

Autonomy in Classroom Assessment: Teachers' Perceptions on the Abolition of Level 1 Biennials Examinations in Malaysian National Schools

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ABSTRACT

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Classroom assessment requires teachers to focus their autonomy optimally in assessment without having to be distracted by other forms of assessment, especially among level 1 teachers in primary schools in Malaysia. Three objectives of the study were set; to identify whether teachers are still conducting mid-year and end-of-year examinations for level 1 students, to identify support for the abolition of examinations for level 1 students and to identify increased autonomy in classroom assessment. The quantitative approach was used with survey method as a data collection technique and conducted using an online questionnaire instrument. A total of 662 teachers teaching at level 1 were selected using stratified random sampling. Data were then analyzed using IBM SPSS version 25 descriptively. The findings of the study showed that teachers felt an increase in autonomy in classroom assessment as well as supporting the abolition of examinations for level 1 students. However, the majority of teachers still conduct biennial examinations as part of the assessment.

Contribution/Originality: Overall, this study identifies fundamental issues in the implementation of change in assessment at the school. Therefore this study adds to the understanding and information related to the implementation of education policy in Malaysia at the grassroots level. This study also contributes to the existing literature on teacher autonomy, education management, and leadership.

1. Introduction

Education in Malaysia is currently in the 3rd wave in the Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025. To improve the quality of education, the transformation in the curriculum was carried out through the change of the Integrated Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) to the Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR)

starting in 2011. In KSSR, student assessment is holistic through school assessment. Starting in 2018, mid-year examinations and end-of-year examinations have been abolished for level 1 students in primary schools nationwide ([Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2018](#)). Thus, for level 1 students, classroom assessment is the only medium used for student assessment.

Since classroom assessment is conducted entirely by teachers, teacher autonomy is the key that needs to be improved for the implementation of classroom assessment to successfully achieve its goals. According to [Fadaee et al. \(2021\)](#), autonomous teachers not only have enough freedom in managing their teaching but also can influence the level of student psychology, student learning styles and strategies as well as the development of student autonomy (learner autonomy). Therefore, the autonomy of teachers, especially in classroom assessment must be given attention by school administrators to be on the right track in line with the guidelines that have been set by the policymaker ([Mohd Isa et al., 2020](#)). In line with the abolition of examinations for level one students who now rely entirely on assessment as a form of assessment, there is a need to conduct studies on teachers' perceptions of teacher autonomy in classroom assessment and teachers' support for examination abolition to identify the extent of classroom assessment implementation in schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teacher Autonomy

In the field of education, the concept of autonomy is less discussed, especially teacher autonomy ([Vasile, 2013](#)). Previously, teachers were considered as educational machinery for standard knowledge transmission ([Xiao & Kwo, 2018](#)) without being given autonomy in performing their duties. However, the reform of the global education system based on holistic education opens up space for teachers to be more autonomous, especially in matters related to teaching and learning in the classroom.

Based on previous studies, teacher autonomy is defined from various perspectives. The two main definitions of autonomy are freedom of decision-making and control over areas of responsibility. According to [Guan \(2021\)](#), teacher autonomy means that teachers can teach independently, or have the ability, freedom or responsibility to choose matters related to teaching and learning. In other words, autonomy is the professional responsibility of teachers ([Duyen, 2019](#); [Tehrani & Mansor, 2012](#); [Ulas & Aksu, 2015](#)) and decision-making freedom ([Ananthan, 2016](#); [Ipek, 2017](#)) that affect the environment and content of teaching duties ([Silva & Mølsted, 2020](#); [Worth & Brande, 2020](#)).

Teacher autonomy has a positive impact in a variety of areas. Past studies have shown, autonomy is positively correlated with self-efficacy, job satisfaction ([Esfandiari & Kamali, 2016](#)), empowerment ([Mohamad & Ali, 2019](#)) and work environment ([Salokangas & Wermke, 2020](#)). According to [Al-Bataineh et al. \(2021\)](#), teacher autonomy also affects the atmosphere of happiness in school (school happiness). Therefore, all parties at the top level including ministry officials, education departments, school boards and school leaders such as headmasters should recognize the importance of teacher autonomy and meet the need for increased autonomy to increase motivation, empower teachers and minimize stress and teacher workload ([Vangrieken et al., 2017](#)).

2.2. Classroom Assessment

Classroom assessment is part of the school-based assessment in KSSR. For level 1 students, the assessment is to apply classroom assessment as a whole and there are no more mid-year examinations and end-of-year examinations. Beginning in 2019, level 1 pupils nationwide will no longer be assessed with an A score number but use proficiency levels 1 to 6. Formative and summative continuous assessment in PBD is the main focus of the ministry as one of the efforts to ensure holistic development among students. (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2018a). According to Idris (2016), it is a holistic assessment that can assess the cognitive (intellectual), affective (emotional and spiritual) and psychomotor (physical) aspects in line with the National Education Philosophy, Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) and Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM).

Based on previous studies, various implications arise following the transformation of assessment forms from examination to assessment. One of the main effects faced by teachers is an increase in workload (Maskan, 2013; Tan, 2018). According to Tan and Kenayathulla (2020), this situation occurs when teachers separate the assessment and teaching-learning in the classroom. In addition, there are previous studies that show that many schools still conduct examinations even though they have been abolished for level 1 students (Mohd Isa et al., 2020). The increase in workload generally has a negative impact on teachers such as stress (Mohd. Kosnin & Tan, 2012) and low motivation (Othman & Md. Omar, 2014) as well as affect school performance. However, according to Worth and Brande (2020), with the autonomy of teachers, the workload will be able to be managed as teachers can manage their tasks according to their priorities and professional wisdom.

2.3. Objective

In this study, three research objectives are to:

- i. Identify whether teachers are still conducting mid-year and end-of-year examinations for level 1 students in the school
- ii. Identify support for the abolition of examinations for level 1 students
- iii. Identify increased autonomy in classroom assessment

3. Method

This study employed a quantitative approach conducted in one of the states in Malaysia. An online survey was conducted by distributing a google form questionnaire through school WhatsApp's and telegram. Respondents throughout the states were selected using stratified random sampling. This is to ensure that the respondents for each district are sufficient. A total of 662 teachers who teach years 1, 2 and 3 were selected as respondents. Data were then analyzed using IBM SPSS version 25 descriptively.

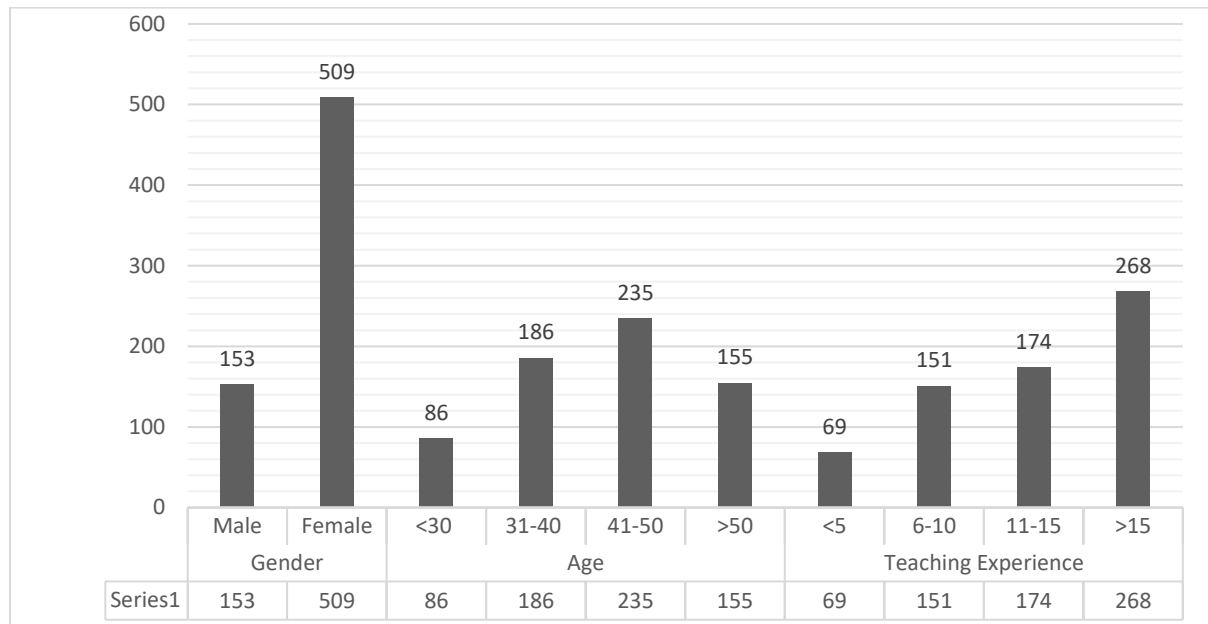
4. Results

This study was conducted by covering the population of level 1 teachers in a state in eastern Malaysia. A total of 662 primary school teachers were involved as respondents. Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents based on demographics. The majority of respondents are female teachers of 509 (76.9%) compared to male teachers of 153 (23.1%). Of the total, the largest number of respondents are teachers aged between 41

to 50 years which is 35.5%, followed by teachers aged 31 to 40 years which is 28.1% and teachers aged 50 years and above which is 23.4%. Teachers under the age of 30 were the least at 13.0%.

As for the aspect of teaching experience, the most respondents are teachers who have taught for more than 15 years which is 268 (40.5%), followed by teachers who have taught for 11 to 15 years which is 174 (26.3%) and teachers who have taught for 6 to 10 years which is 151 (22.8%). Teachers with less than 5 years of teaching experience are the fewest respondents at only 10.4%.

Figure 1: Respondent Demography



4.1. Mid-year and end-of-year examinations for year 1, 2 and 3

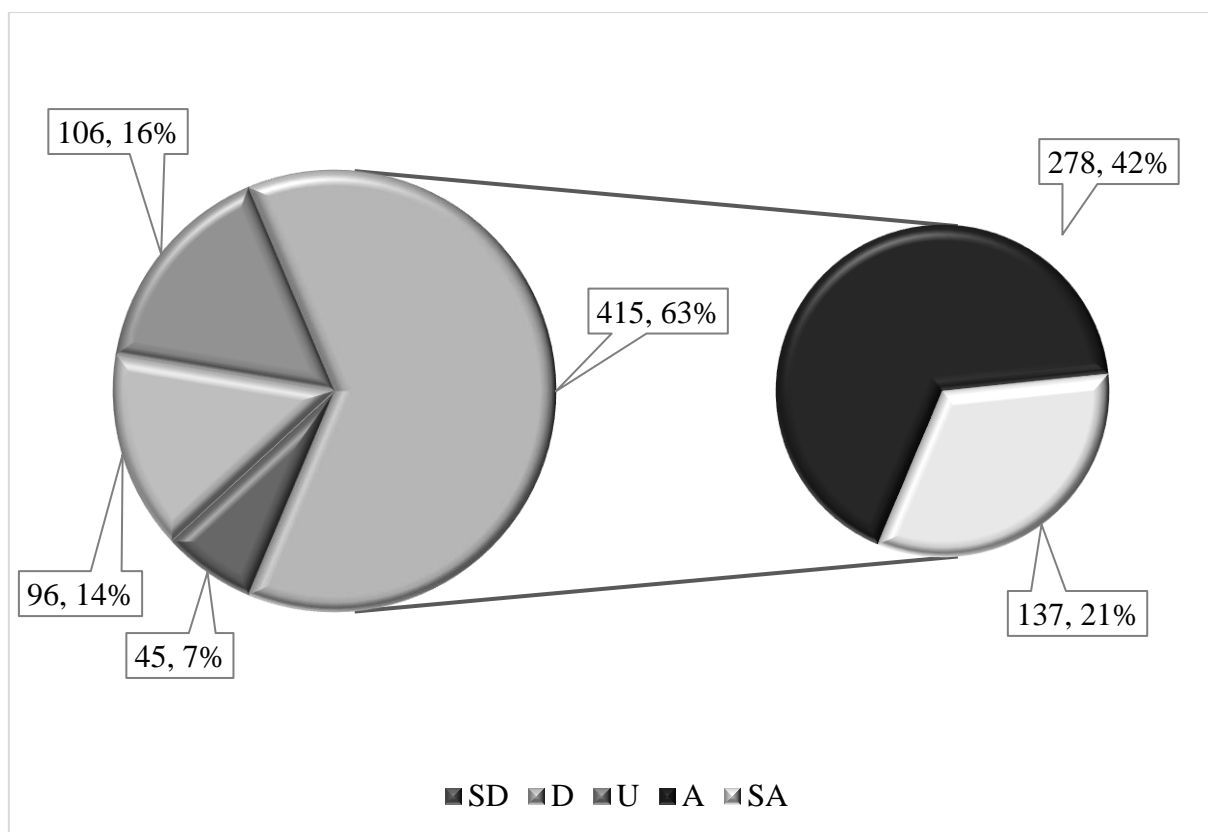
Item 1 in the questionnaire is the statement “I am still conducting mid-year and end-of-year examinations for level 1 students as part of classroom assessment”. This item is intended to identify whether teachers are still conducting these two types of examinations even though they have been abolished since 2019. The findings of the study are shown in Table 1. The results of the study found that the number of teachers who agreed (A) was the most at 42.0% followed by teachers who strongly agreed (SA) (20.7%). A total of 106 (16.0%) teachers were unsure (U) while 96 (14.5%) disagreed (D) and 45 (6.8%) teachers strongly disagreed (SD). Based on Figure 2, a total of 415 (63%) respondents are still conducting examinations in schools for level one students while only 141 (21.3%) teachers have complied with the abolition of the examination.

Table 1: Teachers still conduct mid-year and end-of-year examinations

Respond	<i>f</i>	%	Cummulative %
SD	45	6.8	6.8
D	96	14.5	21.3
U	106	16.0	37.3
A	278	42.0	79.3
SA	137	20.7	100.0
Total	662	100.0	

These findings are equivalent to the initial findings of [Mohd Isa et al. \(2020\)](#) who found that the number of teachers who still conducted examinations was higher than teachers who did not conduct mid-year and end-of-year examinations. This proves that schools are still practising examinations for level 1 pupils despite the repealed directive starting in 2019. This situation confirms the cultivation of an examination-oriented education system ([Idris, 2016](#)) is difficult to change ([Boon & Shaharuddin, 2011](#)). According to [Hussein \(2014\)](#), one of the challenges in the transformation of education policy is the selective nature of teachers and administrators in implementing the policy, where only the agreed things are implemented while the disagreed things are ignored. This is due to they find it very difficult to break free from the existing concept of assessment that is traditionally ([Maskan, 2013](#)) through mid-year and end-of-year examinations.

Figure 2: Pie chart of teachers who conduct mid-year and end-of-year examinations



4.2. Support for the abolition of examinations for level 1 students

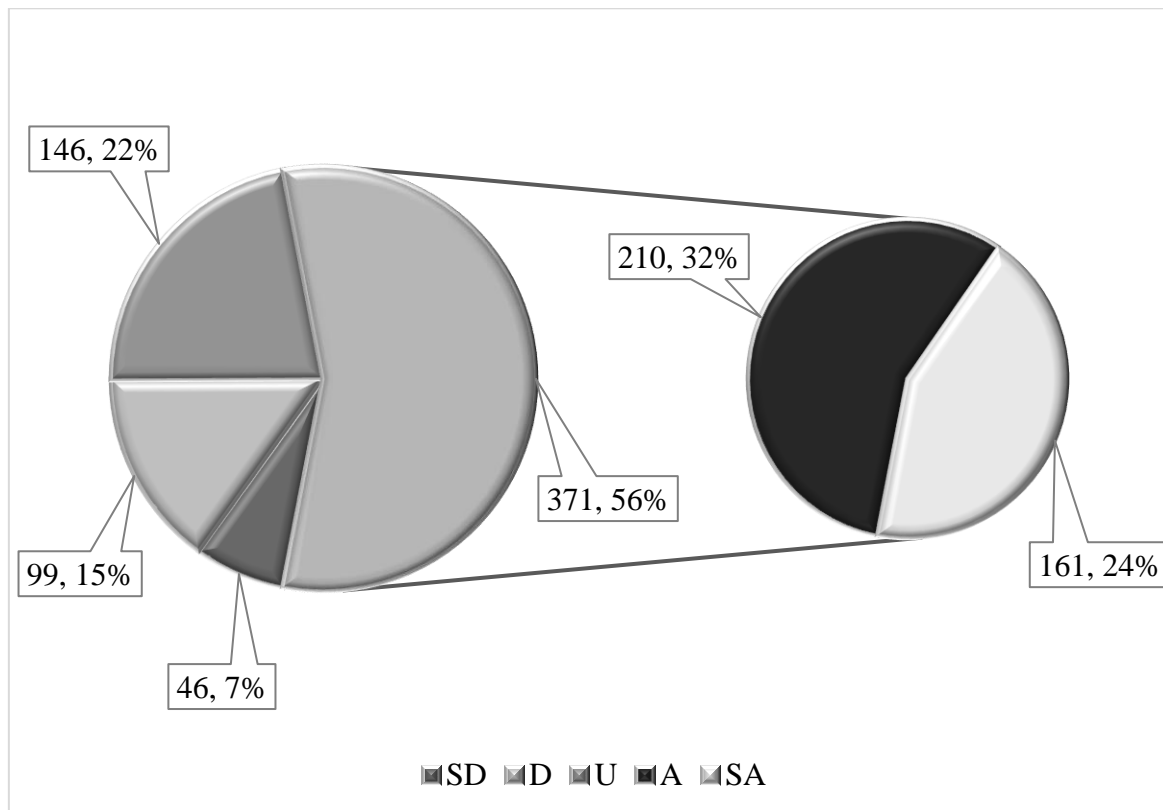
Item 2 in the questionnaire is the statement “I support the abolition of mid-year and end-of-year examinations for level 1 students”. This item is intended to look at teachers’ perceptions of whether or not they support the repeal. Based on [Table 2](#), a total of 31.7% of teachers agreed (A) followed by strongly agree (SA) of 24.3%. The number of unsure teachers (U) is 22.1%, disagree (D) by 15.0% and strongly disagree (SD) by 6.9%. [Figure 3](#) shows that in general, the majority of teachers support the abolition of mid-year and end-of-year examinations. This can be seen in the pie chart which shows that 371 teachers (56%) agreed to support the abolition of the examination compared to 139 teachers (22%) who did not agree.

These findings prove that teachers as civil servants are always open to change and transformation implemented by the ministry of education. According to [Varatharaj \(2018\)](#), teachers as policy implementers carry out their work prudently, as recommended but are still tied to the upper-level bureaucracy. This matter is also discussed in the study of [Raman and Yamat \(2014\)](#) where teachers accept the change in assessment in schools but it is increasingly unpopular due to the challenges that arise during its implementation. This is due to changes in the education system demanding higher accountability among teachers ([Southern, 2018](#)).

Table 2: Teachers who support the abolition of examinations for level 1 students

Respond	<i>f</i>	%	Cummulative %
SD	46	6.9	6.9
D	99	15.0	21.9
U	146	22.1	44.0
A	210	31.7	75.7
SA	161	24.3	100.0
Total	662	100.0	

Figure 3: Pie chart of teachers who support the abolition of examinations for level 1 students



4.3. Increased Autonomy

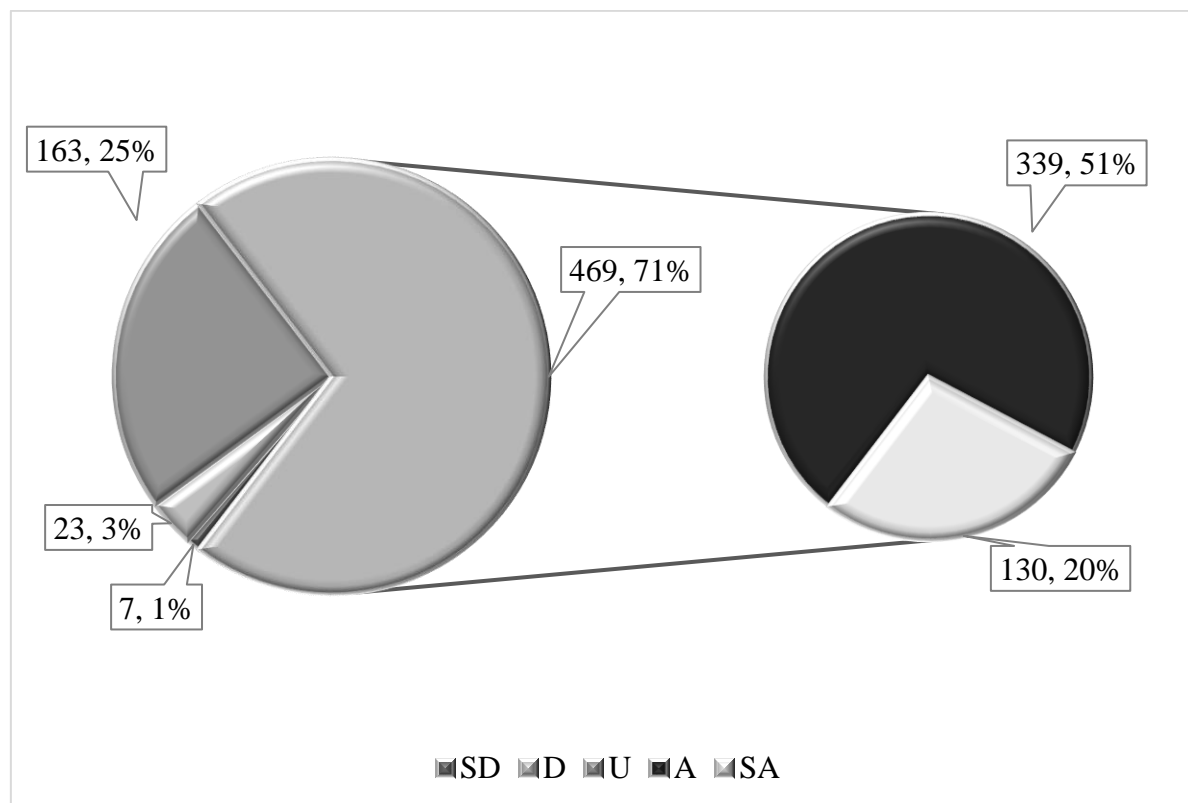
Item 3 is related to the statement "I feel an increase in autonomy in classroom assessment". This item aims to identify teachers' perceptions related to the changes in autonomy felt after the implementation of classroom assessment as well as the abolition of examinations for level 1 students. Based on [Table 3](#), the number of teachers who agree (A) is the most at 51.2%, followed by uncertain (U) at 24.6%, strongly agree (SA)

19.6%, disagree (D) at 23 teachers (3.5%) and strongly disagree (SD) by 1.1%. Figure 4 shows that the majority of respondents agreed on the increase in autonomy with classroom assessment of 469 teachers (71%) and only a small number did not feel the increase in the autonomy of 4.6% equivalent to 30 teachers.

Table 3: Teachers who feel increased autonomy in classroom assessment

Respond	<i>f</i>	%	Cummulative %
SD	7	1.1	1.1
D	23	3.5	4.5
U	163	24.6	29.2
A	339	51.2	80.4
SA	130	19.6	100.0
Total	662	100.0	

Figure 4: Pie chart of teachers who felt increased autonomy with PBD



This result means that level one teachers feel there is an increase in autonomy when conducting classroom assessments. This is likely due to this form of PBD assessment which leaves it entirely to the teacher to provide professional judgment in conducting the assessment (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2018b). According to Tan & Kenayathulla (2020), teachers need commitment and assessment skills in ensuring the quality of assessment in the classroom as well as ensuring the effectiveness and success of classroom assessment. Therefore, teachers in Malaysia should be given exposure to assessment standards that should be achieved, especially those related to the teaching and learning process in the classroom (Abd. Rahman, 2014).

5. Discussion

This study was conducted to identify teacher perception and teacher autonomy in classroom assessment after the abolition of the level 1 student examination. The findings of the study are unique and reflect the real situation of the policy implementation level that takes place in schools. Teachers supported the abolition of examinations for level 1 students and felt that there was an increase in autonomy in the implementation of classroom assessment. Nevertheless, at the same time the majority of teachers still also conduct mid-year and end-of-year examinations. This shows that teachers are always positive and ready for any transformation in education in Malaysia. However, the examination culture that has been ingrained in the learning assessment system in schools is difficult to change. This will make the occurrence of two forms of assessment in schools, namely examination based on the number of A, as well as assessment based on the level of mastery. In other words, teachers conduct both forms of examination assessment and classroom assessment resulting in an increase in the workload of teachers as well as contradicting the initial objectives of KSSR ([Mohd Isa et al., 2020](#)). Indirectly, this situation will affect the quality of assessments performed by teachers in the classroom.

However, the decision to conduct the examination generally does not depend on the individual teachers but more on the collective decision of the school including the school administrators. Therefore, teachers in Malaysia should be commended for their ability to conduct both forms of assessment with great excellence. Although in general, this situation contributes to an increase in the workload of teachers in schools equivalent to the findings of a study by [Maskan \(2013\)](#) where teachers argue that assessment increases the workload of teachers in schools that are already burdened with administrative and co-curricular tasks. The increase in workload and essential responsibilities as a whole needs to be re-evaluated from the perspective of teachers based on priorities ([Rasul, 2013](#)) to avoid a decrease in motivation ([Nizam & Othman, 2014](#)) and teacher happiness in school ([Al-Bataineh et al., 2021](#)) which are factors barriers to the application of soft skills among students ([Arbaa, 2015](#)).

The indirect effect of this situation will lead to the occurrence of resistance to changes among teachers in schools ([Al Salami et al., 2017](#)). According to [Hussein \(2014\)](#), teachers tend to oppose or reject changes that demand additional time and energy for reasons of professional dedication. Resistance to this change occurs when teachers seek space to negotiate between their situation in school and changes in education ([Buchanan, 2015](#)). Thus, there is a situation where teachers support and implement assessment in accordance with the transformation of education but still also implement examinations that have been abolished.

To address this problem, the researcher suggested that a focused review should be conducted by the ministry of education in schools so that there are no two forms of assessment among level 1 students. Enforcement of released letter bill 14/2018 ([Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2018](#)) needs to be done so that the objective of creating a holistic assessment can be achieved. Careless implementation without comprehensive monitoring will thwart the target of educational transformation based on current global education trends. Teachers will be more autonomous in assessing if they can be more focused with one form of assessment holistically only.

In addition, the vision of school leaders as mentors in the implementation of education policy is necessary in line with the aspirations of the ministry. This is due to the headteacher as a leader there must be a quality of self so that the members of the school institution he leads feel that they are leaders who bring innovation, spark ideas, develop, focus on people and spirit, spark hope and confidence, have a long -term perspective, have answers to what and why questions, looking at the horizons of the environment, challenging the status quo, focusing on the right things and being ahead of time in matters such as assessments (Boon & Shaharuddin, 2011). In other words, headmasters need to ensure that the collective decisions decided at the school level regarding the form of an assessment conducted should be inclined and based only on the circulars that have been distributed. Conducting additional assessments such as examinations not only adds to the burden but shows that resistance is not only among teachers but also among school leaders. Finally, the desire to implement transformation in education will not have the appropriate impact.

6. Conclusion

Classroom assessment requires teachers to focus their autonomy optimally in assessment without having to be distracted by other forms of assessment such as annual examination especially among level 1 teachers. Support for the abolition of examinations and increased autonomy shows that teachers are compliant and understand the form of transformation in education that they want to implement in schools. The main issue identified was the resistance in the abolition of level 1 examinations which contributed to the increase in the existing workload. Thus, the researcher proposed a focused review of the enforcement of the release letter bill 14/2018 as well as continuous guidance to school leaders and teachers to remain in line with the aspirations of education policy that has been set in PPPM 2013-2025.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study.

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