

Teachers' Professional Judgment in Malaysia Classroom-Based Assessment: The Iconic Runaway in Education?

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Abstract

Malaysia education system is moving towards a more holistic approach in school assessment with the implementation of classroom-based assessment. It is believed that it will provide better appraisal with fairer judgment for the students. However, teachers being the sole evaluator of the students' performance has invited many parties doubting the ability of humans as a fair judge. This concept paper aims to explore the challenges faced by teachers in Malaysia in exercising sound professional judgment in classroom-based assessment. This is done by going through the transformation in Malaysia education system from centralized exam-based assessment to the current classroom-based assessment which is more personalized and student-centered. This paper identifies four key challenges, which are assessment literacy, teachers' experience, duration of evaluation, and ability to justify decisions. It discusses the need for continuous knowledge development, experience sharing, reducing the class size and the development of precise instruments to measure teacher's professional judgment. This paper concludes with a call for the education community to recognize and respect teachers' professional judgment. A reasonable approach to tackle this issue could be taken by the ministry by enhancing teacher training, understanding the readiness of teachers as assessors, exploring the relationship between teaching activities and judgment quality and to design and validate instruments that can measure teachers' professional judgment.

Keywords: Professional Judgment, Classroom-Based Assessment, Teacher, School, Challenge

Introduction

Teachers' professional judgment in Malaysia is an evaluation made on the students based on the teachers' knowledge of the curriculum set up by the Ministry of Education (MoE), comprising skills, knowledge, good values, performance evidence, teaching strategies, assessment method as well as criteria and standard fixed on the students (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019). Despite being practiced by the teachers as part of the assessment, it has attracted many with the issues raised since the implementation of the

classroom-based assessment (CBA) in Malaysia. Through CBA, the students are not only being assessed based on written assessment but holistically using the Performance Level (PL) and the teacher has the final say in determining the PL.

The Performance Levels ranged from 1 to 6, used to indicate the students' learning development. They are arranged in the ascending order to guide the students of their achievement in their subject with PL1 says their achievement is very limited, PL2 is limited, PL3 is at satisfactory level, PL4 is good, PL 5 and PL6 is very good and excellent respectively. With the abolishment of the standardized and centralized test known as Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) at Year 6 of the elementary school, which has been a prerequisite for special schools' intake of the secondary school, such as the Fully Residential Schools and MARA Junior Science College, the role of the teachers as the decision-maker is highly at stake. The MoE renounced the role of UPSR with a replacement assessment known as the Specific Schools Admission Assessment saying that only those who applied for the special schools will sit for it. Following suite, after the UPSR cancellation is the abolishment of Form 3 Assessment which was taken in the third year of secondary school. The assessment was the determinant of the students' next stage of learning, the upper secondary. In Malaysia, the upper secondary is another two years of learning and the students are segregated based on their interest, considering their performance in their third year of lower secondary. Again, with the abolishment, teachers' professional judgment is considered to finalize their next stage of study.

Starting the year 2020, the MoE provided different packages for the students to choose when they enter their upper secondary, provided that the school offered the subjects of interest. The students have the option to move to a school which offers the subjects of he has interest in if the current school is not providing the subjects. Hence, teachers' recommendation is highly valued at this stage as they need to have the knowledge, facilitated with their experience, to be able get as much input as possible from the students for them to conduct their professional judgment responsibly as it can chart the students' future and building parents' perception towards them.

This area is to be studied because the Malaysian education system is moving from a centralized examination-based assessment to a more personalized and student-centered assessment in the classroom. The need for this study arises from the recognition of four key challenges, which are, assessment literacy, teacher experience, length of assessment and the ability to justify decisions. Understanding and overcoming these challenges is critical to the successful implementation of classroom-based assessment and ensuring fair assessment for students.

Policy Transformation

The challenges regarding teachers' professional judgment began to receive public's attention after CBA was introduced in Malaysia at the end of 2016. In fact, it was the refinement of the school-based assessment (SBA) that was introduced in 2011. This assessment aims to assess students holistically, academically, and non-academically. For academic assessment, SBA involves Standardized Central Assessment and School Assessment, and as for non-academic assessment, it involves Physical Activity, Sports, and Co-curricular Assessment, along with

Psychometric Assessment. These four components in SBA were retained during the transformation in 2016, to be part of CBA.

Later in 2019, the implementation of CBA was further enhanced with the introduction of Project-Based Classroom Assessment, which incorporates Project-Based Learning (PBL) into the teaching and learning process of students (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019). To ensure that the implementation goes smoothly, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has released the second edition of the CBA Handbook to coincide with the introduction of PBL to provide guidance to teachers on how to assess the projects using the rubrics developed by the Ministry of Education to ensure that teachers' assessment is up to standard. This further strengthens the role of teachers whichn assessing students, whichh must be done in a continuous formative and summative manner. This is in line with the Ministry of Education's endeavor to ensure the overall development of students (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019).

A teacher must make professional judgments about their students in an ethical manner and with full responsibility to ensure that the student's PL is authentic and truthful, based on the analysis and synthesis of the student's learning. This gives the teacher autonomy in determining the student's PL. In March 2023, the Ministry of Education reaffirmed the autonomy of teachers in planning and implementing the teaching and learning process in the classroom. The Ministry of Education's announcement is a follow-up to the Malaysian Education Minister's media statement on the Seven Immediate Steps to Teachers' Wellbeing in February 2023 (Fadhlina, 2023). The seven steps announced include strengthening teacher's autonomy in planning and implementing the teaching and learning process and assessment in the classroom by using the Standard Curriculum and Assessment Document (SCAD) as a reference for teachers. Implementation began in the 2023 school term.

Teacher autonomy refers to the right and responsibility of teachers to determine the implementation of the curriculum, which includes aspects of curriculum content, pedagogy, and assessment. In terms of curriculum content, teachers can plan and design the content of the curriculum considering the student's background, environment, and available resources to optimize student learning. This gives the teacher the opportunity to break down the content of the curriculum to match the needs and abilities of the students. On the pedagogical aspect, teachers could determine the approach, strategy and material resources needed in teaching and learning to meet students' interests, talents, learning styles and potential. Teachers are also given the opportunity to implement teaching and learning inside or outside the classroom. In terms of assessment, the ministry has emphasized that teachers must continuously implement CBA in teaching and learning. This requires that teachers are given autonomy in planning and implementing CBA so that they can use appropriate tools.

Teachers must also ensure that the assessment chosen is fair, equitable and appropriate to the student's ability. The implementation of this continuous assessment undoubtedly requires teachers to exercise professional judgment, such as recording the assessment results, reporting the assessment to the parties involved, and conducting appropriate follow-up. This shows that the teacher must exercise professional judgment before, during and after the assessment is conducted. A 2019 CBA Handbook identifies the four main elements that a

teacher must have to assess their students, namely knowledge, experience, student contribution and professional responsibility. The elements are shown in Figure 1 below.

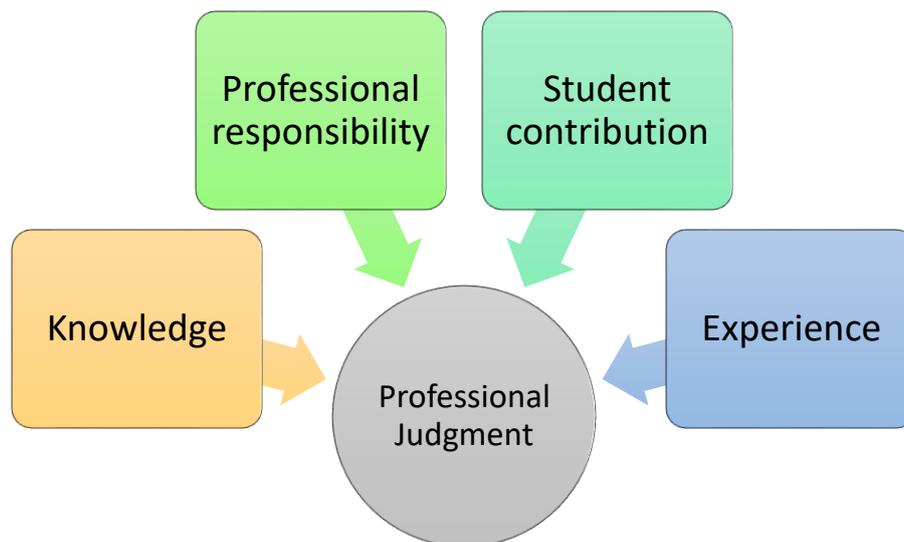


Figure 1 Elements of Professional Judgment (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019)

In addition to the four elements above, when professionally assessing students, the teacher must ensure that his judgment is consistent with the curricular intentions contained in the SCAD, clearly understand the purpose of assessment, use a variety of assessment methods, such as observation, oral and written assessment, create an assessment environment that does not pressure teachers and students, that is conducted with confidence without compromise or favoritism, and provides fair opportunities and space for students to develop their potential (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019).

Challenges in performing professional judgment and overcoming strategies.

There are four challenges usually faced by teachers in making an informed judgment on their students while exercising classroom-based assessment in Malaysia.

A. Teacher's assessment literacy

The ability to make assessments requires teachers to always have the latest knowledge in their field of teaching, either through reading or through the exchange of information between teachers and other teachers. For the teachers to exercise professional judgment, knowledge in the subject area and across subjects is crucially needed. Taylor (2009) defines assessment literacy as the ability of stakeholders to use assessment for both learning and evaluation purposes. This statement supports Stiggins (1991) assertion that assessment literacy must be promoted for all. Stiggins (1991) stated that most assessors lack the knowledge of the basics of assessment to know whether the performance data recorded is in line with the objectives. However, teachers should be given space to improve their judging skill as professional judgment in assessment requires teachers who have a high level of knowledge and assessment skills (Abdul Musikin & Matore, 2020).

In Malaysia, many teachers are not clear about the objectives and content of the Malaysian Teacher Standard that has been set (Makhsin et al., 2022), even though the importance of assessment literacy in the education system has been emphasized by outlining the qualities that a teacher must possess in the Malaysian Teacher Standard (Bahagian Pendidikan Guru,

2009) and Malaysian Teacher Standard 2.0 (Bahagian Profesionalisme Guru, 2023). If this issue persists and not taken seriously, it can affect the students by not being able to master the content and lagging the syllabus schedule due to the teacher's incompetency (Makhsin et al., 2022). In fact, teachers themselves agreed that they need regular workshops or courses to improve their knowledge in their field to ensure they can conduct the lesson effectively and achieve the objectives outlined (Makhsin et al., 2022). With those workshops and trainings for the teachers, the school leaders are also having problem in understanding the method of deciding the PL using teacher's professional judgment, by claiming they do not have deep understanding with the PL system (Arumugham & Ariffin, 2021).

Teachers who have extensive knowledge of the subject area, including content, teaching strategies, and the ability to assess students using a variety of assessment methods, according to the given standard documents, will be more confident in their professional judgment. However, new teachers feel less confident in their level of knowledge. If they remain not guided, the situation will eventually affect their professional judgment on their students (Daly et al., 2023). In Malaysia, subject knowledge is also the top three challenges for new teachers along with aspects of pedagogical approach and student control (Abdullah & Md Shamsuddin, 2011). Teachers need a broad and deep knowledge of the subjects to be taught so that they can make professional decisions. To make the right decision, teachers must have knowledge, mastery of the subject content, know strategies for teaching and learning, and be able to assess students using different assessment methods (Kamaruddin & Mohd Matore, 2020). The assessment conducted must be fair, transparent, and consistent for students to avoid biased results. In implementing CBA, teachers must not only be involved in the teaching and learning, planning and construction of instruments, but also be directly involved in conducting the assessment, the results of which must then be recorded, analyzed, and reported and follow-up action should be taken if necessary (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019).

Teacher training in Malaysia has been drilling content and pedagogy curriculum in their syllabus but not much attention has been given to the pre-service teacher in evaluating their students, which now comprises only ten percent of their overall mark (Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia, 2014). Lack of assessment literacy will affect their confidence in evaluating their students once they start teaching as a novice teacher (Che Hasan Sabri & Muhamad, 2016; Keller-Schneider et al., 2020). This will be challenging to them as novice teachers compared to when they were a pre-service teacher, they were observed and evaluated mainly based on their pedagogy skill which focuses on their soft skills in managing students and classroom. They are also observed based on many criteria such as interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects, knowledge on the subject taught, teaching and learning skills, communication skills, evaluation skill, involvement in cocurricular activities and other roles as contribution to the school (Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia, 2014). Specifically on the evaluation skill, the pre-service teacher is required to be able to evaluate and give feedback on their student's input, managing student's record, keeping an awareness on their student's performance and make an evaluation on teaching and learning process. Due to this, it is suggested that the Teacher Training Institute in Malaysia and universities who offered the teaching courses to equip the pre-service teachers with more experience in evaluating their students to ensure the future teachers are assessment literate before starting their service.

B. Teachers' Experience

There is a challenge for teachers to conduct their professional judgment due to the limitation of their experience. In a speaking test for example, teachers with more experience as assessors tend to give more firm evaluation, and teachers with less teaching experience tend to give less firm evaluation (Noh & Matore, 2022). This is telling us that teaching and assessment experience is an important factor to consider when appointing an assessor, as experienced teachers make more professional judgments than new teachers (Tripp, 2011). Tripp (2011) reported that experienced teachers indeed spent more time with students and understand them better in relation to the students' culture and lives than new teachers with less experience. This allows teachers who have more experience to use their professional judgment in their assessment. Without enough experience, there is less variation in way of assessing students (Allal, 2013). Experienced teachers could use different type of assessment based on their student's situation (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020). However, teachers' professional judgment based on experience is often misunderstood and not being recognized as compared to when doctors and lawyers giving their verdict (Allal, 2013).

Regardless of the situation, the ministry believes that teachers should use their teaching experience to improve their interaction with students (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019) by recognizing students' strengths and potential. This element of experience is also supported by previous studies by which conclude that student achievement is highly influenced by a teacher's classroom experience (Adhikari, 2020; Podolsky et al., 2019; Wammes et al., 2023). The more experience a teacher has, the better their students perform, not just on the test, but holistically (Burroughs et al., 2019; Podolsky et al., 2019). Through experience, teachers learn to build competence and improve self-efficacy in assessment (Entoh et al., 2020).

In Malaysia, it is a common practice among teachers to write down their reflections after teaching and learning sessions. This reflective writing was already used in teacher training when the teacher completed a practicum in which he was instructed by the lecturer to write a reflection after each teaching and learning session (Zainol et al., 2023). This written reflection is important because by reflecting, the teacher can expand their experience in relation to the situation in the classroom and improve their practice in the next class (Schon, 1983). This proves how important the teacher's experience is for good student assessment. John Dewey explained that learning must be based on experience Ali (2023); Schmidt & Allsup (2019), stressing that with more experience, a teacher can make better judgment and as a better assessor.

Experience sharing sessions among teachers will expedite the experience as an assessor. A teacher does not have to wait for years to gain the experience but can learn from the senior teachers instead (Daly et al., 2023). The ministry realized the element of experience that teachers need in their professional judgment as something that can be guided and applied among teachers. Hence, in line with the Ministry of Education's desire to ensure that CBA is a continuous process, schools under the District Education Office have been placed under the supervision and guidance of School Improvement Specialist Coaches (SISC+). Sharing experience between SISC+ officers and teachers through visits to schools can be an added value to the teacher's experience (Lee et al., 2021). Studies shown that having discussions and sharing session among peers such as Professional Learning Community (PLC), helped to

improved teacher's efficacy and eventually improve student's achievement (Iksan et al., 2021; W.Md Rasidi et al., 2020).

C. Duration of evaluation in CBA

Professional judgment is a process that teachers must continually exercise throughout the teaching and learning process. However, a teacher can only exercise their professional judgment based on the frequency of their interaction with a student (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019). For example, by observing and talking to students during teaching and learning or at other appropriate times. The amount of time spent should also be in line with the type of assessment that the teacher undertakes. For an assessment to be recognized as valid and reliable, teachers and students must be given sufficient opportunities (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2019). It is important for teachers to assess fairly and judiciously, and for students, sufficient opportunities are needed for a student to demonstrate to their teacher that they have mastered the lesson. When assessing students, the teacher must observe the student's work sufficiently to form an opinion of the student's overall mastery and to inform the teacher's professional judgment. The teacher's judgment of students must be justified so as not to cause problems in the future such as trust issues from the students and their parents.

However, the situation in a real classroom is far from ideal for the teachers to have ample time with their students due to the high number of students in each classroom. It has been demonstrated that a high intake of students, results in inadequacy of learning quality (Makhsin et al., 2022). As of today, there are 5 055 784 students attending government school, with the capacity of 413 459 teachers (Ministry of Education, 2020). The numbers include those teaching in pre-school, primary and secondary school and bring to the ratio of one teacher to 12 students. Nevertheless, the ratio is imbalanced due to the distribution of teachers for each school. In Malaysia, there is a school which is categorized as Low Enrolment School when the students registered is less than 150 per session, and the teacher-student ratio is 1 to 5.48, far below the national ratio (Berita Harian, 2024). This imbalance is showing that Malaysia comprises large schools and high teacher-student ratio. The teacher-student ratio is considered to one of the factors that contributes poor school performance (Gamazo & Martínez-Abad, 2020).

To rectify this problem, the ministry should put a limit in the number of students in each classroom. The teacher-student ratio can no longer be considered as a reference. This is to ensure the quality time between teacher and student is sufficient for their growth in learning, and teachers have ample time to make a sound judgment. Developed countries have benefitted from the smaller class size in schools (Surianshah, 2022). However, Surianshah (2022) research also has revealed that high performing female students who have the privilege to attend good schools are the ones most benefitted when being placed in a small class size. Those who are in bigger class size however, some have shown good performance, but it is due to the teachers who are expert in handling the high number of students at one time (Surianshah, 2022).

D. Justifying Decision

Errare humanum est is a Latin word meaning that to err is human and that people make inaccurate judgments without realizing it (Kahneman, 2011). For many years, teachers in

Malaysia have relied on a grading scheme and guidelines for assessment, but now they can no longer rely on this alone as there is an area where they need to assess their students professionally, based on their integrity and responsibility. This change in format has caused uproar among parents who question the PL they give their children (Mustaqim Roslan, 2024). Teachers' judgment is perceived as unreliable and biased, unlike other professions in medicine and law (Allal, 2013). School leaders have expressed concern about this type of assessment, which they believe is carried out without the readiness of teachers (Arumugham & Ariffin, 2021).

Teachers face problems in conducting classroom assessments such as lack of confidence in practicing assessment skills and unable to provide feedback (Rodhiana et al., 2021). These factors reflect teachers' low efficiency in conducting classroom-based assessments, which leads to inaccuracies and does not serve the original purpose of this holistic assessment. However, Wammes et al (2023) found that confidence level plays a lesser role in biasing teachers' decision making. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to have accurate assessment skills (Urhahne & Wijnia, 2021), which can serve as justification for the teacher's competence in assigning grades. This includes the ability to accurately assess student characteristics as well as learning and task demands. However, studies show that teachers assessed students' performance on standardized tests better than their actual performance which gives the idea there might be bias in teacher's grading in real time assessment (Urhahne & Wijnia, 2021; Wammes et al., 2023). Due to this, there is an urgent need for the ministry to develop an instrument which can measure the teacher's competency in conducting assessment (Rodhiana et al., 2021).

Significance of the Study

The study of professional judgment in classroom assessment is of great importance as it has a direct impact on the educational experience and student outcomes. By examining the effectiveness of specific training for teachers in assessment methods, the study aims to improve the quality of education by ensuring fair and sensible assessment practices. This is beneficial for both students and teachers as it promotes a more holistic, less exam-centered approach to education. In addition, the study is important for policy makers and educational institutions as it provides valuable insights into the factors that influence student achievement and teacher effectiveness. Ultimately, the importance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the improvement of the education system and the overall development of human capital.

The benefits and effectiveness of this study lie in the potential to improve the quality of education in Malaysia by strengthening teachers' ability to make professional judgments. By addressing the challenges and proposing solutions, this study aims to support the transformation of the education system towards a more holistic, less examination-centered approach. This can lead to a fairer assessment of students, better outcomes for students and a more personalized and student-centered assessment process. It can also help to improve parents' perceptions of teachers and the education system.

Conclusion

The decision to abolish the centralized exam, such as the UPSR and the Form 3 assessment proved the commitment of the ministry in transcending the learning culture to not being

exam-centric, but the challenges faced by the teachers need to be recognized to reach the desired outcome. Teachers are being tested in terms of knowledge, experience, struggling with the time frame to conduct the evaluation with high number of students per class and facing difficulties in justifying their professional judgment on their students, to the parents and the society. Solutions proposed include early assessor training for pre-service teachers, mentorship from more seasoned educators, adjusting class sizes to improve teacher-student interactions, and developing precise instruments to gauge teacher competency in assessments. These steps aim to strengthen teachers' ability to make professional judgements and thus support the transformation of the education system towards a more holistic, less exam-centered approach.

The government aspiration in producing students who excel holistically really needs to be supported by having teachers who can conduct their judgment professionally along the teaching and learning process. What is concerning however is the high-performance teachers, which are not distributed. These teachers, who were supposed to be the catalyst in bridging the gap between the multilevel knowledge and experience teachers, were usually placed in high performance schools and would stay in a certain school for a very long period. High-performance teachers are suggested to be rotated among schools as how the specialist of a hospital department is being sent to the other hospitals which depended on their expertise. Considering this situation, this paper strengthens the role of teachers, who are now at the forefront of student assessment. The shift from standardized testing to classroom-based assessment emphasis on teacher's professional judgment, demanding a holistic assessment on their students which will determine their educational pathways. Teacher autonomy and growth must not be taken lightly and must strongly be supported by a clear framework to promote teachers' professional growth and recognize them as professionals if the ministry intended to proceed the classroom-based assessment in schools.

Future studies on the current topic are therefore recommended (Figure 2). One of these is to conduct a study on the effectiveness of specific training for teachers around assessment methods. Specific training that explains to teachers how to create rubrics for assessment, for example, incorporating PBL, is even rarely discussed. Most teachers choose to use existing rubrics for student assessment, which can lead to a possible bias in the teacher's judgment. The reason for the low use of rubrics among teachers is that they lack knowledge about how to create and use rubrics and how using rubrics can improve their assessment experience.

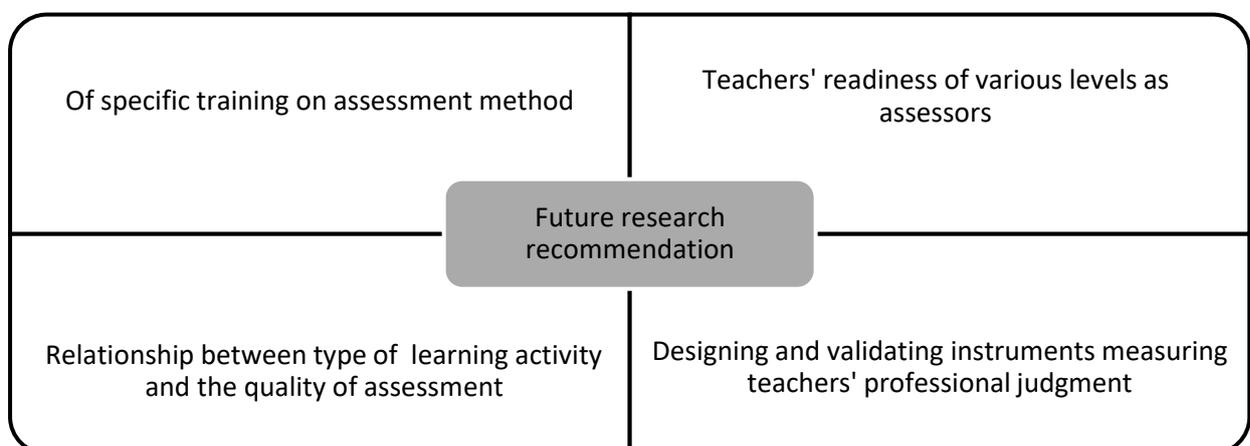


Figure 2 Future research suggestions

The second research proposal is a study on the readiness of teachers of various levels as assessors. Multi-level teachers here mean all levels of teachers, from first year teachers to sixth form teachers. Effective measures to increase the level of readiness in teachers, regardless of school background, whether it is a National School, a National Type School or a Government Aided Religious School in assessment need to be implemented. The third research proposal is to examine the relationship between teaching and learning activities and assessment. Reason being research on the relationship between the type of activity and the quality of assessment is limited. The variety of teaching and learning methods and activities and curriculum assessment influence the implementation process of CBA to be carried out effectively. And lastly, future research could be to design and validate instruments that can measure teachers' professional judgment, including their ability to provide feedback, and make unbiased judgments. It is time for the parties involved to acknowledge teacher's judgment as professional and to be trusted as the main driver of the educational reform in Malaysia.

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