitative research which typically focuses on outcomes and absolute “truths”. Goodson and Gill (2011) echo this point, stating narrative inquiry as one that “questions and challenges the positivist approach to examining the social world and understanding human experience” (p. 18).

3.1 Research Overview

To address the lack of qualitative research on instructional coaching in Malaysia, I used a case study method rooted in narrative inquiry methodology to carry out this research. Case studies give researchers the opportunity to look at the particularity or local specificity and complexity of a single case (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Stake, 2003). Because I am interested in understanding the experiences of instructional coaches working with teachers within a particular and specific context that is rural Sarawak, using the case study approach served my purpose as it allows “an in-depth study to understand stages or phases in processes, and to investigate a phenomenon within its environmental context” (Gilgun, 1994). Similarly, Dyson and Genishi (2005) explain the importance of context and how the production of meaning in case studies is dependent on context, which they deem as the “frameworks of interpretation” (p. 5). They further highlight how cultural meaning is embodied in language which is then used as a means of narrating experiences. Since I spoke to instructional coaches who are each placed in different

educational districts in rural Sarawak, using the narrative case study approach gave them the space to re-story experiences that are unique to the context they are in through their “linguistic repertoire” (p. 5).

However, to specifically look at the structure of the language or “linguistic repertoire” that participants use to narrate their experiences is based on the structuralist approach to knowledge, which assumes that everything has a structure that can be analyzed or described (Combs & Freedman, 2012). The goal of the structuralist approach is to identify generalizable and universal laws or truths. As a researcher, my intention is not to produce generalized knowledge because I recognize the importance of acknowledging the complexity and richness of experiences of those coaching in rural Sarawak that vary across time and space. Therefore, for my study, I turn to the poststructuralist approach to narrative inquiry that values contextualized meaning making. Poststructuralists advocate looking beyond language structures and focusing on all the important aspects that shape our experiences: Culture, language, and discourse of those within communities. All these, as Combs and Freedman posit, are shaped by the “beliefs, intentions, and actions of others” (p. 1036) as well as our own. What this tells us is that there is a degree of complexity in the study of narratives, which, to me, makes it ideal for unpacking multifaceted and localized experiences such as those in rural Sarawak.

3.2 What is Narrative?

Before discussing the development of narrative inquiry as a research methodology, it is necessary to unpack the meaning of “narrative”. Kim (2016) did a wonderful job at doing this, starting with an etymological breakdown of the word *narrative*, which she argues has its roots in Latin. In explaining how the term *narrative* is derived from *narrat* (“related”, “told”) and *narrare* (“to tell) in Latin or *narrativus* (“telling a story”) in late Latin, she notes how these are

related to the Latin word *gnârus* (meaning “having knowledge or experience”) which originates from the ancient Sanskrit word *gnâ* meaning “to know”. With this observation, she demonstrates how it is impossible to separate narrative and knowledge. In fact, earlier narrative theorists linked narrative and knowledge by defining narrative as a way of organizing knowledge through language (Punday, 2003). McQuillan (2000) adds to this discussion by reiterating that narrative and knowledge are inextricably linked, stating that a narrative is “a form of knowledge that catches the two sides of narrative, telling as well as knowing” (as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 32).

Polkinghorne (1988), a notable narrative historian, further expounds on the definition of narratives with a discussion on narrative ways of knowing. Polkinghorne divided narrative logic into two levels in his discussion of narratives through his exploration of literature, historical narrative, and myth. He defines the first-order discourse as “facts” and the second-order discourse as “plot”. According to Polkinghorne, facts are related to “events that actually happened in the way they are reported in the sentences of the narratives” (p. 62) and the plot is concerned with “coherence among the statements” (p. 63). He makes a case for narrative ways of knowing, explaining that “literary coherence” gives a more narrative truth compared to the “logic coherence” that we often see in the sciences (p. 63). In short, Polkinghorne believes that the strength of the narrative mode of thinking is in the focus on descriptions of experience (facts) and explanations of experience (plot).

It is worth noting that early narrative theorists such as Barthes, Genette, and Todorov put forth the study of narratives or narratology in a structuralist framework. This meant that less emphasis was placed on the content compared to the language used to express it. However, limitations to this approach became more evident and later led to the “narrative turn” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) which helped strengthen narrative’s place in qualitative inquiry. When defining

this “turn”, Pinnegar and Daynes point out that they are referring to a change in direction in how researchers think about research. They classify these turns into four and posit that researchers experience these turns in ways that are personal to their inquiry process rather than negotiating these turns in a linear order. In doing so, they acknowledge that there are multiple ways of knowing or seeing the world and how people interact, and that every researcher’s inquiry begins at different junctures.

3.2.1 The Four Themes of the Narrative Turn

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) assert that one can only become a narrative inquirer when one embraces the four turns toward narrative. They identified four turns towards narrative inquiry which are (1) a closer researcher/participant relationship, (2) moving from numbers to words as data, (3) a shift in focus from the general to the specific or particular, and (4) a recognition of multiple ways of knowing.

Turn 1: A closer researcher/participant relationship. Seeing this as one of the more important turns, Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) define the first narrative turn as the researcher’s move away from “a position of objectivity defined from the positivistic, realist perspective toward a research perspective focused on interpretation and the understanding of meaning” (p. 7). In the early years of social science research, many researchers believed that scientific methods from the physical or natural sciences could merely be extended and applied to research focusing on human relationships, interactions, and dispositions. This saw positivist influences on social science research where the researcher/participant relationship was seen as separate and distanced, static, and generalizable. Towards the late 20th century, however, social science researchers increasingly moved away from “scientific objectivity” (p. 25) and embraced a turn toward narratives. Through embracing this turn, researchers take on a less authoritative role and

acknowledge that they are engaged in the research along with the researched, thus accepting the researcher/participant position as temporally-bound, subjective, and relational (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Turn 2: Moving from numbers to words as data. The next turn toward narrative inquiry is a move from a heavy reliance on numbers to recognizing words as legitimate forms of data. However, Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) point out that when researchers embrace this turn, it does not mean that numbers should then be perceived as unreliable data and therefore be rejected altogether. Instead, this turn suggests that researchers tend to miss the “nuances of experience and relationship in a particular setting” (p. 13) when they merely code experience as numerical data. Various researchers have articulated the problems of number-centric research in capturing experience, mostly citing the sterile and limited ways they tend to be presented through numbers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Turn 3: A shift in focus from the general to the specific or particular. In this narrative turn, narrative inquirers move away from the notion that research findings can and should be generalized beyond the setting or context of their research. There are still studies that are concerned with generalizability and “the capturing of the universal” to construct grand narratives or “theories of the world that could be applied universally, regardless of particular circumstances” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 19). This narrative turn, however, shifts researchers’ focus toward the individual experiences of their research participants, allowing a deeper understanding of a particular topic or situation in the context their participants are in. Pinnegar and Daynes assert that true narrative inquirers “embrace the power of the particular” (p.

22) to understand experience, and in turn, use that experience to form an understanding of a phenomenon in specific places and at specific times.

Turn 4: A recognition of multiple ways of knowing. The final turn suggested by Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) is the turn from one singular method of knowing to an acknowledgement that there are alternative ways of knowing, exploring, and understanding human experience. They assert that when narrative inquirers make this turn, they are ultimately embracing how narrative inquiry “allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views” (p. 22) in research.

3.2.2 Narrative Inquiry in Education

In education, the term “narrative inquiry” was first used by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) to describe a research approach that focused on personal storytelling in teacher education. They define narrative inquiry as the study of how we experience the world and further suggest that this translates into viewing education as the “construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories” and that “teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories” (p. 2). They also consider narrative as both phenomenon and method, in that the experience or phenomenon is studied in the form of narratives, and the experience can be explored through the method of narrative inquiry.

The work of Connelly and Clandinin claims that what we know in and about education comes from stories of educational experience being told and shared with each other. They are strong believers that experiences should be studied narratively “because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 18). In a similar vein, Webster and Mertova (2007) state that stories are often embedded and told informally in our social interactions. In the same way, many of the coaching narratives

that I know are shared informally between coaches when we meet for professional development workshops or during our informal chats through social media apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram. These narratives are often rich and unique to the context of the individual coaches who share them, but unfortunately, they only get shared in such a limited social sphere. I argue that exploring these narratives is an important step to take both for education research in Malaysia and the Malaysian education system as a whole, particularly because the complexities and multilayered context of the Malaysian education system are not reflected in the limited research that has been done so far on instructional coaching.

3.3 Theoretical Frameworks

This study is situated in the following theories: Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and the three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework. CRP is a pedagogy that “empowers students... by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 20). According to Ladson-Billings (1995), CRP ultimately aims to ensure the following three goals are achieved: (1) improve students’ academic achievements, (2) build students’ cultural competence, and (3) inculcate sociopolitical awareness and consciousness in students. To achieve these goals, teachers themselves must have cultural competence and be critically aware of “social inequities and their cause” (p. 477). This will help teachers in creating a bridge between the students’ home and school lives while still teaching meaningful content (Aceves & Orosco, 2014). However, this may be challenging when students and teachers have culturally distinct lives such as different lived experiences, home languages, and ways of perceiving the world. It can also be challenging when those who are tasked to support teachers, such as instructional coaches, are equally unprepared to attend to the cultural dynamics in

schools and classrooms. CRP therefore gives teachers and those who support them, the coaches, the knowledge and tools to wholly support students from multicultural backgrounds.

This project also extends the narrative inquiry approach, which is rooted in Dewey's work (1938) that highlights the connection between personal experience and education. He introduced three criteria which are critical in understanding rural teachers' experience: interaction, continuity, and situation. This research highlights the key element of "situation", which is distinguishing various forms of learning experiences of coaches across contexts in rural Sarawak. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) built upon Dewey's ideas and proposed the "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" to examine educational experiences in three ways. First, through "interaction" that involves looking "inward" into their internal conditions such as "feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) and "outward" toward existential environments around them. Second, through "continuity" which involves looking backward to previous experiences and connecting them to current ones, and looking forward to implied or anticipated future experiences. Finally, through "situation" which looks at the context or locations in the participants' geographical spaces that would add situated meaning to their narratives. Together, these frameworks provide a solid analytical lens for my project especially since such a study has yet to be done focusing on the multicultural education context of rural Sarawak.

3.4 Research Questions

The following questions guide this research:

- 1) In the context of a multicultural rural setting, how do instructional coaches narrate their experiences of supporting rural English teachers?

- 2) What can we learn from the narratives of instructional coaches regarding their roles and responsibilities of coaching rural English teachers in a multicultural rural setting?
- 3) What changes or adjustments need to be made in the preparation and professional development of coaches in a multicultural setting?

3.5 Research Design

3.5.1 Context of the Research

The Malaysian education system is centralized and led by the Ministry of Education (MOE), which is organized into four cascading levels: Federal, state, district, and school. MOE translates the Malaysian Education Blueprint into educational plans, programs, and projects at the federal level. MOE also sets guidelines for the implementation and management of these programs and projects, which are then cascaded down to state education departments, district education offices, and finally, schools.

For Sarawak, the largest Malaysian state, the State Education Department oversees overall educational needs as well as the implementation and management of education programs and projects in its education districts. Due to its size and rugged terrain, Sarawak has a lower population density, poorer infrastructure, and significantly less development compared to other states in the country, which adds to the challenge of ensuring equitable access to education across the state. Being the largest state also means that there are more interior parts in Sarawak compared to any other Malaysian states, and limited access to basic services such as healthcare, transportation, clean water, electricity, and telecommunications is common in the interiors of Sarawak. In many rural schools across the state, treated water and power supply are still insufficient, which means that rural schools still run on gasoline-powered generators at night and rely on piping systems to draw water from rivers or mountains. There are over 1000 dilapidated

schools in Sarawak, and 415 of them are in critical condition (Kanyakumari, 2019). Due to insufficient funding, conditions such as collapsed wooden buildings and bridges, rusty playground equipment, and termite infestation in hostels and classrooms remain unfixed.

There are a total of 33 education districts in Sarawak, and out of these 33 districts, only 4 districts are in city centers and serve urban schools. 25 districts are in the interiors of Sarawak and serve only rural schools, whereas the remaining 4 districts serve both rural and urban schools. Thus, this study takes into account that a majority of the instructional coaches in Sarawak work with teachers in a rural setting. The instructional coaches selected for this study serve in rural education districts in the southern and central regions. The selected districts are traditionally home to the Ibans, the largest indigenous ethnic group in the state, and other ethnic groups such as the Orang Ulu, Bidayuh, and Melanau. It is important to note that their ethnic subgroups also make up the demography of the selected districts and that the teachers who serve these communities may come from other districts in Sarawak or other Malaysian states.

The education districts selected for the study are connected to other parts of Sarawak by road, but river transportation by ferry or boat is still the main choice of transportation for those traveling in the area. Some schools in the districts are only accessible by unpaved timber tracks and palm estate roads.

3.5.2 Research Participants

For this narrative case study, I employed the purposive sampling method (Merriam, 1998) to select the participants. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) posit that each research setting is made up of a unique “mix of people and contextual factors” (p. 186). Therefore, using purposive sampling gave me the opportunity to get a deeper insight into the lived experiences of the coaches in their respective districts and avoid generalizing their experiences across the board.

Instructional coaches from rural education districts in the southern and central regions of Sarawak served as participants in this research. The current pool of instructional coaches who work with English teachers in Sarawak is small since some of the coaches have retired and the spots still remain vacant today. Because the racial composition differs in each region, including coaches from various rural districts will ensure that the participant pool is diverse and allow a more comprehensive understanding across different rural settings in Sarawak. Taking this into account, I used criterion sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) because although I don't intend to generalize their experiences to represent all the coaches in Sarawak, there is some degree of representation for coaches in their respective districts, and thus, the region where their district is. Appendix A outlines the division of education districts under each region.

Instructional coaches in Sarawak report to their district's education office and they work as full-time instructional coaches that monitor and guide teachers in several schools assigned to them. They have three main responsibilities: Coach and mentor teachers in pedagogy and curriculum implementation, collaboratively plan and monitor implementation of intervention programs in schools, and organize professional development programs for teachers in the education district (MOE, 2015). Coaching in schools is done four out of five days a week while one day a week is set aside for reporting, meeting, and planning purposes with other instructional coaches in their office. Instructional coaches in Sarawak work with teachers whose educational background and teaching experience may vary: Some, especially those who have been in the teaching profession for more than 15 years, only have a general teaching certificate, while some are specifically trained in local teacher training colleges or universities to teach English for primary or secondary schools. There are also many English language teachers who do not have the basic qualification of a four-year degree in TESL/TEFL/TESOL. These teachers are

graduates from varying disciplines such as Human Resource, Engineering, Information Technology (IT), and so on. In order to earn a teaching diploma, they had to undergo a one-year training called KPLI (*Kursus Perguruan Lepas an Ijazah* or postgraduate course in teaching) in local teacher training institutes to learn the basics of becoming an English teacher.

For this research, two coaches from the southern region and one coach from the central region were selected as participants. Prior to becoming instructional coaches, they were all trained as English language teachers either at teacher training colleges or universities, and have had more than 15 years of teaching experience. To ensure that I get rich enough data for this research, I limited the selection of participants to those who have more than 7 years of coaching experience. This ensures that the coaches have somewhat of an equal starting point when they began as coaches since they will have shared experiences of attending the same preparation and training workshops as well as ongoing professional development courses that focus on coaching and pedagogy. In addition, the selection criteria for instructional coaches set by the State Education Department differed slightly for each round of application. Since the introduction of instructional coaching in Sarawak, teachers who applied for this post would need to fulfill a certain set of criteria such as achieving more than 90% in their yearly assessment 3 years in a row and being certified *Excellent Teachers*. Thus, the participants selected for this study would have fulfilled the same selection criteria before officially becoming instructional coaches.

3.5.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

For this research, I collected data over three months using interviews as my primary source of data. I began the process by conducting baseline interviews and engaging in one-on-one conversations with the coaches in person, which required me to travel to their respective districts. This gave me valuable additional data about the different contexts each of the

instructional coaches are in. The conversations we had were semi-structured to encourage narration and sharing of stories freely from the coaches.

By engaging in these conversations, I was also able to gather secondary data for my researcher notes through observing them in their particular coaching environments. Following up on these baseline interviews, I conducted at least one additional interview with each coach to collect additional data to support their initial interview data. These additional interviews were recorded on Zoom, which gave me the opportunity to replay the interviews to ensure that I accurately transcribed and analyzed the interview data (Merriam, 1998). The transcriptions were then verified for accuracy by cross-checking the transcriptions with the audio recording of each interview (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In cases where the audio recordings were inaudible, I followed up with the coaches via informal chats on WhatsApp or Telegram to clarify what they said.

Data from the interviews were analyzed and interpreted using Polkinghorne's method of analysis of narratives or the paradigmatic mode of analysis. Polkinghorne (1995, as cited in Kim, 2016) proposed that paradigmatic cognition "produces cognitive networks of concepts that allow people to construct experiences as familiar by emphasizing the common elements that appear over and over" (p. 172). In other words, Polkinghorne's analysis of narratives allowed me to identify common patterns and themes that emerged from my interview data. It is helpful to uncover the common themes across the multiple sets of data collected from interviews with coaches to further highlight the unique context and experience of coaching in rural Sarawak.

I also gathered writing that the coaches produced outside our conversations such as coaching journals, text messages, and social media posts. These sources provided important insight into the coaches' experiences that were not fully shared during the interviews.

The following table summarizes the data sources that informed my research.

Table 1: Research questions and corresponding data sources

Research Question	Significance of question	Data sources
(1) In the context of a multicultural rural setting, how do instructional coaches narrate their experiences of supporting rural English teachers?	Elicit narratives of each coach’s experiences of supporting teachers that may come from diverse backgrounds and are not local to the school. These teachers serve in rural Sarawak schools that have a demography of various indigenous and ethnic groups.	i) Semi-structured interview. Sample question: - Tell me about a time/a memorable moment when you worked with a teacher who is not local to the school. ii) Written narratives through coaching journals, text messages, and social media posts. I also followed up on these through additional interviews and informal chats via WhatsApp or Telegram.
(2) What can we learn from the narratives of instructional coaches regarding their roles and responsibilities of coaching English teachers in a multicultural rural setting?	Elicit narratives of past experiences that the instructional coaches may have prior to becoming coaches and what roles these experiences play in influencing the way they work with teachers.	i) Semi-structured interview. Sample question: - What do you think influences how you work with multicultural teachers in your particular setting? Tell me about a time that may have led to this way of working with your teachers.
(3) What changes or adjustments need to be made in the preparation and professional development of coaches in a multicultural setting?	Elicit narratives on complexities of coaching in rural Sarawak and what type of support the coaches may need.	i) Semi-structured interview question: - Tell me about a particular coaching moment that sticks with you or speaks to your preparation and professional development as a coach. ii) Written narratives (coaching journals, text messages, and social media posts). I also followed up on the questions through further interviews or informal chats via WhatsApp and Telegram.

3.6 Participant Profiles

The following subsections introduce each participant and the context of their districts in detail. I have also incorporated the narratives I constructed based on my interviews with the participants as well as my own experiences of working with them to add to their description. By

doing so, I hope that the narratives can provide readers with a better understanding of the different contexts of each participant. In compliance with Teachers College's IRB requirements, the participants' real names have all been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities. Any personal identifiers that may connect the participants' identities to their narratives have also been removed.

3.6.1 Participant 1: Hope

I have known Hope ever since I was a beginning teacher, long before I became an instructional coach. In fact, one could say that Hope was in a way my unofficial coach in my early years of teaching.

In Malaysia, those interested to teach in public schools typically go through a minimum of 4 years of teacher preparation either in local teacher training institutes or universities that offer teaching degrees. Upon graduating with a teaching degree and license, they will then complete an application with the Malaysian Education Service Commission that decides the schools they are posted to, which is usually based on the schools' needs and quota for teachers. My first posting as a teacher was in a rural school located in a quaint fishing village about 4 hours away from the capital city of Sarawak and 45 minutes' drive in from the main road. The small road that led to the school had no streetlights and could barely fit one car on each side of the road. It was also surrounded mostly with large trees and undergrowth, with a few patches of paddy fields. The school was fairly small with less than 1000 students and it served nearby *kampung* or villages that mostly comprised Malays. There was a small percentage of Ibans and Chinese as well.

When I was going into my second year of teaching, I was appointed as the head of the English panel. With only one full year of teaching experience under my belt, I felt completely

unqualified for the role. Four years of teacher training did not really prepare me for a leadership role, and the pressure added to my feeling overwhelmed with having to uproot from a pampered life in the city and serve in a rural school located 180 miles away from home. I felt inadequate because of my inexperience too: Being the youngest teacher in a school where most had more than 20 years of teaching was nerve-racking. How was I supposed to lead those who taught longer than I had? My impostor syndrome was on overdrive at that time and it wasn't a pleasant feeling.

Malaysian schools are ranked annually based on their achievements in the national standardized examination, the Malaysian Certificate of Education (or more commonly known as SPM). This is a required examination that 17-year-old students in the country have to sit for in order to gain entry to pre-university programs. When I took over as the head of the English panel, my school was unfortunately ranked as one of the worst performing schools in the district back then, and the school's English language achievement in SPM was highlighted during intense staff meetings with the school administration as one of the contributing factors to the low performance of the school. Without any prior knowledge of school data analysis, I remember feeling anxious hearing terms like "baseline data", "TOV", "OTI", "ETR", and "AR" being thrown around the meeting room, which strangely felt more like a corporate board room with managerial talk taking center stage rather than teacher talk. The terms used sounded like alien language to me, but what was more concerning was that these terms alienated us from the students we were supposed to serve, and reduced them to mere numbers on the excel spreadsheet and moving dots on the graph.

During these meetings, we were asked to design "data-driven interventions" to improve our students' achievement in standardized exams. This was when I was told to be in touch with

Hope who was teaching in a secondary school in a nearby town. She was already quite well known amongst other teachers in the district due to her innovative ways of improving students' English proficiency, and for a school that was desperate to improve its ranks and achievement in standardized examinations, this meant inviting her often to give talks and workshops to students and teachers in the school. I had sufficiently good mentors in the school, but it was from her that I really learned how to plan lessons that were geared for the students I taught and structure interventions to help improve their English language skills.

Hope unofficially took me under her wings because we both shared a passion for teaching English to rural kids. In fact, one can say that Hope played a major role in helping me keep my flame for teaching alive. Whenever I felt like giving up or at my wit's ends in helping my students, Hope would help me to approach whatever issue I had from different angles. She had a way of making you believe in yourself beyond what you are capable of too: When we both became instructional coaches, I was the youngest instructional coach in Sarawak. However, rather than viewing my age as a deficit, she saw it as a strength I could bring to coaching.

Thus, when it was down to deciding who to talk to about coaching and teaching, I knew I had to talk to Hope to learn about teaching and coaching experiences in rural Sarawak. Hope's storytelling always drew me toward her life, particularly her life as a coach that was largely shaped by her own experiences teaching in rural schools when she first started out as a teacher and her experiences as a struggling language learner.

Hope grew up just outside of Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak. She identifies as a native Iban² and has immense pride in her Iban heritage. Hope described her younger days as

² The Iban, also known as Sea Dayak because they mostly dwell near rivers or coastlines, is the largest indigenous ethnic group in Sarawak. The Iban tribe is believed to be the original inhabitants of the island of Borneo which is now shared between three countries: Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah), Brunei, and Indonesia (Kalimantan).

“extremely challenging”: As the eldest and only girl among her siblings, she had to shoulder the responsibilities of caring for her ailing mother and sacrificing her needs in a single income household. During our interview, Hope shared an intimate detail of her younger days: “My mom and I even had to share undergarments. The economy was so bad, and my late father was just a corporal in the police force. So money was always a problem, and the priority always went to my little brothers.” This did not deter her from pursuing a career in education. In fact, it became the very thing that motivated and fueled her desire to “get out of poverty” through education.

Hope received her general English teaching certificate from a local teacher training college before being posted to teach in a rural primary school in Sarawak. She taught in several rural primary schools before deciding to upgrade from a teaching certificate to a degree. Being in rural schools, Hope shared that she felt “left out” and unsupported in her professional development and took matters in her own hands to improve her knowledge by pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at a local university. Upon completion of her degree, she was posted to a rural secondary school.

Hope had more than 25 years’ experience in teaching English before becoming an instructional coach. She also had the experience of being a part-time coach to English teachers in another rural school before becoming a full-time instructional coach, and she enjoyed the sense of community and sharing of ideas. However, the journey she had to make just to coach the teachers part-time was challenging because the school was only accessible by river then. It was a journey I was all too familiar with because I went along on one of her trips there. The journey began with a 1.5-hour drive to a nearby district where we then boarded a wooden express boat

for another 3-hour journey along the Rajang river³ to reach the school. The boat we took was considered premium despite being a mere wooden express boat—all because it had an “entertainment system” that was basically a retro 13” bulky tv. It was barely enough to keep our minds off the fact that we were crammed in a boat and traveling through the largest river system in Sarawak without any life jackets. When we reached the small town where the school was located, we were greeted with a typical small-town scene: makeshift wooden eating stalls where the locals convened for their morning coffee or afternoon tea, old wooden shophouses that preserved remnants of the town’s past, and a few newer ones that showed the town’s attempt to modernize. We had to stay at a shop lot-turned-hotel for the entire week that we were there, which was what Hope had to do as well whenever she went there to coach.

When MOE opened up the opportunity for teachers in the country to become full-time instructional coaches, Hope took the chance and applied for the post in a neighboring district, noting that she made a deliberate choice to coach outside the district where she taught as a teacher. She shared,

I wanted a different environment and still be close to home. The district I applied to was 30–40 minutes away, better than how it was when I used to teach in very remote schools in Sarawak... I used to teach a school so remote that it was close to the Indonesian border. It was only accessible by river and I had to start my journey on a longboat at 9am whenever I returned to the school after visiting my young kids at my in-law’s for the weekend. They were so young at that time, and I couldn’t take them with me not just because the journey was tough, but because the school had no clean water supply and electricity. The other teachers and I would pack steamed rice and side dishes, and share them when we stopped by the riverbank for lunch halfway to the school. If we were lucky, we would reach the school around 3–4pm. But if the tide was low, we had to jump out of the longboat and pull it along the river. We would then reach the school later in the evening, around 6–7pm. It was such an adventure. I would’ve liked it more if I didn’t have to worry about crocodiles in the river!

³ The Rajang River twists and turns over 350 miles from the upper Kapuas Mountain Range in the interiors of Sarawak that borders Kalimantan, Indonesia, and flows into the South China Sea. It is the longest river in Sarawak and Malaysia.

As a teacher, Hope has served in both primary and secondary schools, and in her capacity as an instructional coach, she now works with teachers across all levels including kindergarten teachers. Hope was in the first batch of instructional coaches selected to pioneer the coaching program when it was first introduced in the Malaysian education system and had been a coach for nine years at the time of this research. Presently, she coaches in the same district she used to teach in, so she is familiar with the surrounding community's cultural beliefs and practices. It is a predominantly Iban area with only 58 schools spread out throughout the district. The schools are mostly accessible by road, but three schools can only be accessed using river transportation.

3.6.2 Participant 2: Adam

Out of the three participants, my history with Adam goes back in a way that took me by surprise the most. We first met as newly appointed instructional coaches attending national level professional development workshops for English coaches. It was a series of workshops spread out over three years and the number of coaches attending from Sarawak at that time was still fairly small. There were 13 of us altogether and we would travel as a group from Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia for these workshops, so we naturally developed a friendship from spending a lot of time together.

Adam had over 20 years of teaching experience in rural primary and secondary schools before he became an instructional coach. He was also one of the key trainers in the state education department and was actively involved in planning as well as implementing state-level English language programs for schools throughout Sarawak. In contrast, I had less than half of his experience and would always feel small compared to him and the other coaches. However, Adam was always quick to reassure and praise me for my maturity and fresh approaches to educational issues we commonly faced in Sarawak. Thus, Adam began to include me as part of

the training team that worked closely with the state education department in disseminating knowledge and skills to rural English teachers through training workshops. It was through this collaborative work that he found out that I was the daughter of one of his high school teachers; one that left a huge impact on his worldview as an educator today, nonetheless.

Adam grew up north of Kuching city in one of the Malay villages near the riverbanks of the Sarawak river. As a young boy, he would take the *perahu tambang* or passenger boat from his village to cross the Sarawak river and walk to school. The boat ride would cost less than 50 cents each way, “but even that was too expensive for us back then. Life was hard for my family and we did everything we could to scrape by,” he shared. Despite facing economic hardships during his school days, he still did his best to become a star student. Just like Hope, Adam viewed education as a powerful means of upward mobility, and enrolled in a local teacher training college after completing secondary school to obtain a primary school English teaching certificate. Upon completion of this certificate, Adam was posted to a rural school on the opposite end of the state which was close to the Malaysian-Brunei border.

Currently, Adam coaches in a district that caters to both urban and rural schools. His prior background of teaching in both types of school settings comes in handy in his role as a coach. With over 85 schools in his education district, Adam has to be really strategic and purposeful when it comes to his coaching. When asked to describe his coaching approach, Adam explained:

I try to make sure that my coaching covers as many teachers as possible, so I do a lot of whole-school approach. What I mean is that I like to plan workshop series that involve all the teachers in the school, including those who teach subjects other than English as well as the school administration. This way, I can still focus on individual teachers as required of us, and at the same time, ensure that the rest of their colleagues can benefit from some form of coaching as well. For change to happen, it needs to involve every member of the school community. This is my way of involving every single person in the school.

Adam's preference for a whole-school approach speaks to his principle that no teacher nor student should be left behind in education. He explains that to some extent, this was one of the ways he could ensure that no teacher in his district feels the disconnect he felt years ago when he could not have easy access to professional development and teacher support.

3.6.3 Participant 3: Aisya

Aisya grew up in a primarily Bidayuh⁴ area just outside of Kuching city. Before becoming an instructional coach or SISC+, Aisya taught English in secondary schools for over 10 years. She began her teaching career far from home: Her first posting was a rural secondary school in northern Sarawak. She also taught in another rural school within the same district before moving to teach out of state. After several years, Aisya made the decision to return to Sarawak and teach in a school district that was closer to home. When asked what her motivation was in becoming an instructional coach, Aisya answered,

I transitioned into coaching because I have always liked to share what I know and what I've found work for me with my colleagues. I had a very good mentor when I first started teaching, and the culture in the school was so positive because everybody liked to share. That was how it started for me. But when I went to my second school, everybody just kept to themselves, so I had all these ideas bursting in my head but I couldn't share them with anyone! The same thing happened in the third and fourth school I taught in. But when I met teachers from other schools and talked about our practices in class, and I shared what I know and what I did, they seemed very interested... and they invited me to go to their schools and share with their colleagues. So when the SISC+ position opened, I thought, "Hey, this will be a good opportunity for me to start sharing with other teachers." I thought that maybe my knowledge and experience can help other teachers as well.

Aisya brings in a unique background into her role as an instructional coach. She studied for her Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) degree and obtained her teaching license through a twinning program between a local Malaysian teacher training institute and a university

⁴ The Bidayuh is the second largest indigenous ethnic group after the Iban. They mostly live inland and are also known as "Land Dayak".

in the United Kingdom. In addition to this, she has the experience of teaching in an international school that caters to both local and expatriate students. Currently, she serves in a district in southern Sarawak that has over 50 schools, but only one of them is considered an urban school. Aisya shared that most of the schools in her district are categorized as rural schools that serve mainly the Malay, Iban, and Chinese communities. She describes her education district as such:

The Malay, Iban, and Chinese villages are scattered throughout the district, and the schools are really far apart from each other. The furthest school is a primary school that you can only reach by parking your car at the jetty and riding a wooden passenger boat to cross the river... crocodile infested river! So you can really see the difference in terms of the students because when you go further inside the district, you'll see that the students are mostly children of fishermen or farmers, but when you go to another school that's closer to town, you'll have children of lecturers or other professionals. So even if the schools are mostly rural, you can see the distinction in terms of the cultural background of the students themselves as well as their socioeconomic status.

Aisya focuses on 20 teachers to coach and mentor each year, which is the maximum number set by her district education office. However, this means that she can only coach and mentor teachers from a fraction of the schools in her district. "It depends on our district education office," she explained, "because if they give us a list of 10 schools to focus on that year, then we'll have to find 20 teachers from that list of schools. If we take on too many teachers, we can't really do multiple coaching sessions with them because the schools are so far apart from each other."

As an individual, Aisya is mild-mannered and has a sweet disposition. She has a quiet confidence about her from her experiences in both local and international education settings. This translates to the way she works with the teachers in her district. I have had the privilege of working closely with her in various state education projects since we began our role as instructional coaches in 2014, including creating English teaching modules focusing on language learners in rural Sarawak. At the core of these modules is the principle of understanding

students' backgrounds and readiness and Aisya carries this principle into her approach in coaching as well.

Chapter 4: “*Bebatak*” Through Murky Waters: Entering into the Terrains of Coaching in Rural Sarawak

Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once -somewhere- far away in another existence perhaps.

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

When I revisited the narrative of my first coaching visit to a school that was only accessible by boat, I realized how it resembled the protagonist’s journey in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. For many first-time teachers in Sarawak, being sent to the rural areas as our first posting feels like a ritual—almost like a rite of passage, it seems. Almost every other teacher who has served in Sarawak would have a story or two about teaching in a remote, rural school. The theme across all the stories would have one similarity in terms of their first journey to the school. It would be a journey rife with geographical challenges: endless twists and turns of narrow roads and rivers that are difficult to navigate as well as the occasional sightings of wildlife, mostly crocodiles⁵.

In many ways, journeying into the interiors of rural Sarawak may be likened to Conrad’s metaphor of “traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world”, especially for those who had little to no prior experience of being in rural Sarawak. This is true even for an indigenous

⁵ A popular Iban myth revolves around a giant crocodile the size of a bus called *Bujang Senang*. Legend has it that *Bujang Senang* was a fearsome headhunter killed by his enemies at the Batang Lupar river in Sarawak. The river deities cursed his body and turned him into a giant crocodile with a white stripe on its back. The crocodile then exacted revenge and began terrorizing the descendants of his killers living along the Batang Lupar river.

Iban woman like me who spent most of her life growing up in the city and only occasionally going back to the village for *Gawai Dayak*, a harvest festival celebrated to give thanks for a year of bountiful harvest. For most teachers and coaches who serve in rural education districts, a typical journey to remote schools in the interiors of Sarawak that are primarily accessible by river transportation would require beginning the journey earlier in the day. This is to avoid having to wade through murky waters and manually pull the boats along the rivers during low tides. In one of my conversations with Hope about an experience she had going to a rural school, Hope shared that the Iban term for this action is “bebatak”⁶, which usually requires the strength of 3 people or more. As she shared how much she struggled with the difficult feat of manually pulling the boats while wading in rivers lined with sharp rocks at the bottom with the force of the water pushing against her and her colleagues, I was drawn to what the word symbolizes. “Bebatak” is the perfect metaphor to capture the coaches’ retelling of their experiences in coaching across the various rural districts in Sarawak and how they overcome the issues that come with their work due to the geospatial and geopolitical issues tied to the remoteness of their schools. It seems apt, then, for this word to be included in the title of this chapter which gives readers the first real glimpse of what coaching in rural Sarawak really looks like.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings from the participants’ narratives that pertain to the following questions: **What can we learn from the narratives of instructional coaches regarding their roles and responsibilities of coaching English teachers in a multicultural rural setting?** How do their past experiences as preservice and in-service teachers or earlier coaching experiences play into the ways they support English teachers in rural Sarawak? The participants’ narratives illuminate common themes of remoteness and feelings of isolation, and

⁶ “Bebatak” means wading through water while pulling a wooden boat. For those serving in the rural areas, the boats are also used to transport their personal belongings and supplies (food, teaching supplies, etc.)

how they overcome these by leaning on their past experiences in different stages of their academic careers. Furthermore, their narratives highlight how one's experiences cannot be detached from other individuals and the context they are in. Through the participants' narratives, we will see that even in the midst of feeling isolated or alone in a remote place, the participants relied on their past experiences with students and fellow teachers or coaches in the various contexts they have been in before. They also thought about how these experiences helped them to perceive ways of attending to similar situations in the future. This is in line with Clandinin and Murphy's (2009) view that individuals perceive their realities as "relational, temporal, and continuous" (p. 599). In accordance with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, the participants' narratives show how they went back to specific interactions at various times and places to help them make sense of their coaching experiences.

I sought to engage the participants in reflective conversations about the work they do as coaches with English teachers in rural schools. Knight (2007) posits that reflective practice is a key component in the work of instructional coaches. It helps coaches to examine their own practices, beliefs, and attitudes and how these play into the work that they do with teachers in their respective schools. It also allows coaches to gain a better understanding of the schools' context. Thus, in responding to my conversation prompts, the participants reflected on experiences in various moments of their lives. Hope notably shared more detailed narratives of her days as a preservice teacher compared to her current coaching experiences. Adam and Aisya, on the other hand, spoke more of their experiences as in-service teachers and their current work as coaches. The following subsections present their restorying of their experiences in relation to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. This is followed by a cross-case analysis that focuses on the points of convergence and divergence in the participants' restorying.

4.1 Hope: Rural Stories to Live By

I feel compelled to begin this chapter by restorying Hope's narratives, but I must admit that it is for a selfish reason: Setting a time to meet and chat with her was the easiest to do. However, the journey that I had to take to meet her was the toughest out of the three participants. I spent over 6 hours driving across 5 districts on roads that were largely under construction. Despite the long and exhausting journey, meeting with her and hearing her stories made it all worthwhile.

Hope's restorying of her experiences was the most detailed one out of the three participants. In listening to Hope's experiences of coaching the teachers in her school district, I was curious about what could possibly influence the way she viewed and approached coaching. What prior life experiences shaped her teaching and, ultimately, her coaching beliefs? Thus, I decided to ask her to reflect on this question which got her thinking about her initial journey into the field of education. In response, Hope reached into her personal life. She confessed how it was never really in her plan to become an educator and that it all fell into place for her, thanks to her late father. She began her story from the very beginning:

Actually, being a teacher was never in my dream (laughs). At that point in my life, I did not have any goals. I just wanted to enjoy life. At the same time, my mum was actually sick... she had a half-body stroke. So after completing secondary school, I had to take care of my mum. She was a very tough, independent woman. She was sick but she would still cook for us and walk around and do household chores as she normally would. At that time, I worked part-time in a fast-food restaurant and pumped gas at a local gas station near our house. But one day –it was raining that day, I still remember– my late father came home with an application form for a teacher training certificate. He sat down in front of me and asked me to fill in the form, so being the obedient daughter, I did... But I just filled it in without hoping much, you know.

The narrative above reveals an important piece of information about Hope. Her latter narratives will highlight her resilience in facing the challenges in different key moments of her life from training as a teacher to being a full-time instructional coach. The above narrative traces this

resilience back to her mother, who, despite being ill, remained a “tough, independent woman”. Hope’s experience of growing up with a strong female figure shaped her “internal conditions” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and the way she thought about herself and the world. Pagnucci (2004) supports this notion too, stating that “stories of our families serve as powerfully constructive forces on what happens to us, who we become” (p. 91). We will see that Hope carries her mother’s resilience –shaped by the storied life of her mother– into her work in the field of education, especially in her ways of addressing the challenges of teaching and coaching in rural Sarawak.

Hope pointed out that despite not being interested in becoming a teacher initially, her interest grew when her neighbor received an acceptance letter for the same preservice teacher program that she applied to. “When that happened, it really woke me up, you know? Like, your neighbor who is much younger is going to be a trained teacher... what are you going to do with your life, Hope?” she shared. For months after Hope’s neighbor received her acceptance letter, Hope would wait for hers to no avail. “By August, which was three months later, there was still no news. I was already telling myself that maybe teaching wasn’t for me... then my letter finally came,” she shared. However, Hope noted that the program that she was accepted into was not the typical teacher training program where applicants were sent to local teacher training colleges⁷. Instead, Hope was selected as a recipient of a student exchange scholarship which meant that her preservice teacher training would be in a teacher training college outside of Sarawak. “I was from a single-income family, so that’s how I got selected. We received some stipend each month.

⁷ In Malaysia, preservice teacher education is currently provided by both universities and institutes of teacher education (ITE). ITEs were previously known as teacher training colleges and only offered teaching certificates and diplomas. In July 2005, these colleges were upgraded to the status of ITEs which allowed them to offer undergraduate teaching degrees parallel to the ones offered by universities. For the purpose of this research, I use the term *teacher training college* to refer to where the participants received their initial teacher training as it was known at that point in time.

It wasn't much, but it was good enough because my family didn't have to worry about sending me money they didn't have," Hope explained. She added,

Life was so hard back then, you know, Fel... To go to the training college, of course we had to fly from Sarawak. And all I had was one old suitcase. It was raining too on the day of my flight... All we had was an old, cheap motorbike, so my father and I had to put on raincoats and somehow carry the suitcase with us all the way to the airport. The only pocket money that I had for the two and a half years of studying was RM150. That's barely \$35usd... And it wasn't given by my parents or from my father's salary. It was from *marik empang*⁸ that I made and sold. These days, the lowest price for *marik empang* is about RM500. But at that time, I could only sell it for RM150. That was already a big sum of money for me.

A common thread in Hope's narratives is how every step she took in the field of education was "murky" and filled with trials and tribulations. She shared another narrative to highlight her struggles when she was a preservice teacher:

Even with a scholarship, after having payments deducted from the stipend, I was left with less than RM100 a month. So during school holidays, I was always one of the three people who remained in the dorms because it was just too expensive to go anywhere. We were so poor then... there were no other means of help available to us at that time. We had one lecturer who was very kind and would bring us food once in a while. But most of the time, we were on our own. There was an agriculture program during my time and they had a vegetable patch behind our dorm. So every night, we would sneak in and help ourselves to the vegetables there like brinjals and okra and boil them for our meals. Some days we would have rice to eat, some days we won't have anything at all for the entire day... but we always completed our assignments on time! (laughs) It was a real struggle, but it shaped my mindset that I must keep moving forward to improve my situation, whatever that situation is.

Hope shared how her experience as a struggling preservice teacher helped to strengthen her mentally and emotionally. It also came in handy when she was sent to teach in several rural schools in Sarawak and, later on, when she made the switch from teaching to instructional coaching. Hope shared how she would not let issues plague her and would rather look for

⁸ An intricate traditional craft making which takes years to master, *marik empang* is an elaborate traditional Iban collar made out of fine beads. It is worn as part of the Iban traditional costume for females called *ngepan*. A full *ngepan* costume can cost between RM10,000 – RM20,000 (\$2200-\$4500usd).

practical solutions: “This is how I work with my teachers too when I coach. Yes, there are problems, but how do we solve them? That’s more important.” Listening to the way Hope narrated how she found strength even in the worst moments, I could not help but feel encouraged by her tenacity.

Hope continued with her reflection by recalling the next stage of her journey in the field of education: her initial years as a teacher. When she started out as a teacher, being placed in a remote school that was far from the nearest town was overwhelming and the lack of support and attention given to teachers by the school administration amplified that feeling. She shared,

For my first posting, I was sent to the interior region. And us rural teachers, we were not really being paid attention to by administrators, you know, and nobody cares... nobody cares about what you are doing in the interior region. So it was a bit frustrating for me.

Hope’s statement on nobody caring about what rural teachers do hints at the social interaction she may have experienced as a beginning teacher in a rural school. Just like most beginning teachers, Hope may have looked to her superiors to support her at the start of her career but unfortunately did not get the support she needed. The statement also highlights the core issue of the lack of support given to schools in the interiors of Sarawak by the district education offices that they are placed under. Her retelling, although just a brief statement in relation to place or context, reveals a perennial problem experienced by those serving in the context of rural Sarawak: Limited staffing in rural education offices. The staffing for each district education office is based on a quota system where the total number of schools in the district dictates the total number of officers that they are allowed to employ. Because there are fewer schools in the interior, the number of workers in the district education office is equally small with the excuse

that not many officers are needed to support a small number of schools. This would ideally work if the schools were all located within the vicinity of the district education office.

However, this is not the case for rural Sarawak where most schools in the interiors are located far apart from each other and can only be reached after hours of traveling either by boat or four-wheel drive vehicles. In her short narrative here, Hope looked inward to reflect on what she felt when she had little support as a beginning teacher. This particular frustration that she felt would later be revealed as the very reason why she decided to become a full-time instructional coach in a rural education district. It also illuminates the ways in which Hope chooses to work with her teachers. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explain that “people shape their daily lives by stories of who they are and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories” (p. 477). In a way, Hope’s restorying of her experiences as a beginning teacher in a remote school in the interiors of Sarawak shaped and shed light on who she is as a coach today.

Hope’s first foray into coaching started at the same time as mine did around 2013. Out of all the participants, she was the only one who had prior experience in coaching before becoming a full-time coach at her district education office. At that time, coaching was done part-time which meant that we had an additional portfolio on top of what we did in our schools. Because the coaching program was just a pilot program then, we were only given one school each to coach. For me, it was a school in a neighboring village about 20 minutes’ drive from my school, but for Hope, it was a more remote school that required her to drive 2 hours to a nearby town before taking a 3-hour boat ride before she could reach the school. However, the journey was the least of her worries:

I didn't know what a part-time coach was at that time. So the state education officer said that your school will be somewhere further into the interior (laughs) and it was an

interesting and challenging journey for me to go and coach part-time at a school I didn't know anything about. I didn't know much about that school except their place on the map, and to go about coaching that school also was quite tough because the teachers there are very skeptical of you. Like me, they don't know what this coaching is all about. Throughout the one week, I couldn't gain much. I was like, you know, being left alone at the table inside the office and then the teachers were all out. I did not know whether I should go with them inside the classroom. At that time, we did not have any course or training for coaching.

On paper, the instructional coaching program had lofty goals: it was part of the larger systemic reform in the Malaysian education system focused on teacher support and development that was meant to lead to improved educational outcomes. Coaches were appointed as on-site resources for teachers to provide targeted support that would meet their needs, which would then be expected to eventually result in improved student outcomes. As such, the pilot program for instructional coaching appointed teachers, many of whom were recognized as effective or excellent by their respective schools and districts, as part-time coaches. However, merely placing good teachers in such a position without any training and expecting them to effectively coach teachers in other schools was counterintuitive to the program's aims.

In Hope's retelling here, we get a glimpse of how she felt as a first-time coach, a feeling that I can resonate with as well. While we were both good teachers in our own ways, that didn't necessarily automatically translate into being a good coach. For me, particularly, it was tough because I only had 4 years of classroom teaching experience when I was offered a part-time instructional coaching position. I experienced the impostor syndrome that was similar to the one I felt when I first started teaching: Who was I to coach more experienced rural teachers? Sure, I had results to prove how the students in my school performed well above the district's averages on standardized tests ever since I took over the helm of leading our English panel, but that didn't mean I could automatically help other schools replicate the progress that took me and my colleagues years to achieve. But that was what I was expected to do.

Similarly, Hope was expected to do the same by injecting her brand of creativity into the teaching of English in the school she coached. During our interview, Hope moved inward to recall how she felt at that particular moment and situation to restore her experience of the initial interaction she had with the teachers she first coached. She shared how she felt lost without any direction or training on how to coach. She spent her first week barely coaching as teachers in the school saw her as an outsider and ignored her presence. “It was like coming to someone’s house unannounced and staying for a week,” Hope shared. Years later, when Hope and I became full-time coaches, we learned that establishing rapport and building good relationships is key to successful coaching. But at that point in time when the teachers would not even spare a second to interact with her, Hope did not know how to even begin building a coaching relationship with the teachers. If she had been given the right amount of preparation and support as a coach, perhaps her initial coaching experience would have turned out differently.

From her days as a teacher in rural Sarawak to being an instructional coach, Hope seemed to have experienced similar feelings of being isolated and detached from others, either from those whom she sought support from or the teachers she was tasked to coach. Research, though limited, have shown that instructional coaches who work with teachers in rural schools may experience resistance from teachers in trying to gain initial entry into their classrooms (Hartman, 2013; Harmon et al., 2007). In Sarawak, rural school communities tend to be smaller and thus more tight-knit due to their distance from other schools, making it more challenging for those whom the teachers perceive as “outsiders” to be “accepted” as part of their community. In Hope’s case, she was initially positioned as someone outside the school community and her presence seemed unwelcome at first.

However, being resilient and not one to back away from challenges, Hope did not let this initial pushback deter her from carrying out her duties as an instructional coach. She shared how coaching teachers could give them the support and push that she needed but did not experience when she was teaching in rural Sarawak:

I don't want the teachers to be like me when I was in the rural areas last time... cut off from the outside world, not knowing the latest updates in education. I don't want them to feel like they don't know anything, that they do not get the support or don't know where to go.

Looking at her decision-making through the lens of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, we see all three dimensions (sociality, temporality, and space) coming into play. In her narrative, Hope takes us across the dimensions of space and time while giving us a deeper look into her inner feelings and social interactions that influence her decision-making. We see Hope going inward to attend to her feelings first by going back to the time and place when she was a beginning teacher in rural Sarawak, then going forward to when she first started coaching another rural school. These two experiences highlighted Hope's feelings on two opposite ends of the spectrum which would eventually influence her decision of becoming a coach: one of frustration and disappointment with the lack of support she received as a beginning teacher, and one of optimism that something can indeed be done to support other teachers in the rural areas so that they don't endure what she did. Hope also moved outward and took into account the social relationships and interactions she experienced as a part-time coach to help her make a career transition from teaching to coaching. Over the years, as Hope established herself as an instructional coach, her past experiences – both as a teacher in rural Sarawak and a part-time coach – shaped the kind of coach she is today: Ever ready to help, motivate, and support teachers in rural Sarawak.

4.2 Adam's Narratives: Making "Ruralness" Work

Having worked closely with Adam on projects such as the development of modules as well as workshop developments and facilitations, I can confidently say that he is the kind of person who thinks deeply and intentionally about his work as a coach. Even when he was a teacher, Adam never saw teaching as a mundane job that he needed to do just to get his monthly pay. "I put my heart and soul into the work I do," Adam shared, "and I guess that's why I feel so disappointed when the teachers I coach don't have the same principle." Still, Adam is the biggest advocate for teachers, especially in his current role as an instructional coach. He believes in bringing real-world and meaningful approaches to education and is therefore never afraid to be outspoken and push back against what he feels may not be feasible for the teachers and schools.

Much of Adam's worldview or internal conditions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) were shaped by his experiences as a school teacher. Adam's teaching experience is unique in the sense that he has taught in all school settings – urban, rural, single-race majority schools as well as more diverse schools. Adam's initial training was as a primary school English teacher in a local teachers' training college. Thus, the first few schools that he taught in were primary schools that were mostly in rural areas. Adam shared the following as he reminisced about the school where his teaching career began:

It was a typical rural school. All the buildings—the classrooms, staffroom, hostels, and teachers' quarters—they were made out of wood and had either leaf-thatched or zinc roofs back then. And the school is still only accessible by river today. The boats that go into the nearest town would pass by the school at three different times per day, and you basically have to wait at the jetty and wave down a boat like you would a taxi just to hitch a ride to town.

Like many first-time teachers in Sarawak, Adam has his fair share of rural teaching stories to tell. For his first posting as a teacher, Adam had to leave his home to go to a school that was at the

opposite end of the state. It was a rural school in the northern region of Sarawak, near the Malaysian-Brunei border. Adam shared that his first visit to the school was rough:

I was used to using the *tambang*⁹ to cross the Sarawak River to go to school, but those rides were less than 10 minutes. To reach the rural school I was first sent to, it took us more than an hour. All I could see were stretches of mud-colored water and forests along the way. And I remember feeling anxious and worried about my safety the whole trip.

The school that Adam was sent to is located along one of the major rivers in Sarawak and surrounded by swamp forests, which means that it is constantly waterlogged and susceptible to flooding. For these reasons, the school buildings were built on stilts. At the time of his posting more than 25 years ago, the school was small with 10 teachers or so catering to less than 50 students that came from nearby villages. “It was so remote... and the school community was small and contained. What I knew about teaching in rural schools, I learned it from my colleagues in the school too,” Adam shared. Here, Adam pointed out the strength of rural schools due to how isolated they are: the strong sense of community and camaraderie amongst those teaching in rural schools (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995, as cited in Bauch, 2001). Rural schools are generally smaller compared to urban schools and thus have a dense staff relationship because everyone knows each other (Chance & Segura, 2009; Howley & Howley, 2005). Later, he reflected on how this affected his experience of coaching rural schools. Like Hope, Adam divulged how tough it can be to buy into a tight knit rural school community as a coach, especially in the earlier years of instructional coaching in Malaysia. “I had to prove myself as worthy of being accepted into their ‘exclusive’ community,” Adam shared.

Adam requested to be transferred to a different school after five years of teaching in the first rural school he was posted to. “I wanted a change of scenery. The students and my

⁹ The *perahu tambang* is a wooden passenger boat used to ferry people across rivers. In Malay, *Perahu* means “boat” and *tambang* means “fee”. Passengers typically have to pay a fee of a few cents or ringgit to ride the boat.

colleagues at my old school were lovely, but professionally, I felt stuck. I wanted to do more,” Adam disclosed in regard to his decision of applying for his transfer. He shared that the physical remoteness of the school made it difficult for him to get the support he needed to develop as a teacher; a feeling that many teachers in rural Sarawak can relate to. Adam was then transferred to another rural school within the same district. It was still remote, but it had a slightly closer proximity to the nearest town and was accessible by hilly and unpaved logging roads. In recent years, the roads were upgraded and were no longer unpaved, but the journey to the school remains challenging due to the steep hills in the area.

As Adam noted in the previous paragraph, he experienced the same disconnect that Hope felt with the outside world during his time in rural primary schools. In particular, he talked about feeling isolated and unsupported in his work and growth as an English teacher: “It was hard to access professional development and support. Was I teaching correctly? Was I doing the right thing? Were there better ways to teach English to my rural kids? I didn’t know. I didn’t have any way to know,” he lamented. When a full-time opportunity opened up for Adam to upgrade from a teaching certificate to a diploma in TESL, he took it even if it meant leaving the school setting temporarily. “I’m constantly looking for ways to upgrade my knowledge and skills, so when the opportunity came up, I just grabbed it,” he shared. The opportunity took him 750 miles by air across the country to a state that was the furthest from Sarawak. “Going from one end to another seems to be a recurring theme for me,” he laughed as he reflected on his journey in the field of education.

In his work as a coach, Adam saw himself as the district resource person and professional development provider for the teachers in his district. He noted that his work in coaching and mentoring encompassed these two additional roles because of the needs of the teachers in his

district. He articulated that he worked with a lot of teachers who had parallel experiences with his time as a teacher before. Specifically, he realized how common it was for rural teachers to feel secluded and thus neglected due to the distance of their schools from his district education office. He reflected on his own experience when he was a rural teacher:

Even though my school was deep in the interiors of Sarawak, I was still invited to attend workshops or courses organized by our district education office. But I often could not attend them because it was expensive. Normally, we have to pay for our travel and accommodation first and claim later... and the claim would often be paid much, much later. That's additional financial burden rural teachers try to avoid.

To make sure that the teachers in his district receive the support they need regardless of their schools' locations, Adam devised a system to carry out his workshops efficiently. He explained that because his education district was quite big, he often had to conduct district-wide workshops in schools because their district education office had limited space. He shared,

I group the schools I coach according to zones and carry out my workshops in one of the schools in each zone. That way, it's easier for all the teachers to attend the workshops, including those in schools that are more remote.

Adam shared how his time in remote rural schools helped him to come up with this solution. He did not want any of his teachers to feel isolated or unsupported like he did when he was a teacher in the rural areas. However, he acknowledged that it was easier for him to carry out his workshop by zones in his current education district because most of the schools were accessible by road. "If I were still in my previous education district where you need to use boats to reach most of the schools, I won't be able to use the same approach. I would probably have to visit each school one by one instead of having the teachers travel to one central location," Adam shared as he reflected on the different contexts of his current and previous education districts. Adam's awareness of context in planning his workshops resonates with the views of some research that emphasized the importance of contextualizing teachers' professional development for more context-appropriate

learning for teachers in order to influence positive changes in their professional practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Joyce & Showers, 1996).

For Adam, his experience of teaching in various rural schools helped him to be more pointedly aware of how one rural setting in Sarawak might differ from another, which meant that a one-size-fits-all approach to workshop planning would not work for him. I had the privilege of observing how Adam carried out his workshops from the earliest stage of planning to implementation and post-workshop reflection. At every stage, I noticed that he would ask himself one key question: “How do I make this work for the teachers in that school or setting?” On the surface, it would seem that Adam’s concern was just about making his workshops relevant to the schools’ context; taking into account the schools’ culture, as it were. However, he shared that it was more than that. “I want the teachers to take away something that they can use for a long time from my workshops, even after I’m no longer their coach,” he explained.

Sustainable practice is a major focus in Adam’s coaching approach, thus an important step in his workshop planning includes reflecting on the “rural realities” (Johnson & Howley, 2015, p. 235) that teachers face during their day-to-day teaching. Adam shared how the realities in his district’s rural schools complicate the implementation of one-size-fits-all educational policy or curriculum reforms. On top of the physical distance of the schools, they also have other issues such as limited resources due to lower parental incomes and a shortage of teachers in specialized subjects such as English, Mathematics, and Science. Adam had been aware of these critical issues since his days as a rural school teacher and thus made sure to take these issues into consideration in his workshop planning.

Despite careful deliberation in planning his workshops to provide effective and sustainable coaching support, Adam still faced pushback from some teachers, especially in the

initial months of being an instructional coach. “I always plan a series of workshops for the schools I have to focus on,” Adam explained, “these are usually schools identified by the district education office as being underperforming based on the schools’ results in SPM¹⁰.” Adam explained that in order to maximize the impact of his coaching for these schools, he would use a whole-school approach in addition to one-on-one coaching with selected English teachers. His whole-school approach would involve a series of workshops that were carried out weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly depending on the school’s preference. “Most school principals would request my workshops to be on Saturdays if their school has a double session¹¹. Single-session schools usually request for workshops to be done during weekdays,” Adam explained. However, he noted that it was impossible to come up with an arrangement that would please everyone. “There’s always a few people who are unhappy about spending extra hours at work. Even if it’s for their own professional development,” he disclosed. He shared one particular moment when this happened:

There was one school where I did the whole-school approach and involved everyone, including the principal. The principal was very enthusiastic about my workshop series because I had already done the same thing in her previous school. The approach worked in her previous school so she wanted me to replicate it at her new school. But some teachers didn’t like the idea of coming to work on Saturdays, so my sessions didn’t always have full attendance. It’s nothing new to me, but I can’t help but feel frustrated. I work hard to prepare for my workshops, and I make it a point to stick to my workshop schedule. Even when I’m sick, I still carry out my workshops as planned. So when I went to the school and quite a few of the teachers didn’t show up for my workshops, I felt as if I wasn’t welcome, you know?

¹⁰ SPM is the national standardized examination that 17-year-old students in Malaysia have to sit for to gain entry to pre-university programs. Schools are ranked based on their students’ achievement in this exam. In the initial years of instructional coaching in Malaysia, selection of focus schools for coaches was mostly based on this ranking.

¹¹ Secondary schools that don’t have the space to accommodate their large student population have to be carried out in double sessions: afternoon session for lower secondary (usually 12.00 pm - 6.30 pm) and morning session for upper secondary (usually 6.30 am - 12.45 pm)

In helping him to explain the lukewarm reception he received, Adam went back in time and reflected on his years of teaching in isolation in rural schools. He relayed how it was typical for most rural schools to be “left to their own devices” due to their distance from their respective district education offices and that “that’s how it has been for years”. Thus, since the introduction of instructional coaching by the education ministry, most schools have had a hard time coming to terms with the notion of having “outsiders” visit them almost every week. Adam further explained,

Being in rural schools means being from the town and the education office. After a while, you get used to not being visited by any education officers, you know? So of course the way rural teachers work remains the same throughout the years because they don’t get any outside feedback. When coaches show up every other week to provide them with on-site support and PD, it’s hard for them to get used to it... it takes a while.

At the start of his coaching with his teachers, Adam experienced the same resistance from teachers that Hope did. Hartman (2013) points out that “gaining entry” (p. 57) into a teacher’s classroom is an essential step for instructional coaches to take in order to establish a positive coaching relationship. When coaches are unable to initiate this first step successfully with their teachers, it can lead to ongoing frustration between coaches and teachers. However, gaining entry into rural schools can be challenging for coaches due to the strong sense of community that has long been established in schools and is almost familial in nature (Chance & Segura, 2009). For Adam, his attempts of gaining entry into schools to build rapport and trust were met with much more resistance in the earlier days of instructional coaching in Malaysia. Now that he has coached in his education district for almost 10 years, Adam noted that he focused more on maintaining the rapport and working relationships he has established with the schools over the years.

4.3 Aisya's Narratives: Good Mentoring Begets Good Mentoring

Aisya and I had planned to meet up several times when I was back in Sarawak for my data collection. However, we were unable to agree on a specific time due to her tight work schedule. Now that things have returned in person post-Covid, there were many more workshops and meetings for coaches to travel to and attend on top of their regular coaching sessions in schools. Aisya explained how this impacted her coaching time:

Most of the workshops and meetings are held in central cities like Kuching, Sibul, or Miri... all of them are too far from where my district is. So attending a 2-day workshop would mean losing an entire week's worth of coaching because I have to set aside the other 3 days for travel and other preparations.

Aisya added that she would sometimes squeeze in a coaching session at a nearby school if it fits any of her coach's schedules, but noted that she often could not do so due to the last-minute nature of how meetings and workshops were usually informed. "We usually get the calling letters just days before any meeting or workshop," Aisya lamented. "Sometimes, the letter comes on the day of! Always last minute. So I have to cancel my coaching plans and attend the meetings or workshops as instructed." Despite being unable to keep to her planned coaching schedule, Aisya made sure to take her coaching sessions with her on the road. Using social media apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp, Aisya would have virtual coaching sessions with her teachers if she were unable to meet them in person. "Only with teachers who are willing, of course," Aisya pointed out.

I highlighted Aisya's restorying here to point to the roles that she perceived as having in her education district. In her capacity as a coach, she saw herself as a provider of ongoing support to teachers, particularly in improving their students' achievement. She also saw herself

as a data analyst and professional developer. Aisya explained how all of these roles are embedded into a typical coaching session with teachers:

I think a big part of our job as instructional coaches is that we are also data analysts. Anything can be data, not just students' grades. Whatever my teachers share with me — the stories, complaints, classroom anecdotes— they are all data. And I share with my teachers how to “see” the different types of data and how to use them in their day-to-day lesson planning and intervention. I use this approach too when I think about what type of workshops to plan for them. For example, if our workshop focuses on planning interventions for students, data analysis is a big part of the workshop.

In one of her coaching sessions, I observed how Aisya incorporated data analysis into her coaching. During the session, she worked with a teacher on planning intervention lessons to improve her students' reading comprehension skills. Aisya had just conducted a workshop on reading strategies which the teacher attended, so they were able to draw some sample activities from the workshop. Aisya then made it clear to the teacher that the strategies should be differentiated to suit her students' level and proceeded to work on a series of lessons with suitable differentiated strategies. During this session, it was clear that Aisya had successfully “gained entry” (Hartman, 2013) with her teacher because their rapport was evidently strong. Thus, during the coaching session, Aisya was able to focus on the core objectives of her coaching.

Just weeks before I had to return to the U.S., Aisya and I finally locked down a date to meet and chat in person during one of her lunch breaks. She was facilitating a workshop for teachers in her district at that time and only had a couple of hours to meet. I wanted to maximize the limited time we had and decided to have our chat in a food court that was the nearest to her. Luckily for us, the food court was just recently opened with very little promotion, which meant

that not many knew of its existence. This worked out perfectly for us because we practically had the entire place to ourselves.

Aisya and I coached in neighboring districts, so we often collaborated to widen our coaching reach beyond our own education districts. On one occasion, Aisya brought me along on a coaching trip to some of the furthest schools in her district. We spent approximately an hour driving on lonely coastal roads just to reach the school which was located in one of the fishing villages in her district. The school was isolated from everything else and there was not even a food stall nearby for teachers and students, which is what most rural schools would typically have. Aisya's presence in the school was palpable and it was clear that she was welcome by the school community. However, she shared that this was not achieved overnight:

It was not easy to gain the trust of the teachers because they seldom get outsiders visiting them due to the sheer distance of their school from everything else. They were so used to being closed from the "outside world". They weren't used to my presence at first but I showed up consistently to build my rapport with them.

Just like Adam and Hope, Aisya faced similar moments of resistance from schools during her earlier days of coaching. In her education district, particularly, the schools were mostly contained in their respective communities because they were located very far from each other. Despite the distance, Aisya made sure to be as consistent as possible to make sure her presence is felt in the schools. She shared that this was her way of ensuring that she provided continuous, ongoing support to the teachers. This is congruent with Bryk's (2010) opinion that the key to quality professional learning for teachers is in giving them ongoing support beyond workshops or training.

Interestingly, Aisya noted that her choice of providing ongoing support beyond the typical on-off workshops or training stemmed from a positive mentoring experience she had when she was a beginning teacher. She shared how her more experienced colleagues helped her to bridge theory to practice when she first began teaching after graduating from her preservice teacher training. Aisya singled out one particular colleague who she saw as her immediate mentor. “She was a very good mentor and an important part of my growth as an educator,” Aisya said. She added, “She made it really easy for me to approach her with questions or concerns I had. I never felt judged or looked down on whenever I sought advice from her.” On top of having one particularly good mentor who gave her nonjudgmental support, Aisya also experienced a positive school culture that encouraged collaboration. Thus, she drew upon these positive experiences when thinking about how best to provide quality professional learning and support for the teachers she had to coach.

Aisya is the only one of the three participants who has had the experience of teaching in a multinational school setting. This particular experience was meaningful for her because it helped her to be consciously aware of the diversity in her classrooms. It also made her aware of how truly challenging it can be for teachers to cater to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. For Aisya, it was even more challenging because “everyone kept to themselves in the school” and she was left to fend for herself without the help of a mentor like she did when she first started teaching. Nevertheless, she was determined to make a difference, and took it upon herself to reach out to her students, connect with them and build relationships. The experience proved to be useful when she became a coach and worked with a teacher who faced

similar struggles as she did. She was able to draw upon her past experience to coach the teacher and offer advice and guidance. I share a more detailed discussion of this in the next chapter.

4.4 Point of Convergence (and Divergence) in the Participants' Restorying

In the beginning years of instructional coaching in Malaysia, the post was only offered to teachers in school, particularly those who were awarded the Excellent Teacher title. However, due to the limited number of Excellent Teachers in Sarawak, teachers who did not have the official title but maintained a good track record in teaching could also apply to become instructional coaches. Hope, Adam, and Aisya all belong in the latter category. When asked about why they decided to become coaches, all three participants reflected on their past by going backward in time and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Hope, in particular, described her lonely experience of being a teacher in a remote rural school as a “frustrating” one due to being neglected and unsupported by the school administration. Out of all the three participants, Hope’s restorying highlighted the “murkiness” of navigating coaching in rural schools the most. In contrast, even though Aisya reflected on her journey into coaching by looking back on her experiences as a teacher, she interestingly noted that her motivation was somewhat positive in nature. She shared that her decision of transitioning from teaching to coaching was driven by her love for sharing knowledge with others. Adam shared this sentiment as well, noting that he has always loved sharing ideas and “troubleshooting with teachers” to come up with effective and engaging English lessons.

What stood out from Aisya’s narrative is that her initial experience as a teacher strengthened this love for her because she had “a very good mentor” along with a supportive and positive school culture that encouraged the sharing of information amongst teachers. Research highlights the importance of positive school culture in inculcating shared purpose, beliefs, and

values within members of the school community towards continuous school improvement (Brendefur et al., 2014; Peterson & Deal, 2009). The narratives from both Hope and Aisya reiterate this point. Their narratives pulled me backward in time and place along with them as well; a move viewed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as situating listeners in the place and time where the narrative happened.

Out of the three participants, however, I noted that Hope did this a little more purposefully in the narratives she shared with me. For example, she reflected a lot about how she felt back then as she recalled her initial journey as a teacher and how this influenced her decision to become a coach. When she started out as a teacher, being placed in a remote school that was far from the nearest town was overwhelming and the lack of support and attention given to teachers by the school administration amplified that feeling. In her short narrative here, Hope looked inward to reflect on what she felt when she had little support as a beginning teacher. This particular frustration that she endured would later be revealed as the very reason why she decided to become a full-time instructional coach in a rural education district. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) propose that “people shape their daily lives by stories of who they are and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories” (p. 477). In a way, Hope’s interpretation of her past experiences as a beginning teacher in a remote school in the interiors of Sarawak shape and shed light on who she is as a coach today.

In the same way, Adam leaned on his past experiences to help him navigate the complicated layers of coaching teachers in rural Sarawak. However, he went a step further in his reflection and chose to focus on using his past experiences to inform his future actions. Schön (1992), an American philosopher who developed the concept and theory of reflective practice based on Dewey’s definition of reflection, introduced the concept of reflection-in-action which

reiterates the importance of reflecting while doing as well as reflection-on-action which emphasizes the importance of reflecting upon what has already been done. These will then inform an individual's next steps as they reflect-for-action (Killion & Todnem, 1991). Killion and Todnem further posit that for educators, the act of reflecting should involve thinking about the past, present, and future concurrently to guide and improve their practice. Adam echoed this in his principle of working with teachers. He shared,

It's important to have the ability to think on the spot and address the needs of teachers and students. But I think it's equally important to move beyond that and think about what needs to be done to improve practice in the future. How else can I teach to connect with students better? How else can I make this work for my class? I think these are important questions to ask and I try to guide my teachers to think about that when I coach them.

Aisya conveyed a similar approach in the way she worked with her teachers. However, her approach differed slightly in that she did not rush the process and thought only about how to make things work in future situations. Aisya reiterates the importance of staying in the moment when coaching teachers. "If you go in and straightaway coach them, you might not be supporting them in areas that they need. It's important to just listen, sometimes," she shared.

The stories shared by Hope, Adam, and Aisya in this chapter provide a glimpse into who they are as coaches as well as how their experiences contributed to shaping their world view as coaches. I hesitate to conclude this chapter as it somehow gives a sense of "finalizability" (Bakhtin, 1981) to the stories of the participants, but in truth, I have only just begun unpacking their stories. In keeping with Bakhtin's dialogic treatment of the novel, I will maintain the openendedness of this chapter as the stories of the participants are still evolving. I will, however, leave you with a narrative I wrote of a journey back to my village to continue our journey into rural Sarawak.

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A&HE6152 Advanced Narrative Research: Narrative Turns and Attentions

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You look outside at the sky and it's pitch black. Usually, the sky will be littered with stars, but for some reason, the sky is a lonely canvas tonight. "It's going to rain," you hear my dad say, "we better get going if we want to beat the traffic."

You expected a walk, but the truth is, to get to our destination, it is not as straightforward as going on a walk. The journey will be a little over 5 hours, depending on the traffic. Of all days, we decided to travel on the busiest day of the year on this side of the country – during the harvest festival at the end of May and early June. The traffic will be a slow crawl. People say that if it is your first time visiting a place, all the trees along the way will want to greet you and say hello, which is why the journey may seem longer than it actually is for the first time. I hope your phone is fully charged with all your favorite songs on Spotify downloaded.

We pile into the car, all 4 of us: my dad, who's driving, and mum, who'll sit in the front passenger seat – a necessary arrangement because her nagging will keep him awake throughout the 5-hour drive. Then there's you and me in the back seat. You thought it'd be spacious with just the two of us in the back, but any available space is filled with baskets filled with groceries, tidbits, and bottles of drinking water. There's also a box of Johnny Walkers on the floor for the folks back in the village. The car is a white Honda City – which, I assure you, will look nothing like what it looks like now after a 5-hour rainy drive. The beams light the road as we start our journey in the early hours in the morning. It's now 5am, and we should reach the village just in time to join the preparations for lunch (or maybe just lunch itself if the journey takes longer than usual).

The air is thick with fog as we drive through the quiet roads. As we drive out of the city, the street lights start getting further and further apart from each other, and the roads start getting narrower. There are ample 3 to 4-lane roads in the city, but once we drive out, we need to contend with single-lane roads riddled with potholes. Having driven these roads all his life, my dad does a good job at avoiding the potholes. But he is still careful because new ones tend to form every now and then. These roads are frequently travelled by all, including lorry and bus drivers. The roads will never seem to see better days taking all these heavy loads placed on them. You feel the car suspension dip as my dad accidentally drives over a pothole, but your worry seems to be drowned out by my mum's quick reprimand of my father.

As we continue driving, the fog starts clearing and the dark sky shifts, giving way to daylight. On each side of the road are endless trees and shrubbery. The sight seems to lull you to sleep, and you're tempted to play a game of Candy Crush on your phone to stay awake. You decided not to, though, after seeing the depleting battery percentage on the top right corner of your phone. You look outside the window and see a huge piece of land with a wooden hut in the middle. My dad drove quite fast past it, but your quick eyes caught sight of a man in his 50s tending to what looked like paddy growing near the hut. You notice that this is quite a normal sight to see throughout the journey. People tending to their fields, big or small, in the early hours of the morning. It is, after all, harvest season, and we are on the way back to the village to celebrate the harvest festival to mark the beginning of the season.

You feel the gear of the car suddenly shifting quite obviously and slowing down as it attempts to climb a steep hill. "Too many accidents happen here, I'm slowing down," my dad announces. It is 5 past 7am, and by now, he's been driving about 2 hours. The drive uphill is slow, but a few daring and impatient drivers overtake our car. There's a huge trailer in front of

us, and although it slows down our journey uphill, my dad decides to be safe and stay behind it. You hold your breath in more and more with every car that overtakes us. The drive downhill is equally steep, and even more dangerous today because of the rain. We see a few cars skidding slightly as they speed downhill, and luckily no accidents happen despite the wet and slippery condition of the road. You realize that you've been holding your breath the entire time, and can only breathe out easy once we reach the bottom of the hill on the other side.

At the foot of the hill is a well-known pitstop called Lachau. By now we all need something to eat and drink, and a desperate bathroom break. It's still quite early in the morning, but the corner coffee shop – the one EVERYONE goes to - is packed with people. Everyone from different towns is headed back to their own villages, also in different areas and places, but they all seem to know each other quite well in this space. We make our way to one empty table. My dad's eyes light up as he sees a few familiar faces – some are friends or relatives, and some are friends he has made over the years during his pitstops in this place - and exchange pleasantries with them. Because this is your first time eating here, I order a plate of crispy noodles with gravy made from ketchup, a dish this coffee shop is famous for. You're tempted to order another plate after finishing the first one, but we still have 2 ½ hours left to our journey, and you certainly don't want to be too full because there are no restrooms available along the way.

We continue our journey after breakfast in Lachau. You find yourself unable to resist the temptation to sleep, so you doze off for a little. You get woken up suddenly as you feel the ride getting more bumpy than usual. You look out but your view is blocked by hills, so you look down and see that the road is now filled with gravel. We've just entered my village, but it will still take us another hour of driving in to finally reach the longhouse. The gravel road slows the

journey down, but let me just tell you that I'll take the gravel road over a muddy road any day, especially when it's been raining. It feels as if we are driving in a valley with hills on each side of the car. After some time, the hills disappear. They get replaced with tall trees that act as canopy, shielding those under it from the sun and heat. Some of these trees bear fruit – the tallest, I think, would be the durian trees. But the city girl in me is never really sure of what they are. Every now and then, we drive past junctions that lead to other longhouses in the area. Some of the roads lead downhill, so you can only see the top of the longhouses. Some, like the one that leads to mine, go uphill.

My dad points to a tall durian tree that's ahead of us. That tree also acts as a signpost to signal us to slow down because the junction to our longhouse is coming right ahead. We drive past the tree and my dad slows down to prepare the car for the turn. He turns left onto a mini hill – enough to fit one small car or two motorcycles – and the car seems to be working hard with the extra load it has. (You're secretly glad you did not order the second plate of noodles earlier). On one side of the hill are rows of rubber trees, and you see two women working the trees with a rubber tapping knife. With a swift movement, they mark the tree trunks with these knives, and you see milky liquid flowing down these marks into a collecting can tied around the tree trunk, at the bottom of each mark. On the other side of the hill are rows of Sarawak pepper trees. Their con shapes remind you of Christmas trees, and the cluster of green pepper corns that dangle from the trees remind you of tiny grape bunches. You wonder what they would taste like.

The car makes it to the top of the hill and drives onto a huge space that acts as a center court for the longhouse and the individual houses in the area. In the middle of this court, you see a raised platform made of bamboo. You see a woman in her 80s, wearing sarong and topless laying out pepper corns on rattan mats to dry them in the sun. The entire platform –which looked

like it could fit at least two cars— is filled with the rattan mats. She then moves from the platform and starts laying out mats on the ground. Here, she dumps baskets of paddy to dry them in the sun. My dad honks the car and the woman looks up, smiling once she realizes that it's us. As we drive closer, we are greeted by her smile, one filled with happiness after not seeing us for quite some time.



Figure 2: My late Inik (grandmother) drying paddy on rattan mats she weaved herself.

Chapter 5: Rethinking “culture” in Coaching in Rural Sarawak

*Bejalai betungkat ke adat,
Tinduk bepanggal ke penganjat.*

—*Sempama Iban* (Iban proverb)

I set out to begin this chapter with a direct word-for-word translation of the famous Iban proverb or *sempama* above, but my effort was futile. I found myself typing and deleting any attempts of directly translating the *sempama*. The Iban language is poetic in nature, and my attempts of translating the *sempama* fall short of fully capturing its essence. It is also important to note that I do not have formal training in the teaching of Iban language and my acquisition of the language was done informally in a multi-language household in the southern region of Sarawak. Thus, the Iban language that I grew up speaking and listening to is dialectal in nature and may differ from what is considered as the formal or standard form of the Iban language.

Still, I will attempt to explain what the *sempama* means, beginning with the most important word: *bejalai* which means “to walk”. However, the Iban term *bejalai* means more than just the act of everyday walking. To the Iban, the concept of *bejalai* is an old, ancient tradition of wandering in search of better pastures. Like many culturally constructed notions formed in the days of old, the notion of *bejalai* or travel was exclusive to Iban men, specifically younger ones who would leave their longhouses to embark on the journey of *bejalai* and self-discovery. However, the modern-day take on *bejalai* goes beyond the traditional male-biased notion. For many, regardless of their gender, the spirit of *bejalai* is embedded into their very core of seeing, being, and thinking about the world around them.

Other keywords in the proverb include *betungkat*, which means “to use a cane as support”, *adat* or “culture”, *tinduk* or “sleep”, *bepanggal*, which means “using a pillow”, and *penganjat*, which means “memories” or “experiences”. In essence, this *sempama* is rooted in the

belief that every individual is shaped by the culture and experiences they grew up with. To put it in simpler terms, the *sempama* is a reminder that one's cultural values, norms, beliefs, and traditions are of paramount importance no matter where they may be. Thus, one should always hold on to them as they go through life like how one would hold on to a cane to walk.

I chose to use this proverb to open this chapter to highlight how culture is deeply rooted in the lives of indigenous people in multicultural Sarawak: the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Kelabit, Kayan, Kenyah, Penan, and Lun Bawang, just to name a few. Each of these indigenous groups has its specific cultural beliefs and norms that play into their daily lives, influencing the way they view the world. This ranges from how each culture positions individuals in their community's social hierarchy to how they perceive education, and, relatedly, the learning of a once-colonial¹² language such as English. The teaching and learning of English in Sarawak, therefore, require a deeper, more nuanced understanding of what "culture" is, but to what extent are teachers and coaches in rural Sarawak prepared to address this?

For most Malaysians, the notion of "culture" is closely related to race. Race in Malaysia, according to Gabriel (2021), is more than a social construction. Gabriel defines race in Malaysia as the "historically specific outcome of a set of social practices and motivations" (p. 612) and traces the origins of this understanding to colonial times. Race was used during the British colonial rule to "define and rule" (Mamdani, 2012), which is a strategy they used to identify particular groups with certain economic functions. This "colonial division of labor" (Gabriel,

¹² Sarawak's history with the British dates back to 1841 when James Brooke, a former British soldier, was rewarded the title *Rajah* (King) of Sarawak by the Sultan of Brunei for helping to suppress a rebellion by the Ibans, who were known to be fearless headhunters then. The Brooke family reigned as the *White Rajah* (White King) of Sarawak from 1841 for three generations. After the Japanese occupation from 1941-1945, Sarawak struggled to recover due to its weak economy. Faced with depleting funds, *Rajah* Charles Vyner Brooke turned Sarawak over to the British Empire, which made Sarawak their final colonial acquisition. Sarawak became a British Crown colony from 1946-1963.

2015, p. 789) saw the segregation of races during the colonial rule: local Malays were confined to rural egalitarian activities in their *kampungs* (villages), Indians were placed as laborers in rubber, tea, and oil palm plantations, and the Chinese were placed in tin mines. For indigenous groups in Sarawak, their economic roles depended on where they resided because they had to adapt their activities to different geographical conditions (Kaur, 1995). These colonial labels gave birth to racial stereotypes that still exist in post-colonial Malaysia.

The move by the British to classify and divide races according to labor played into other aspects such as education and administration. For example, Malay and Tamil vernacular schools were introduced during colonial rule to maintain the racial division that the British established (Gabriel, 2015). Kaur (1995) wrote that in Sarawak, roles were introduced based on race (e.g. political roles for Malays, economic roles for the Chinese, and military roles for the Iban) to ease administrative control over the different races. Kaur further explained that the administrative control by the British extended to the socialization between racial groups: They were not allowed to socialize with each other and their movements were restricted within the areas or districts they were in.

The implications of the racial division in politics and economy during the British colonial period continued into post-colonial Malaysia which perceives race as “natural and simply given” (Gabriel, 2015, p. 783). Cultural stereotypes rooted in the British’s racialized colonial governance are embedded in the day to day lives of Malaysians. Consequently, racism, discrimination, and inequality are seen as “routine practices” (p. 784) in Malaysia. At most, they are often downplayed or used for the purpose of maintaining structure or social hierarchies within the political or economic discourse (Gabriel, 2021). Outside politics or economy, there is relatively less conversations around race and the need to disrupt racial imbalance in the country,

especially within educational spaces. Consequently, there is relatively little research on racial discourse in Malaysian classrooms. Conversations and research around race and culture in Malaysian educational spaces are limited and focus mostly on dominant ethnic groups while sidelining ethnic indigenous groups (Embong, 2018). Pollock (2004) found that teachers and students do not often talk about issues of race, and this lack of discussion surrounding race permeates into the lives of Malaysians, shaping their way of being and thinking. Thus, teachers and students all bring into the classrooms their perceived understanding of race and culture, which then leads to racialization or the process of which race is used to maintain structure or social hierarchies (Gabriel, 2021).

This chapter presents a discussion of the participants' narratives that attempt to answer the following research question: **In the context of a multicultural rural setting, how do instructional coaches narrate their experiences of supporting rural English teachers?**

Taking a leaf out of Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) book, I made sure to ask Hope, Adam, and Aisya "temporality, sociality, and place questions" (p. 481) to acknowledge not only the centrality of their past on their present and their present on their future, but also the events and persons who contribute to their experiences. My conversations with them revealed how each of them perceived "culture" as shaped by their respective personal, social, and temporal conditions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). One particularly interesting revelation is how Hope did not view "culture" as connected to race or ethnicity when she shared about how it played into her coaching in rural schools. Instead, she spoke mainly about the expected behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and values of teachers and administrators in schools. These are part of the larger "hidden curriculum", a term first introduced by Jackson (1968) to refer to an "informal system" that influences the overall school climate and the students' learning environment. This is not to say

that she did not have any specific cultural experiences related to race and ethnicity. In my discussion of her restorying below, we will see how Hope's awareness of her interaction with culture in the context of race and ethnicity is not as apparent compared to her awareness of school culture. Her past experiences as a preservice teacher, in-service teacher, and a beginning coach all contribute to this difference in awareness. In contrast, Adam and Aisya's narratives revolved mostly around their interactions with culture through the lens of race and ethnicity, also shaped by their past experiences. In my discussion of each of their narratives, I also explore how, if at all, they position "culture" in the work they do as coaches in rural Sarawak.

5.1 Hope's Narratives: "Do you really live on trees?"

As I flipped open the tattered pages of my research notes, I came across pages of scribbled handwritten notes I made for Hope's narratives. I had forgotten I made these notes, and it took me a while to make out what I had written with my barely legible handwriting. The notes were my post-conversation reflections of our conversations, mostly with reminders to myself about what to pay attention to and what to archive. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't because I thought that her narratives were not integral to the research. I looked forward to my conversations with Hope because she is a natural storyteller. She just always seems to have something to share. However, being the enthusiastic storyteller that she is, Hope tends to share so much that her stories get lost in her restorying. In my analysis, I would then uncover stories within stories within stories. Looking back on my research notes, I began to realize that I missed a significant chunk of Hope's embedded narratives because I was too focused on looking out for narratives that served my research questions. It was in fact her embedded narratives that spoke the most to my research, as exemplified in the paragraphs that follow.

In my conversations with Hope, the notion of “culture” came up quite organically in her narratives. It did seem like she was quite reluctant to make obvious statements about race or culture, knowing that her narratives were being collected for my research data. Whenever I attempted to encourage her to retell a particular experience related to race or culture, I noticed that she would hesitate and stop herself more often mid-sharing, as if policing her own retelling. She would also use fillers like “uhm” and “hmm” considerably more, probably to give herself more time to process what she wanted to ultimately narrate.

In my initial analysis, I missed out the subtle references Hope made regarding race and culture, one of them being her experience studying outside of Sarawak for the first time. In this particular narrative, Hope spoke about how she never really had the sense of feeling like a minority or the “other” until she had to enroll in a student exchange program for preservice teachers that required her to study in a different Malaysian state. Hope attributed this feeling to the fact that she lived all her life growing up surrounded by other indigenous Sarawakians. In her restorying, Hope recalled how she felt when she made her maiden trip out of Sarawak:

It was my first time for a lot of things... the first time going on an airplane; I was so scared. I dared not move! I held in my pee (laughs), I didn't dare to walk down the aisle, I didn't dare to do anything because what if we fell out of the sky? (laughs) It was all I could think about at that time. It was also my first time meeting people who are not from Sarawak... people who spoke differently than me, who had different cultures and customs, who ate food that I wasn't used to eating... When we first reached the college, the people there saw us like we were less developed compared to them. Their view of us was really different. But they were like us too... they've never been out of Peninsular Malaysia. They've never been to Sarawak. So all they can say about Sarawak is that we live on trees! They would ask questions like “Do you really live on trees? How do you iron your clothes there? Do you just press your clothes between sheets?” and all that... They would ask us which longhouse we were from, and how you build a longhouse, how do you cut trees...things like that. (pauses) Come to think of it, it was really genuine curiosity on their part. There was no way to learn about Sarawak that time except from us, you know? There was no Google at that time. And really, I didn't feel too alone... I had others from Sarawak and also Sabah¹³ who were with me. The Head of the Language

¹³ Sabah and Sarawak are the only two Malaysian states in the east side of the country. Both states are also on the Bornean island and bear some similarities in terms of culture.

Department at that time was very kind to us too. She really went out of her way to help us to feel more at ease and settle down.

In Hope's retelling of her experience, I noticed how she began her narration by highlighting her fear and discomfort of being in a new place. She also highlighted the comments she received from her fellow preservice teachers whom she noted may have reacted the way they did because they did not have ample knowledge about Sarawak ethnic groups. Hope's move inward provides us a window to both her feelings and thoughts about the outward conditions that influence her experience at that moment (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In doing so, she is looking into both her personal conditions as well as the social conditions that are a part of what makes her experience uniquely hers.

Upon reflecting on Hope's retelling here, I realized that she did not reflect in bitterness towards the initial reactions she received, nor did she adopt an "us vs. them" mentality when she ventured into the new space. This can be explained with Ibrahim's (2017) point about the contrasting ways in which discourse around race or culture is addressed in Sarawak compared to Peninsular Malaysia. He wrote that Sarawak "seems to bask in its pluralism and intercultural fluidity" (p. 41) because the notion of a dominant culture or ethnicity is uncommon. Of course, this is not to say that there aren't any issues of racial disparity in Sarawak, which Jehom (2008) argues can be traced back as being the aftermath of the British colonial policies to define and rule. Jehom is adamant, however, that goodwill and sensibility amongst the different races and ethnicities in Sarawak seem to prevail.

We see this "goodwill" and "sensibility" ingrained in Hope and the ways in which she makes sense of the world and her experiences. Too ingrained, perhaps, that she did not make apparent references to culture in narrating her experiences with me. There was one particular instance where I noticed how she spoke of culture without being aware of it. It was when she

retold her experience of struggling financially throughout her preservice years to the point that she did not have enough money to buy food. I could see that it was a painful experience to retell on her part. She had a smile on her face (as she always does because of her cheerful nature) as she told this story, but her downcast eyes and additional, heavy sighs peppering her narration told me more than I needed to know. But when Hope made a cultural reference in her retelling, I noticed a change in her. She seemed to sit up straighter and begin to speak with more conviction.

In this particular retelling of her experience, Hope brought up the Iban cultural concept of “*ngari*” or “representation” and how it contributed to her efforts of becoming a top student every semester: “I really studied, I didn’t play around (laughs). My friends and relatives back home were very supportive of me too,” Hope added, code switching a little to Iban, “they saw me ‘*ngari ke sida*’ in that setting.” *Ngari ke sida*, an Iban phrase that means “representing them”, carries a lot of weight for the person who articulates it (Ibrahim, 2017). In Hope’s case, the representation of indigenous Sarawakians in educational spaces was relatively low during her time, thus she felt a sense of responsibility in making sure she did not disappoint those whom she represented. Although Hope did not verbalize it, her restorying sheds light on how her previous actions were clearly driven by the cultural practices and norms she grew up with. Most importantly, it draws attention to the ways in which her culture influences how she makes sense of her experiences.

I wondered, then, how this would play into the ways in which she worked with her teachers in rural schools, if at all. I wanted to know more about the extent to which her ways of knowing were shaped by her culture or her knowledge and understanding of the culture of a particular school community. When I asked her to share any coaching experience that speaks to this, she paused for a millisecond and quickly responded, “Not that I’m aware of, no... I don’t

think culture has ever influenced any of my coaching sessions.” What she meant to say here is that in approaching her teachers, Hope did not think that she relied on culture as much. However, her restorying would reveal otherwise.

Further into our conversation, Hope shared her earliest experience as a part-time coach. This particular experience stood out to me as a perfect example of how her awareness of culture influenced her coaching approach. Hope shared a story of how the panel of English teachers she was tasked to coach did not really acknowledge her presence in their school initially. Since the school was quite a distance from her district and was only accessible by river transportation, she had to spend an entire week at a time whenever she visited. Her first week’s visit, as she expected, had a lukewarm welcome. “I felt like an outsider... coaching was new to everyone at that time. I didn’t know what to do for my first visit, and the school didn’t know what to do with me. It was awkward,” she shared.

However, that initial awkwardness did not deter her from figuring out how best to approach the teachers in the school. For her second coaching visit to the school months later, Hope dug into her knowledge and understanding of the cultures of those in rural Sarawak from her years of teaching in rural areas. She took the cultural practice of being a good house guest and brought some local delicacies with her such as *buah maram* (a local tart fruit that grows in peat swarp forests) and paired them with some *sambal belacan* (spicy shrimp paste *sambal* with pounded anchovies, chili, and lime juice). She shared how this seemingly simple move opened the door to establishing a coaching relationship with the teachers at the school:

Food is always the best, you know, conversation starter. It worked and they were more open and they told me what they wanted to do. We went to work straight away. As we ate, we also did hands-on activities. I introduced some language games and the Small Book activity for them to try. We did some games and Kagan structures such as “think-pair-share”. So the third time I went there, they were eager to show me their files and they were very eager to ‘*sambut*’ (welcome) me at the jetty. I find it interesting, you

know, to see the change in the teachers. So I thought: This is it. This is the drive, the encouragement, and the support that the teachers need.

At the beginning of Hope's experience with the teachers, we see them positioning her as an outsider by refusing to interact with her or acknowledge her presence in the school. We also get a glimpse into not just Hope's feelings about coaching for the first time, but also the teachers' skeptical feelings about her presence in their school. Without any support or training for part-time coaches, Hope had to depend on her knowledge and understanding of the community she was going into. In particular, she had to depend on her understanding of their culture. She was not familiar with them and felt that the school environment was "foreign", but she made use of what she generally knew about rural communities and the common culture of the locals and leveraged that knowledge to help her establish rapport with the school community. Potluck meals are a common practice in rural schools, especially on Fridays, mostly because Muslim teachers in the school would bring meals that they have prepared to share with others as a form of the Muslim practice of "*sedekah*" or charity. Sharing communal meals provided the space for teachers in the school to engage in casual talk; mostly conversations that revolved around food: "How did you cook this?", "This is delicious; please share your recipe with me", "How did you get the meat to be so tender?" Having served in rural Sarawak since the beginning of her teaching career, Hope was accustomed to this culture surrounding food, so she used it as her way in with the teachers she had to coach.

Hope's action of doing so showed that she understood the societal and cultural norms of the school community, and this made them open up and no longer position her as an outsider. We see a positive turn in terms of the school's acceptance of Hope's presence in the school as a coach, particularly during her third visit when they eagerly waited for her to arrive by boat at the town jetty. This is a form of nonverbal communication that tells Hope that she is now not just

accepted into the school community, but also positioned as a “knowledgeable other” that they can rely on for guidance on anything related to teaching. What this tells us is that for coaching to work in a particular context, it takes more than just placing a good teacher in another school to coach and relying on their classroom experience or instructional expertise to translate into another teacher’s classroom. One needs to take into account the culture of the school they are entering and learn to navigate the complicated nature of building working relationships with teachers so that they become comfortable and open enough to ask for and receive help from coaches.

It’s interesting to note that Hope’s perceived understanding of the word “culture” in her coaching context was more in relation to the values and institutional beliefs of each individual school that she coaches. She spoke more of institutional culture, especially on the roles of school leaders in building a positive “school culture” to provide the right environment for teachers to thrive in their work. That is not to say that she did not think of the word “culture” in the traditional sense – related to race and ethnicity. Hope, like many indigenous Sarawakians, is deeply proud of her heritage and culture. Having grown up surrounded mostly by members of her indigenous community, the cultural beliefs and practices of the community are ingrained in her very being, influencing every facet of her life – from the way she thinks to the way she talks. Thus, despite her being seemingly unaware of the influence of culture on her work, Hope lives and breathes culture in everything she does.

The journey to meet Hope took me more than 6 hours’ drive from Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak. In total, the drive to and from Hope’s district had me spending roughly 12 hours on the road. Having been away for 3 years in a foreign country and relying completely on public

transport (because I have no clue on how to drive on the right side of the road), I was actually looking forward to driving even though I knew how tiring it would be. Perhaps it was the idea of being in complete control for the drive that got me excited. I began preparing the week before: curating 12-hour playlists with all my favorite songs (mostly BTS) and talking to people about changes in the roads due to the construction of the Pan-Borneo Highway¹⁴. I wasn't sure what to expect during the journey, and many cautioned me to avoid driving when it gets dark.

The roads leading to Hope's district were still under heavy construction when I went to see her. There were diversions every few miles marked by orange traffic cones because roads had to be blocked off for construction on one side of the road. The roads were used as the main route by all types of vehicles—cars, motorcycles, lorries and trucks of various sizes, and buses—and so the surface of the roads were no longer smooth and even. They were rippled and ridden with potholes; it was no wonder that I was told to avoid driving at night. They were not in the best condition to drive on, but those who have to travel across Sarawak and journey into the interiors would have no choice but to brave a bumpy ride (and risk blowing out their tires) through these roads. However, facing this on a daily basis is not a novelty for those in rural Sarawak. In fact, it is an everyday reality for them and a part of how life is lived in rural Sarawak.

In many ways, this extends to how culture is embodied in the everyday lives of those in Sarawak's rural communities. Culture is synonymous and viewed with equal importance as race and ethnicity (King, 2016), and is “taught, learned, shared, and transmitted as a part of collective life” (p. 17). I interpret this as culture being embodied and kept alive through the act of living in

¹⁴ The Pan-Borneo Highway is a road improvement project that will connect all the major towns in Sarawak and Sabah. It is planned to have a four-lane dual carriageway that runs along the coastline of Sarawak, Brunei, and Sabah. However, even with the construction of this highway, roads in the interiors of rural Sarawak mostly remain untouched and underdeveloped.

community. In Hope's case, even though she does not name "culture" as key in her coaching, her narratives reveal otherwise. In the paragraphs that follow, I will retell a conversation I had with Hope about a teacher she had worked closely with during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hope's office was hard to miss: It was a small, repurposed school building nested in the compound of a secondary school in her district. This is a typical set-up for smaller rural district education offices since they are rarely given a building that is specifically designed or built for them. And I could spot Hope from a mile away: Her signature fiery red lips popped out amidst the dull and weathered beige-colored outer walls of her office. As we walked into her office building, she gave me a quick tour of the building, introduced me to her colleagues who happened to be around at that time, and offered me a warm cup of tea and some local *kuih* or desserts she prepared for me. "I'm sure you miss our local *kuih*!" she chimed as she carried the plate of brightly colored local desserts into the meeting room where we would eventually set up port in. She was the perfect host; again, another indication of her tapping into her cultural practice of being one.

We sat down to chat over tea and *kuih* about a coaching experience during the height of the pandemic. Hope was particularly proud of how one of her rural teachers overcame the shortcomings of teaching digitally and virtually when schools were forced to shut down due to the pandemic. Regardless of whether they taught in urban or rural schools, teachers everywhere scrambled to adapt to an "emergency curriculum" and move their classrooms to a virtual space when the Covid-19 pandemic occurred. For those in rural Sarawak, a complete reliance on technology meant that a lot of students were left behind in their education. It wasn't because their teachers did not do enough or that the students were not interested in learning. They were simply not able to because of where they were physically.

Poor internet accessibility is a major predicament faced by those in rural Sarawak because of the large geographical area and topography which makes it challenging for telecommunication networks to set up enough cellular towers to provide internet coverage for the entire State. During the pandemic, stories of teachers and students hiking through dense jungles and camping out on hills just to get internet access and catch up on virtual classes were common¹⁵. In addition to connectivity issues, rural Sarawak students who mostly come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds do not have access to technological tools such as computers, laptops, or smartphones. “Many of the students have to share one mobile phone among their siblings, and it’s usually their parent’s. And the phones are usually basic ones so they can only access WhatsApp, at most,” Hope explained, sharing what she observed during the pandemic.

Despite this, Hope and the teacher she worked with, Lily (pseudonym), thought of ways to ensure that her students remain actively engaged in learning despite being out of their classrooms. As Hope prepared to tell me what they did, she pulled her chair closer and leaned in toward me, barely containing her excitement. She shared,

I worked with Lily who taught in a small rural primary school that served 5 nearby *rumah panjai*¹⁶. Most of the students live with their mothers or grandparents because their fathers have to work as the family breadwinners in major towns outside the district. And during Covid, travel across districts was strictly monitored because the state government wanted to curb the spread of Covid. So most of Lily’s students lived without seeing their

¹⁵ In November 2020, Borneo Post (a news outlet in Sarawak) released an article about a teacher in rural Sarawak who led a group from his longhouse and a nearby longhouse on a 2 hours 30 minutes hike through dense jungle and streams in search of internet access (Timbang, 2020). The group consisted of primary and secondary school students with their parents. The teacher decided to lead the group because he saw some students, some as young as 9 years old, making the journey individually and felt that it was unsafe for them to go without any adult supervision. There are other similar stories of teachers and students in Sarawak trekking uphill through jungles for hours just to get sufficient internet bandwidth to attend online classes or access learning materials during the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹⁶ *Rumah panjai* or longhouse is an elongated single structural unit that houses multiple families. The longest *rumah panjai* in Sarawak has over 100 “doors” or *bilik*, referring to each family’s private living quarters or apartments. The families have their own *bilik* but share a common *ruai* or communal living space. Traditionally, longhouses are built from wood, ranging from cheap ones to more expensive ones like the *Belian* wood, but some longhouses have opted to undergo modernization and be rebuilt using brick and mortar.

fathers for more than a year during that time, and some of their fathers had even lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Lily started thinking, “What’s the best way to help my students learn?” without adding to their families’ financial burdens. She came to me and we just started brainstorming about low-cost, high impact activities for the students. She had wonderful ideas... she always does. All I needed to do was to give her some feedback and additional ideas to play with. I suggested some ideas of course, but one thing I told her to really look into was to find ways of actively involving the *rumah panjai* community –the students’ mothers, grandmothers, and relatives– and that’s what she did.

Hope’s retelling here highlights her preferred coaching style. As a coach, Hope’s strategy is to always look at the bigger picture and find possible opportunities for collaboration. Having worked with her for years, I can say that this is one of her strengths. In her coaching with Lily, we see Hope tapping into her knowledge of the Iban culture that centers on communal living which is central to the Ibans, as evidenced by the way in which their *rumah panjai* is typically constructed. In the *rumah panjai*, privately owned *bilik* or apartments are housed under one single roof, thus depicting the *rumah panjai* as a single unit. As you walk into a *rumah panjai*, you will first step into the *ruai* which stretches the entire length of the longhouse. It is a community space shared by all the families and it is where community activities and events are held, such as rituals like *miring*¹⁷ and *ngajat* (traditional dance) performances during *Gawai* celebrations. Apart from a space for celebrations, it is also a space where day to day life is experienced. You will typically see families in the longhouse spending time in the *ruai* chatting, working on traditional crafts like weaving straw mats and working on looms, or even sharing meals. Living in one *rumah panjai* therefore signifies belonging to a particular community.

¹⁷ *Miring* is a ceremony carried out to please the gods, spirits, and ancestors of the Iban in return for their blessings. It originated from the olden days where the Ibans were traditionally animists and believed that everything that surrounds them has a soul or spirit. These days, however, most Ibans have embraced religions such as Christianity and Islam, and thus *miring* is done to merely preserve this unique Iban tradition rather than a representation of their actual religious belief.

In her retelling of this particular experience, Hope offered more details of what Lily eventually decided to do for her students. Lily, who is also Iban, developed a plan to engage her students and their families in her English lessons. “She thought about how she struggled to learn English when she was younger, and planned content based on what she thought would’ve worked for her,” Hope explained. Her first strategy was to increase her students’ excitement and interest in learning English. To do so, she created short videos to teach practical language content that they can use in their daily lives. She also involved her own children to act out short dialogues to show real-world usage of the English language. “Her students loved the short sketches the most,” Hope said, “I guess seeing other young people who look like them using the English language made them feel that they can do it too.” Lily was also highly aware of how tough it was for parents and their children to load long videos on their phones due to the limited internet connection in their longhouses. To combat this, she recorded short videos in lower quality that will not use up too much of their internet data. She also created a WhatsApp group with her students’ mothers or grandmothers and sent short voice notes and messages in the Iban language to share tips on how they can support their children’s learning at home:

For each lesson, Lily created two-part videos. One would be the content for her students in English, and the other would be instructions for their mothers or grandmothers in Iban. I thought this was brilliant. She would teach them how to create simple teaching aids and how to help their children practice the English language at home. For example, if the lesson includes English phrases for the children to practice, she would explain what they meant in Iban and teach them what to say to their children to encourage their use of the English phrases. She then made sure that they sent video or picture evidence of them using her tips at home. In a way, she turned the mothers and grandmothers into home teachers through this WhatsApp group. It was incredible!

I must point out that at this juncture, Hope could not contain how excited she was about sharing this information with me. As she spoke, she scrolled through pictures and videos on her phone to show evidence of Lily’s work with her students and the surrounding longhouses. Her eyes

clearly showed how proud she was of Lily. Here, we see how Hope worked with Lily to fully leverage the communal way of life among her students. “Community” is synonymous with the culture of the Ibans, and we definitely see that playing into the ways in which Hope approached her coaching with Lily. Even though she did not articulate it as so, her retelling here told us a different story.

5.2 Adam: “Don’t be so stereotypical!”

All these factors –culture, their family environment, and the beliefs of the individual students themselves– they all impact each other. But the biggest one of them all is culture itself. It’s big, you know. The moment the students speak in English, someone in their community will straight away say “Why are you speaking in English? We’re not westerners, don’t use the language”. What does that do to the students’ motivation of using the target language? (Adam’s interview transcript)

Locking down a time to sit and chat with Adam was the hardest among the three participants. His schedule was packed, just like how it has always been for him since I first got to know him. As much as he wanted to meet with me, he just could not find a suitable time in his busy work schedule. “I’ve got meetings, workshops, school visits, more meetings, you name it... I’m only free on weekends!” he told me on the phone when he called me a few days after I texted him about his availability. “And you should have just called me!” he chided jokingly, bringing his typical big brother energy into the conversation, “you know I don’t read text messages especially when I’m busy.” Adam laughed after playfully telling me off. I could tell that he felt bad about not responding to my text sooner. “I texted because I know how busy you are,” I quickly replied, “And weekend, yes... I’ll take it! Is this Saturday good?” We agreed on Saturday brunch, and I offered to pick him up since he was particularly busy that week going from one school to another. I wanted to give him a break from driving for at least one day, and I figured we would have more time for stories.

Adam has a way of conversing with others that keeps them engaged. Most importantly, he has a way of making them feel heard and seen during the conversation. Regardless of who he is conversing with, Adam makes sure to give them his full attention. He would listen actively and be extremely aware about not interrupting others. When I picked him up for our Saturday brunch, Adam did most of the listening initially and gave me space to share what I have been up to for the past 3 ½ years that I have been away. Perhaps it was the need to multitask; driving and thinking of ways to best enter into a conversation that could serve my data collection, while reorienting myself to the roads of the city that I just came home to after years of being away that made me unaware of the fact that I was dominating the conversation in the beginning. Stopping at the first traffic light after I picked him up, I looked over to Adam and said, “Wait, today is about you... I want to hear YOUR stories” to shift the attention back to him. Adam let out his signature hearty laugh. Not missing a beat, he dove straight into his stories.

Adam’s favorite stories to tell always revolve around him telling those he worked with such as teachers and students, to not be “walking stereotypes” of their race. He would say it jokingly to those who were of the same race as he is and insisted that he “didn’t mean it in an insulting way”. He explained that because he became an instructional coach in the same education district where he used to teach, he knew most of the teachers in the district and his reputation preceded him.

“Don’t be so stereotypical” has always been a favorite phrase of Adam’s, and I was curious as to why it was so. He responded, “I just want to instill in them the motivation, the drive to break away from the stereotypes that people always have of our race, you know?” It was a straight-forward yet complex answer. For as long as I’ve known Adam, he has always remarked how he grew up with stereotypical labels of his race. He expressed the same sentiment again in

our conversation that day, sharing how the general public saw people of his race as “slow, unmotivated, and uninterested” in progressing toward anything. I noticed that he was careful and a little hesitant this time, though, to articulate that to me. He kept insisting, “it’s just my opinion... based on my own experience,” as if worried that his words might be taken out of context to represent the opinion of the general public. I reassured him that his “storied life” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), although they may only represent experiences that *he* has *lived* all *his* life, were crucial to hear. My choice of reassuring him was done deliberately both on my part as a researcher and as a friend. Here, I am reminded by the words of Noddings (1986) who emphasized the importance of situating ourselves in relation to the participants to create a relationship where both the researcher and the researched value and affirm each other’s voices.

Adam continued with his narratives along the temporal line (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to share how he faced similar racialized stereotypes as an in-service English teacher. He shared how he had to constantly go the extra mile to prove that he was a competent English teacher, despite being trained in a proper teacher training college. “I had to prove myself because they think I’m not proficient in English due to my race,” Adam added, with a slight raise in the tone of his voice this time. At this point, I was not sure who he meant by “they”, and frankly, I felt hesitant about interrupting him after noticing a change in his tone. He seemed to notice this and offered an explanation without being asked: By “they”, he was referring to his colleagues and parents of students who were from other races. “Of course that means showing I can produce good results in standardized exams. Because to them, that’s how good teaching is measured,” he continued, with what I noticed was a slight hint of bitterness in his tone. He was of course referring to the Malaysian educational landscape that has been heavily influenced by the need for numerical evidence of success due to the race for accountability (Taubman, 2009).

While Adam initially deliberately went all out to prove his naysayers wrong, he eventually started internalizing this “system of surveillance” (Foucault, 1980, p. 155) and began “exercising this surveillance over and against himself” (p. 155). He noted how this resulted in him being highly critical in every decision-making process, which, to him, was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he trained himself to put more thought into his decision-making, and on the other hand, he noted how unnecessarily hypercritical he would be at times. Having worked with him for almost ten years, I understood what he meant by that. Back then, however, I did not have enough insight on how his experiences with culture contributed to this side of him. His restorying on being stereotyped based on race helped me to understand this characteristic of his.

Adam went on to highlight how he faced the same conundrum of being stereotyped when he made the shift from teaching to coaching. Despite having established himself as an effective English teacher in his district, he found that he had to start all over again from the beginning to establish his reputation with certain schools when he made the switch from teaching to coaching. He shared, “I’ve never been to some of the schools I had to coach when I was a teacher before... and because of my race, they didn’t really listen to what I had to say or take me as, you know, being capable in the beginning.” He continued,

This is from my own personal experience. It may not be true for all, but in my experience, schools with teachers who are not the same race as I am did not acknowledge me at first. Usually, they won’t acknowledge you until you have proven yourself worthy of that respect. So until you prove that you’re capable of producing results, they won’t respect you.

Adam highlighted how his preparation as a coach did not prepare him enough to face such racialized treatments in schools. As such, he relied on his previous experience of being in an identical situation. “Because to get through to the teachers, I have to actually address that issue. But whatever I know is not enough,” he said. When he shared this with me, I thought about other

coaches who might have undergone somewhat similar situations as he did. What if they did not have any prior experience to lean on and learn from? How, then, might we reframe the support given to coaches to equip them to address similar circumstances? Adam was “lucky” in the sense that he had diverse teaching experiences which allowed him to perceive the challenges he later faced as a coach and attend to them accordingly. However, not many would have the same privilege.

For me, shifting to coaching after teaching for 5 years made me the youngest instructional coach in the state. Thus, I had my fair share of resistance from the teachers I coached, especially from those who were much more experienced than I was. While most coaches in my district would be able to approach the teachers they had to coach much more easily, I found that I had to spend a little bit more time to buy in and build rapport with my teachers. Of course, after overcoming this hurdle, the teachers were more open to and confident with my coaching.

It is important to note that the initial push-back I got from teachers is more cultural than anything else. For Asians, respect for the elderly is at the foundation of our culture regardless of race or ethnicity, and being coached by a much younger person was akin to being taught how to teach by someone they saw as still being “green” in the field. Therefore, respect was much harder to earn from the teachers I worked with. Was I prepared for this when I first got into coaching? Did the professional development sessions for coaches help me to address situations like this when I coach? Unfortunately, it’s a no from me for both questions.

In my conversation with Adam, he, too, pointed out how our “training as coaches is limited” when it comes to addressing issues related to culture. “They take for granted that coaches are experienced teachers,” he continued, “but they forget that even in our preparation as

teachers, we didn't really touch on how to attend to culture in teaching." He was not wrong, of course. Goh and Blake (2015) posit that Malaysian teacher preparation curriculum tends to gear toward replicating a Western system that is based on Western-centric theories and research. They argue for a "localized-pedagogy" (p. 472) that is more fitting to the Malaysian context. Karubi et al. (2013) concurred with them and stated that the curriculum for teacher education would benefit from including local and indigenous knowledges to truly reflect Malaysia's multiculturalism. Thus, a "culturally authentic" (Gopinathan, 2006, p. 262) teacher education would be ideal for Malaysia.

However, the current Malaysian education policy on teacher education still has plenty of room for improvement when it comes to incorporating a more "culturally authentic" approach as suggested by Gopinathan (2006). In the latest Malaysian education reform document, the *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025* (MOE, 2013), a chapter is dedicated to lay out the Ministry's plans for improving teachers and school leaders in the country. In the document's subsection on *Revamping the Institute of Teacher Education and Teacher Training*, the one statement that seems to hint at addressing culture is as follows: "The Ministry will ensure that the Institute of Teacher Education curriculum is better adapted to the needs of different school contexts, such as rural-urban settings" (p. 5-5). Not much is said further about how this would be achieved. Adam pointed out that this was the crux of the problem: "They take for granted that we already know how to deal with issues related to culture and that this is something that doesn't really matter."

I could tell Adam felt frustrated about the lack of tangible steps in dealing with issues related to culture in Malaysian education. Adam saw culture as the biggest obstacle when it comes to teaching English in multicultural classrooms. He explained,

When you are in a single race majority classroom, in a school that is surrounded by a single race community, the common thinking is, “What’s the purpose of using English? What’s the point of learning it?” because you don’t speak the language at home. There’s no need to! And those who do want to learn English get teased by the larger community for using a language that is not their first language. So how do we deal with that as teachers, especially when our own background and culture don’t match with our students’? And how do we help teachers to deal with that as coaches? It all depends on our own wisdom and experience.

Adam began to share an instance where culture influenced the teaching outcomes of a teacher he worked with. The teacher was Chinese and taught in a majority Malay rural school set in a Malay fishing village. In his restorying, he noted, “She failed to connect to the students. She just couldn’t... and this is my assumption: Part of it is because there’s no understanding about the students’ culture and background.” He shared how the teacher was hardworking and did everything right by the book. “She taught what she was supposed to teach, but there was just no learning,” he continued. He went on to talk about how the students seemed uninterested in her lessons and would refuse to participate in any class activities. “The students weren’t unruly or anything... they were quiet and disciplined, but they were just not actively involved in her lessons,” Adam explained. He shared how he decided to speak to the students to get to the root of the problem:

I asked the students what the issue was, and they said they just didn’t understand what she was saying. She would just use English because Malay is not her first language. And, well, the students don’t speak any other languages but Malay. But I think it’s also more than just the language barrier. My assumption is this... because the students have no experience in mixing with the Chinese, learning about their culture and everything, so that’s why the Chinese are still strangers to them. And when you don’t understand a person’s culture, you’ll always have prejudice against the person and shut them out even when they’re trying to teach you.

Here, Adam pointed out that the failure of both the teacher and her students in understanding each other’s cultures contributed to the lack of learning in the classroom. However, he felt that the teacher could have dealt with the situation by learning about the students’ background to

inform her lesson planning. On the teacher's part, he felt that the teacher "bulldozed" her way into teaching English "as if she's sitting next to the Queen of England", which made it difficult for her students to accept her. He continued: "If you put yourself highly and you don't understand the students' culture and their acceptance of the English language, how are you going to break the barrier?" I could not help but to interject his restorying here, however. I pointed out that the teacher was perhaps just doing what she knew best, which is to teach how she was trained to teach: without much awareness of how to address cultural differences in the classroom. "Of course," Adam said, agreeing with me. "We learned sociolinguistics, how culture shapes our thinking and how language represents what we are thinking and all that. But we're not told how we can help students of different cultures to learn the language," he continued. He also lamented how much of the things we learned in teacher training were "just theories, but they didn't help us to bridge theory to the actual teaching." "We were exposed to these things, yes, but that's it. So teachers in the field struggle. And coaches also struggle because our training is limited, because they take for granted that we are experienced," he continued.

Throughout our conversation, Adam kept reiterating how teachers and coaches in multicultural Malaysia cannot run away from addressing the element of culture. He illustrated this point using the Malay culture as an example:

It's not common in Malay culture for you to look into someone's eyes when you talk to them. At times, when you look at the person right into their eyes, especially those who are older than you, you are considered as being rude. In my own experience of teaching in a Malay school, I found that my students did not look into my eyes when I talked to them. They would either look down or somewhere else. I used to be so annoyed and thought that they were just being rude. But in their culture, when you look into someone's eyes directly, it's perceived as trying to challenge authority or something. So, you see, if teachers fail to understand this cultural practice, then they will simply accuse the students of being rude.

In Adam's case, it was this experience that helped him to be aware of the importance of culture in teaching. It was also the reason why he was able to bring the element of culture into his coaching with the Chinese teacher. "But we never talk about culture in our training," Adam said, as he had mentioned multiple times throughout our conversation. For Adam, culture in terms of race and ethnicity was not just important to address in classrooms, but also in the coaching relationship between coaches and teachers. He left me with these important questions to ponder: "If I don't understand your background or culture, how am I going to approach you as a coach? How am I going to communicate effectively with you?"

5.3 Aisya: Entering Culture through Language

My research notes on Aisya are possibly the easiest to make out. There weren't as many arrows, circles, or scribbles as compared to what I had for Hope. Aisya's narratives in regard to culture were more straightforward and easier to follow, so much so that our conversation did not even go beyond an hour. Perhaps for Aisya, it was easier to think about how culture influenced her coaching because she spent most of her adult life in an environment where she was a minority. Aisya spent her post-secondary years outside of Sarawak: 2 years in Peninsular Malaysia in a preparatory teaching program before heading to the UK for 4 years to complete her undergraduate degree in teaching. She was also one of the few indigenous students from Sarawak who was selected to pursue an overseas teaching degree during her time. Thus, her awareness of culture began much earlier on.

When asked to speak about an experience where culture played into her coaching, Aisya was quick to identify a particular teacher in her earlier coaching days. Out of all the participants, Aisya was the only one who had experience in coaching teachers who were not local to Sarawak.

These teachers came from states outside of Sarawak and most had never visited Sarawak before.

One particular teacher stood out to Aisya:

Yeah, I actually have one interesting teacher that I worked with a few years before Covid happened. She was from the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia if I'm not mistaken. On top of that, her option was actually music but she was asked to teach English because the school did not have enough English teachers. And she had never been to Sarawak at all. To top it all off, she was posted to one of the furthest schools here by the riverbank. The school is accessible by road, but the journey there is still pretty rough and the school is really secluded. When I first met her, she was very defensive. She would tell me, "I cannot speak English because the students don't understand English" or "I cannot do this because the students don't know how to do this." After a while, when she got comfortable with me, she started really explaining the difficulties she faced. First, in terms of language.. the students don't really speak the standard Malay language that we learn formally in schools.. they speak in their local Malay dialect. And she had some Iban students in her class who spoke Iban. Speaking English was out of the question for them. And being from outside Sarawak, the teacher could not understand them, and they couldn't understand her. So language was her biggest barrier. She was stressed out for the first few months being in that school and she couldn't concentrate on her work. Another thing that stressed her out was the cultural background and practices that were different from what she grew up with. It took a while for her to get used to the differences.

In this narrative, Aisya shared the experience of a teacher who was newly transferred from a different state to her district. The teacher was not new to teaching as she already had 6 years of teaching experience, yet she still struggled to adjust to a new environment. Palazzolo (2015, as cited in Mahali & Sevigny, 2022) pointed out that teachers who have limited cultural and diversity awareness at the beginning of their career tend to lack the confidence when it comes to addressing cultural differences in their classrooms. This leads to an increased anxiety amongst teachers which will then impact how negatively they view themselves as teachers (Bandura, 1997). We see this encapsulated perfectly in the experiences that Aisya's teacher had when she first started teaching in a culturally heterogeneous school in rural Sarawak. Her limited awareness of the cultural diversity of her school and its surrounding community overwhelmed her to the point where she felt helpless and could not fully perform her duties as a teacher to her best ability.

Interestingly, Aisya pointed out that it was her past experience of teaching in an urban school instead of a rural school that helped her to coach the teacher. Aisya shared how she had a similar experience when she taught in an urban school outside Sarawak. “Like the teacher, I felt like an outsider to the school,” Aisya began, “I was this teacher from Sarawak who was sent to teach at a school with students from different cultures, family backgrounds, even nationalities because we had expat’s children at the school. I felt lost at first.” Aisya tapped into this experience and shared it with her teacher, which then helped her teacher to be more receptive to her coaching.

The thing that made her accept me was because I had the same experience. You know... me, being a Sarawakian, a Bidayuh, teaching in a school where my students were talking in all sorts of languages and came from different cultural backgrounds. This connection brought us together and made her feel comfortable with me. I guess I was lucky in that sense because I had that experience. She felt that I could understand her, which I did... I did. I could understand how she felt because of my own experience. So when I shared my experience, she opened up to me and became more positive about my coaching. And she actually became a very, very good teacher. When I first met her, she said she didn’t want to teach English and she wanted to transfer to another school. But at the end of our coaching period, she told me that she wanted to continue teaching English. In fact, until now, she’s still teaching English.

I noticed how Aisya was able to immediately identify that the teacher struggled particularly with the different cultures of her students. Aisya decided to address this issue first instead of focusing on the teacher’s pedagogical strategies. Her reason for doing so was simple: She had a similar experience and struggle as well. Reflecting on this, she brought up a concern similar to Adam’s: How would a coach cope with the same issue if they had no prior experience of dealing with anything related to culture? Like Adam, Aisya admitted that she was “lucky” to have an experience she could tap into to establish a common ground with an initially reluctant teacher who struggled to teach in a rural school because she couldn’t understand the local languages and customs. “On top of diverse local students, I had international students too, and they of course

brought with them home languages that I'm not familiar with," Aisya shared. Communicating in English or standard Malay was not a viable option because Aisya's students did not have mastery in either languages. Aisya shared that this was due to how the students were grouped into different classes based on their academic performance, a practice that is typical in Malaysian schools:

The school made me the discipline teacher and gave me all the back classes, and most of the students in these classes didn't speak English or Malay. So my Indian and Punjabi students would speak Tamil, Punjabi, or Hindi, and my Chinese students would speak Cantonese. The international students would speak in their own languages too, so it was a lot to deal with. I didn't speak any of their languages.

In her restorying above, Aisya pointed out one key notion that she felt was closely related to culture: Language. Multiple sociocultural research has pointed to the connection between culture and language (Kramsch, 1998; Nieto, 2002). Aisya was aware of the fact that her students' languages represent more than just a way of communicating: It is a representation of their identities, histories, and worldviews, shaped by the cultural context they grew up in (Nieto, 2002). She is also aware of how power can be intertwined in the notions of culture and language (Fairclough, 1989). Aisya knew that if she were to remain firm in just communicating in English with her students, she would be contributing to the invisible power structure between them. All these awareness helped Aisya to decide on the best ways to engage her students in her English lessons. She shared that her first strategy was non-academic: "I needed to connect with them first, so I learned their languages. I started greeting them in Cantonese, Tamil, Hindi... I even asked them to teach me vocabularies in their first language." Aisya did this to connect with her students on a more personal level rather than diving straight into teaching. It was clear to me then that she translated her teaching experience into her coaching. Using a similar approach, Aisya opted to first connect and get to know her teacher. Aisya emphasized that she used this approach

because “everyone comes from different backgrounds and has different needs, so if you just approach them and stick to your set agenda, you might not be supporting them in their areas of need.”

Acknowledging the cultural differences of individual teachers and schools is central to Aisya’s coaching philosophy. However, just like Hope and Adam, Aisya also builds her coaching philosophy upon the communal way of life that is common in rural communities. “I supplement individual coaching with workshops that cater to common needs of schools in my district,” Aisya stated. Though her teachers may bring varying values, beliefs, identities, and motivations along with them (Levinson & Sutton, 2001), Aisya envisioned her workshops to be spaces where learning is not just focused on pedagogy, but also on how to negotiate the individual differences that contribute to their teaching experiences.

Back when we used to coach in neighboring education districts, Aisya and I often planned and facilitated workshops together because we had almost similar issues in coaching. Both of our education districts had a significant number of rural schools, and planning workshops that combined schools from both of our districts allowed for more opportunities for our teachers to collaborate and build community beyond the boundaries of their respective schools. Aisya and I would make sure that we carved enough time during our workshops for the teachers to talk about localized issues related to the workshop focus. Often, the issues highlighted would revolve around the cultural contexts of each school. Those who taught in schools with similar demographics usually shared the same stories: Exhausted students who would sleep through lessons because their families made them take up part-time work after school and they had no choice but to oblige, and, at the other end of the spectrum, uninterested students who would disrupt lessons because their parents’ financial privilege meant that they did

not need to be excellent students. Teachers also shared stories of students who saw English as the language of the privileged, and that their “people” (read: those with the same race or ethnicity) did not need to converse in English to succeed in life.

The scope of the stories shared by teachers during these workshops go beyond what I have listed here. In retrospect, I realize how reluctant the teachers were in admitting that culture was at the root of their issues, but without naming and accepting it, Aisya and I often found ourselves unable to provide any actionable solutions to the teachers. And so the conversations remained as conversations during workshops, with our carved out time for these conversations turning into outlets for the teachers to vent their frustrations. I shared this revelation with Aisya, and she was quick to agree. “Of course, of course,” she said, nodding her head in agreement, “As coaches, we were not prepared at all to address anything related to culture. And it seems like we were scared to point it out too, for fear that it would be deemed as disrespectful and racist, right?” She took the words right out of my mouth. Aisya’s opinion here reiterates Jehom’s (2008) point about how goodwill and sensibility is rife amongst the various races and ethnicities in Sarawak.

When I asked Aisya’s opinions about how prepared Malaysian teachers are in dealing with classroom issues rooted in culture, she shared the same sentiment as well:

Totally unprepared. We were not prepared at all. How the real world would be was never presented to us in terms of the locality of the school. Our training focus more on what we’re going to do, not how to tailor it according to where we’re going to go... so for a lot of teachers, it’s a “pleasant” surprise.

Sadly, I have to agree with Aisya’s point here. Cultural awareness is a given in multicultural Malaysia and it is a given for every Malaysian citizen to understand and respect the cultural differences between races and ethnicities in the country. Thus, those trained to teach in schools are expected to know how to cater to their multicultural classrooms. In actual fact, however, the

diversity in Malaysia differs from state to state. In most states in Malaysia, the Malays make up the largest ethnic group, followed by the Chinese and Indians (Joseph, 2014). In contrast, the Ibans make up the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, followed by other ethnic groups such as the Bidayuh, Melanau, Orang Ulu. The rest of the population are Malays, Chinese, and Indians. With a makeup that is mostly indigenous and therefore unique to Sarawak, many teachers who grew up in environments with a single-race or a maximum of three-race majority would definitely struggle to adapt when they first start teaching in Sarawak. The geopolitical layers of this experience make it even more challenging for them. Teacher preparation and professional development unfortunately do not address these issues which I believe are pertinent in supporting the holistic growth of teachers serving in rural Sarawak. This also extends to those who serve as instructional coaches in rural Sarawak since all Malaysian coaches come from a teaching background. I will explore more of this in the upcoming chapter.

5.4 The Meeting of Stories: The Place of Culture in Coaching

At the beginning of this chapter, I opened with a discussion on how culture is embedded and embodied in the lives of many in rural Sarawak. In Hope, Adam, and Aisya's retelling of their experiences, they each revealed how it was important for them to develop relationships with their teachers, and their way of establishing the relationships was to lean on their understanding of the teachers' and their surrounding communities' culture. Yosso (2005) terms this step as valuing the "community cultural wealth" (p. 69) and moving away from viewing culturally-shaped experiences as deficits. It refers to "cultural capital" categories that identify an "array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (Yosso, 2005, p. 69).

Yosso (2005) outlined six cultural capitals: *aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant* (pp. 77–79). She cautioned that the different cultural capitals should not be viewed as mutually exclusive and that they are “dynamic processes” (p. 77) that complement each other. Stories retold by Hope, Adam, and Aisya each revealed that they tapped into different cultural capitals in their attempts to establish rapport with their teachers. Adam and Aisya, for example, leveraged the linguistic capital of the communities that their teachers served in. Yosso defines linguistic capital as the skills that one has attained through years of “communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (p. 78). Adam and Aisya’s retelling particularly points to the ways they leverage their teachers’ and the surrounding community’s linguistic capital in their coaching. Through their coaching approaches, we see them acknowledging the richness of various languages of the communities rather than seeing them as stumbling blocks in the EL classroom. Their approach included coaching their teachers to see the ways in which their students’ home languages can be used as an entry point into engaging the students in their English language lessons.

On the other hand, Hope did not speak to this. This was perhaps because she coached schools that are predominantly Iban or teachers of other races and ethnicities that can communicate in Iban fluently. She explained,

Most of the teachers I work with who are not from Sarawak have been here for more than 10 years... they have assimilated and become part of the Iban community, so they dress, think, eat, speak, etc. in the same way. You wouldn’t know that they are not Ibans at first because they speak so fluently and sound very Iban.

Hope’s sharing here implies how she might not see the connection between language and culture and how they play into the EL classroom. Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), however, have long argued that culture is inherently tied to language. Kramsch’s (2014) work discussed this connection at length, asserting a view held by SLA researchers that “culture is

linked to language in three major ways: semiotically, linguistically, discursively” (p. 37). She based her work on Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory to explain how language does not determine our cognition. Instead, she argued that the culture of the community in which one resides largely influences one’s view and interpretation of “linguistic signs” (p. 37) and language. It is important to note that my observation of Hope's sharing here is not a criticism of her knowledge or skills as a coach. Rather, I believe that the degree of her understanding of how culture impacts language teaching and learning reflects the training and PD she has received thus far as a coach. This will be explored further in the following chapter.

A common characteristic in all three coaches’ approaches is that they built upon familial and social capitals in their work with their teachers. *Familial capital* refers to the ways in which families and extended families “carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79) to inform their ways of being, thinking, feeling, and doing. *Social capital*, on the other hand, refers to the networks of people outside the family that forms the community. Yosso explains that communities are equally important as families in providing “instrumental and emotional support to navigate society’s institutions” (p. 79). Together, familial and social capitals contribute to the construction of experiences and knowledge that both teachers and their students bring into the classroom. These experiences and knowledge influence the way teachers and students interact and learn in the classroom, which will ultimately impact students’ learning, motivation, and overall well-being. Additionally, these experiences can help teachers construct lessons that facilitate meaningful learning opportunities for students from multicultural backgrounds.

In Hope’s retelling, she shared how she capitalized on the strength of the longhouse communities and worked with her teacher to use it to her advantage to create engaging lessons

for her students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together with her teacher, Hope leveraged the “networks of people and community resources” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79) in the longhouses in order to support the students academically and, most importantly, emotionally during the Covid-19 pandemic school closures. Adam and Aisya, on the other hand, focused on strengthening communal bonds and building relationships within and between schools. To do this, they made sure to acknowledge both the similarities and differences of the schools’ cultural contexts. They did this by carrying out a thorough needs analysis to understand the needs of individual schools. As a result, this helped inform their planning of initiatives that would best fit the context of each school and community.

However, in their restorying, I noticed that the big issue seems to be their teachers’ lack of understanding and appreciation of the ways in which students from various cultural backgrounds may have different experiences, and these experiences contribute to their successes and failures in the classroom (Horowitz et al., 2005). As I have pointed out in the opening of this chapter, this may be attributed to how race, ethnicity, and culture are rarely discussed critically in Sarawak’s educational sphere, and how there seems to be no notion of “dominance” when it comes to discourse around race and ethnicity in Sarawak (Ibrahim, 2017).

What does this mean for coaching, then? For Hope, Adam, and Aisya, despite having awareness of the lack of racial discourse in education in Sarawak, there was nothing much they could do without ample preparation and training. They articulated the need for culture to be incorporated into coaching in rural Sarawak, but this cannot be done without evaluating and rethinking the ways in which culture is thought and talked about in coaching in rural Sarawak. To effectively support teachers in a multicultural rural setting, coaches must be prepared to introduce and discuss culture more explicitly as well as be able to facilitate open dialogue with

their teachers. Thus, coaches need to be trained to recognize and understand the local history, culture, and context of the community in which they serve. They must also be trained to lead respectful critical discourse on culture and education with their coached teachers. As challenging as these efforts may be, they are integral for ensuring culturally relevant coaching in rural Sarawak.

Chapter 6: Reimagining the Preparation and Professional Development of Coaches

It was the third quarter of 2013 and I was in my fourth year of teaching. I was finally starting to feel settled in the rural school I was serving in when the English Language Officer (ELO) from our State Education Department contacted me about applying for a newly introduced post by the Ministry of Education, the *School Improvement Specialist Coach Plus* (SISC+). “You had a taste of coaching part-time earlier this year,” he said, and asked, “How was it for you?” In truth, I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about coaching, much less being a full-time coach. When I took on coaching part-time, I was only given a month's notice about the new role I had to take up. There was no training or induction; all I received was an appointment letter informing me of my new part-time role as a coach for the Head of the English Panel and the name of the school that I was attached to, which was in a neighboring town. Since I didn't know anything about coaching, I shared what I knew best at the time: my own English Panel's best practices. Nevertheless, it was an awkward experience for us both. There I was, barely 5 years into teaching, sharing what I *thought* I knew best with a teacher who had been teaching for well over twenty years; and he had no idea why an outsider suddenly appeared in his school one day to coach him. Despite the awkwardness, we maintained cordiality and were extremely relieved at the end of what seemed like a dragged-out coaching cycle.

In light of this, I hesitated to share the truth with the ELO about my part-time coaching experience. I didn't know how to without making it obvious that the lack of preparation and external support shaped my unmemorable initial coaching experience. Furthermore, I had just completed a part-time program in a local university in order to earn my Master's degree at that time and did not have the headspace to think about transitioning to a post that meant leaving

school permanently to be placed in a district education office. I never quite saw myself doing anything else other than teaching. "As a teacher coach, you'll focus solely on teaching," he said, in an attempt to coax me into applying for the full-time position. It sounded extremely appealing to be able to completely focus on classroom teaching and student improvement, so I took the plunge and applied for the SISC+ position.

The SISC+ post was introduced under the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB), a major education reform launched by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) after conducting a large-scale extensive review of the Malaysian education system. MEB was crafted and launched in part as a response to declining standards in national examinations as well as international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Malaysia ranked in the bottom third amongst 74 participating countries and lower than the OECD average in Reading, Mathematics, and Science for PISA, while for TIMSS, Malaysian students' achievements barely met the international average for proficiency in mathematical and scientific concepts (MOE, 2013).

MOE's review of the Malaysian education system was conducted between October 2011 to December 2012 and involved education experts from UNESCO, the World Bank, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and local universities (MOE, 2013). It also involved key stakeholders such as school principals, teachers, parents, students, and members of the public from every Malaysian state. The review culminated in a blueprint that mapped out 11 strategic and operational shifts towards transforming the Malaysian

education system to address five system aspirations¹⁸ that align with Malaysia's National Education Philosophy of a balanced and holistic education.

The 11 shifts cover various components that MOE deemed important in redesigning and strengthening the education system. Two out of the 11 shifts contributed to the introduction of instructional coaches or SISC+ in Malaysia¹⁹: Shift 4 focuses on the teaching profession and specifically mandates that the quality of continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers be upgraded beginning 2013 through coaching and mentoring; and Shift 6 calls for the empowerment of district education offices in crafting needs-based solutions, which led to the introduction of the District Transformation Program (DTP) that outlines and oversees the implementation of coaches or SISC+.

With the implementation of the DTP, coaches were employed and placed in every district education office beginning 2014 to coach and mentor English language, Mathematics, and *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) teachers in schools that were identified as low performing according to MOE's standards (MOE, 2013). The roles and responsibilities of the coaches include (1) providing direct and ongoing support to teachers through coaching and mentoring to help them reflect on and plan effective classroom lessons, interventions, and remedial instruction; (2) ensuring the successful implementation of curriculum reforms and new MOE programs in schools; and (3) conducting professional development (PD) workshops and

¹⁸ In the MEB, MOE identified five system aspirations or outcomes for the Malaysian education system: Access (100% enrolment in preschool all the way to upper secondary by 2020), quality (place in the top third ranking in PISA and TIMSS in 15 years), equity (reduce urban-rural, socio-economic, and gender achievement gaps by 50% by 2020), unity (inculcate shared values and experiences by embracing diversity), and efficiency (maximize return on investment for funds allocated for education). What this means is that all educational programs or plans should be planned towards achieving these 5 system aspirations.

¹⁹ It is important to note that another coaching and mentoring role was also introduced at the same time: School Improvement Partner (SIPartner+). The focus of SIPartner+ is on coaching and mentoring school leaders to improve their leadership skills.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within and across schools, districts, and states (School Management Division, 2017).

To prepare the coaches for their newly appointed roles, MOE conducted a one-week induction training during which the coaches were introduced to coaching models and approaches as well as coaching observation and teacher intervention tools that they are required to use during their visits to schools. After this initial training, coaches then discussed the selection of “focus schools” with their SIPartner+ and other officers who lead the various sectors (i.e. Learning Sector, School Management Sector, Student Development Sector, and the District Counseling) at their district education office. Under the DTP, the selection of schools must satisfy the following criteria: (1) are “Underperforming” schools ranked under Band 5, 6, and 7²⁰, (2) the teachers’ overall standards are below the satisfactory level of the Standards for Quality Education in Malaysia (officially known as SKPMg2²¹), and (3) has received approval from the District Education Officer to be included as a focus school.

SISC+ would then go on to identify teachers to coach within these focus schools, taking into account suggestions from the school leaders, the teachers’ classroom teaching assessment reports, and their students’ results (School Management Division, 2017). Their coaching visits must be done at least three times a year or as many times as required by their respective

²⁰ The performance of Malaysian schools is assessed based on SKPMg2. Schools are categorized under Band 1–7 based on scores garnered from the assessment, with high performing schools placed under Bands 1–4 and low performing schools under Bands 5–7. The ranking of schools is not meant to be used as a basis for comparison and is merely used to identify and prioritize schools that would require additional support from district education offices to improve their quality.

²¹ SKPMg2 is a self-assessment tool for schools which is filled twice a year. There are five different assessments termed as “Standards” and they are as follows: 1) Leadership; 2) Organizational management; 3) Curriculum, co-curriculum, and student affairs management; 4) Learning and facilitation; and 5) Student development. Standards 1–3 require teachers to evaluate their school management and provide evidence for their scores. Standard 4 evaluates classroom teaching and it involves teachers' own self-assessment for the first part of the year, and assessment by an administrator or middle leader during a lesson observation for the second half of the year. The score for Standard 5 is gathered from students’ achievements in public examinations, involvement in co-curriculum activities, discipline records, and school attendance (UNICEF, 2020).

education offices. Moreover, coaches are required to inform their district education officers on a bi-weekly basis about their coaching outcomes, challenges, and needs, and may request assistance from other officers within the district if the issue is beyond the scope of coaching and mentoring. Coaches may also be appointed as representatives of their districts at inter-district or state level meetings or PD. This will undoubtedly take time away from their core coaching responsibilities.

The DTP program has undergone two major revamps, with the latest changes finalized in 2019. For English language (EL), there are currently 11 secondary school coaches and 16 primary school coaches in the entire state of Sarawak. This small number of coaches barely covers the needs of over 30 education districts and more than 1400 schools in Sarawak.

All three participants, Hope, Adam, and Aisya, were involved as SISC+ or coaches for secondary school EL teachers since the implementation of the coaching and mentoring program under DTP in 2014. Thus, all three participants have experienced the two major revamps under DTP that saw an extension in terms of their focus in coaching. Before, they were required to work with individual EL teachers who were identified as “underperforming” by their schools. With the revamp, however, the coaching focus is expanded to include middle leaders in schools such as Heads of Panel or Heads of Language Departments to empower them in becoming effective peer mentors for EL teachers under their care.

In the same way as myself, Hope had some prior coaching experience before becoming a full-time coach in the district where she works. She also served in two different rural districts as a coach. On the other hand, Adam and Aisya have served in their respective districts since 2014. The three participants also went for the initial training together and continue to attend the same

professional development sessions because of their shared coaching focus on rural English teachers and middle leaders.

This chapter sets out to answer the question **“What changes or adjustments need to be made in the preparation and professional development of coaches in a multicultural setting?”** To do so, I will present the narratives from each participant that speak to the experiences of their coaching journey that highlight their initial preparation and ongoing PD as coaches. In particular, I will highlight the participants’ restorying of what worked and did not work for them, which will hopefully inform the ways in which we can reimagine future preparations and PD for coaches in a multicultural setting.

6.1 Hope’s Concerns: “How do we deal with ‘untaught’ things?”

Prior to the restructuring of MOE which aligned the coaches to new roles of working with middle leaders in schools, Hope worked with at least 20–25 English teachers a year in kindergartens, primary, and secondary schools in her district. On top of being culturally diverse, these teachers vary in their education background and teaching experience.

In this regard, Hope spoke to the importance of being prepared to coach teachers with different backgrounds and teaching experiences. However, the training she initially received fell short of her expectations. “Our induction training taught us the basics of coaching, but not much about how to coach teachers with diverse backgrounds and skills,” Hope shared in her reflection. She added, “It was more like I had to use my prior experience in my work as a coach. But that’s not enough.” Hope felt this way because during her stint as a part-time coach, she only worked with a small group of English teachers in one rural school. This meant that her earlier coaching experience was confined to one context. Thus, while her part-time coaching experience seemed

to give her an edge over other coaches, she still felt inadequately prepared when she began coaching full-time.

As we continued with our conversation, I noticed how Hope struggled to name the problems she faced as a coach, partly because it was not discussed during her initial preparation or PDs. After some prompting, she was able to identify the difficulty in articulating the problems she experienced. She noted that workshop facilitators should provide the space for coaches to discuss concerns they face in their respective districts to help them identify and name their issues. She shared,

It would be beneficial for us if we had a chance to discuss our concerns during training and workshops. This way, we can understand our roles and responsibilities as coaches better and also how to address district-specific issues while ensuring that we remain true to our role and carry out our responsibilities as required by the ministry.

One particular issue Hope brought into our discussion was the difficulty in dealing with different school cultures that are often characterized by unspoken rules or norms in the school. Kaplan and Owings (2013) define school culture as “shared orientations, values, norms, and practices that hold an educational unit together, give it a distinctive identity, and vigorously resist change from the outside” (p. 2). Based on their study of 40 years of research data on school reforms, Kaplan and Owings concluded that the lack of a supportive school culture may affect reform success rates. For schools to achieve overall improvement, they contend that a positive school culture must be in place, ensuring that effective leadership, a conducive learning environment for students, improved classroom teaching and teacher leadership, and community engagement are all working together.

Due to the unwelcoming school culture toward "outsiders," Hope found it challenging to engage certain teachers in meaningful discussions about their classroom teaching. Despite having been a teacher herself, she shared that some schools still see her as “just another officer from the

district education office” sent to schools to judge or assess them. Moreover, she shared that some school leaders saw coaches as “disruptors” of the school culture that they have developed over the years and would sometimes prevent the coaches from integrating into the school community. “Because their school culture doesn’t welcome outsiders, some teachers would give excuses to avoid having me observe their lessons. So how do we deal with such pushback and reluctance that begins from the very top, the school leaders?” she inquired.

Hope brought up a key point about how coaches have to balance the “liminal positions” of being both an “insider and outsider in the classroom” (Lowenhaupt et al., 2014, p. 749), and this would require an understanding of unwritten or unspoken expectations in the particular contexts in which the classrooms and schools are situated. For Hope, there was an absence of proper training and PD that taught coaches how to identify the unspoken norms in schools that they have to coach. She shared,

For schools in my district, they mostly share the same culture because students are mostly all Ibans. We also have Malay villages and a small Chinese community. The difference lies in the culture of the administration, and that impacts the teaching and learning in the classrooms, right... We were not prepared for that, you know? Yes, we were given courses on how to coach using coaching models like the GROW model²² and all that, but we were not taught how to recognize types of leadership in school as a whole, and how these leadership styles influence the teachers’ beliefs and acceptance of outsiders.

Without the skill to recognize the types of leadership styles, Hope shared that it impacted her entire coaching experience in schools. “The first thing you do when stepping into a school is to approach the school head,” Hope stated, “so it’s important for us to be equipped with the skills to recognize what type of leaders they are.” In addition to being taught these skills, she also highlighted the importance of knowing how to approach and “deal with” the different types of

²² The acronym GROW refers to “Goal”, “Reality”, “Options”, “Way forward”. Each word represents steps that structure a coaching process.

school leaders because this initial meeting sets the tone for coaching in schools. “It’s not like we coach for a few months, leave, and then never see anyone from the school ever again,” Hope shared with a laugh. “We become part of the school community when we start coaching, and so it’s tough to be accepted as part of their community without their leader’s endorsement,” she continued.

Hope’s sharing here reminded me of my own experience when I first visited schools as a newly appointed coach. Since coaching and mentoring was a relatively new concept for Malaysian schools, my fellow coaches and I decided to begin with a district-wide tour to introduce ourselves to schools. We decided to visit schools in groups led by SIPartner+ who coach and mentor school leaders. Personally, I found this approach helpful because it lifted so much burden off my shoulders when it comes to meeting school heads. As the youngest coach in Sarawak back then, I had very little classroom experience to lean on compared to the others, and this made me feel insecure about what I could actually offer as a coach. Nevertheless, it was interesting to hear that even for someone as experienced as Hope, it was still insufficient to rely on prior experiences in order to coach effectively. “There are so many ‘untaught’ things that we were never exposed to but have to face when we go to schools to coach,” Hope pointed out. “How do we face the school community without the right tools and training?” she asked.

Hope’s question raises a key point about PD content for coaches. To maximize their impact, the content should be tailored to their needs and be relevant to their coaching context. Thus, Hope stated that a relevant PD content would be one that equips coaches not only with the knowledge, but also the skills necessary to approach different types of school leadership. This could involve teaching coaches how to identify various leadership styles in order to have effective conversations with school leaders and how to recognize unwritten school culture to buy

into the school community and build relationships that are mutually beneficial. Such PD content would be invaluable to coaches like Hope who are working in a multicultural context and may not have had prior exposure to such training before.

Moreover, Hope stressed the importance of being skilled in coaching teachers who come from cultures different from those of the majority school community. In her view, teachers should understand the cultural backgrounds of rural Sarawak students in order to value their diverse perspectives. This can help create a positive learning environment and foster respect between teachers and their students. However, not many teachers would have the necessary skills and knowledge to do so. Thus, coaching would be an essential tool to ensure that teachers are well-equipped to address the needs of their multicultural students.

Even so, Hope feels there is still much to be done when it comes to coaching culturally diverse teachers in rural schools that are equally diverse. “I think it’s important to raise our teachers’ awareness about their students’ different cultures and ways of living, especially for teachers who come from outside of Sarawak to teach here for the first time,” she opined. “But not many coaches know how to do this... including myself!” she continued. She shared a particular narrative that highlighted an experience she had with a non-Sarawakian teacher who came to teach in her district for the first time and how she initially struggled with coaching him:

I once coached a teacher who was just posted to a secondary school deep in the interior, and to reach the school, you’ll have to board a ferry to cross the river. This teacher had never been to Sarawak before, and so everything was new to him: the food, language, culture.. And even though the school he was posted to was attended by majority Malay students, he found it hard to fit in at first even though he was Malay as well. It was hard for me to start coaching him too because I’m not familiar with his culture.. I didn’t know where to begin, and I didn’t see how the students’ culture played a role in the lessons. It’s not that I wasn’t familiar with their community’s way of life... I was, but in terms of seeing how it is in connection to coaching, I wasn’t very aware of that.

Hope attributed her initial lack of awareness of how culture played into coaching to the inadequate preparation she had as a coach on how to address issues pertaining to culture. Coaching in a multicultural setting contributes to the complexity of the work that coaches do, which adds to their need for targeted and ongoing professional learning opportunities (Saclarides & Kane, 2021). Ongoing professional learning opportunities such as training workshops and mentoring for coaches can be beneficial in developing their content knowledge and coaching skills in matters related to culture. It is important to note that impactful professional learning needs to take into account the multifaceted and contextual nature of coaching.

In the case of preparation and PD for coaches in Sarawak thus far, Hope was of the opinion that there is definitely room for improvement. “Our training and PD mostly focus on general coaching strategies and curriculum content... especially these days, it’s mostly content. We don’t talk about how culture can affect our coaching,” she said. Do we need to talk about culture, though? I asked. “Of course,” she responded, and further added:

Content is important, no doubt. A big part of our job is to support our teachers in implementing new curriculum and content in the classroom. I mean, it’s in our DTP guidebook! But people forget that successful implementation depends highly on the school contexts. And the school context is shaped by the culture of the surrounding community.

Hope’s response echoes Wertsch’s (1991) work that emphasized how culture situates learning in schools and mediates what students eventually perceive at the end of a lesson. His view maintains that culture is a lens through which knowledge is constructed, and it is through this lens that students make meaning of their learning. Therefore, when designing lessons, it is crucial that teachers take into account their students’ cultural contexts.

In her retelling above, Hope highlights how the culture of local communities attaches meaning to the ways in which content is learnt in schools (Fuller & Clarke, 1994). Thus, a big

part of her role as a coach in her district is to help teachers attend to the complexities that may arise in an EL classroom due to the influence of culture. Unfortunately, Hope felt that no amount of training prepared her to notice and address the influence of culture on teaching and learning in rural classrooms. In spite of that, she was determined to learn, and articulated the need for coaches to support teachers in moving away from viewing instructional tools and teaching approaches as “cultureless, technical instruments” (Fuller & Clarke, 1994, p. 139) used merely to raise student achievements and begin incorporating cultural awareness and understanding into their lesson planning. Therefore, there needs to be a revamp in the ways coaches are trained in order for them to engage in critical conversations with teachers about culture in their classrooms. Coaches need to be trained in how to effectively have these conversations so that they can not only identify issues in the classroom, but also help teachers create a positive and inclusive learning environment for their students. They must also be given the necessary resources and support so they are able to hold these conversations in contextually meaningful and productive ways with their teachers.

6.2 Adam’s Narratives: “We need to be supported... not condemned.”

Adam is known to be quite outspoken among coaches in Sarawak when it comes to voicing out matters that do not contribute to improving the coaching experience in Sarawak. He is a big advocate for providing contextualized support to the teachers he works with because he believes that coaching would not be successful with a one-size-fits-all approach. Thus, he seeks to provide tailored advice and strategies that will have the most impact on the teachers he works with to ensure that he is meeting their needs, and, ultimately, their students’ needs. Adam is very passionate about providing his coached teachers with the resources and support they need to help

their students succeed. He often hosts workshops to ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to best serve their students.

Adam shared that it is difficult to detach culture from context, particularly in Sarawak, when addressing the needs of teachers and students. “But this is what is missing in our training as coaches,” he lamented. He shared that oftentimes, the lack of focus on culture in the training and PD of coaches result in cultural discourse being absent during coaching sessions with teachers. This leaves coaches ill-prepared in understanding the nuances and complexities of culture in EL classrooms in rural Sarawak. Instead, coaches direct their conversations to what they were trained to focus on: curriculum content, pedagogy and instructional strategies, which reinforces the status quo of the educational system and limits their teachers’ potential to engage in conversations that can lead to meaningful change. “But that doesn’t mean that issues surrounding race and culture are not there. And the more we avoid dealing with them, the more they build up,” Adam stated. He shared one particular instance when a teacher he coached struggled with the cultural aspect of teaching EL:

I’ve been coaching this teacher for years now, and she still struggles with getting her students to learn English. She finds it difficult to get the students to do what she wants them to do during her lessons. The school is rural and she is from the city, so there are obvious gaps in terms of social norms and practices. One of the things she shared with me is that it’s difficult for her to get the students to use English in a school that is majority Malay and surrounded by Malay communities. So even when I coach her to use cooperative learning strategies to get the students to use English more, it doesn’t really work because the students don’t see the need to use English in their community. They already have a language to communicate with... effectively!

In his restorying, Adam highlighted how his teacher struggled with engaging her students because of her inability to understand and capitalize on her students’ cultural backgrounds in her lessons. But Adam was aware that in his role as a coach, he was equally unprepared in addressing the impact that culture has on the learning of English amongst rural students. Even

though he shared all the best teaching strategies that he learned through previous training and PDs, he still found it insufficient in helping the teacher engage her students in class.

Additionally, he noted that although he was efficient as a teacher, that experience alone was not enough when coaching. “There’s so many expectations placed on us as coaches, and somehow people think that it’s enough to know how to teach well in order to know how to coach well,” Adam remarked. His opinion resonated with Chval et al. (2010) who stated that often, it is assumed that “effective teachers will be effective coaches” (p. 192) and thus can do without much support as they take on new responsibilities as coaches. In reality, however, coaches need ongoing support in order to develop the “knowledge, dispositions, and skills necessary to be powerful and lasting change agents” (Saclarides & Kane, 2021, p. 2) in their education districts.

There is still room for improvement in the support that coaches receive in Sarawak, according to Adam. He felt that the ministry’s attempts to provide ample support for coaches were commendable, but he believed that more could be done. When SISC+ was first introduced, one of the ways that support was provided to coaches was through mentoring by lecturers from local teacher training institutes. This approach echoes Stock and Duncan (2010) who posit that even very experienced educators like principals and instructional coaches can benefit from mentoring. Unfortunately, the mentoring program for SISC+ lasted less than a year, partly due to funding constraints. Adam explained,

Mentoring coaches in rural Sarawak means riding longboats and chartering four-wheel drive vehicles to visit schools with them. Then there's the accommodation cost to think of for really remote schools that you cannot visit without staying the night. If you are traveling to a very remote school, the trip can take as long as 1-2 days, and so it makes perfect sense to spend at least a few days there to make the trip worthwhile. The cost for all this can really add up.

A rough estimate of the travel expenses for visiting schools in rural Sarawak can range from RM300 to RM1000. For schools where there is no easy access to passenger boats, private boat

rentals are available, and can cost between RM200–RM500 for a return trip. Before submitting official claim forms for reimbursement, these expenses have to be paid out-of-pocket. As such, the mentoring program for coaches added substantial financial burden on the mentors as well as MOE. Additionally, it is unclear whether the mentors were provided with tools to support SISC+ such as standardized mentoring documents. Because of this, the mentoring experiences amongst SISC+ were diverse. My own experience differed greatly from that of other coaches: Others have reported that their mentors were more involved during their coaching sessions and modeled coaching techniques, while mine employed a more traditional approach and mostly observed my sessions and provided feedback at the end.

In the absence of a mentoring program, coaches now rely on training workshops and courses conducted by the MOE, State Education Department, and teacher training institutes for support. Adam, however, felt that the training and courses he has received so far have been inadequate. “Our training as coaches is definitely limited. We focus a lot on pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, the whats and whys of doing things, all the theories... but no one tells us HOW to bridge the gap between theory and practice,” Adam lamented, raising his voice slightly to stress the word “how”.

He was obviously agitated: His hands were gripping his coffee cup a little too tightly. I knew too well how he felt about the training and PD we receive as coaches. In fact, improving it has always been something he fought for since our earlier days as coaches. Adam believed that there is a need to extend the focus of training workshops beyond merely delivering content. “We get a lot of input such as curriculum content, which is important, of course,” Adam stated, “But what’s more important is how do we deliver all that, taking into consideration the challenges we face in our respective districts. That’s the part they need to work on.” This is something I

couldn't disagree with. Often, coaches are left to contextualize the support they provide to teachers themselves, mostly relying on their previous experiences as "excellent teachers". I cannot emphasize enough, however, that being an effective teacher does not automatically translate to coaching, and coaches need professional development opportunities, mentorship, and resources in order to coach well.

In the training workshops Adam has attended so far, he noted that he appreciated the space in which coaches are able to discuss key coaching issues. However, he believes that there is room for improvement in how issues raised are followed up on. "Sometimes I feel like they use the issues we raise to condemn us instead of helping us become better coaches," he confessed. "So we feel discouraged and end up not sharing our problems." He shared a few instances where coaches felt "ganged up against" by those tasked with overseeing their training and welfare. He spoke of a feeling of isolation and mistrust, of being treated as if coaches were a burden instead of an asset to the education department. This is understandably frustrating, especially for coaches in Sarawak who not only have to think about the added challenges of coaching rural schools, but also act as the conduit between the ministry, district education offices, and schools.

Without ample support, coaches risk losing motivation and dedication to the work that they do. Adam believes that coaches should be encouraged and supported, not undermined. He shared some actionable steps that can be taken to ensure this:

This is how they can do it: They can send out surveys or go around collecting issues from SISC+. Even the smallest, simplest issue is significant. The task force overseeing coaches in Sarawak can then categorize these issues and create training workshops that address them. For example, a teacher might not respect a coach because he believes that the coach doesn't know English well enough due to his race. So what can be done to help the coach overcome this obstacle? There are other cultural issues too such as age. Teachers with lots of experience might not be open to being coached by someone with less experience. Personally, now that I look much older, I noticed that teachers listen and pay

more attention to me! They show more respect when I talk to them or advise them. That's part of our culture too, right? Showing respect for those who are older than us.

Dealing with culture in coaching can be tricky, Adam pointed out. It adds to the complexity of the work that coaches are expected to do (Saclarides & Kane, 2021). Thus, ongoing support is necessary for coaches to develop their skills and knowledge of examining issues that may be rooted in culture, rather than sidestepping them and leaving them up to the coaches to resolve on their own.

6.3 Aisya: “...If we don't talk about the issues, how can we begin to deal with them?”

When we spoke about her experience of being supported as a coach, Aisya began talking about it in a positive light. She felt that the initial training and workshops she attended were especially helpful. In the initial years when coaching was newly introduced by MOE, funding was more widely available for training and PD for coaches. For example, the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC), an institution under MOE that offers PD to in-service English language teachers and professionals, developed a comprehensive year-long PD program for English language coaches. This was done in collaboration with LeapED Services, a private education consultancy company known for their Trust Schools Program²³. Building on LeapED's innovative approach to training, ELTC developed PD that focused on high engagement and valued critical discussion of issues pertaining to coaching in the Malaysian context. The week-long PD was carried out in three stages throughout the year to allow coaches to practice skills

²³ The Trust Schools program (TSP) is a whole-school transformation program led by LeapED together with AMIR Foundation and MOE in Malaysia. Schools under TSP are structured differently than other schools: They have subject-based classrooms where students move from one class to the next instead of having all their lessons carried out in one classroom like how it's typically done in Malaysian schools. Having subject-based classrooms means that teachers have complete control over their classroom setting to create a conducive learning environment for their students. LeapED trainers also provide in-school support for school leadership and teachers, much like the SISC+ and SIPartner+. However, unlike the SISC+ who coach teachers from multiple schools, LeapEd trainers are placed permanently in individual schools and can thus provide daily support to the school leaders and teachers.

and knowledge gained from each session. This three-phased PD approach also gave coaches the opportunity to discuss implementation issues and brainstorm practical solutions to overcome them. Aisya recalled one key takeaway from earlier training sessions she experienced:

Remember when we went for our training in 2014? They said the first thing we need to do is to get to know the teacher. I think that's very important. Because every teacher comes with different backgrounds and needs, and it's the same thing too for their students. I remember we did some exercise during the workshop where we just casually talked to our partners and focused on listening to get to know their background and their pretend-students' backgrounds, without touching on sensitive issues. So I thought that was very useful for me. I continue to practice that with the teachers I coach until now.

Here, Aisya pointed out how she benefited from PD that focused on refining her coaching skills such as active listening. She said that the PD taught her the importance of being more empathetic when dealing with her coached teachers. She was able to build better relationships which helped them to be more welcoming of her presence in schools. Aguilar (2013) wrote about what skills might be useful for coaches. She believes that although improving a coach's content knowledge and instructional skills is important, they can be useless without relationship building skills.

Aguilar further explains that developing a coach's relationship building skills involves building their "cultural competence" (p. 274), which is something that coaches must work on intentionally. By building their cultural competence, coaches can then "work across race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and language backgrounds" (p. 274). For Aisya, there was definitely a lack of focus on cultural competence in the training she has received thus far as a coach. We will take a closer look at Aisya's retelling on this issue in the upcoming pages.

While Aisya found her initial PD experiences to be positive, her subsequent ones were far from perfect. She felt that the issues and content seemed "recycled" and there was a lack of follow up from the PD facilitators, unlike what she experienced with ELTC. Aisya conveyed her

disappointment in the types of PD she has to attend lately. “They’re just all the same... nothing seems to change from one session to the next,” she commented. She added,

So far, the training given to us has focused a lot on content since one of our main roles is to support teachers in the implementation of the revised curriculum. But we can also benefit from sessions on culture and how it influences teaching and learning in rural schools. For example, how can we coach a Chinese teacher from a metropolitan city like Kuala Lumpur who has to teach in a rural school in Baram? I can’t imagine how a coach could support this teacher effectively if they didn’t have similar experience. So how would they coach the teacher? How can they approach the teacher? How can they help the teacher become familiar with Sarawak’s unique cultural context? These are all important questions that need to be addressed during PD for coaches.

Thus, although Aisya shared that there have been ample opportunities provided for coaches to develop their content and pedagogical knowledge, she felt that a more holistic approach in PD is necessary to better equip coaches in Sarawak. “We often talk about challenging interactions with resistant teachers or administrators,” Aisya noted, “but what’s at the core of these interactions? Is it related to culture or something else? Whatever it is, we need to learn how to notice and name it, then we can start to think of solutions.”

In particular, Aisya stated that issues related to culture should be acknowledged first before we even begin to think about ways to tackle them effectively. She brought up a pertinent point: “We don’t talk about how culture impacts our coaching... and if we don’t talk about it, how can we even start to deal with them?” For Aisya, the first step to problem solving involves noticing cultural issues and this requires deliberate acknowledgement of the various issues present in schools. In the context of rural Sarawak, these issues may also vary according to individual schools due to their different demographics. Thus, Aisya believes that instructional coaches can benefit from being trained to “cultivate an internal awareness” (Aguilar, 2013, p. 274) of cultural issues in schools. “We need to be aware of every culture, not just the culture of the majority race,” Aisya pointed out. With this awareness, coaches can then be better equipped

to guide teachers in understanding and responding to issues that may arise in their multicultural classroom. By doing so, teachers can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

Besides raising coaches' cultural competence, Aisya pointed out that coaches can benefit from PD that teaches them how to differentiate their coaching according to the personalities of their teachers. She argued that understanding individual differences among teachers is a key factor in effective coaching. “We talk a lot about differentiating instruction for students,” Aisya said, “but we forget that we should also differentiate our coaching for teachers.” Kise (2017) posits that differentiated coaching aims to uphold “diversity of thought, experiences, culture, strengths, and beliefs as a way to transform deficit thinking into a productive appreciation of the diversity that truly makes learning communities stronger” (p. 25). Differentiated coaching therefore involves acknowledging what teachers bring to the table and “communicating, questioning, supporting, and collaborating with teachers in ways that may not match what [the coaches] do best” (p. 4) in order to meet their needs.

Thus, Aisya felt that the preparation of coaches should help them become more than just “deliverers of new curriculum”. Differentiating coaching based on individual teachers is easier said than done, according to her. She explained,

To coach effectively, we need to know how to do a needs analysis for individual teachers before coaching them. But we don't really know how to because we're not really trained to do so. So our teachers become resistant to our coaching because we're not giving them what they need.

Aisya asserted that coaches should be trained to recognize underlying reasons as well as “fears and obstacles, real or imagined” (Kise, 2017, p. 21) that may cause teachers' resistance to change and adapt their coaching approaches accordingly. Kise (2017) highlights why it may not be an easy task: Changing the practice of teachers means changing their beliefs that are formed by their

individual personalities and ways of thinking and making meaning. This makes change a challenging process if coaches approach all their teachers with a one-size-fits-all strategy.

Aisya's strong call for differentiated coaching aligns with Kise's (2017) point that teachers should be valued as individuals who come into the coaching partnership with their own strengths and beliefs as well as "concerns, experiences, models of excellence, tried-and-true methods, and prior successes and failures that also influence how they teach—and how they need to be coached" (p. 21). This is important in a coaching process as it allows teachers to be seen and heard in ways that are meaningful to them. It will also encourage them to feel empowered in making their own decisions and having ownership over their own teaching practice. All this will lead to more sustained and meaningful changes in the classroom.

6.4 The Missing Pieces in the PD Puzzle

Hope, Adam, and Aisya's retellings bring to the fore literature on PD in education, which suggests that many countries still emphasize the dissemination of predetermined content through traditional modes such as cascading or one-off workshops, as the primary mode of PD (Schwille et al., 2007). Through these modes, the content of the PD is rarely adjusted to reflect real-world problems and issues faced by coaches when they are on the ground (Veen et al., 2011). What this approach fails to do is to recognize that coaching is a complex and dynamic process that requires all parties involved to play an active role and engage in continuous reflection and critical thinking. Without comprehensive PD in place, instructional coaches become ill-equipped in supporting their teachers in meaningful ways. For coaches in rural Sarawak, the coaching process is complicated by aspects that typically characterize rural communities such as rough terrain, lack of access to basic necessities such as clean water supply, electricity, and the internet,

as well as the cultures of various indigenous ethnic groups. Therefore, the three participants called for new approaches to their PD that consider these variables.

In particular, Hope, Adam, and Aisya stressed the importance of providing PDs that would help coaches to better understand how culture plays into the work they do with teachers. The participants were aware that they did not have the cultural competence to adequately support teachers and students in a multicultural setting. Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term “cultural competence” (p. 160) as one of the three components of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. According to her, educators who have cultural competence have the ability to “help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). For coaches to be able to build up their teachers’ cultural competence, they must first be adequately equipped and knowledgeable in culturally responsive coaching. The three participants, however, felt that for coaches in Sarawak, there has been insufficient opportunities provided for coaches to recognize and build up their language for racial and cultural discourse with their teachers. Thus, the participants called for PD that equipped coaches with concrete strategies in addition to deepening their understanding and knowledge of the values, beliefs, and practices of the diverse ethnic groups in Sarawak. Only then can they begin to engage in culturally responsive best practices with their teachers.

It is important to note that the participants collectively highlighted that in the PDs they have attended thus far, there is a lack of clear structure and tangible steps to move forward in their coaching. They argued for PDs that go beyond transferring knowledge or content to provide concrete, actionable steps that are relevant to their contexts. There is strong evidence that the method or approach to PD contributes greatly to changes in practice amongst those in the education field (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Joyce & Showers, 1995;

Vandenberghe, 2002). Context is key in all of the participants' retelling because they recognize the role of place and context in helping coaches to understand the nuanced experiences of teachers and their students. With cultural competence, coaches can examine the context in which teaching and learning takes place and gain insights into what best works for teachers and students in a particular setting.

Hope, Adam, and Aisya also emphasized the need for proper support to sustain the changes in coaches' practices following PD sessions. They spoke about how follow-ups are critical in ensuring that coaches are supported in their cycle of implementing new practices. This is based on Fullan's (1991) work on the phenomenology of change which states that "neglect of the phenomenology of change—that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended—is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most reforms" (p. 4). Follow-up support, which can be in various forms ranging from one-to-one feedback to revisiting workshop content in groups, can help facilitate the change process experienced by coaches so that they can cope with and successfully implement change not only in their practice but in their teachers' as well.

In addition to follow-up support, the participants also pointed out that coaches can benefit from having a proper platform to seek help as a form of PD. The participants opined that it should provide a safe space for struggling coaches to reach out for help without fear of judgment or repercussions. As it is currently, the participants felt that this kind of platform was missing and more thought needs to go into the design and delivery of PD for coaches in Sarawak. Their retellings affirm the importance of ensuring that PDs for coaches are well-designed and implemented in order to maximize their effectiveness on the coaches' practice. Therefore, it is essential to create an environment where coaches can access support and guidance without

feeling vulnerable or embarrassed. This would enable them to improve their skills without the fear of judgment. Furthermore, such an environment would promote open dialogue and collaboration among coaches, and, ultimately, contribute to a positive PD experience and make the coaches feel fully supported to carry out their responsibilities efficiently.

Chapter 7: Pausing and Making Sense of the Stories

Tired. Exasperated. Worn out. All the conversations I had with Hope, Adam, and Aisya seemed to end with them articulating the same feelings of despair after reflecting on their coaching experiences and the support they have received thus far in their work as coaches. Their feelings are accumulated over years of giving their all to their work with rural Sarawak teachers and not receiving the support they need. I could empathize with their feelings and understand why they felt unsupported. In a sense, it seems ironic that despite providing on-the-job support to teachers, the coaches articulated receiving a lack of necessary support to effectively perform their duties. This proved to be a major source of frustration for them, and their restorying hinted at how they felt underappreciated. In spite of these feelings, Hope, Adam, and Aisya greatly value the work they do as coaches and the impact they have not only on their teachers' practices, but also on their schools and surrounding communities. This sense of commitment is why I believe that we need to push for better policies and support for instructional coaches in order to enable them to perform their duties efficiently and effectively, particularly in a context so unique and complex like rural Sarawak.

I feel it necessary to reiterate that this narrative case study is not meant to critique or question the systems in place for education in Malaysia. I acknowledge that I am in no position to do so. To quote Hope, "We are just a tiny voice in the system." However, my decision to include the "tiny" voices of the three instructional coaches was intentional: I wanted to highlight the perspectives, reflections, and needs of the very people on the ground who are working closely with teachers on a daily basis to improve their students' outcomes. Noddings (2015) brought up an important point about the failure of education reforms: That it is impossible for educators to meet the policies shaped by those who are detached from the daily realities in

classrooms while they attend to day-to-day classroom issues that are rarely addressed by policymakers. Noddings argued that reforms often fail because “neither those in daily contact with the kids nor the kids themselves are in any way involved in the decisions” (p. 60). Therefore, my purpose in doing a ground-up approach for this project was to bring forward the localized knowledge of the participants that are “context-bound, community-specific, and nonsystematic” (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 4) to address the dearth of research that focus on day-to-day experiences of instructional coaches who work closely with teachers and students in rural Sarawak and provide nuanced data to inform stakeholders and policymakers in their reform efforts for instructional coaching in Malaysia.

Thus, I set out to answer these three research questions through a narrative case study approach to highlight the experiences of rural Sarawak coaches: (1) In the context of a multicultural rural setting, how do instructional coaches narrate their experiences of supporting rural English teachers? (2) What can we learn from the narratives of instructional coaches regarding their roles and responsibilities of coaching English teachers in a multicultural rural setting? (3) What changes or adjustments need to be made in the preparation and professional development of coaches in a multicultural setting? With these questions, I focused my attention on temporality, sociality, and place according to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space framework. They identified these commonplaces for researchers to pay attention to when doing narrative inquiry. Thus, when looking at my participants’ data, I paid attention to how they described their experiences in relation to time or temporality, particularly on how their past, present, or future influenced their meaning-making and restorying. Furthermore, I looked at the commonplace of sociality that takes into account both personal and social conditions. In particular, I made sure to pay close attention to the

personal “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) of the participants. I also paid attention to their social conditions or how they perceived “existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) in shaping their experiences in particular contexts. Thus, when recounting the participants’ stories, I tried to strike a balance in my description of their personal conditions and the broader social conditions that shaped their particular experiences. Finally, I made sure to note “specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place” where the participants’ experiences take place and how their experiences may be influenced by the particular place in which they happened. For the participants, this is closely related to the rural context that they serve in.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) posit that the three commonplaces do not occur separately and must be treated in relation to each other in narrative inquiry. As such, the commonplaces weaved in and overlapped with each other in my discussion of the participants’ restorying under each of the following themes: (a) how they made ‘ruralness’ work using their past experiences, (b) their perception of culture, specifically in relation to their work as coaches in rural Sarawak, and (c) their assessment of their initial training and professional development as coaches, and their recommendations for improvement. To echo Connelly and Clandinin’s beliefs about narrative inquiry, I made sure to focus on the participants’ “living and telling” (p. 478) in my, for lack of a better word, retelling and reliving of their stories. As such, I presented and weaved in their narratives in my discussion as much as possible to make sure that their voices take center stage.

7.1 Limitations of the Study

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) pointed out that the act of retelling and reliving can be particularly challenging for narrative researchers, and I worry that I did not do enough justice to the participants' storied lives in my retelling of their narratives. I acknowledge that in my discussion of the participants' restorying, my full understanding of their narratives is limited to what was shared with me by the participants as well as my own experiences of working with them in past years. In this regard, I acknowledge that there may still be gaps in my discussion of their narratives and that the reliability of the data presented is influenced by the individual experiences of the participants as well as mine (Clandinin, 2013). I mitigated this limitation by member checking and providing rich and thick descriptions of the participants' restorying (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also acknowledge that my interpretation of the participants' restorying may be biased due to my own experiences, values, and preconceived notions from my previous role as an instructional coach as well. I addressed this as best as I could by keeping analytic research memos and member checking to ensure that I maintain my transparency and reflexivity in my thinking of and through the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

It is also important to note that collectively, the experiences of the participants and mine are limited to the context of rural Sarawak, which should be clear by now how glaringly different it is from other rural settings. Thus, the findings from this project may not be generalizable across all contexts, and it was never my intention for it to be generalizable in the first place. However, the participants' restorying can still serve as a guide for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in other rural contexts that may identify with the challenges discussed as long as we recognize that each context and community is unique. Any education programs, interventions, or

reforms that are designed to benefit rural communities must consider their unique needs and be tailored accordingly.

7.2 Key Takeaways from the Retelling and Reliving of the Participants' Stories

This narrative case study sought to highlight and understand the experiences of instructional coaches in rural Sarawak and what they perceive as necessary in improving the collective experience of coaching in a multicultural rural setting. This section details out the salient points from the participants' narratives that speak to their need for better training and support in their work as instructional coaches. Their restorying highlighted three major takeaways to consider toward improving instructional coaching in a multicultural setting.

7.2.1 The Role of Context in Instructional Coaching

Haneda et al. (2019) remind us that the roles that instructional coaches play are complex and constantly changing based on the needs of the educational system as well as the schools, teachers, students, and surrounding communities. Therefore, coaches must be provided with training and support that are specific to the context of the larger educational system as well as the particular communities that they serve.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the participants' restorying in detail, highlighting how context influenced their experiences and, consequently, their ways of coaching teachers in rural Sarawak. The three participants spoke of isolation and feeling neglected when they were teaching in rural schools and how they turned to these experiences to help them provide contextualized support to their teachers. Key researchers of teacher PD agree that providing contextualized PD to teachers, especially through instructional coaching, can encourage positive changes in their practice as teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Joyce & Showers, 1995). However, as the participants noted, coaches who lack the knowledge and experience of serving multicultural rural

communities might not know how to engage in coaching practices that reflect cultural awareness and competence. As a result, they might not be able to provide context-specific feedback and guidance to their coached teachers.

The participants also brought up the initial pushback they experienced in their earlier days as coaches. Prior to the introduction of instructional coaches, rural Sarawak schools were rarely frequented by officers from the district education offices due to the remoteness of their schools as well as the lack of staff in smaller rural districts. As a result, teachers in rural schools generally have familial-like close-knit relationships and their schools become more contained, making it difficult for coaches to gain their trust and establish coaching relationships in the beginning (Chance & Segura, 2009; Howley & Howley, 2005). The participants shared that although they knew that building rapport is an important first step in coaching, they struggled with implementing it in their actual coaching. Through their restorying, Hope, Adam, and Aisya shared that the training and PD they received did not provide detailed ways in which they are expected to engage with teachers in their districts, which resulted in them struggling to transfer the learning to their daily coaching practice. They felt that they would have benefited more from seeing the coaching strategies explicitly and reflecting on how to transfer the strategies to the context of their respective districts. One way of putting context in the forefront of training and PD for coaches is to ensure that opportunities are available for coaches to engage in conversations about coaching strategies and dilemmas with each other. This can provide a platform for coaches to share issues that are specific to their contexts and gain feedback as well as insight into their next steps by learning from coaches in other districts (Stoetzel & Shedrow, 2020).

7.2.2 Attending to Cultural Discourse in Coaching

With 27 ethnic groups and over 40 ethnic sub-groups across Sarawak, teachers who are placed to serve in Sarawak need to attend to students who come from various backgrounds and carry with them varying home languages, culture, and beliefs. Thus, they need to be able to recognize and be prepared to address the cultural diversity that exists in their classrooms.

Consequently, instructional coaches who are tasked to provide embedded, on-the-job support to these teachers need to be equally prepared to identify and address the complexities of accommodating the needs of students in multicultural classrooms. To echo Ladson-Billings (1995), they must be prepared to engage in culturally responsive approaches that place equal importance on improving student achievement, maintaining students' "cultural integrity" (p. 474), and building up their students' critical understanding and awareness regarding issues of equity in their respective communities. Ladson-Billings posited that this requires a change in ideologies and beliefs, which can be a challenging task to undertake. It involves being open to having meaningful and often uncomfortable conversations about difficult topics of race, ethnicity, and culture, as well as reflecting on their biases and privileges.

Research has shown that instructional coaches who understand the needs of teachers and their diverse classrooms are better able to tailor their coaching conversations and approaches to meet these needs (Haneda et al., 2017; Kho et al., 2019). However, Hope, Adam, and Aisya all articulated that although they might have cultural awareness, they did not necessarily have the cultural competence to efficiently support teachers and students within a multicultural rural setting. They acknowledged the importance of addressing culture in the work that they do with their teachers but felt ill-equipped when it comes to facilitating conversations around culture, especially when the conversations border on being culturally sensitive and uncomfortable. Thus,

they called for PD that provide them with opportunities to talk about issues that impact their teachers' multicultural classrooms and discuss tangible ways to overcome them.

This echoes Aguilar (2013) who emphasized the need for coaches to “learn how to engage teachers in conversations about equity issues that surface in their classroom and about how to interrupt those inequities” (p. 269). Instructional coaches must be provided with the necessary training and resources to improve their awareness and understanding of the needs of teachers and their students. This will help them to facilitate meaningful conversations around culture and allow them to provide a safe and supportive environment to teachers under their care in their process of becoming culturally responsive teachers.

7.2.3 The Need for Better Support for Coaches

In their restorying, Hope, Adam, and Aisya collectively felt that support for coaches in Sarawak need to be improved in order to help them carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively. Typically, the support they receive are in the form of PD sessions that merely transfer knowledge such as implementation of curriculum and state or district initiatives. As providers of ongoing and on-the-job support to teachers in their districts, the participants articulated a need for continuous and contextualized support for the work that they do. In particular, they called for support that addresses the complexities of coaching in rural Sarawak. Therefore, training and PD for coaches in Sarawak need to move beyond the one-size-fits-all approach. To do so, PD organizers must take into account their unique needs as well as experiences in order to create meaningful learning opportunities for them and equip them with practical and sustainable coaching knowledge and skills (Trotter, 2006).

Hope, Adam, and Aisya also highlighted the importance of providing coaches with a support network. This can be in the form of one-on-one follow-ups, collaboration opportunities,

or a designated platform for coaches to share their challenges without judgement and receive support and encouragement from others. Implementing change is a complex and often painful process for educators as it involves questioning ingrained habits, beliefs, and opinions formed from our “experiences, cultural backgrounds, and genetic makeup” (Kise, 2017, p. 5), and thus can be particularly challenging to do alone. Providing instructional coaches with a network of support can help overcome this, and they will feel less isolated and be able to grow professionally in a safe and collaborative environment.

7.3 Putting a Pause on the Stories

In keeping with Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of unfinalizability, I made an intentional decision not to use the word “conclusion” in this chapter. Narrative inquiry focuses on the *lived* experiences of the participants, and because Hope, Adam, and Aisya continue to live their experiences beyond this project, it feels unethical for me to conclude their stories for them. Just like how Bakhtin views the polyphonic novel, the participants’ lives and stories are inconclusive, continuous, and emergent, and therefore has no final word. He posits that there should be “*freedom for others’ point of view to reveal themselves without any finalizing evaluations from the author*” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 69, emphasis in original). With the close of this chapter, Hope, Adam, and Aisya will carry on with their lives, storied or not. They will continue to face the rural realities (Johnson & Howley, 2015, p. 235) in their work with teachers in rural Sarawak and thus continue to be in dialogue with themselves and others about the issues and challenges they raised in my conversations with them. Rather than concluding Hope, Adam, and Aisya’s restorying, I choose to pause them instead, in the hopes that this will invite readers to continue to engage with their stories and be curious enough to step further into the interiors of rural Sarawak

with them to uncover other equally important variables that shape the nuanced experiences of those serving in the interiors.

As I type away on the keys of my mechanical keyboard, the sound and air of New York City fills my apartment. Yet, despite the melodic attempts of New York City's sirens and honks, I am transported back to the warm, quiet, and remote interiors of Sarawak as I sit with Hope's, Adam's, and Aisya's narratives. Ladson-Billings (1995) sits beside me, keeping me in check as I attempted to unpack how the participants' perception of their cultural competence and the ways in which culture plays into their coaching. Ladson-Billings' work on culturally relevant pedagogy reminds me that for Sarawak, there remains much work to be done to prepare and train coaches who acknowledge the need to help teachers to recognize and celebrate the cultural wealth and diversity of their students while building up their critical social consciousness at the same time.

Meanwhile, as Connelly and Clandinin (2006) sit on my shoulders and whisper reminders of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, I noticed how Hope, Adam, and Aisya shifted across the dimensions of interaction/sociality, temporality, and place while also looking inward and outward when reflecting on their experiences to restory them. This multidimensional approach of seeing and re-seeing experiences helps me to consider the different ways I can inquire into and interpret experiences (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). Chan et al. (2012) posit that this also helps us to "disrupt traditional narrative structures, constraints, and plotlines, allowing for reimaginings" (p. 6). Indeed, it is my hope to invite readers, whether they are familiar or not with the context of rural Sarawak, to reimagine and re-see the narratives of

coaching in the hopes of not only disrupting how they are traditionally told, but in reconsidering how to improve the overall coaching experiences in rural Sarawak.

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Appendix A

Map of Malaysia and Sarawak



Figure A1. Map of Malaysia. From Sarawak Government Website. Retrieved April 16, 2023 from https://sarawak.gov.my/web/home/article_view/159/176/?id=159. Copyright 2018-2023 by Sarawak Government.



Figure A2. Map of Sarawak. Google Maps. Retrieved April 16, 2023 from <https://goo.gl/maps/5uxaCF5u8HohXUnR6>

Appendix B

The following figure is based on information retrieved from the Sarawak Government Website.

In Sarawak, education is under the jurisdiction of the state education department while general administration is under the state government. Therefore, education district boundaries differ from administrative district boundaries.

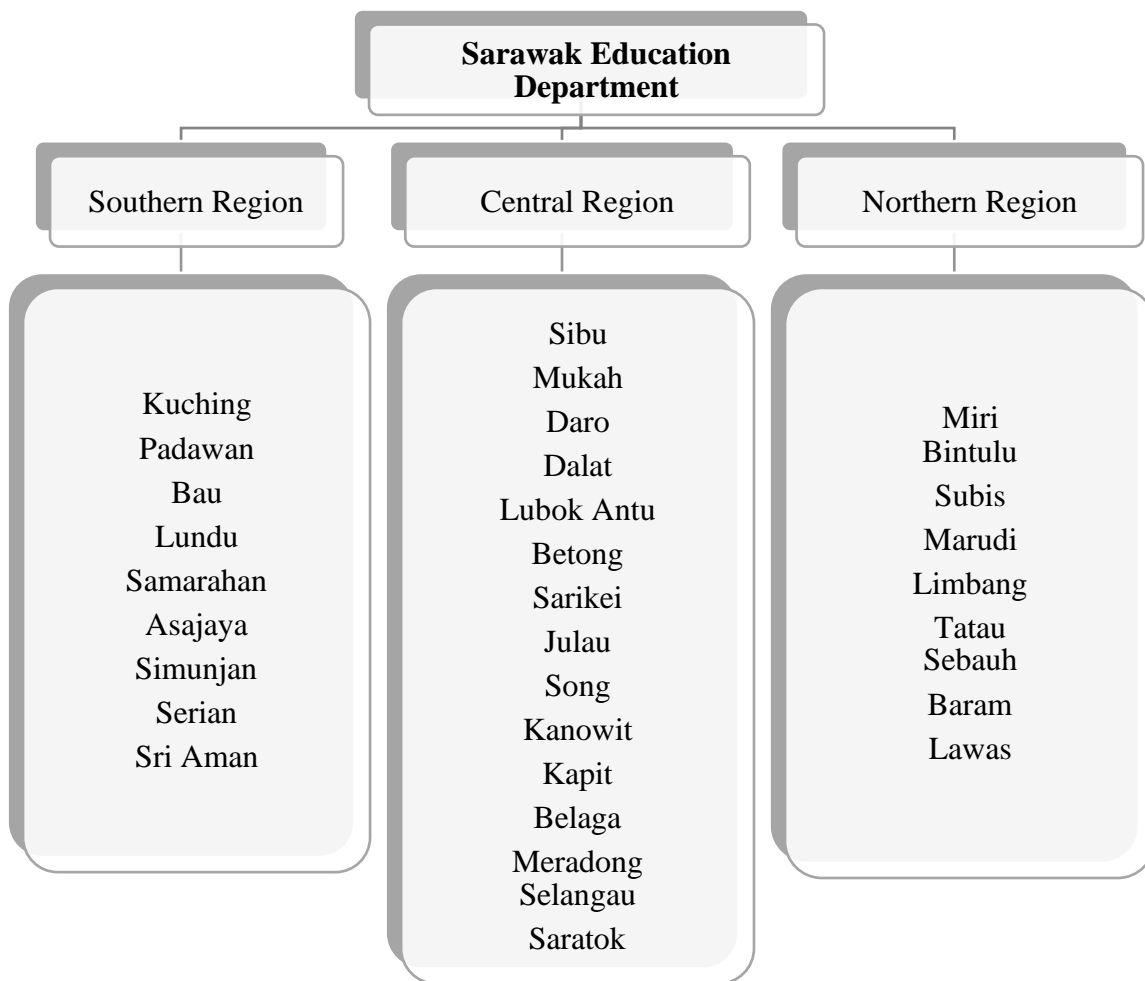


Figure B1. Division of education districts under Sarawak Education Department