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### EMPOWERING VOICES: UNPACKING TEACHER AGENCY IN ASSESSMENT REFORM WITHIN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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#### ABSTRACT

This academic paper presents a compelling qualitative exploration of how teachers in primary schools across Malaysia perceive and engage with the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) reform. Moving beyond traditional assessment practices, this study delves into the dynamic strategies adopted by educators to align with NEAS goals, which emphasize holistic learning, school-based assessment, and student readiness over standardized testing. The research focuses on two contrasting case studies SAGA Primary School, recognized for its exemplary implementation, and WIRA Primary School, still navigating challenges to uncover the key factors influencing teacher agency and ownership in educational change. Through semi-structured interviews and observations, the study reveals that successful NEAS implementation is closely tied to strong leadership, positive teacher beliefs, collaborative relationships, and a supportive work culture. Conversely, challenges such as low morale, resistance to change, and lack of training hinder progress in other settings. This paper not only contributes to the discourse on assessment reform but also highlights the critical role of teacher empowerment in driving sustainable change in primary education systems.

**Keywords:** Teacher agency, assessment reform, National Education Assessment System (NEAS), case study, educational change.

#### INTRODUCTION

In 1988, Malaysia introduced the National Education Philosophy, or *Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan*, which emphasized the development of individuals through cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and physical dimensions while fostering unity in a diverse society. Building upon this foundation, the Malaysian

Examination Syndicate developed the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) in 2011, aiming to shift focus from rote memorization and high-stakes exams to a more comprehensive and formative approach to learning. The NEAS integrates both centralized examinations and school-based assessments (SBA), including academic and non-academic components such as psychometric evaluations and co-curricular activities. Its core objectives include reducing reliance on public exams, enhancing school-based evaluation, improving student engagement, and developing a well-rounded human capital. However, the success of such reforms hinges significantly on how teachers those at the frontline of implementation perceive, interpret, and enact these changes.

This paper reimagines the original topic by focusing on teacher agency, defined as the capacity of educators to make meaningful decisions and take initiative within their professional contexts. It explores how individual and collective agency among teachers shapes the effectiveness of NEAS implementation and offers insights into how systemic support can foster greater ownership and innovation in assessment reform.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In 1988, the inception of the National Education Philosophy, also referred to as the Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan, marked a pivotal moment in Malaysian educational discourse, emphasizing the paramount importance of fostering holistic development and personal growth encompassing cognitive, affective, spiritual, and psychomotor dimensions. Furthermore, it underscored the imperative of nurturing a cohesive and progressive multi-racial society. Subsequently, this philosophical framework served as the cornerstone for the development of the National Education Assessment System (NEAS), as elucidated by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate (LPM) in 2012. The NEAS, as delineated by the Lembaga Peperiksaan (2010), represents an educational paradigm geared towards the comprehensive evaluation of students' potential and their readiness to engage in the learning process, transcending traditional metrics solely focused on academic achievement. Implementation of the NEAS commenced in 2011, guided by overarching objectives delineated by the LPM (2009), including diminishing the undue emphasis on standardized examinations, fortifying the prominence of school-based assessment, enhancing students' learning experiences, engendering a holistic and enduring evaluative framework, and cultivating a more robust human capital. This evolutionary trajectory in educational assessment underscores Malaysia's commitment to fostering a dynamic and inclusive educational landscape that prioritizes the multifaceted development of its citizenry and the cultivation of a harmonious and forward-thinking society.

Educational reform is inherently complex, involving shifts in policy, practice, and mindset. Fullan (2005) identifies four phases of change: initiation, implementation, continuation, and outcome assessment. Each phase demands active participation from stakeholders, particularly teachers, who must navigate new frameworks while maintaining instructional quality.

Teacher agency, as conceptualized by Goodson (2003), plays a pivotal role in this process. Teachers are not merely implementers of policy; they are reflective practitioners who shape and reshape reforms based on classroom realities. Their beliefs, values, and relationships influence how innovations like NEAS are internalized and operationalized.

## **NEAS in the Malaysian Context**

The NEAS represents a paradigm shift in Malaysian education, moving away from summative testing toward continuous, learner-centered assessment. Ong (2010) notes that the integration of formative assessment under SBA has introduced novel expectations for teachers, requiring them to adopt new pedagogical tools and feedback mechanisms. While promising, this transition has also exposed gaps in training, resources, and institutional support, affecting the pace and depth of reform.

This study investigates:

1. How do teachers develop and adapt strategies in response to NEAS implementation?
2. What factors enable or constrain teacher agency during the reform process?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Case Study Design**

Adopting a qualitative case study approach, the research examines two primary schools SAGA and WIRA to understand the nuances of NEAS implementation. These cases were selected based on their differing levels of success in adopting the reform, offering rich comparative insights.

### **Data Collection**

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders, along with classroom observations. A total of 20 participants were involved, ensuring a mix of perspectives across grade levels and administrative roles.

### **Data Analysis**

Using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method, data was coded and categorized to identify emerging themes related to teacher agency, leadership, collaboration, and systemic barriers. Member checking and peer review enhanced validity, while triangulation through multiple data sources strengthened reliability.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Strategies Adopted by Teachers in Response to NEAS**

At SAGA Primary School, the enactment of the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) was marked by a culture of deliberate and distributed professionalism, manifested through four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: sustained collaborative planning in which grade-level teams routinely convened to co-construct standards-aligned assessments and circulate evidence-informed pedagogical repertoires; targeted professional development that immersed teachers in iterative cycles of formative assessment training and dialogic feedback design; shared leadership practices that devolved curricular and assessment decision-making to teacher-led committees, thereby cultivating an institutional ethos of ownership and accountability; and purposeful community engagement that mobilised parents and local stakeholders as co-educators in the pursuit of holistic learning. Collectively, these strategies nurtured a

robust sense of collective teacher agency, positioning educators not merely as implementers but as empowered architects of systemic reform.

In contrast, WIRA Primary School faced significant hurdles. Teachers expressed frustration over unclear directives, insufficient training, and limited autonomy. Many viewed NEAS as an additional burden rather than a transformative tool. Despite these challenges, some teachers showed resilience and sought informal ways to integrate aspects of the reform into their teaching.

### **Factors Influencing Teacher Agency in NEAS Implementation**

First, the divergent leadership styles enacted by the two sites decisively conditioned teacher engagement with NEAS. At SAGA, principals and middle leaders enacted what might be termed transformational-distributed leadership: they articulated a clear, future-oriented vision of assessment for learning, sustained high visibility through open-door policies and regular instructional walkthroughs, and crucially functioned as institutional brokers who channeled material and symbolic resources toward classroom needs. This dialogic stance not only legitimized teacher voice but also generated a sense of psychological safety in which experimentation was construed as collective inquiry rather than individual liability. Conversely, WIRA's administrative cadre adopted a hierarchical, compliance-oriented posture; directives were issued with limited consultation, feedback loops were attenuated, and resource requests were routinely deferred. Consequently, WIRA teachers experienced a form of structural alienation wherein policy mandates appeared externally imposed and pedagogical discretion was eroded.

Second, the texture of interpersonal relationships and the architecture of collaborative structures operated as a powerful mediating variable. SAGA cultivated dense professional networks underpinned by formal communities of practice and informal peer mentoring dyads; these configurations enabled iterative cycles of design, enactment, and reflection that rendered assessment innovation a jointly owned enterprise. Knowledge flowed laterally across grade-level and departmental boundaries, creating what Wenger would recognize as a vibrant "landscape of practice." At WIRA, however, departmental silos and a pervasive norm of privacy curtailed cross-fertilization of ideas; collaboration was episodic and instrumental, confined largely to bureaucratic compliance tasks rather than to joint problem-solving. The resultant scarcity of social capital undermined creative risk-taking and reinforced a culture of guarded autonomy.

Third, teachers' epistemic beliefs and motivational trajectories constituted a critical affective filter through which policy signals were interpreted. SAGA practitioners exhibited a coherent, mastery-oriented belief system: they construed NEAS not as an accountability apparatus but as a catalyst for formative refinement and student empowerment. This orientation was recursively reinforced by robust professional development offerings and opportunities for micro-credentialing, which elevated intrinsic valuation of the reform. In stark contrast, WIRA teachers expressed skepticism regarding the technical adequacy and fairness of NEAS instruments; their efficacy beliefs were attenuated by fragmented training and a climate that foregrounded performative anxiety. Fear of public failure became internalized, producing avoidance behaviors and surface-level enactment that further eroded motivation.

Finally, the macro-cultural milieu and the material-resource ecology of each school crystallized these micro-processes into durable patterns of action. SAGA institutionalized a culture of relational trust and organizational transparency manifest in open data walls, faculty-led inquiry cycles, and celebratory

recognition of instructional risk-taking. This normative order, coupled with reliable access to assessment materials and responsive curricular guidance, created enabling conditions for deep implementation. WIRA, however, was enmeshed in a culture of performativity and audit: innovation was subordinated to metric compliance, and inconsistent directives from the district level engendered strategic ambiguity. Chronic shortages of assessment tools and asynchronous communication exacerbated teacher frustration, culminating in a vicious cycle wherein minimal uptake reinforced institutional narratives of teacher incapacity, further entrenching the compliance mindset.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although restricted to two urban primary schools, this case study furnishes a theoretically generative and empirically grounded reference for scholarship on assessment reform within Malaysia's evolving educational landscape. By integrating Activity Theory as an analytical prism, it disentangles the recursive interplay between micro-level pedagogical agency and macro-structural conditions, thereby exemplifying Fullan's (2001) imperative to decode the processes and contextual contingencies that render educational change meaningful. The insights spanning leadership dynamics, relational infrastructures, teacher epistemologies, and institutional cultures extend beyond the immediate sites to inform Ministry of Education policymakers, the Malaysian Examination Syndicate (MES), school administrators, and classroom practitioners engaged in iterative refinement of the National Education Assessment System (NEAS). Future inquiries can leverage this heuristic foundation by incorporating rural schools with constrained infrastructures, intensifying methodological triangulation, and deploying large-scale quantitative designs that enable comparative generalisability, thereby advancing both theoretical elaborations of policy enactment and pragmatic guidance for equitable NEAS implementation across Malaysia's heterogeneous schooling contexts.

In sum, this inquiry furnishes a theoretically grounded and methodologically transparent exemplar of how fine-grained case study research can illuminate the situated enactment of educational change within Malaysian primary schools. Notwithstanding its bounded generalizability, the study's configurational analysis of leadership architectures, relational ecologies, and institutional cultures offers a transferable heuristic for policymakers and practitioners intent on calibrating the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) to diverse contextual contingencies, thereby serving as an instructive template for equitable and sustainable reform trajectories across Malaysia's heterogeneous educational landscape.

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