

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE ASSESSMENT REFORM IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: *The present paper is a qualitative case study of exploring the perceptions of assessment reform in primary schools in Malaysia. It is to explore the approaches developed by schools in response to the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) and to explore the factors which affect the implementation of NEAS. The participants of the study are teachers and the head teachers. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and observations. Results of data analysis revealed that the SAGA Primary School was found to be representing a school that successful in implementing the NEAS. It clearly shows that there is a true spirit of teamwork, a good leadership and good beliefs among teachers. All the approaches were meant to help in achieving the objectives in NEAS implementation. The factors which affect the implementation of the NEAS for both schools are great relationships between staffs, leadership and positive beliefs in teachers.*

Keywords: *Assessment Reform, National Education Assessment System (NEAS), Case Study, Primary Schools*

Introduction

In 1988, the National Education Philosophy (or known as Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan) is established focusing on the importance of holistic education and personal development of individuals including cognitive, affective, spiritual and psychomotor aspects as well as the development of a united and harmonious multi-racial progressive society. Later, this philosophy is used to develop an assessment system called National Education Assessment System (NEAS) (LPM, 2012). By definition, the NEAS is an educational system conducted by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate and schools with the main aim to introduce a set of indicators in assessing students' potential and their readiness to learn rather than testing solely on their achievement (Lembaga Peperiksaan, 2010). The NEAS was implemented in 2011. The

objective of the NEAS are to reduce the focus on public examinations, to strengthen school-based assessment, to improve students' learning, to create a holistic and everlasting assessment and to develop a better human capital (LPM, 2009).

The Problem Statement

The concept of educational change has an influence on changes in school system. The Malaysian education system has introduced KSSR and KSSM in 2011 as a paradigm shift in its education system. As proposed by the Assessment Reform Group (2008), any reform made has to have an innovation such as innovation in assessment system. However, literature regarding educational change is not sufficient (Soillane, 1999). According to Supovitz (2008), in many countries, the shifts in educational policies for certain purposes are due to poor, inadequate and inefficient implementation. Similarly, in the Malaysian context, very little is known about the effectiveness of NEAS. So, this study is meant to explore more on the educational reform implemented as suggested by NEAS. Although it is a case studies which could not be generalized to all schools in Malaysia, but still the findings would be beneficial to the ministry.

Literature Review

Education is an integral part of change. Hence, public and private universities should offer programs which are in line with market's needs. The Ministry of Education also need to transform the entire education system to improve creativity and innovation in the education system. A new perspective is needed whereby education does not only need adding staffs and facilities but to improve the dynamics of the teaching and learning process. The Education Development Plan (2013-2025) also known as Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 launched by the former Prime Minister in 2013. It has 11 strategic shifts in transforming the education system such as to provide equal access to quality education of an international standard, to ensure every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English language, to develop values-driven Malaysians, to transform teaching into the profession of choice, to ensure high-performing school leaders in every school, to empower State Education Departments, District Education Offices and schools to customise solutions based on need, to leverage information and communication technology to scale up quality learning across Malaysia, to transform ministry delivery capabilities and capacity, to partner with parents, community and private sector at scale, to maximise student outcomes for every ringgit and to increase transparency for direct public accountability.

The Nature of Educational Change

There is an extensive body of literature on educational change. The educational change is very complex. The anatomy of educational change could be viewed and scrutinized from four essential aspects namely the intended goal of the change, the system and processes, the beliefs, values and perception of the implementers and the change in work culture, status quo, leadership and support mechanisms. Firstly is the intended goal of the change. The goal of educational change is to bring innovative changes which are timely to replace former structures and programmes (Fullan, 2005). And, there are four phases of change which involves the initiation stage whereby a decision needs to be made regarding the change involved, the implementation of the innovations, followed by the process to ensure that the innovation is an on-going process and the final phase of change is the phase to look for the outcome of the innovation. Secondly, the system and processes involved. We are going to look at the change of system, processes and work culture. These changes could be a procedure which is designed to improve the current procedure effectiveness or a complete new procedure which seeks to

change the status-quo (Fullan, 2001). Thirdly is the beliefs, values and perception of the implementers. According to Cheung (2001), one of the reason why innovation fails is due to teachers' belief systems. And, it is very difficult to change teachers' belief system although teachers are the main agent who implement the system. The response of people towards the questions of "what?", "why?" and "how?" are very important in making sure the successful change in the educational system (Hollingsworth, 2000). Lastly is the leadership and the management mechanism factor. Without doubt, leadership and management are important in educational change (Fullan, 2005). However, as the nature of the change itself is non-linear and mostly chaotic, leadership is also a sensitive issues. A good leadership and a good management practises could only happen with a very immense contribution and participation of individuals towards educational change (Goodson, 2001).

The NEAS In the Malaysian Education Context

The NEAS consists of central examination and school-based assessment (SBA). SBA consists of four components which are central assessment, school assessment, physical activity, sports and co-curriculum assessment and psychometric assessment. The first two components are under academic components and the other two are under non-academic components (Ong, 2010). SBA is being implemented in 2011. School assessment in SBA consists of formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is something new to the Malaysian assessment system.

The study reported in this paper was designed to explore the following research questions:

- i) What approaches the school developing in respond to the NEAS?
- ii) What factors affect the implementation of the NEAS?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). This social theory is suitable as it has various elements of transformation of change. In addition, its features allows compatible use for analysis, its interrelated aspects shows a very complex social phenomenon and most elements in it are used as a tool to produce items in the instrument of this research. CHAT is made up of object-oriented, collective activity mediated by artefacts, community, rules and division of labour (Engestrom, 1987). Even, the entire activity system is the unit of analysis which is intended to investigate the system as an objectively given context (Engestrom, 1993).

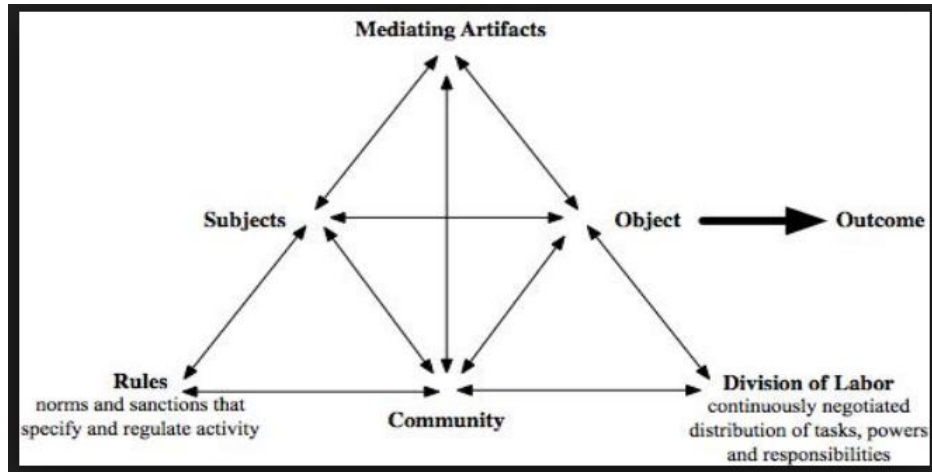


Figure 1: Framework of The Socially Distributed Activity System

Methodology

This study is a case study collecting data using semi-structured interviews and observations. The context of this study is primary schools in Malaysia. This study will be undertake a qualitative case study paradigm which will provide insights into the potential usage of qualitative research approaches by numerous parties in the educational field to assist them in eliciting rich data which will lead to significant understanding of more phenomena revolving around educational change. The participants of the study are teachers and head teachers. Two schools were involved which are SAGA and WIRA Primary Schools. The name are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the school identity for ethical purposes. The schools involved is one of the schools from an urban area and rural area in the country. From each school, three subject teachers and one head teacher are selected. Each of the subject teachers teaches Mathematics, Malay language and English subjects. They are chosen as these subjects are compulsory in the implementation of NEAS. The methodology of this research is based on the purposive sampling which involve two case studies separated into two categories namely the “successful school” and the “in-progress school” which are implementing the NEAS in Malaysia. Data analysis for this study is using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). By using this method, raw data of the first informant was compared to the second informant. And, as it involves qualitative data, data collection and data analysis should happen simultaneously (Merriam, 1998).

There are few strategies that have been undertaken in this study to enhance validity and reliability of this research. They include providing a thick description of the scenario, using member check whereby the emerging patterns or themes were shown to some of the participants interviewed to check whether the tentative assertions of the findings were probable (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2003). The third strategy used is peer review. In this study, the patterns of the findings was shown to the supervisor and the expert. And, the verbal protocols and the interviews were verified. Next is the audit trail whereby the audiotapes of the interviews and observations were reviewed. Triangulation method is also used to increase the confidence in the interpretation, which the data was collected using interviews and observation. This study also uses prolonged engagement and anonymity as to enhance validity and reliability of this study.

Results and Discussions

What Approaches the School Developing in Respond to the NEAS?

In this study, data collected from the SAGA Primary school showed that the implementation of the NEAS is successful. The approaches used by the teachers are teamwork, having a good leadership and good teachers' belief among the colleagues, management team, parents and community. Even, an effective leadership means that a leader has to really understand what works, when and with whom. Furthermore, a good leader must at least understand his or her personal strengths and weaknesses so that all the staffs under him could work effectively. During the interview, the teachers believed that true leadership of teachers and the teachers' high interest in teaching which they feel as a result of courses and training that they have gone through contribute to the school's success. All of these approaches which have been developed by the school in responding to the NEAS are believed to have assisted in the success of the NEAS implementation.

What Factors Affect the Implementation of the NEAS?

In this study, from the data collected from SAGA Primary school, it is found that the factors affecting the implementation of the NEAS are relationship, leadership, teacher beliefs, super working culture and culture of respect. Teachers in WIRA Primary school believe that the factors are relationship, leadership, teacher beliefs, students' attitude and low staff morale. It is clearly shown that the first three factors which are relationship, leadership and the belief of teachers seem to overlap for both schools. Teachers of WIRA Primary school is having a negative belief towards NEAS. They feel that NEAS are burdening them, very challenging and time-consuming and are having difficulties to cope with the new system. However, they do believe that with proper guidance from the Ministry of Education, they can improve. On the other hand, teachers of SAGA Primary school have a positive perceptions towards NEAS whereby they feel that they could use the teaching tools provided productively.

Conclusions and Implications

This case study could be a reference to other researcher who is interested to look at the assessment reform in the Malaysian educational context. Although this is only a case study which involves only two schools, it still could play a role to be an example for others. According to Fullan (2001), educational change needs an understanding of the process and also the factors that contribute to the success. If teachers do not understand those two factors, it is very difficult to implement any changes to the education system. Furthermore, in order to change, it is suitable to use Activity Theory in a micro-level and macro-level study. Finally, the experienced that is gained in conducting a case study is very valuable to me as a researcher. This study has some implications. This research could further contribute to other researchers, ministry of education officers and academicians. Other researchers could use this study as a reference for other similar study in the field of educational change and assessment, which could then benefit the community. The findings of this study could also help in decision-making among MES, school administrators and teachers. For future research, this study could be treated as a guide for the implementation of the NEAS in later years. However, this study could be improved if the triangulation process is added. And, study could also be conducted using rural schools as the infrastructure for rural schools are very limited. Quantitative studies can also be conducted involving hundreds of schools and thousands of teachers so that results can be compared.

This case study shows an example of how an exploration towards the implementation of an educational change in primary schools are conducted. Although this case study could not be generalized to other primary schools in Malaysia, it could assist in the school reform and also be an example for others. The sample might be perceived as small but the findings could give an impact to facilitate in the successful implementation of the NEAS in Malaysian educational context.

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