



Researching Pupils' Participation in School-Based Co-Curricular Activities Through an Ethnographic Case Study of Learning

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Abstract

Case studies are widely used in qualitative research. Often, they require phenomena observed within a particular research to be examined in detail from various perspectives. In our account here, we show how one case study helped uncover a range of learning opportunities that arise from pupils' participation in one school-based co-curricular activity (CCA) in Singapore. School-based CCAs are a distinctive type of organized activities in Singapore. The different types of CCAs such as Boys' Brigade, Basketball, Choir, and Design and Innovation Club offer pupils the time and space to explore and interact outside of their academic curriculum. The research on which our case account is based challenges the deficit view of CCAs as lacking in educational value. The research argues how participation in CCAs can enhance academic learning rather than simply develop pupils' dispositions. The case begins with a description of how CCAs were introduced to the schools in Singapore and their increasing importance to the school curriculum, in particular, their integration to initiatives that are linked to the development of 21st-century skills. In studying the educational potentials of CCAs, the case study approach was used with ethnography to examine closely the contextualizing features of CCA participation such as CCA curriculum and pupils' ways of taking part in CCAs, and more significantly to illuminate what counts as school-based CCAs in Singapore. We conclude with a discussion on the perceived limited generalizability of case study research and provide some caveats for its use in qualitative studies.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Know how to use an ethnographic case study approach to investigate school-based activities
- Learn how to triangulate between different research tools so as to obtain deep insights into the study and to generate credible data for analysis
- Explain why and how a single case study can generate both unique and universal understandings
- Evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of using case study research and delineate the caveats when using such an approach in qualitative studies

Case Study Account: Overview and Context

The research project on which our ethnographic case study account is based was funded by the National Institute of Education (NIE), a teacher training institute in Singapore. This methodological approach taps into the key features of two research methods, namely

ethnography and case study. The detailed analysis, as well as the interconnectedness of phenomena within the case study, is enhanced by gathering data in an ethnographic way. In ethnography, researchers engage with real-world settings in their investigation and use multiple tools over a prolonged period of time at the research site to obtain data.

Our research is also informed by the theoretical framework of New Literacy Studies (NLS; Gee, 1996; Street, 2008), drawing on the social uses of literacy to examine how our understanding of specific events in co-curricular activity (CCA) participation has broader meanings and implications, if we understand better the contexts of their occurrence. Viewed in this way, the concept of CCAs can go beyond the meaning of activities.

School-based CCA has a socio-political lineage in Singapore. Writing from the perspective of education developments in Singapore, Yee Gwee, Joseph Doray, Karl Waldhauser, and Zaroor Ahmad (1969) have noted the strategic introduction of CCA to schools as part of the larger goal of fostering social cohesion among pupils after the state achieved self-governance in 1959. The importance of CCA to the school curriculum can be seen in the change of its former name, “extracurricular” activities, to its current one, “co-curricular” activities, and in the integration of the role of CCA to the educational initiatives that are connected with the development of 21st-century skills such as communication, critical and inventive thinking skills, and cross-cultural skills (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2010, 2014). Indeed, interest in CCA as an integral agent for developing pupils holistically has been strong in recent years. In fact, the term “holistic education” has become a buzzword within the education discourse in Singapore and has synonymously been associated with the development of pupils’ character, their social and emotional competencies, and skills in innovation and communication that are required of today’s globalized world, in addition to their cognitive development.

Interestingly, despite the state’s concern in raising the status of CCA within the holistic development of pupils, CCA as a school activity has not enjoyed a comparable level of recognition to classroom academic activities like essay writing or English language lessons, although both CCA and academic activities are school-related activities, occurring predominantly on school grounds. School-based CCAs are categorized into four distinct groups: sports and games (e.g., Basketball), uniformed groups (e.g., Boys’ Brigade), performing arts group (e.g., Choir), and clubs and societies (e.g., Design and Innovation Club). Pupils are encouraged to participate in any CCA based on their interest and aptitude, and to stay with their chosen CCA throughout their secondary school years or during the time when they were between the ages of 12 and 17 years at school.

An important goal of the various CCA groups is to equip pupils with life skills although such

skills vary in the ways in which they are developed and acquired across the CCA groups (MOE, 2010, 2012). CCAs that are within the uniformed groups tend to lean toward the development of leadership skills and seek to instill in pupils a sense of respect for authority and seniority. The clubs and societies attempt to deepen pupils' knowledge and skills in their field(s) of interest, often with the help of experienced professionals engaged by the school, and involve pupils working with others. Activities in CCAs are typically participatory and collaborative, tapping into the talents, abilities, knowledge, and skills of every pupil. CCAs are a feature of pupils' school life which they attend for at least 3.5 hr per week during their academic term.

As we have seen thus far, CCA is a site saturated with activities that appears to have very little to do with reading and writing. CCA is not a place where one would think of using, acquiring, or even enriching one's ability to use literacy. Research on CCA at NIE has also paid little attention to how pupils use writing in their CCAs or how they use literacies acquired from CCA to access the academic curriculum. It appears that classrooms are sites generally recognized for academic learning, including literacy learning, but not CCAs. Essentially, this perspective of viewing learning marginalizes CCAs within the educational context, making their activities seem unrelated to academic learning. It is also not uncommon to read in the local news about parents and pupils voicing their concerns about the time spent on CCA at the expense of their academic studies (Lee, 2014; Yong, 2014). Hence, our research challenges this deficit state of CCA by probing into what counts as school-based CCA participation, and how CCA participation has educational value and can be conceptualized beyond building dispositions.

Research Practicalities

We conducted our research study from December 2012 to December 2014, with the data collection occurring during two school semesters in 2013. The data collection in schools, which involved both CCA and classroom sites, was carried out mainly by me, Sau Kew Chong. I spent 4 weeks at the pilot study school in April 2013; I spent 7 weeks between July and August 2013 collecting data at the main case study school, which is the focus of this case account. Our research team comprised three members: two university researchers and a research assistant. In the following subsections, we outline three research practical considerations that may be of interest to researchers.

Selecting the Appropriate Theoretical Framework

A key challenge that our team faced was finding a suitable theoretical framework that could adequately uncover the educationally valuable ways of using literacy and learning within CCA participation, since our study has never been researched through the widened lens of literacy before. Drawing on my PhD studies on the range of literacies found in the schools in

Singapore, I employed the same methodological approach to investigate this research: an ethnographically informed case study approach with concepts grounded in NLS. The NLS approach provides a broader way for understanding what literacy is by considering reading and writing as social practices rather than as a set of reified skills (e.g., essay writing) (Barton, 2007; Gee, 1996; Street, 2008). The NLS approach looks at what people do with texts to get something done, such as writing an email to a sponsor to seek funding for a particular competition within a CCA. Embracing this view of literacy, thus, shifts the prevailing schools' focus on skills or literacies as products in education to people and their ways of using literacies to accomplish a larger goal with others, sometimes a collective one such as a competition that is participated and won as a team within a particular CCA.

Notion of Context

To make visible the learning potentials of CCAs, we adopted a relational understanding of context, focusing on the “socially constructed relationship” between events and between people across places (Bloome et al., 2008, p. 30). Although this understanding of context foregrounds the contextualizing features of the study such as CCA curriculum, school culture, teachers' roles and pupils' ways of participating in CCAs and academic curricula, and a pilot study, this conceptualization of context resulted in our team getting a lot of data which at some point made the analysis complicated because we had to consider the data from various sources and see how the data were connected across different sources to produce a coherent account. Ways to reconcile this included revisiting the project's research questions periodically and navigating between them and the provisional themes which I, as the main researcher, had identified during the initial coding stages from a pilot study.

Multiple Research Tools—A Double-Edged Strategy

Because the project was exploratory in nature within the school context of Singapore, I tapped into the strengths of multiple research tools such as participant observations, semi-structured interviews, observational field notes, and photographs of artifacts so as to capture phenomena that could not be obtained adequately by a single research tool. This approach had worked well in my PhD research in explaining how reading and writing were undertaken in the schools in Singapore. Riding on this success, I was motivated to use multiple research tools again in our project to illuminate the diverse ways in which literacies could be used at CCA.

The uptake of several research tools had enabled us to achieve data triangulation. Here, we draw on Uwe Flick's (2000) concept of triangulation as a strategy that seeks to gain more and deeper knowledge about the research under study and with the aim to justify knowledge rather than as a validation strategy. While the use of various tools did allow us to gain a better

understanding of what CCA participation meant, the use of several different instruments sometimes deterred schools from participating in our study. In my emails and visits to schools to seek their approval for conducting our study at their school site, some school leaders were skeptical about the benefits in research or practice that would arise from the use of multiple instruments and were concerned about the possible interference of such a practice on their teachers' teaching schedule. Hence, most schools shunned the implementation of our study at their school site despite our repeated assurance of minimal disruptions to their day-to-day school activities.

In one meeting with a school principal, the principal questioned the relevance of using observational study in classroom and CCA sites for several weeks, since interviews with school participants could easily address our research aims. I explained to the principal the importance of observation as a research tool in our data collection that was influenced by ethnography, how observation study could help uncover the potentials of CCAs in schools, in particular, the different ways in which teachers engaged pupils with activities. I also shared with the principal how I had successfully carried it out in two case study schools in Singapore before and revealed the invisible ways in which literacy is used in schools. In brief, I contended that, observations, as compared to other research tools like interviews and artifact analysis, could allow us to gain more direct contact and understanding of the data under study (e.g., how CCA was conducted and participants' insights into what CCA participation meant to them) and to make some interpretations of what we saw since we would be present physically at the sites of investigation.

By contrast, credibility of interviews hinges largely on participants' willingness and integrity to share the truth about the issue in question. Relying solely on interviews, especially one-off interviews may prove difficult in ascertaining the truth of the data completely, if there were no other research tools to reveal how participants enacted the tasks in their school-based CCAs. From this experience, it appears that school leaders appreciate comprehensive rationales from researchers' use of different instruments at their school site so as to allay their fears of any disruptions to their teachers' practices in engaging pupils' participation in classrooms or CCAs.

Research Design

Our research acknowledges the practical impossibility of conducting a comprehensive study involving all schools and their CCAs in Singapore in the 2-year time frame given. To obtain a holistic analysis without compromising the detailed account of the research, we tapped into the ethnographic case study approach that uses multiple research tools.

As with many studies on qualitative literacy research, we adopted ethnography as a way of collecting data. We adhere to this tradition and are cognizant of the advantages that ethnography brings to literacy studies, specifically the real-world settings that researchers work within, the range of methods used, the emphasis on the whole rather than on discrete unrelated phenomena, and the possibility to make interpretation and representation of participants' perspectives through researchers' fieldwork (Gregory, Williams, Baker, & Street, 2004).

Ethnographic Perspective to Research

Judith Green and David Bloome (1997) outline three approaches to ethnography in educational studies, namely, doing ethnography, adopting an ethnographic perspective and using ethnographic tools in research. Of the three approaches, doing ethnography is the most comprehensive in terms of the coverage of the study and the time spent on the research sites. It encompasses conceptualizing, conducting, interpreting the data, and writing of the long-term detailed study of a particular social or cultural group of people within a specific field. Adopting an ethnographic perspective, however, takes a more focused approach, though less in scope than that undertaken in doing ethnography. Research under study typically examines the cultural practices of a particular social group, including particular aspects of everyday life. The third approach focuses on the use of methods and techniques commonly linked to fieldwork such as observing how people interact in completing specific tasks and gathering and analyzing samples of participants' work.

In view of the three different ways of carrying out ethnography, we adopted the ethnographic perspective to research. Although "doing ethnography" could shed light on our study through the wide-ranging research processes of conceptualizing, conducting, interpreting, and writing of the in-depth study of a particular cultural group of people (Green & Bloome, 1997), this approach is not always feasible in the school settings of Singapore as it requires the investigator to spend an extended period of time at the sites linked to CCA participation such as pupils' classrooms, outdoor activities—fieldtrips, after-school lessons, and pupils' participation at other schools' sites. Our project's timeline, however, did not permit our prolonged stay at the schools for data gathering.

Clearly, the issues of drawing on the inherent features of doing ethnography research would be apparent if we embraced it completely in our school context. In our study that drew on the ethnographic perspective approach, we focused on two aspects of investigation: (1) how teachers involved pupils with learning in their CCAs and (2) how learning and literacies acquired from CCA site support academic learning that commonly resides in classrooms. Taking

this perspective narrowed our research, particularly in the scope of our data collection. So, we concentrated on examining how pupils took part in their weekly CCA and how teachers involved them with tasks within their CCA. In brief, we are interested in the unique cultural practices of pupils' participation in a CCA within the school under study.

Conflating Case Study and Ethnographic Perspective Approaches

Although the ethnographic approach to data collection can provide a holistic account of the investigation, relying on ethnography alone tends to produce a general written account and exclude the nuances of CCA experiences of teachers and pupils, including the moment-by-moment interactions between pupils and teachers. Although the preliminary analysis of our ethnographic account had illuminated the themes of our study, the analysis lacked details in accounts involving teachers and pupils which could have demonstrated how CCA participation contributed to classroom academic learning. The problem, as it appeared then, lay in the organization of data which an uptake of the case study approach could address. The case study investigation added another layer of analysis by teasing out the relationships between the phenomena observed using concepts such as power, identity, and culture.

The conflation of case study and ethnographic perspective approaches not only brings about the overall patterns of CCA participation examined at the macro (school) level, but also at the micro level, the use of two approaches also makes visible the multiple ways of participating in CCA by a particular group (e.g., teachers and pupils of a specific CCA or a class) in a particular context (e.g., CCA or classroom setting), and at a particular time (before and after school's timetabled hours), and the reasons for the phenomena observed.

This phenomenon is reminiscent of David Bloome's (2005) notion of "particular," which focuses on "what happens in a particular place, at a particular time and with a particular set of people, engaged in a particular activity and event" (p. 276). What and how pupils make sense of what they do in particular tasks within their CCA and the relevance of what they do in regard to the broader notions of classroom academic learning, 21st-century skills, building dispositions, and the fostering of interpersonal skills and good relationship in CCA participation become central.

Essentially, what differentiates case studies from ethnography is the former's emphasis on details and particularity of the written account, a point that also reflects British anthropologist Clyde Mitchell's (1984) notion of case study—the "telling" case—which has the capacity to show the details of the study derived from its ethnographic data as well as to generate analytical and theoretical insights to readers for making inferences. Such features of the case study significantly mark it out from research that draws entirely on ethnography.

Putting Ethnographic Case Study Into Action

From our data collection experience, implementing ethnographic case study method in an entirely different school setting calls for the need to examine participants' identities, their power relations, and the cultural practices of their classes and CCAs from scratch since literacy and learning are socially situated and vary across the contexts of their uses. The notion of situatedness suggests that particular ways of using reading, writing, and learning have different meanings and significance in different domains of our life. As such, what, how, and why literacies and learning are used in CCA participation at a particular time and place are critical in our study. For this reason, new researchers might want to attend to the following steps when carrying out an ethnographic case study.

Establish the Context of Study

To prepare for the data collection of this research, it was crucial for us to establish the context of the study, primarily because our study topic was commonly viewed as underresearched in Singapore. Prior to gathering data from schools, I conducted interviews with 11 people outside of the study: 3 researchers, 2 teachers, 1 vice-principal, 2 university lecturers, and 3 undergraduate students. The interviewees were informally recruited. I randomly approached students on our university campus, which NIE constitutes part of, and asked them if they were willing to participate in a brief interview with me on CCA participation. The rest of the participants were personal friends of mine who shared with me their experiences in conducting CCAs or managing CCAs in their school. In these interviews, I

- Introduced my role as an NIE researcher to my interviewees;
- Provided potential interviewees with a gist of our research project—brief description of project, explanation of interview's purpose, and how interview data could add insights into our research; and
- Verbally sought potential interviewees' consent for sharing their retrospective accounts of CCA participation and experiences with me.

As a protocol for conducting educational research that involves humans in schools in Singapore, it is imperative for researchers to obtain ethics approval from our university, Nanyang Technological University, and the MOE's consent before carrying out their research in schools. We adhered to these procedures upon receiving the research funding and successfully obtained them before we began any observational studies or interviewing. Access to schools was more formal than those conducted with participants outside of the study. Typically, school access for this project comprised the following aspects:

- An invitation emailed to the school in Singapore which we had searched online to participate in our research project. After the school had agreed to take part in our study, we met and discussed the data collection;
- Three rounds of face-to-face negotiations with the key school personnel (the head of department for co-curricular activities) on how data could best be collected with minimal interference to teachers' teaching schedules. This was mutually agreed between the case study school and NIE researchers;
- Provision of written information to school participants about our project, the scope of data collection, and participants' right to withdraw their participation from our study. Such details were outlined in a document called "Information Sheet" and were given to school participants. Accordingly, consent forms for participating in our research were also given to school participants.

The purpose of the pre-data collection was to find out the possible perceptions of CCA participation based on participants' retrospective accounts of the CCA which they (pupil participants) took part during their secondary school years (or when they were between 12 and 17 years of age) or they (teacher participants) had conducted or are conducting with their pupils. The participants' accounts were useful in

- Giving me a sense of what might count as school-based CCA participation;
- Anticipating the possible questions that participants might ask and the responses that they might give to my questions at interviews;
- Providing me with the experience of a grounded context for constructing specific interview questions that might resonate with our participants.

Purposive Sampling

We used purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to identify a specific government secondary school as the research site so that the data collection could reveal a broad range of ways in which CCAs were undertaken in the school. In this sampling method, the interest is on selecting a research site, including its participants that can provide the best knowledge to address the research topic. Hence, the selection of the school and participants to be studied was deliberate rather than left to chance. Instead of randomly picking any government school that voluntarily served as our research site, we intentionally chose a coeducational government secondary school in Singapore, Hawthorn Secondary School (HSS; not its real name), as the main study because it was more heterogeneous in race, abilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds than other government schools which were seen as academically high performing. Such features of our main (case) study school, HSS, were likely to suggest the

variety of ways in which CCAs are undertaken. With regard to the specific CCA at HSS for in-depth study, we identified Design and Innovation Club as a case because of its diverse activities which appeared to go beyond the conventional aim of building dispositions that have characterized CCAs in the school.

Ethnographic Observations

Ethnographic observation was predominantly used during data gathering at HSS. Characteristic of this tool is the extensive observational study of the research site. Our data gathering was not only confined to CCA sites, but it was also conducted in the classrooms. We obtained data from pupils' CCA participation mainly from the school's premises such as the workshops where the club's activities mostly took place. Since the CCAs in focus occurred every Friday morning, I spent at least 1 hr of observational study of pupils' participation at the Design and Innovation Club every Friday morning. On days when pupils extended their CCA participation beyond the normal CCA session on Friday, I stayed on to document the activities taking place in the club. At the same time, where possible and appropriate, I would ask the teacher and pupil participants if I did not understand the CCA tasks that I saw the pupils doing. This was done in addition to the scheduled interviews with my participants.

Drawing on my experience in gathering data in schools, observations can potentially open up a resourceful context for interactions with potential participants/interviewees. Some of the ways in which research activities had been documented during the observation process are outlined below:

- I observed activities that involved the uses of literacy, a choice that is in line with the theoretical framework of NLS that has guided our study. As I observed, I also jotted these observations down in short phrases quickly on my note book (paper-based). The notes were written briefly in order to help me recall the different stages of the observation study which I would revisit when rewriting the field notes in plain grammatical English and during the different phases of data analysis. Some examples of these short phrases were "*pupils ÷ed [divided] into 4 grps [groups]*," "*Yan's grp—built model & rebl'd [rebuild] model*," "*Aim: find 'rt' [right] model*," "*Grp lder [leader] record their expt [experiment] in journal—made sketches → ref to photo*."
- I also tracked the time which these activities took place, their duration and the place which they occurred, and recorded them in writing.
- For activities which I observed and reconstructed them as written field notes, I also took photographs of pupils at work with their tasks (e.g., group members constructing and building a model). This was done with participants' consent in having their participation and

work being photographed. Where pupils or teachers felt uncomfortable with themselves in the pictures, I would either focus the camera on their work or resort to sketching the specific part of the activity that I saw. Or, I would digitally block their faces in the photographs so that their identity would not be revealed.

- Occasionally, I made interpretations of my own observations during the observational study and scribbled my thoughts next to my observational notes. I would then revisit these notes later at the data analysis stage.
- For the notes that I had jotted down, I rewrote them into comprehensible and plain grammatical English after the site visits. These were then used at different stages of the data analysis and for dissemination to project team members for discussion of findings.

To understand more about pupils' involvement in their CCAs, I also attended the club's competition which was held at a tertiary institution in Singapore where several club members showcased the product—a miniature car—which they had worked on for weeks. Other data gathering tools associated with ethnographic observations included taking field notes and photographs of artifacts that were linked to the club's activities such as posters, banners, and bulletin boards found on the school premises. As a point to note, the activities that revolved around the club's activities and the connectedness between such activities give the case its particularity.

Selective Inclusion of Teacher and Pupil Interviewees

In this study, our access to research data is not always granted smoothly but has to be tactfully negotiated with participants. While this was the case, our research team remained very selective in recruiting teachers and pupils as participants because this determines the depth of details and the uniqueness of our study, and ultimately whether the case can be generalized to other situations or not.

We generally conducted interviews with participants after two sessions of observational studies of their involvements in CCA or classroom sites so that we would then have a sense of what constitutes the club's activities and what and how the participants had been doing with their activities. In addition to participants' willingness to participate in our semi-structured interviews, we selected the following bases:

- Diversity and comprehensiveness of the account of their CCA (club) which they were likely to share; and
- Intensity of involvement or the lack of it in their participation at CCA or literacy related tasks.

Within the Design and Innovation Club, I had interviewed 17 participants, comprising mainly

teachers and pupils. Eight of the participants were teachers, and nine were pupils from the club. Of the eight teachers, four were directly involved in the main activities of the club. The interviews were to find out how participants had supported their members in engaging in their tasks within their CCA. Of the remaining four teachers, two took charge of the larger school programs, and their insights helped provide the contextual background for interpreting the data. The remaining two teachers were of interest to the study in that they were seen actively helping the club's members with their competition even though they were not officially in charge of the club.

Seven of the nine participating pupils, from age 14 to 15 years, were in secondary three and were more senior than the rest of the pupil participants. Given their extended experience in their CCA, the seniors served as the main informants for the case study.

Conducting Ethnographic Case Study: Practical Lessons Learned

Preparing for the Context of Study

The preparatory work of interviewing people for their retrospective accounts of CCA participation can help anticipate the kind of responses that participants at the school site might give. As noted earlier, I had interviewed people who were outside of our research before conducting our study at HSS. The interviewees were from diverse occupational backgrounds—research assistants, undergraduate students, university lecturers, and school teachers—though working within the education field. In my interviews with them, I drew on the three-part teacher–student sequences—teacher initiation, learner response, and teacher feedback or follow-up (TRF)—which I, a former teacher, often used during classroom lessons. In this approach, I also foregrounded the use of sub-questions with participants outside of our study and school participants before dovetailing them to the main question in focus. The following examples demonstrate how I had used some of the sub-questions to get my pupil interviewee to answer one of the main interview questions: “*How does CCA participation change you as a person?*” which also directly addresses our research investigation:

Sub-question 1, Researcher: Why did you join this CCA [Design and Innovation Club]?

Sub-question 2, Researcher: Alright. So, how do you feel about your participation in all these projects? You actually got the top three [awards]. How do you feel about this, you know, after every event?

Sub-question 3, Researcher: So, how do you feel about all these [participation and

winning]?

Main Question, Researcher: You did change? Can you specifically remember or tell me one or two things that you have changed?

Sub-question 5, Researcher: Okay, can I say that you are more vocal now with your ideas?

Response, Interviewee: Yeah.

In these examples, the intervals between the sub-questions were filled with several turn-takings between the pupil interviewee and me. However, most were dominated by the pupil responding to the sub-questions I posed.

To ensure that my interviewee stayed focused on the key interview questions of the study, I tended to ask short questions that carried one or two themes (see sub-questions above), though sometimes such questions were ungrammatical. This is a skill which I picked up while interviewing the participants during the pre-data collection phase. I realized that interviewees were sometimes not interested in my speaking in complete grammatical sentences. Short phrases or sentences seemed to work better in getting them to grasp the main point of my questions immediately. Participants' time spent in taking part in the interview was important too, and even those who were my friends spent at most 45 min at the interview. I was mindful of this so my interviews with teachers and pupils were normally kept to 20-30 min and 10-20 min, respectively.

When interviewing pupils, I also paraphrased a question or repeated the same question in a slightly different way, sometimes with more lexical words to ensure that they were clear about what I was asking, as in the case of Sub-question 2. Crucially, the goal of paraphrasing and asking brief questions was to access my participants' level of comprehension, elicit their responses, thereby allowing them to share at length. However, when I needed to interrupt the interview, either because they had already shared adequately or they were digressing from my question, I tapped into the use of backchannels like 'alright' (Sub-question 2) and 'so' (Sub-questions 2 and 3). Occasionally, I would use a falling intonation with the backchannel to signal a request from the participant to respond to a different topic embedded within a different question, as in Sub-question 3. I posed Sub-question 3 because the pupil was sharing enthusiastically about his views on the notion of winning but little on the impact of winning on him as an individual.

Interviewing people from diverse backgrounds provided me with the opportunity to

- Practice my interviewing skills like when to interrupt interviewees diplomatically to divert them back to the key themes of our study;
- (Re-)word or (re-)present specific questions for particular participants so as to elicit the “right” responses that reflected their CCA participation and experiences. If the first interview did not quite achieve the type of responses that I desired, I used the same interview questions again but modified the tone or rephrased the sentences with another interviewee; and
- Build my confidence in speaking fluently and with less nervousness with my participants who were strangers to me. As I spoke to more interviewees, there were less instances of my mispronouncing words and more insights into the interviews could be obtained within a shorter duration. Hence, confidence in delivering the interviews can be overcome by carrying out similar interviews asking similar questions to people of different backgrounds.

Essentially, the pre-data collection experience had allowed me to speak the same language with my participants. Through this process, together with the use of other research tools in the data collection phase, we were able to generate a rich discussion and description of what CCA participation was.

Clearly, substantial groundwork for developing the case study had to be made prior to data collection at the main study. Our analysis of the data collection in this research study suggests attending to two key aspects:

- Conducting informal interviews or conversations with people such as adolescents from the community that is to be researched so as to understand the context of the research site. For example, we could approach youths who are studying at tertiary institutions in the neighborhood or those who have graduated from the school under study to get a glimpse of the research site. Of course, this would be done with participants’ consent. We could also use similar interview questions which we have constructed for the study to talk to them.
- Carrying out a pilot study in another school within the same neighborhood where the main study school is located. The purpose is to
 - try out the research tools, including the observation foci, interview questions, and artifacts analysis, to see how they would fare before using them in the main study school; and
 - anticipate conceptual complexities that might hinder participants’ understanding of the interview questions. In our study, the pre-data collection sought to find out whether the meanings of literacy, learning, and co-curricular activities would be clear to pupil participants and the researchers.

For example, in my interviews with the participants outside of our study, I was initially very entrenched in talking about literacy as a social practice. After the interview with the third participant, I realized that my three participants tended to associate literacy with writing activities like essay writing or language activities that often reside in the English language classrooms. To ensure that my school participants and I were speaking on the same conception of literacy, I decided to avoid using the terms ‘literacy practices’ or ‘literacies’ that are concepts commonly used within NLS. Instead, I focused on the terms’ “use(s)” and “meaning(s)” of literacy used by lay persons, as in questions like *“Do you use this kind of writing [journaling] in class? Are there times where you would write to the sponsors or prepare a draft email to your teacher?”*

Similarly, my interviews with the undergraduate students reminded me that while the term “CCAs,” is widely used in schools in Singapore, it does not mean the same as extracurricular activities (ECA) that is used at universities. In the case of the ECA, it is not compulsory for the students to take up an activity outside of their academic studies. Hence, whenever I interviewed pupils who had just joined our local education system or who had completed part of their education outside of Singapore, I would ask them to share a little bit about their school-related activities they had participated in prior to joining the local government schools. For them, they had participated in ECAs, not CCAs, in their former schools such as international schools in Malaysia. Hence, being aware of the conceptual complexities of some of the terms used before the official data collection occurs can help maintain the data quality.

The pre-data collection experience had given me the context for constructing specific interview questions. In one interview, the participant recounted how her enthusiasm for and experience in running in her CCA—Track and Field—had sometimes given her the content as well as the passion for enhancing her essay writing in English class. Conflating this insight with our research goal, I constructed one salient question which I later used it with the school participants: *“Based on the activities/projects that you have participated in your CCA, do you think that what you have learnt here is useful or helpful for classroom academic learning?”* Occasionally, in a less formal interview with teachers, I would pose a simplified version of this question in a conversational tone after the teacher: *“So, how useful are these skills when they [pupils] are back in classroom learning their academic subjects?”*

Despite having prepared the interview questions, I was mindful that the crafted questions were not meant to be used in a prescriptive way to shape and generate responses that I wanted from my research participants. In my data collection, I had remained open to their questions and responses, and these have occasionally led to interesting trajectories which I had not imagined. For instance, I was enlightened by an interview with a teacher when he reminded me about the

inherent differences between CCA and academic curricula, although there could be evidence that learning is recontextualized from CCA to classroom site. This prompted me to examine the characteristics of learning in both sites, though it was not part of our project agenda. This shift in our research process was useful in explaining the challenges in learning transfer across CCA and classroom sites and the unique acquisition of skills within CCA.

Co-Constructed Data Between Researcher and Researched

The data collection process was a shared experience, often co-constructed between the participants as the researched and myself as the researcher. On several occasions, I found that teachers' responses, in particular the depth of their responses, were shaped by the types of open questions that I had asked, such as '*How might you do this differently with your students next year?*' and '*How might you carry out the preparation of the competition with your students?*' The occasional prompts to get teachers to compare their activities or competitions they did with those in other schools were helpful in enhancing the quality of their responses. For instance, during my interviews with one teacher who shared with interest about the club's achievements since 2005 and the possibility of CCA being a suitable platform for building pupils' dispositions, I probed whether their school has deliberately constructed CCA as an alternative site for developing pupils' competencies beyond the learning of academic skills. I asked,

When I looked at your school as well as other schools' websites, the pupils' T-scores [which were comparatively lower than those in other schools] and the CCA results, the CCA results are amazing. I'm wondering if there is a deliberate attempt by your school to make CCA as an alternative site for developing pupils' learning. If you look at their academic performance, they didn't do that well, right?

With this prompt, the teacher explained the rationale for having a significantly large number of uniformed groups (7 groups) where more than half of the student population was in this CCA category. I probed again curiously whether this phenomenon has to do with the social dynamics of their pupils. The teacher went on to elaborate how the inception of their CCA model has much to do with the need to develop discipline and resilience in their pupils because a large number of them came from less-advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. By having more uniformed groups than other CCA groups, HSS hopes to use CCA as a platform to enable pupils to be "a leader of themselves" (Teacher Interviewee, 29 July 2016). The teacher acknowledges this unique feature of CCA in his school to shift the majority of the pupil population to uniform groups. In the interview, the teacher also argues for this move as a way of giving pupils more "chance[s] and exposure to lead" in their uniformed group and to experience what success means since their academic performance had not been fantastic (Teacher

Interviewee, 29 July 2016).

As seen in this example, the teacher was able to elaborate, evaluate, and voice his views on CCA participation. The data are the result of co-construction rather than purely eliciting information from my participants. This co-construction of data depends largely on what and how questions are asked. In our research experience with data collection, the co-constructed data hinge a great deal on the interviewer to respond promptly and to build on the interviewees' responses. Not every prompt or question in my interviews can achieve this effect, but in this example, I tapped into the teachers' point on club's achievements and his positive view of CCA as a place for developing pupils' character. My prompts fitted naturally into this topic, which he also seemed passionate about, sharing at length and voluntarily showed me the pictures of his pupils' participation at competition. While the interviewee spoke at length, I learnt from my pre-data collection that it was also crucial to sustain the interview by providing supportive backchannel cues like "That's interesting," "Yeah," or "I see" as ways of acknowledging his responses before advancing to my subsequent questions.

Mutually Dependent and Reinforcing Roles of Observation and Interviewing

In case study research, observational study can be carried out at various points of the data gathering stage. However, in an ethnographic case study conducted, it is best to conduct some informal interviews during the observational study with the researcher posing a few brief questions that are specific to the activities undertaken at the point of observation. In my data gathering, although there were space and time for me to speak to the participants through the scheduled interviews, there were occasions where I felt that some questions that required short answers like "*How many models have you built? Who checks on the draft of this portfolio, your teacher or group members?*" could be addressed while I was observing the pupils doing the tasks in action.

Interviews with participants also provided me with some foci on what to observe during the CCA sessions and in the brief time that I had on the school site, although my observation analysis of specific site and events was initially guided by our research questions. For instance, after observing how a teacher had guided the club members successfully on building the various structural configurations using four paper cylinders, I wondered whether the teacher was going to use some scientific concepts to teach his pupils in exploring the various structural configurations. When I interviewed the teacher the following week, he explained that the focus of the club's sessions was more oriented toward helping pupils to develop the problem-solving skills and the mind-set for tackling problems they encountered in their daily lives rather than introducing scientific concepts to learn. Following that interview, I noticed the teacher carry out

the CCA in the same way as I had observed and providing pupils with the space to investigate the ways to build a structurally sound model. Drawing on this insight, I started to lean toward this perspective of problem-solving in CCA participation as I continued my observational study of subsequent CCA sessions. In this sense, both observations and interviewing mutually inform and are indispensable to each other.

Observational Study First, Then Interviews

Most interviews in our study occurred after the observational study during the CCA sessions. This approach yields more informative and comprehensive responses from participants instead of simply interviewing them with the research questions. As noted earlier, the observational study of the CCA sites provided a common established context for both the participants and me to further discuss about their participation in the club activities. For instance, in one interview with the pupil, I was interested to find out whether the pupil received any support elsewhere for the competition that his team had won. Instead of diving straight into my prepared question “*What other support did you get and from where?*,” I made reference to their competition which the pupil and his team had won against other schools. I had previously attended their competition so I commented on the contrasting turnout of pupils’ parents from other schools and HSS that I saw. As I noticed that none of HSS pupils’ parents were present as compared to those of their competitors from other schools, I asked the pupil interviewee if his parents were aware of his team’s competition. Following that, I probed into the kind of support his parents had given. The pupil revealed how his father had given some ideas, in verbal form, on how to improve the shape of the miniature car which his team worked on and eventually won the fastest car on the racing track at the competition.

In interviews with pupils, it is useful to have pupils comment on the responses made by other participants. In my data gathering, I shared with the pupil interviewees snippets of interviews I had with other pupils (their names were not revealed). In one case, I shared with a pupil interviewee the differing views held by two pupils from two different uniformed groups, one in another school and the other at HSS on whether CCA participation influences a person’s behavior or performance in class. The purpose of this was to get my participant to articulate her views on the influence of CCA participation on classroom behavior before prompting her to talk about the impact of her own commitment in CCA on her attitude toward classroom instruction. I found this method effective in avoiding repetitive responses from all pupils. This could happen when pupils prepared their responses in accordance with what they thought I wanted to hear. Getting them to comment on other pupils’ responses, a technique I used during the one-to-one pupil interviews, helped sustain the interviews, thereby making them conversational, participatory, and enjoyable. This approach was also useful in generating insights into their

sharing and allowed me to gain an understanding of what they were thinking about their roles and participation in CCA, and how CCA provides them with clearer goals than those in academic curriculum. A glimpse into the warrant for this argument can be seen in the following exchange between one pupil and me, when I asked her to compare the two sites, CCA and classroom, in relation to her performance. At the time of data collection, the pupil was in the third year of her CCA participation.

Researcher	In your CCA, I can see that you are always working towards your goal, like your competition in September. In classroom, you also have a goal?
Interviewee	Maybe.
Researcher	Do you have a goal in classroom? Or which is clearer?
Interviewee	D & I [Design and Innovation]
Researcher	Okay, you seem to be very attached to D & I?
Interviewee	Kind of ...
Researcher	Okay, so the goal in D & I is very clear to you. There is a competition and you have to do it by September.
Interviewee	Yeah.
Researcher	But in class, you have different subjects, different goals?
Interviewee	Yeah.
Researcher	Okay, which is more achievable?
Interviewee	D & I.
Researcher	But I thought in class, you have different subjects, different opportunities for ...
Interviewee	But then, I don't do very well in studies. In class, so-so only.

As seen in this transcript, the pupil pointed out that she tended to do better in her CCA—

Design and Innovation Club—because the goal in CCA was clearer. She saw herself as mediocre performer in class (Pupil Interviewee, 23 August 2013).

In our data collection at HSS, pupil and teacher participants were relatively engaged in their interviews and often the rapport I had built with them allowed me to recruit more interviewees than what I initially had in my design of the data collection. Within the club, the plan was to gather four teacher interviewees, primarily because the four teachers took charge of the club, and five pupils for their in-depth accounts of what counts as CCA participation. However, observational study of the club's activities and our initial interactions with the teachers at HSS pointed to the need to speak to teachers who had indirectly contributed to the club like two English teachers who had helped a group of pupils with their oral presentation scripts for their competition. As I spoke to more teachers, I also gathered insights from the teacher interviewees about their colleagues who were also involved in shaping the club's activities. The teachers gladly introduced me to their colleagues who graciously accepted my request to interview them. With regard to pupil interviewees, some of them were recruited through this informal network where the pupil interviewees introduced me to their friends who later agreed to speak to me. In total, I recruited four more teacher and four more pupil interviewees.

This approach is a departure from an interview that uses strictly a highly prepared and prescriptive form of questioning and answering undertaken within a regulated time. In the examples discussed, they were semi-structured and relatively amenable to changes to build on interviewees' responses yet without losing sight of the key themes of our interview questions. Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork experience, I noticed that teachers shared generously whenever I asked them about their work with their pupils, in particular, the projects that they worked collaboratively and learnt with their pupils, and the competition they won together. For some teachers, they acknowledged that the interviews provided them an opportunity to reflect on how CCA can contribute to classroom academic learning. This was something that teachers had not thought about in their day-to-day teaching. There are little opportunities or time for teachers and pupils to articulate their thoughts about more creative ways of enhancing academic learning beyond classrooms.

My interviews with the teachers show that interviews can be designed in such a way that it evokes participants to reflect and react on their existing practices. For example, in one interview, I asked a teacher about his perception of winning and what it meant to him since our observational data indicated that winning was the club's emphasis. Speaking from the perspective of a school teacher, he contended that winning was the club's way of meeting the school's expectation of being a school with a niche in design and innovation. Having explained this, he later shifted to his own individual first person voice and said, "If I have a choice, I

wouldn't think that winning is always a good thing," and he went on to elaborate about the detrimental effects of winning on pupils' ego and resilience if his pupils lost a competition. As I shared my perceptions of winning based on my observations of other schools' CCA participation and contrasted with what I saw at HSS, the teacher paused a little and continued,

Sometimes, I don't know, because I've been thinking about this [winning] also. So, do you have to win in every competition? Or, let's put it in another way. If you want the students really to achieve something good, you have to provide them with a lot of scaffolds ... And you really need to guide them step-by-step until they are able to reach that kind of level. But then, like you say, if I was to just give them the things and let them really explore and try by themselves, without me giving any kind of guidance ... So even if they don't achieve, I mean, don't reach that kind of level that I have expected, I feel they may have gained more ... Because the learning process itself is important. So, they understand failure and they can grow from there ...

In this case, I created a springboard by drawing on my perceptions of competitions and winning gathered in other schools and at HSS in order to spur the teacher to articulate his own opinions on the topics commonly seen as controversial in Singapore. The transcript resembles a monologue or a soliloquy where the teacher articulated his thoughts aloud and reconciled his earlier contention about winning.

Conclusion

Despite the potential of case studies to provide the particular, unique, and universal understandings (Simons, 2006), case studies have often been critiqued for their limited generalizability to other situations. Clyde Mitchell (1982/2006) has argued that the ability to extrapolate from one case study to similar situations is based on the logical inference instead of whether the case is representative. Indeed, this argument underscores the need for events or elements within the case to be clearly presented, linked, and analyzed and more significantly to reveal the theoretical principles in a coherent and convincing way so that the case connects with the reader's purpose and experience.

Although the case that we present here may have little relevance to analysts outside of education, the case of the socially purposeful way of using literacy in CCA epitomizes what learning and/or education in the 21st-century classroom can be like—participatory, collaborative, socially, and academically relevant—and thus may be of interest to policymakers, school leaders, teacher practitioners, and researchers. As asserted by Mary Kennedy (2006), generalization from a single case is essentially based on one's (the reader's) judgment and as

such the transferability from one case to another should be made by individuals who are applying the findings from the case under study to their own situations. In the light of the different views toward this issue of generalizability, it is useful to recall what generalization means in qualitative research. Robert Stake (2006) reminds us that generalization in qualitative studies involves having a good understanding of what goes on in a particular place, at a particular time, and with whom in a particular activity. The documentation of the fieldwork data collection, as presented thus far, illustrates how particularity and the cogency of a qualitative case study can be achieved.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. In the research project on school-based CCA participation, how did we make the case unique? Discuss. What methods and/or tools did we use to increase the range of particularity? How would you envision the use of such methods and tools in your research?
 2. In the research project on school-based co-curricular activities (CCA), the first author focused on two sites of investigation, namely, CCA and classrooms? What other sites could have been investigated if the time for data gathering permits?
 3. What other qualitative methods do you think would work well with case study approach? Discuss.
 4. Do we include all data that are interesting? How do we know what to include in the case write-up after data collection? Discuss.
 5. When using the case study method, how can researchers ensure that the case can be generalized?
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