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**IDEAL Vs. REALITY: EVIDENCES FROM SENIOR TEACHERS'
EXPERIENCES ON THE MALAYSIAN SCHOOL-BASED
ASSESSMENT SYSTEM (SBA)**

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Abstract

School-based Assessment (SBA) system or better known by its Malay acronym as PBS (*Pentaksiran Ber-asaskan Sekolah*) being part of the Malaysia educational reform was officially introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2011, with the aim to improve the effectiveness of the system in evaluating students' academic progress and personal development. Under the system, students' learning outcomes will be evaluated based on their competencies and readiness and teachers are encouraged to use various evaluation methods such as question and answer sessions, quizzes, presentation, short writing, dramas, and role-playing (Dietel, Herman & Knuth, 1991; Davison, 2007). However, the system received many negative feedbacks and claimed to pose great pressures on the part of the teachers, students and their parents as well. This study aspires to investigate the issue of SBA based on evidences revealed by senior teachers from five secondary schools who were involved in the implementation of the system. The qualitative case study aimed at identifying some perceptions, expectations, challenges and suggestions to improve the implementation of the SBA. Respondents perceived that teachers had been imposed with additional workloads in terms paper work on top of their teaching responsibilities. Furthermore, large class size and lack of supporting resources (e.g. internet facilities) had further aggravated their negative perceptions on the SBA system. Overall they strongly admitted that both students and teachers did not receive much benefit from the system. The findings indicate that to ensure the effectiveness of the system's implementation, teachers must be equipped with sufficient and detailed information on the evaluation process for a specified students' competency meant to be evaluated. In doing so, fears and negative attitudes among teachers on the SBA shall be allied. Besides that, a more effective mechanism needs to be developed to reduce the burden of teachers in preparing and completing documentation as per required by the SBA, while issues such as heavy teaching hours and large class size be promptly addressed.

Keywords: school-based assessment (SBA), positive attitudes, supporting resources

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Introduction

Standardised public examinations have long been the accepted measurement for the Malaysian students' achievement. About a decade ago, the Education Ministry viewed that the assessment system applied by all primary and secondary schools was impractical and burdensome to students. Furthermore the system failed to reflect students' true competence. This phenomenon was highlighted by the former Malaysian Director General of Education, Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor who stressed that "The attitude of being too obsessed with too many standardized examinations in the national education system is the main obstacle in achieving maximum level of creativity and innovation. Too many examinations at the primary, secondary and university levels have reduced the time for students to develop their talents, abilities and potentials in their areas of interest"(Utusan Malaysia, 29th September 2005).

Many researchers were in the opinion that the fundamental problem with the exam-oriented education system is that examinations distort students' motivation and learning by over-emphasising the importance of the scores as the ultimate learning outcomes (Che Noraini, 2006; Paris, 1995) while measures of students' competencies and focus on extrinsic goals (such as exam scores) and task completion (such as getting through the exam) had undermined intrinsic motivation, interest, and persistence (Ames and Archer, 1988). In its effort to move from an 'exam-oriented culture' to 'exam-free' environment, the Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyidin Yassin in 2009, hinted that a new evaluation method will be introduced to gauge the competence of students by taking into account both academic and extra-curricular achievements. The Minister said, "The (present) evaluation is basically based on curriculum-achievements... we would like to see a more rounded sort of education achievements among our children." (Daily Express, 6 June 2009)

Thus, the implementation of the School-based Assessment (SBA) by the Ministry of Education in 2011 is considered as an important paradigm shift to a long standing criticism on teaching and rote learning process and from the pressure of exam-oriented system. The main objective is to improve the effectiveness of the system when applied as a form of measurement of students' academic progress.

SBA consists of four components, which are the academic part, the school assessment and centre assessment and the non-academic part, the physical activity, sports and co-curriculum assessment and psychometric assessment. (Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia 2009) . It contributes to certain percent of the whole assessment depending on the level of schooling. There are four main reasons why SBA or PBS have been introduced and implemented:

- i). It is expected to enhance the meaningfulness of assessment where the focus is given more on students' development in learning rather than their scores or grades.

- ii). It is designed to reduce the over-reliance on data (grades and scores) obtained through central examinations in getting information about students in the school system.
- iii). It is anticipated that it will empower the school and teachers to conduct quality assessment of students. Therefore, school assessment will be given due recognition and a significant place in the overall assessment system.
- iv). It ensures that the performance of pupils is comparable to world standards in various areas of knowledge, skills and competence, with the introduction of a standard-referenced assessment.

Looking at the above justifications, it is undeniable fact that the most important stakeholder in ensuring the success of this new assessment system is the teaching staff. As emphasized by the former Malaysian Director General of Education, Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor, “The most important part in the implementation of any plan, is the teachers. However good the plan is, it will be of no use if the teachers do not implement it well.” According to Chan, Sidhu, & Yunus (2006), the SBA system requires teachers to have a variety of teaching approaches and assessment techniques that have a direct impact on the assessment outcomes.

Upon realizing the crucial role of educators in this new system, this study aims to investigate the suitability of the SBA from their perspectives. It will highlight the teachers’ perceptions, expectations and challenges towards this system and the benefits received by both teachers and students after implementing SBA in evaluating students’ academic performance.

Objective of the study

This study aspires to delve into the issue of SBA based on evidences revealed by senior teachers from five secondary schools who were involved in the implementation of this system. It also aimed at identifying some perceptions, expectations, challenges and suggestions to improve the implementation of the SBA.

Research questions

This study explores senior secondary school teachers’ experiences in implementing School-based Assessment (SBA) in order to gain better insight into the implementation and practice of the system and to understand the problems faced by the teachers. Specifically, it aims to find answers to the following research questions:

- i). What are the perceptions of senior secondary school teachers towards the SBA?
- ii). What are the expectations of senior secondary school teachers towards the SBA?
- iii). What are the challenges they faced in implementing the SBA?
- iv). What are the suggestions to be offered to improve the implementation of the SBA?

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with five experienced senior teachers who had been involved with the implementation of the newly introduced assessment system. Three of the respondents had involved in the teaching profession for more than 20 years, in both urban and rural areas. The other two respondents had possessed 15 years of teaching experience. All respondents were interviewed for about two hours using semi-structured interview method. In some occasions the interview departed from the guide in order to explore unanticipated but relevant issues about the SBA brought up by the respondents. The findings were transcribed and analysed according to themes. For ethical purposes, in reporting the views of the respondents, this paper will address them with anonymised names (not their real names)

Findings and discussions

Initial Perceptions and reality

Initially, all respondents agreed that teachers had a very good perception of the SBA as a suitable means of assessment as it moves from the traditional ‘exam orientation’ to a more ‘student-centred orientation.’ Furthermore, the SBA will be able to assess learners from various domains rather than emphasizing mainly on the cognitive aspect. This assessment system is coherent with the concepts entrenched in the National Philosophy of Education which is to enhance potentials of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner in order to create individuals who are well-equipped intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. Additionally, they also thought that the new system would be able to lessen teachers’ burden in conducting assessment. They hoped that this new system could reduce the pressure of ‘exam orientation’ thus provide a better assessment method in evaluating students’ academic progress and personal development.

Unfortunately, after more than two years of its implementation, teachers realized that the SBA is fundamentally idealistic in nature rather than realistic. With a number of problems which seemed to be out of their expectations, this system has been seen as a big obstacle and teachers had gradually lost their faith on the system.

Challenges

Lack of information and training

All respondents admitted that they had not been given sufficient information and relevant trainings on the SBA prior to its implementation. Three of the respondents replied that their knowledge and exposure was only based on a short briefing session given by the headmasters or the ‘panitia’ teachers. As for the other two teachers, they attended a three-day course organized by the District Education Office. After the short course or training which they had gained on the SBA, they had been appointed as the school’s ‘main trainer’ or better known as ‘JU’(Jurulatih Utama). Nevertheless, they

stressed the information given was insufficient to enable them to provide accurate information what more to guide other colleagues to promptly implement the SBA at their own schools. Besides, this ‘cascading training model’ has been found to be ineffective since the information has been diluted along the way (Norzila, 2013). This problem is further aggravated with the lack of reference materials or handbooks on the SBA for teachers to refer to when they confronted with problems during the implementation stage. As highlighted by respondent 1, Mr. Bukhari, “Teachers need to be given clear assessment requirements and detailed guidelines, and then only we can do our job well.” This replies denotes that Mr Bukhari was not well equipped with the content and the process of assessment under the SBA system. He also mentioned this situation has led to a lot of dissatisfaction among teachers as he felt teacher were ‘forced’ to implement the system which they were not familiar with and for the fact that they had very little knowledge about the SBA.

Class size

One of the major problems faced by teachers in implementing the SBA is the huge size of classes they have to deal with. Generally, the normal class size in the Malaysian secondary school is around 36 to 40 students per class. This situation presents a great challenge to teachers as there are too many students’ competencies to be monitored and evaluated. Moreover, the problem becomes worst as in most cases, the same teacher has to teach two or three different subjects many different classes and at the same time deal with such a large class size!. For instance, as explained by respondent 1, Mr. Bukhari “ I have to teach seven classes of 32 to 38 students per class. It means that I have 245 students (7 classes @ an average of 35 students) and to assess 245 students, at one time for each topic covered. This is definitely an insurmountable task for me as well as for other teachers”. This same issue was also critically voiced by respondent 2, Madam Zizah. She reveals, “Now, I am teaching 10 classes for three different subjects, 3 classes for Mathematics, 3 classes for Science and another 4 classes for Arts. With an average of 36 students per class, in total, I have to evaluate almost 360 students. This is simply impossible for me to be fair in my evaluation, since I could not even remember each student’s name.”

Heavy workload and time constraints

Due to the huge class size, the implementation of the SBA has undoubtedly increased the teachers’ workload. According to the interviewees, they are now burdened with endless paperwork and documentations, since the SBA required them to provide evidences that each student had acquired certain level of competence on a specific topic. Respondent 3, Mr. Zubair, highlighted that he spent most of his time to fill in students’ reports, one after another. This task is overwhelmed and unbearable. With the whole process of documentation, he admitted that “ most of the teachers have no choice unless to bring home all the extra administrative work for which they had stay up to late at night”. To make matters worse he added, “these teachers are also given

other responsibilities at school such as, they are to handle school projects, being the advisor for student-clubs and students' co-curricular activities”.

Due to this heavy workload, as claimed by respondent 4, Madam Sharifah, many teachers had developed extreme work stress due to time constraints. She furiously elucidated that: “We were instructed to key-in the ‘band’ achieved by each student, and this duties could only be conducted during our free period. Things become more stressful when we tried to key-in the ‘band’, it takes hours as the internet connection is very poor. And once we managed to access the website, the bell rings. That’s it!!” . She claimed that, the problem is we simply do not have such free time at school to perform such work. After teaching, we have to correct answers from the students’ homework, and during our ‘free period’, we could be asked to take substitute class and be ‘the relief teacher’.

A similar concern was echoed by teachers in a study done by Aidarwati et.al. (2013). This study aimed at eliciting information on the implementation of the SBA from the perspective of the primary and secondary school teachers. She found that teachers need training on time management as they have to assess each and individual student and key-in individual evidence under the SBA (p.31). The researchers also concluded that all teachers involved in the study unanimously agreed that the SBA was very time consuming. Likewise, a study conducted by Faizah (2011) also indicated the teachers in general need proper training on time management in executing the SBA.

Focus of teaching

The respondents also voiced their concern that the implementation of the SBA demanded more attention be paid on the evaluation / assessment duties rather than their core ‘teaching’ responsibility. As complained by respondent 4, Madam Sharifah, “Under this SBA, teachers spend more time with papers than with students.” According to her, most of the teaching hours in the classes are used mainly to implement the SBA rather than on the actual teaching and learning. Although they had tried to focus more on the syllabus and teaching activities, more often than not their progress was hampered due to the need to fulfil the requirements of the SBA. This idea is supported by both respondent 2, Madam Zizah and respondent 4, Mr. Zubair who firmly expressed their contentions when they said, “Our main task as teachers is to teach and guide our students, to develop individuals, not to execute the administrative part of the SBA.” In a worried voice, they also highlighted that at the end of the day, students’ welfare as knowledge seekers is greatly affected and they (the students) would be at the losing end.

Lack of computer and internet facilities

All interviewees pointed out another major obstacle in implementing the SBA – computer and internet facilities. According to them, schools in general are provided with very limited number of computers to be used by teachers. For instance, respondent

4, Madam Sharifah pointed out that, “In my school, there are only 2 computers- one in the office and one in the media room. No computer is provided for teachers in the teachers’ common room. Consequently, when we want to key in the ‘band’, other teachers also would like to do the same and rush to use the limited number of computers made available for the teachers.”

She further expounded that in order to avoid “competition” in using the computers in the office, some teachers brought their own laptops to school in the hope to settle the SBA heavy work during school hours. Nevertheless, she highlighted that teachers still faced a lot of difficulties in key-in in the ‘band’ in the computer due to poor internet connection and overloading in the system. This happens because of the congestion in the system as many teachers are performing the same task at the same hour. Hence, according to her, many of her friends chose to complete this task at home, sometimes at 2.00 or 3.00 o’clock in the morning.

The problem with the poor internet facilities has also led to negative impact on teachers’ evaluation of their students. Respondent 4, Madam Sharifah said, “We felt very stressed out because we have to key-in the ‘band’ for each student each time we finish discussing a topic. The evaluation done after every topic is a great burden for teachers. With a poor internet connection, the problems are getting worse. Due to limited time, some teachers have simply key-in the band without seriously considering the evaluation process. We love teaching, but this system changes our noble task. We have to admit that we do not have time to do all those administrative works !”

Subjective evaluation

Another crucial issue highlighted by the respondents is the reliability and validity of SBA as an assessment system. It is unquestionable fact that teachers are given power to assess their students, however, due to lack of information, training, materials and guidelines in executing the SBA, it has led to a subjective evaluation. According to respondent 5, Madam Ida, “The problem we faced is that we do not know how to define and to place the correct ‘band’. My evaluation might be different from my colleagues. For example, in evaluating student’s learning ability, I noticed the student has not actually achieved Band 3 for me, but his previous teacher has awarded him such band. It creates uncertainty and the validity of the evaluation can be argued.”

This finding concurs with the result of a study done by Aidarwati et.al. (2013). In her study, she found that the major concern among primary school teachers was the need to be given enough training “on assessing the students using the rubric indicated and the exposure on how to conduct the assessment” (p.31). The same concern was raised by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate which found that “teachers have different interpretations on how to carry out PBS in schools” (Norzila, 2013, p.7).

Due to the subjectivity and differences in the teachers' evaluation of the students' performance, some schools have developed their own methods and ways to measure the students' academic achievement. Some of them have preserved the end-of-term examinations (Kin Tung, 2013). This action is fully understandable as mentioned by respondent 2, Madam Zizah, "Based on this SBA system, we are not certain on how to place students in the appropriate level or class for the next academic year." She further explained that due to this problem, 'Now we are confused as we were asked to prepare a set of final exam question, my school has also developed its own form of standardized assessment".

Procedure, validity and reliability

The SBA requires individual assessment of the students where teachers are required to provide evidences for each student. Problems arise when students or teachers are absent from school. This concern was raised by respondent 2, Madam Zizah who said, "When a student is absent for several days, and we have conducted assessment after finishing a topic, we cannot simply give him any 'band' due to his/her absent. When he/she comes back to school, subject teachers will try to push him/her to do exercises to cover the uncovered topics during his/her free time at school in order to fulfil the SBA requirement. Because of so many pressures, it is not impossible for some teachers to do so. It ends up some of them just simply put the 'band' in the system and their job is considered done."

She added that, "When teachers are on medical leave for several days, they have to update their PBS task and have to catch up the entire topics in the syllabus after coming back to work. With all the heavy work and key-in tasks that they have to do, it is not impossible for the teachers to get sick again and require another medical leave. Such PBS is very impractical and burdensome."

Given all the problems which had been highlighted relating to the implementation of the SBA in schools, the main questions remain are, 'Is the SBA a reliable and valid form of assessment of the students?' and "Is the SBA a true reflection of learners' learning competencies?" All respondents involved in this study were undeniably very sceptical on this new assessment system. Hence, they provided some suggestions to improve the process or execution of the SBA in Malaysian education system.

Suggestions

Provide detailed information and sufficient training

All respondents agreed that in general teachers do not have proper knowledge about this system and how it should be efficiently implemented. The lack of the know-how

knowledge is evidently mentioned by all respondents. One of them, respondent 5, Madam Ida suggested that, “The staff from the Ministry of education should visit every school and talk to the teachers. They must listen to the teachers who are the main players of this system. The officials should play an active role to explain about this system and offer hands-on classes for all teachers. They should not just come “to monitor and evaluate teachers.” This direct approach in delivering the information will definitely reduce information dilution which normally happens when information is delivered based on ‘top-down’ approach.

Besides that, respondent 1, Mr. Bukhari argued that many teachers do not have clear understanding on coursework assessment document and unsure of the six ‘band’ grading process of evaluation. He suggested for more effective in-service trainings to be conducted for teachers where they are able to have constructive discussions to tackle the challenges and issues of the SBA.

On a similar note, respondent 3, Mr. Zubair emphasized that teachers need to be given clear ideas on what the SBA is all about and how it should be conducted. Based on his experience, due to lack of understanding on SBA among teachers, their perception in evaluation methods differed. He said, “My perception of Band 3 is different from another teacher. I am a bit strict in evaluating the level of Band 3, whereas others are more lenient. We do not have clear guidelines.” Brown (2011) made the same call when he enunciated that, “without appropriate resource base, policy framework, and professional context, of course, all this (the implementation of the SBA) will NOT work” (p.3). The detailed information and sufficient training will enhance teachers’ readiness in implementing this new assessment system.

Infrastructure - Reduce class size

The respondents proposed that in implementing this new assessment system, the Education Ministry needs to firstly look at the academic milieu of Malaysian education system. As compared to the class size in Australia primary and secondary schools where the class is between 20 to 25 students and in the USA a class consists no more than 18 students per teacher produced the greatest benefits to boost student academic achievement. (US National school Board associations, 2005). On the contrary, a normal class size in a national school in Malaysia is around 36 to 40 students (Nurhidayah, Malaysian Insider, 2013). The huge number of students in a class renders the assessment task of each individual learner becomes very tough and strenuous on the teachers.

Infrastructure – provide sufficient computers with internet facilities

All five teachers strongly suggested that the government must firstly ensure that all schools to be equipped with sufficient support in terms of infrastructure before implementing SBA, particularly having sufficient number of computers for teachers and reasonable internet facilities. According to them, since the SBA emphasizes online grading system, it is highly recommended for each teacher to be facilitated with a

computer and relevant software to ease their task in performing the SBA. Besides that, the internet connection must also be upgraded, especially in rural areas in order to support the heavy task to key-in all the evaluation mark which teachers have to do on a daily basis.

Formulate ways to reduce teachers' workload

In reducing teachers' workload, all respondents suggested that one of the crucial actions to be taken by the education department is to prepare the standard and appropriate assessment instruments for all schools. By having such proper instruments, their evaluation of the students' abilities will be objective and non-discriminatory for students. It can lead to a more reliable and standard system, not only between teachers in the same school, but also from different schools.

Besides that, a more effective mechanism needs to be developed to reduce the burden of teachers in preparing all required paperwork and documentation. At present all sub topics need to be tested and key in all evidences. This can be reduced when only certain topics chosen to be provided with evidences and evaluated. All respondents emphasized that the documentation process is not only time-consuming, but also makes use of a lot of papers which is not congruent with the spirit of the 'paperless world' which Malaysia is currently practicing.

Focusing on the core business of teaching

The respondents also stressed on the importance of teachers to not being carried away with the new assessment system at the expense of the noble task of teaching and educating students. According to them, the strong emphasis given on SBA by the Ministry of Education and the Education Department has reduced the importance of teaching and learning as the priority of the education system. Compounding the issue is the fact that teachers are too engrossed with trying to cope with the new assessment procedure that they unavoidably put aside their main core business that is teaching and educate our new generation in this country.

This research hopes that the issues raised and the suggestions offered will not fall on deaf ears but instead help to improve the management of the SBA and enhance teachers' preparedness in implementing such new system.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the new assessment system was formulated based on a noble and virtuous intention: to provide a more holistic assessment of individual student's learning abilities, to reduce 'exam oriented' syndrome and improve teachers' teaching strategies. Nevertheless, this system has created a lot of problems, especially to the teachers in regards to its implementation.

This study has provided an important insight of the SBA's implementation from the perspective of teachers, who are the core stakeholders of the system. It supports the findings highlighted by previous researchers (Salmiah et.al, 2013; Tan A.M,2010), on the difficulties faced by teachers in implementing the SBA in schools. Another crucial lesson derived from this study is that, any changes to be offered by the authorities in order to improve our education system should be done after necessary preparations in achieving the goals of the new policies are in place prior to its implementation. In order to make such a transformation effective, sufficient information on the new policy must be conveyed to the different stakeholders; parents, teachers and to the students as well. By doing so, those parties could expect the gain benefits from such changes and thus would be more receptive to the new ideas. Hence, it could possibly reduce the resistance especially from the implementers of the system, which involved our noble teachers. It is high time that the policy makers, ministry of education, academicians from higher institutions, teachers and 'think tank' put their heads together in the best interest of the Ministry, in order to improve not just the Malaysian educational system but all other stakeholders in the nation.

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