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THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING ASSESSMENT POLICY CHANGE AND THE MITIGATING FACTORS FOR SUCCESS AT SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Malaysia, like many other countries in the world has been concerned with the ways in which changes in assessment practices and procedures can improve teaching and learning .The timely reform in assessment practices in Malaysia comes with the introduction of the New Educational Assessment System (NEAS) that innovates previous practices via more autonomous and holistic elements in its implementation. With a more school-based approach encompassing systematic stages of monitoring, facilitating and regulating by the respective agencies under the Ministry of Education, NEAS aims to make assessment and evaluation practices in Malaysia more dynamic and integrated. As a landmark national initiative placing a renewed emphasis on the role of the teacher as a change agent, NEAS enables positive changes to the education system in terms of the transformation from a centralized examination orientation into a more flexible orientation which integrates centralized examination with school-based assessment. As common to any change of policy exercise, it does not come without challenges and obstacles. Adopting a qualitative case studies approach with a well-established social theory called Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT); this study analyses educational changes by describing and comparing two focal school communities' practices, the challenges faced and the mitigating factors which foster the change implementation. Mitigating factors such as leadership, beliefs, work culture, relationships and surrounding environment were identified from the emerging themes elicited from the data. CHAT components such as subject, object, outcome, tools, rules, division of labour and community were applied in further scrutinizing the relationships between each of the factors. This helps to capture a holistic view of the activity system and the change processes undergone by the focal school communities in relation to NEAS implementation.

Keywords: Educational Change, Assessment, School Based, Qualitative Case Studies, CHAT

1.0 Introduction

The NEAS which was implemented in 2011 based on the new Educational Policy is seen as the catalyst which will bring about much-needed innovative changes in the system It is intended to change the whole culture of knowledge acquisition by making the students less exam-oriented in learning while assigning more significant and innovative roles for teachers in terms of assessing students' learning output. Wiggins (1998) believes that the aim of assessment is primarily to educate and improve student performance and not merely to audit it, and studies have demonstrated that improving classroom assessment can have strong impact on students' achievement (Black & William 1998; Stiggins 2002). This change introduced to the Malaysian education system creates a dynamic combination of centralized examination and school-based assessment which enables students to

explore more experiential and fun elements in learning. Over the past few years this innovative approach to assessment has emerged as avant garde trend in educational development in a many countries.

Similar to other countries; the Malaysian education system is also concerned with reforming assessment practices towards a more humanistic and innovative approaches. The purpose is to develop human capital capable of sustaining and elevating Malaysia's development (Hishammuddin, 2006). In addition, according to the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia:

> "We need to re-evaluate our curriculum, and the way we assess a student's progress and achievements....An effective and holistic assessment system must be put in place to identify the true potential of the students and nurture them to the fullest."
>
> (Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, 2010)

Assessment data in education should aim to be accurate and relevant so that informed decisions can be made about both the curriculum, teaching and learning process (Fook et al. 2009). This has also been stressed by the former Minister of Education (Hishammuddin 2005) who reiterated that the national leadership was calling for the reform in the education system. He noted that a reform in assessment is a necessary step in Malaysia's plans to advocate the development of a reliable decentralised school-based assessment system to complement the present centralised assessment system. He added

> "...it needs to be well-monitored and driven by clear criteria and well-defined standards"
>
> (Hishammuddin, 2005)

2.0 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how the current changes to Malaysian assessment systems are being implemented and to identify the factors that facilitate as well as inhibit these changes from taking place. With better insights on these factors, schools can develop better understandings of the dynamics that underpin the implementation of any educational change that is to come. Investigating two schools at urban and sub-urban locations; this study looks at their approaches to the changes, the mitigating factors and the impact upon the implementation of this policy. The main research questions are as follows:

1. What are the approaches developed by schools in response to NEAS?

2. What are the factors which affect the implementation of NEAS?

3. How do these factors in schools impact upon the implementation of NEAS?

3. 0 Literature Review

Assessment in Malaysia is described as heavily test-oriented, which restricts the development of creativity among students at school. The dominant functions of assessment in the Malaysian education system are selecting students for further studies or for employment opportunities. Other relevant functions of assessment are unfortunately not as heavily emphasized as the previous two. Although the Malaysian Examination Syndicate (MES) highlights important uses of assessment are for diagnosis, evaluation and guidance, the way assessments are carried out often ignores these functions (Ong, 2010). Due to this, Malaysia has taken a serious measure of allocating huge funds for education

in the 11th Malaysia Plan (11MP) with the Prime Minister emphasizing on the need for education to be innovative to continuously create skilled and knowledgeable workforce which will be the cutting edge of the nation's competitiveness.

Prior to that, the Ministry of Education had long contemplated on such an approach like the NEAS which is to be expanded to all levels of education. According to the former Minister of Education, Musa Mohamed (2003);

> "We need a fresh and new philosophy in our approach to exam....we want to make the education system less exam-oriented and we are looking at increasing school based assessment as it would be a better gauge of students' abilities".

Such a method of assessment would be in line with current practices in other countries such as the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan, Finland and New Zealand (Marlin Abdul Karim, 2002). In line with global trends of testing and measurement, both policymakers and educators in Malaysia are now looking towards school-based assessment as a catalyst for educational reform (Hishamuddin, 2005). Priestley et. al. (2010) highlighted via many studies that similar trends are taking place in many countries around the world. Therefore, NEAS is seen as an innovative catalyst essentially required by the country's stagnant education system.

This study also discusses issues revolving around the changes in assessment practices in Malaysia. According to Cheung D., (2001), "Many attempts at educational change fail" thus for years the problem of curriculum change process has become a subject of studies in many countries (Cuban, 1998; Swann & Brown, 1997; Priestley, 2005). The subject of sustainable curriculum change has also become an issue that is very problematic as reflected in a lot of literature (Halász, 2002; Fullan.,2005; Priestley et al. 2010). One way of investigating this in the context of Malaysia is by getting in-depth information on teachers' practices in relation to NEAS. Many studies have shown that teachers face difficulty in accepting radical changes to their longstanding educational practices as reported by Hollingsworth (1989); Richardson (1990); and Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd (1991) based on evidence from Canada, U.S, Australia and New Zealand. However, to date there are still not many empirical data to gauge whether similar phenomenon is happening in Malaysia.

3.0 Methodology

Employing a qualitative case study methods, the research design incorporates observations and semi-structured interview techniques in the data collection process. Using purposive sampling based on two categories namely the "successful school" and the "in-progress school, the respondents were 10 head teachers and teachers in total whose responses were elicited via interview protocol in both English and Malay. The interviews were digitally tape recorded, transcribed and translated into English for discourse analysis procedure. All these are guided by significant key phrases framed in the research questions mainly the schools' approaches, the mitigating factors and the impact on NEAS implementation." The emerging themes were also analysed using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) components subject, object, outcome, tools, rules, division of labour and community by focusing on their inter-related aspects and functions. This was done via words and key words mapping and matching between the data from the responses and the CHAT components criteria.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

The analysis unearthed interesting findings whereby, two distinct approaches towards NEAS could be seen to be clearly adopted by the two schools namely the reactive approach and the proactive approach. The reactive approach exhibited by school B is laden with less positive, unfavourable and approach. The reactive approach exhibited by school B is laden with less positive, unfavourable and un-dynamic characteristics and aspects. School A could be described as reactive as there were lack of assertiveness and initiative, laced with weak leadership and unproductive culture of complaining/denial, grappling with indiscipline, lack of beliefs and unsupportive environment/unfavourable educational condition. From school A, the studies elicited findings of a more proactive approach incorporated with initiative, assertiveness, supportive environment, good leadership and strong beliefs. There was also a presence of favourable educational environment and positive relationships within the school community. The findings also suggested that there were major factors which were involved in the change processes. Both inter-related external and internal factors played significant roles in facilitating or inhibiting successful NEAS implementation as demonstrated by the CHAT components.

4.1 Findings-Primary School A

The diagramme below highlights findings in terms of factors yielded from Primary School A.
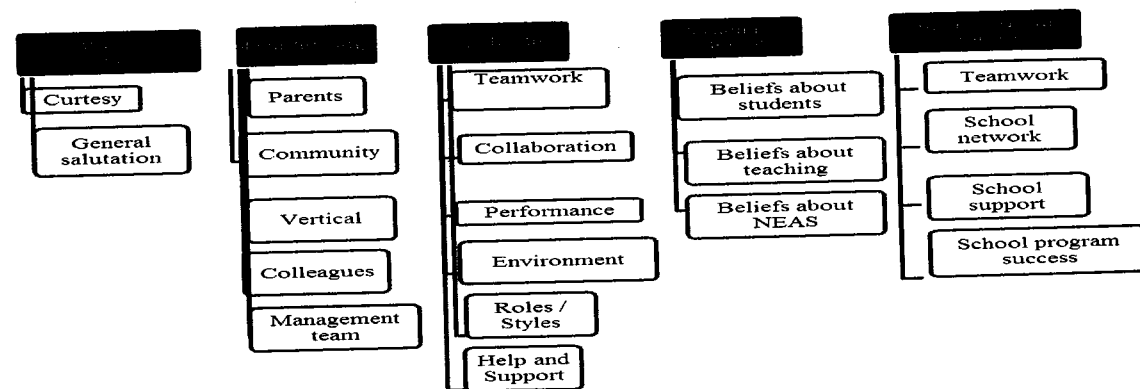

Figure 1.0: Findings for Primary School A.

Factors such as leadership, relationship, teachers' beliefs, "super-working culture", and culture of respect were given focus at Primary School A which led to more success. In implementing NEAS, Primary School A embodies the genuine spirit of teamwork which exemplifies great relationships, leadership by example and teachers ultimately carrying out their role as educators, amidst difficulties of adapting to new practices and increasing workloads. They also strongly believed that it is for the best interest of the school, themselves and their students whilst performing their roles with passion. For instance, many of the teachers provided positive responses such as Teacher A who highlights on the extra workload and the eventual positive outcomes:

> "If I'm to be honest, the workload for us teachers has increased, however the benefits outweigh the cost and it is beneficial as the students seem to be more systematic and hardworking...I have ensured that the task in NEAS to be conducted every Friday in order to tap the talents of the students. We have prize giving ceremonies and pampering classes."

The response above manifests the presence of essential factors namely teachers' belief and the positive relationships with students and the principal. Although School A also reported quite a high teacher turnover is they seem to be able to cope and adopt with the changes required and the team spirit originating from quality leadership, positive relationships and strong beliefs on education

became the biggest asset in that school plays a major part in the success of the school's implementation of NEAS. The teachers all believe that true leadership coupled with sincere interest in teaching which have been instilled in them via various methods of induction adopted by the principal has significantly ensured the school's success. For example, the principal indicated strongly that;

> "We will do any activity that contributes to the student development..."

It was also found that the sometimes unclear and ever changing orders from the Ministry of Education served as a hindrance and obstacle to the school communities' implementation of the policy. Other factors that play a vital role are positive work culture, supportive and well-disciplined students, conducive surrounding and supportive parents towards the new changes brought about via NEAS.
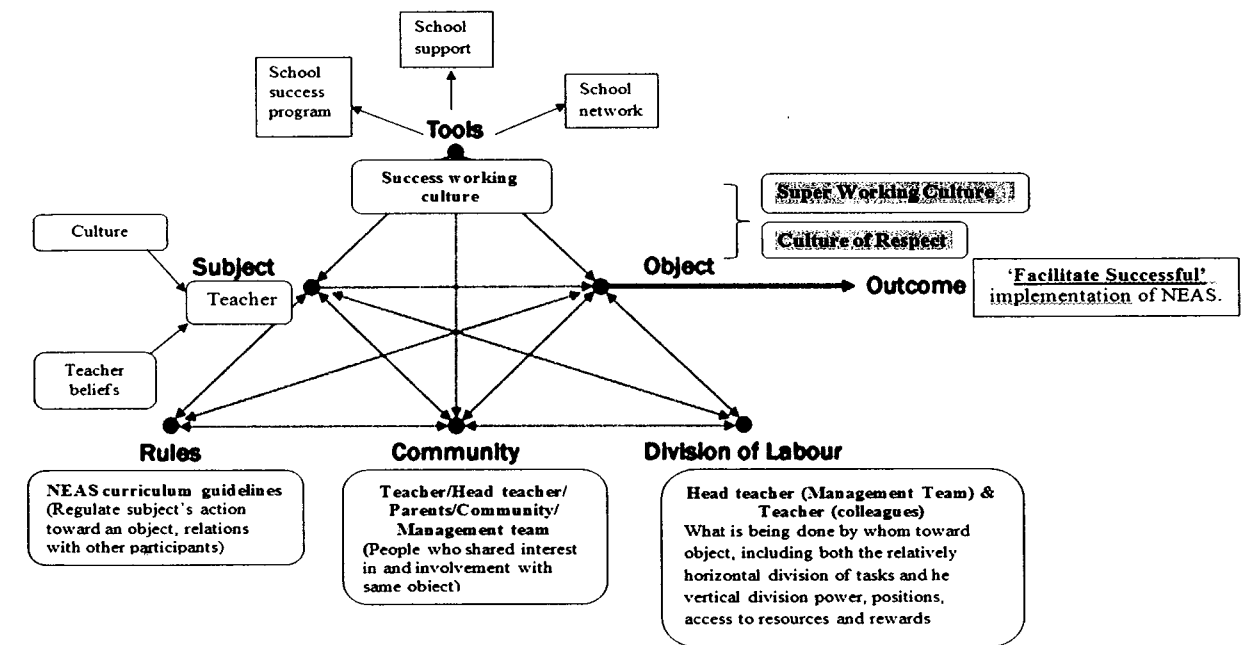

Figure 2.0: Inter-related factors summarized via CHAT

4.2 Discussion of Main Factors for Primary School A

The following themes reflect the main factors which emerged from the case study data for Primary School A

i. Relationship

The teachers reported that positive relationship has developed among them via a shared understanding that complex, new ideas come along in the form of new policy. This relationship where the head teacher, teachers, students and parents provide mutual support has improved teacher agency and developed collegial and collaborative cultures. With this, the implementation of the NEAS in this school has developed effectively.

ii. Leadership

The teachers responded that effective leadership which recognizes what works, when, and with whom exists among them and the management team. This also lies within the division of labour component of CHAT. In addition, with this kind of mediated tool (support) and cooperation among the subjects

and the community at this school, the implementation of NEAS is well supported. The subjects (teachers) also felt that working effectively with others, requires understanding of their personal strengths and inclinations.

iii. Teachers' Beliefs

Positive teachers' beliefs helped foster the implementation of NEAS where they approached planning and decision-making positively. They carried out their duties implementing NEAS creatively by using the prepared tools productively with creative teaching techniques that adapt well to the circumstances, background and surroundings of their pupils.

iv Super Working Culture

The working culture at this school led by the head teacher was successfully adopted by the teachers and staff members with strong conviction, with all believing that positive changes are possible. The great working culture that has been cultivated by the Head Teacher which was cascaded down to the staff members has ensured the success of the school programmes. This created a positive environment lead to the successful implementation of NEAS.

v. Culture of Respect

The positive views held by both teachers and students towards one another within the culture of respect has created a conducive surrounding. This is due to the strong realization that teachers need to be respected by the students and students need to be respected by their teachers, Such strong realization has fostered the successful implementation of NEAS.

4. 3 Findings-Primary School B

The following mind map in figure 3.0 concludes the analysis of the second case study at Primary School B. The absence of good leadership, true spirit of teamwork, positive relations among school communities, lacking of conducive environment and support have wavered the qualities potential for this school to successfully implement NEAS.
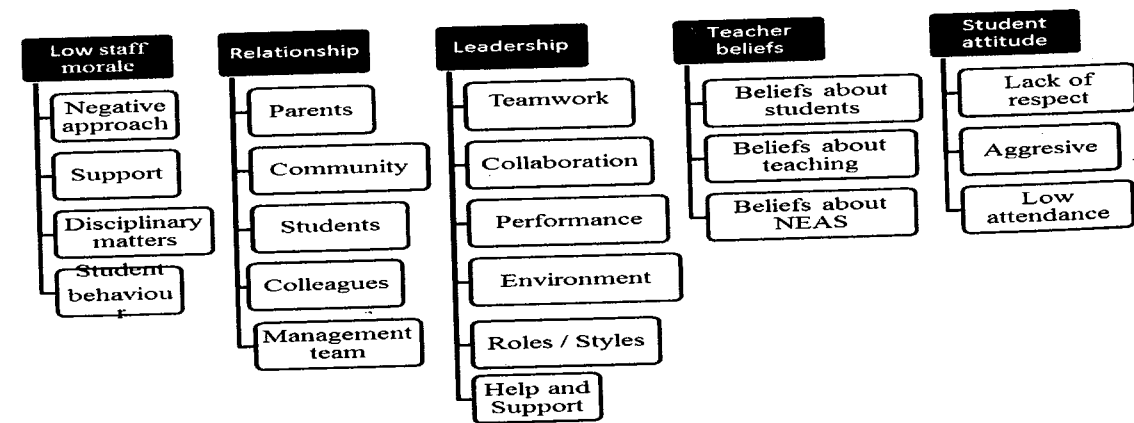

Figure 3.0: Summary of Themes for Primary School B

At Primary School B, relations between teachers and students were not as warm and friendly as the students here are more "afraid" of their educators than loving or respecting them. Teachers constantly struggle to uphold discipline and maintain control and relationship were tensed due to the students'

negative attitude. Leadership could be seen as sometimes ineffective, not transparent and not always followed by staff members. The teachers do not have enough passion in their roles, rather were let down by the unconducive social climate of the suburban part of the town. Because of all these, many of the teachers in Primary School B do not really welcome the implementation of NEAS. For example, one of the teachers expressed her disappointment about rushing to finish the syllabus by stating;

> "At the end of this year, I shall be attending the NEAS course. The syllabus will increase, but the time is cut. I believe it will be difficult to achieve this target. I feel that I will be rushing in trying to complete each syllabus. This is the drawback of the NEAS"

The unclear instructions as well as the ever changing orders from the Ministry of Education were also affecting the successful implementation of NEAS. A number of teachers reflected their concerns on this matter by providing the following responses:

> "We have not been informed in detail… just enough information for us to carry out our duties as ordered. All we are doing is just following orders therefore there is no personal and heartfelt commitment".

Some teachers also reflected on NEAS standards and implementation by providing the following feedback;

> "It is not that I do not wish to do it correctly, but I do not have the time to mark it against NEAS standards. I believe the information on expediting is really unclear"

A few teachers asserted on the need have better guidance in order to achieve the full implementation of NEAS by commenting;

> "Since we are unclear of the actual objectives and lack of explanation in how to expedite the process as we have no proper guide that is the reason as to why we need to do it in our own understanding to catch up with time in order to keep in line with NEAS"

Based on the responses above, it is clear that essential factors such as leadership, relationship, teachers' beliefs, students' attitude and staff morale must be seriously addressed at this institution for before it could successfully implement NEAS.
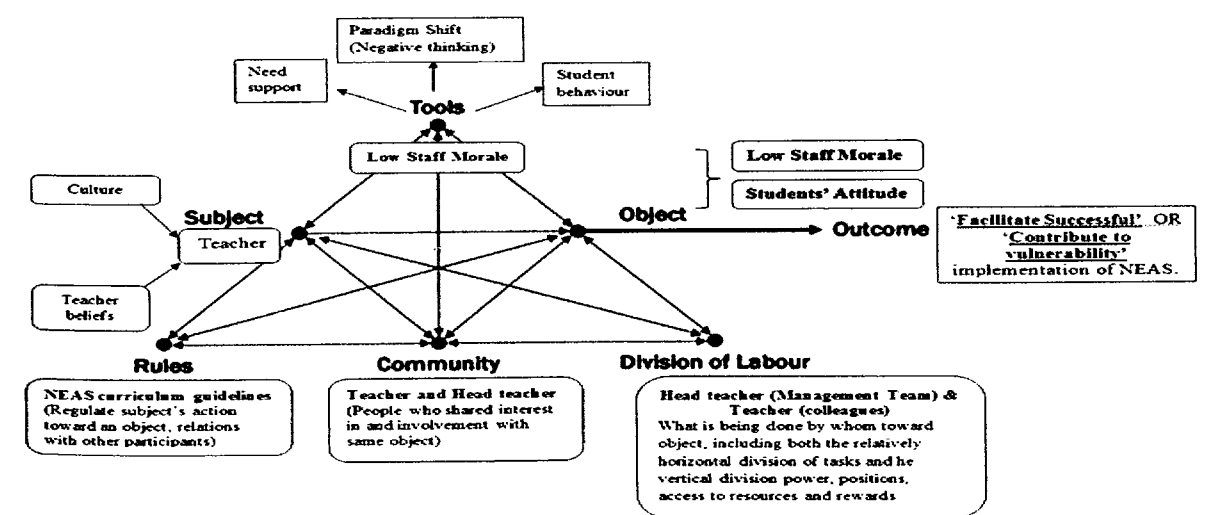

Figure 4.0 Interrelated Factors Summarized via CHAT in Primary School B

4.4 Discussion on the Main Factors-Primary School B

The following themes reflect the main factors which emerged from the case study data for Primary School B, analysed based on the CHAT components..

i. **Relationship**

At this school, positive relationship among and between the management, the teachers, the students and the parents were not prevalent. Positive interaction, mutual support and exchange of new ideas among these individuals and quarters are difficult to achieve. This has prevented the school from effectively implementing NEAS. The teachers agreed that relationship is something that should be cultivated among the teachers and the community component (parents, students and management team).

ii. **Leadership**

Due to the weakness in leadership which fall in the division of labour component, teachers here were apprehensive of the change even with the tools (support from the ministry) and guidelines prepared for them. There was a challenge as far as leadership is concerned at this school and respondents here agreed that effective leadership is needed to successfully implement NEAS. However; this is difficult to accomplish at this school as the leadership was not successful in steering this team towards overcoming the challenges.

iii. **Teachers' Beliefs**

The teachers at this school approached planning and decision-making on NEAS negatively. They have difficulties in carrying out their duties in implementing NEAS where they find it very challenging and time consuming in using the tools prepared for them. They were unable to work productively to use creative teaching techniques to suit the circumstances, background and surroundings of their pupils. The teachers felt with more guidance, direction and support from the Ministry of Education, NEAS, can be carried out successfully.

iv. **Students' Attitude**

The negative aspects of the students' behaviour have directly contributed to a non-effective teaching and learning process. Analysis found that the students lack respect towards their teachers which in turn make the relationship between them tensed and the teachers' morale to be low.

v. **Low Morale of Staff**

The culmination of various unconducive factors has resulted in the low morale of the staff at this school. There was also evidence that the school has adopted a high tolerance towards the students' behaviour and indiscipline nature. This has resulted in the implementation of NEAS to be a constant struggle for them.

According to Levin (1998), the educational field has witnessed a massive introduction of innovation in the past twenty-five years. Due to this, the teachers now feel professionally marginalized, disempowered and afflicted by an increase in bureaucracy and paperwork (Ball 2008, Goodson 2003, Levin 2008). A decade after his earlier observation, Levin (2008) in his analysis of the recent 21st century educational reforms in many contexts still highlight the prevalence of almost identical impacts on the part of the teachers as the main implementers at the base of educational policy change . Nevertheless, a reform activity has mostly focused on the espoused goals for the past few years (Elmore, 2004). Although reform activities have increased the workload for teachers and have presented some of the most challenging tasks to them, no such evidence is available regarding the success of these reform activities in improving classroom achievement. Hence, a literature regarding educational change alone is not sufficient (Cuban 1998, Fullan 1993, Sarason 1990, Spillane 1999) as

the issue here is not that change does not happen; rather; the aspirations of the policy are often not fully met (Supovitz 2008). This notion also reverberates in many studies on educational change using phenomenon in the education systems in many countries as the backdrops. It has also often been shown that the history of breakthroughs in the study of change is not only in form of the creation of isolated, brilliant ideas, but also in the intersection of independently discovered elements spontaneously or otherwise coming together at opportune periods of development (Fullan 2005) .

5.0 Conclusion

It could be concluded that the policy change for assessment is met mixed with reactions by the education circle particularly the principal and teachers where it could be seen that there are both reactive approaches and proactive approaches being adopted at the case study sites. Reactive approaches embody more negative, less responsive and a lack of initiative in mitigating a set of changes which were seen as problems rather than challenges. On the other hand, the proactive approaches adopted by the other school saw healthy level of assertiveness, innovation and initiative taking place in mitigating new changes which were seen as inevitable challenges which must be collegially overcame. As such it could be seen the reactive approaches are influenced by the lack of quality leadership, strong beliefs and a non- favourable institutional environment and surrounding which hinder a smooth implementation of changes.

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National Education Assessment System (NEAS): A Case Study on Approaches Developed by Schools in Malaysia

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Abstract

National Education Assessment System (NEAS) has been introduced into Malaysian educational structure in 2011 for primary schools and 2012 for secondary school. NEAS was introduced in order to improve primary and secondary education system in Malaysia with the purpose of implementation is to create a dynamic and intellectual human resource in the future. The system wasalso initiated to elevate teaching profession in Malaysia while at the same time focusing on the Philosophy of National Education. Since its implementation in 2011, diverse reaction and respond have been ascertained not only among the teachers, but also parents and students. The practice of NEAS requires teachers to consistently assess their students according to the guidelines set by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. This research studies the educational change in Malaysia and examines the experience of reforming assessment since the implementation of NEAS. In order to assemble useful perception and insights towards the implementation of NEAS among teachers in Malaysia, qualitative case study method was employed as researcher stayed anonymous throughout the data collection and during observation of situation. A school in the urban area was randomly picked and it was found that with constant support and sustenance from school head, NEAS can be successful, though intensive trainings are needed in order to help teachers to become skilled at the newly implemented system.

Keywords: National Education Assessment System, school based assessment, reforming assessment

1.0 Introduction

The need to transform the education system in Malaysia is becoming more important in order to prepare the pupils for challenging future ahead. It is believed that most important objective of primary and secondary education system is to create students with as much as possible knowledge and social skills in order to flourish in their later stage of lives (United Kingdom Department of Education, 2014). The Malaysian educational system has been transforming itself since pre-independence and post-independence. According to Jawal (2013), at the early stage, there was no national education system in Malaysia (then was known as Tanah Melayu); instead each different race was schooled