

Research Paper

## **National Primary School Assessment Policies and Implementation in Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia and Maldives: Recent Reforms**

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**Abstract:** In the dynamic landscape of primary education, assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping the learning journey of young students. The evolving educational paradigms and the diverse needs of students necessitates a nuanced understanding of assessment practices employed across different educational systems. In this comparative study which involves three British colonial countries, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia and Maldives, we seek to unravel the paradigm shifts in assessment at the primary level from a historical perspective. We discuss the intricacies of assessment systems in each country and examine how policymakers reform the assessment system, while attempting to seek a balance between strengthening national identities and aligning the systems with global development. We compared and analysed the primary school assessments from four dimensions: shift from national standardised examinations to school-based assessment; assessment in transdisciplinary curriculum; language policies in assessment; and reporting of assessment outcomes. The findings of this comparative analysis show that there are similarities and differences between the assessment systems in these three countries in the post-colonial era. This study also reveals the common patterns and unique trends in assessment that take place across the three countries.

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## Introduction

Every country, invariably, has a history that shapes the present and future directions of its education system. The education systems in postcolonial countries such as Brunei Darussalam (henceforth referred to as Brunei), Malaysia and Maldives continue to evolve in the post-colonial era, framed by the imperatives of their local, national and international contexts. In this paper, we present a comparative analysis of policy documents and a synthesis of research articles on assessment practices at the primary level between Brunei, Malaysia and Maldives. All the three countries were former British colonies and are currently members of the British Commonwealth. Malaya gained independence from the British in 1957. Maldives became a protectorate of the British in 1887, when the Sultan of Maldives signed an agreement with the British Protectorates established in Ceylon. Maldives subsequently gained her independence in 1965, while Brunei achieved independence in 1984. As a result, the education systems in the three countries have been influenced by their legacies of the British education system, especially at the early stages since independence. However, the education systems in all three countries have witnessed paradigm shifts since their independence. Thus, how the education system in the three countries has reformed is worth an investigation.

The second similarity is that the three countries have embraced globalisation, and yet, have placed considerable emphasis on strengthening their national identities and promoting their national languages since independence. For example, in Brunei, *SPN21* (the acronym for *Sistem Pendidikan Negara abad ke-21*, translated National Education System for the 21st century) maintains the Malay language as the national language and preserves the MIB (*Melayu Islam Beraja*, translated Malay Islamic Monarchy) policy for national identity (Muhammad & Petra, 2021). In Malaysia, the Report of the Education Committee 1956 characterises the nationalistic influences that are central to developing a national curriculum which would be adopted by all national schools (Ministry of Education, Federation of Malaya, 1956). In addition, the National Language Act (1963) recognises Bahasa Malaysia as the official language and medium of instruction for all levels of schooling, replacing the English language. In Maldives, the national language, Dhivehi is recognised as the official language of communication in public administration.

Common in all three countries is the national philosophy of education. Malaysia focuses on developing holistic individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced, with a firm belief in God (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2008). Similarly, the education policy of Maldives envisions the development of a confident, competent and productive citizen who is motivated to explore and create knowledge to contribute to his own family, local community and to the global society as a whole. Similarly, the mission of Brunei's Ministry of Education (MoE) is to provide holistic education to develop students' full potential (Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam, 2007).

Despite the above similarities, there are differences in the educational systems between the three countries. Malaysia gradually replaced British-orientated external examinations such as the Cambridge School Certificate and the Malaysia Certificate of Education (MCE) with internal examinations such as Lower Certificate of Education (*Sijil Rendah Pelajaran*) and Lower Secondary Assessment (*Penilaian Menengah Rendah*). On the other hand, students in Brunei Darussalam and Maldives continue to sit for GCE O Level or IGCSE at the end of secondary education. This may be due to the limited study options in these two countries once their students graduate from secondary schools. There are three public universities in Brunei Darussalam while Maldives has two. Having globally recognised certificates at the end of secondary schooling opens up more opportunities for students to further their studies in foreign countries.

This comparative study reveals the common patterns and unique trends in assessments that take place across the three countries, which cannot be done when studying a single country in isolation. This study involved a review of the latest national primary education policies, curriculum standards and educational blueprints in Brunei, Malaysia and Maldives. The authors from the three countries first reviewed the documents and highlighted the current development and future direction of primary school assessment policies in their country. Based on constant analysis and comparison between the documents, four themes emerged: shift from national standardised examinations to school-based assessment; assessment in transdisciplinary curriculum; language policies in assessment; and reporting of assessment. These four themes constituted the comparative framework for the authors to analyse the documents to gain insights into how each theme played out across the countries. The trustworthiness of the research was ensured in the data analysis process by adopting peer checking. The fourth and fifth authors who were not involved directly in developing the themes and writing reviewed and assessed the data analysis process, including validating the interpretations. To set the stage for the comparative analysis of assessment policies and practices, the next section presents the national profiles and assessment practices at the primary level in each of the three countries.

**Brunei Darussalam: National Profile**

Located on the island of Borneo in Southeast Asia, Brunei has a land size of around 5,767 km<sup>2</sup>. Brunei is separated into the western and eastern parts, where western parts include Brunei Muara, Tutong and Belait districts, while the eastern part is the Temburong district. The western parts and eastern parts are separated by Limbang, Malaysia. From the latest e-Census results, the preliminary count of Brunei’s total population was 440,715 persons (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics, 2021). Malay is the official language of Brunei Darussalam, but English is widely spoken, and various Chinese and Indian dialects are used among their respective communities. Brunei has seven indigenous ethnic groups comprising Malay, Kedayan, Belait, Tutong, Bisaya, Murut and Dusun; the majority of the population is Malay. Brunei gained its independence as a British protectorate in 1984.

**Primary School Assessments in Brunei**

Brunei’s education system started in 1912, when the first Malay medium primary school was established. In 1916, the first Chinese vernacular school was established while the first non-government English-medium primary school was established in 1931. Before the Second World War in 1941, only primary education was available in Brunei. In 1984, Brunei introduced a bilingual education policy, resulting in a single mainstream schooling system. Malay-medium primary and English-medium school systems were consequently phased out.

The assessment system of Brunei primary education before 1984 was administered by the Department of Education, established in 1951. The main examination for primary education at that time was the entrance examination to preparatory school. After 1984, the Brunei Examination Board introduced public examination at key levels, where students sat for the Primary Certificate of Education (PCE). In 2002, Primary School Assessment (*Penilaian Sekolah Rendah, PSR*) replaced PCE. Students who passed the examination will proceed to the lower secondary level. The National Education System for the 21st Century (SPN21) was launched in 2009, where some significant changes to curriculum and assessment of primary education were incorporated. Primary education is separated into two-stages as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Stages of schooling and development of primary education in SPN21

| Year Group       | Development of Primary Education                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Year 1 to Year 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop the 3Rs and communicate effectively in Malay and English</li><li>• Cultivate a culture of love for reading</li><li>• Foster social skills and cooperative attitudes, mutual respect for others, reasoning ability and problem-solving skills</li></ul> |

**Table 1.** (con't)

| Year Group       | Development of Primary Education                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equip students with the basic skills of utilising information and communication technology (ICT)</li> <li>• Identify concepts and develop ideas and creativity</li> <li>• Develop spiritual and aesthetic sensitivities</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Year 4 to Year 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Master and apply 3Rs and communicate effectively in Malay and English</li> <li>• Master the basic scientific and mathematical concepts</li> <li>• Participate actively in group work and strengthen emotional growth and physical fitness</li> <li>• Apply ICT skills in learning</li> <li>• Develop knowledge, ability to think and solve problems independently</li> <li>• Develop positive attitudes and values, learn to care about the society and environment and recognise their identity, race, religion and nation</li> <li>• Develop and foster interest in culture and arts</li> </ul> |

SPN21 specifies nine key learning areas: Islamic Religious Education, Nationhood Education, Languages, Mathematics, Science, Physical and Health Education, Social Sciences and Humanities, Technology, Arts and Culture. Under these nine key learning areas, pupils are offered two categories of subjects: Core subjects and General subjects, where core subjects will be tested in the PSR. Besides, all learners need the appropriate knowledge, understanding, skills and values to participate and compete in an era of globalisation that is ever-changing, while still maintaining their nationality. In this regard, SPN21 states that “The embedding of the [national ideology of] Malay Islamic Monarchy or *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) concept and ethics. . . is essential in [developing] learners’ sense of patriotism and citizenship for their country.” (2013, p. 45).

The Student Progress Assessment (SPA) consists of two components: School-based Assessment (SBA) and Primary School Assessment (*Penilaian Sekolah Rendah*, PSR). Under SPA, schools have to prepare reports on student achievement for students and parents. At the same time, SPA enables school administrators and teachers to conduct suitable, accurate, valid, and reliable assessments. SPA also aims to assist educators and learners in identifying strengths and weaknesses in learning to take the appropriate steps toward intervention and remediation. Lastly, one of SPA’s targets is to set national standards as benchmarks for all schools, especially PSR, at the end of Year 6. For Year 1 to Year 3, the subjects’ assessment is school-based assessment (SBA). School-based assessment (SBA) still applies for Year 4 to Year

6. However, pupils have to sit for a primary school assessment (*Penilaian Sekolah Rendah*, PSR) at the end of Year 6.

School-based assessment plays a significant role in the SPN21 curriculum. According to the SPN21, “Schools and teachers are given the autonomy to conduct continuous quality assessments to determine the learning outcomes of the learners.” (2013, pg 75). SBA emphasises a learner-centred approach which is activity-based. It also prioritises the learning process and reduces the emphasis on exam-oriented instruction (2013, pg. 76). The learning assessment is carried out continuously, either formally or informally. The assessment is implemented through observation, participation in discussion, written work, projects and others. The learners are trained to evaluate their work to self-reflect and manage their learning, including monitoring and evaluating their classmates’ achievements (peer assessment) and evaluating their achievements (self-assessment).

### **Malaysia: National Profile**

Malaysia has a total land area of 330,345 km<sup>2</sup>. It consists of West Malaysia on the Malay Peninsula and East Malaysia (i.e., Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo). Malaysia’s population was 32.7 million in 2021 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Malaysia is a multi-racial country, constituting three major ethno-cultural groups, Malay and Bumiputera, Chinese, and Indian. While the Malay language is the national language of Malaysia, other languages such as English, Chinese, Tamil, and various dialects are widely spoken.

### **Primary School Assessments in Malaysia**

The Malaysian school system is structured around kindergarten (which is optional), and a compulsory six years of primary education starting at seven years of age. This is followed by five years of secondary education, and post-secondary and tertiary education. While most Malaysian students study at national schools, private, international and home schools co-exist in the system. All national standardised examinations at national schools are administered by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate (MES) under the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia. Prior to 2001, the Upper Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) was the sole summative assessment at the end of primary education. All Year 6 students had to sit for this exam before they moved to secondary schools. Examinations at primary schools include term exams as well as public examinations. The results of the term examinations can be reviewed by parents through the School Examination Analysis System (SAPS). Public exams including UPSR, Religious Primary School Assessment (PSRA) and KAFA Class Assessment Test (UPKK) are administered by MES.

In 2001, Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (or *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah, KSSR*), was introduced to replace the Integrated Curriculum for Primary School (KBSR) which had been implemented since 1988. KSSR aims to restructure and improve the current curriculum to ensure that students have the relevant knowledge, skills and values to face the challenges of the 21st century. A comparison between KBSR and KSSR is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** A comparison between KBSR and KSSR

| <b>KBSR (Integrated Curriculum for Primary School)</b>                                                                                                    | <b>KSSR (Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools)</b>                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Integrated education to enhance mastery of 3R (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) with a focus on knowledge, skills, values, critical and creative thinking | Integrated education to enhance mastery of 4R (Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic and Reasoning) with additional focus on creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship |
| Three pillars: Communication, interaction with the society and personal development                                                                       | Six pillars: Communication, spiritually attitudes and values, humanities, science and technology, physical and aesthetic development and self-efficacy          |
| Curriculum was written based on content and learning outcomes                                                                                             | Curriculum was written based on content standards and learning standards                                                                                        |
| Year 6 students are assessed through a national standardised exam (UPSR)                                                                                  | Year 6 students are assessed through a national standardised exam (UPSR) and school-based assessment                                                            |
|                                                                                                                                                           | Starting 2023, students are only assessed through school-based assessment                                                                                       |

In line with KSSR, the MOE also introduced school-based assessment (SBA) for Year 1 in 2001. SBA is administered at all grades and school levels. Teachers are guided by Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document. The Malaysian government had proposed to implement SBA (school-based assessment) in public schools to replace the current public examinations. SBA is an initiative to shift from one national standardised examination to one formative assessment system which adopts cumulative graduation standards (Abdul Malik et al., 2021). The aims of SBA are twofold. Firstly, SBA is an attempt to shift students from an exam-oriented education system by reducing the dependency on national standardised examinations (Abdul Malik et al., 2021). Secondly, SBA is regarded as a form of assessment which can assess students comprehensively from cognitive, physical

and psychological aspects (Mahmud et al., 2020). This is in line with the National Education Philosophy which aims to develop a holistic individual (Mahmud et al., 2020). Similarly, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) also highlights that SBA is a holistic assessment that can develop students' skills to compete at the international level (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Under SBA, students are assessed and graded on the criteria and standards outlined in the Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (SCPS) for a specific subject by their subject teachers. There are four components in SBA: (1) central assessment which consists of one or two tasks set by The Malaysian Examination Syndicate (MES) but administered and graded by school teachers based on the standards and rubrics provided by MES; (2) school assessment which is set, administered and graded by the subject teachers based on the standards outlined in the curriculum; (3) assessment on physical activities, co-curricular activities and sports; and (4) psychometric assessment.

In the classroom, teachers are given greater responsibility in designing quality assessments that align with instructional strategies and their students' learning outcomes. Student assessment is based on different evidence markers on a certain grade starting from Band 1 to Band 6. Starting from 2016, the students' SBA results were accorded a weightage of 60% of the final examination, while the national standardised assessment, UPSR, constituted 40% of this assessment. The main reason for introducing school-based assessment (SBA) was to reduce the pressure on all stakeholders caused by an examination-oriented system (Muhammad Sofwan et al., 2020).

In 2020, UPSR was discontinued due to the COVID-19 outbreaks. It was replaced with SBA and finally, abolished starting from 2021. Now, students are only assessed using SBA. For the English subject, the Common European Framework of References (CEFR)-aligned ESL curriculum combines both formative and summative assessment. CEFR is not an examination, but it is used to assess students' proficiency in a foreign language.

### **Maldives: National Profile**

Maldives is an archipelago of small islands spread across the Indian ocean covering a distance of 800 km. It is one of the smallest countries comprising 187 small islands in the Asia Pacific and inhabited by a population of 557,462. About 25% of the population lives in the capital Male' where most of the opportunities for proper education, medical facilities and employment are available. Maldives is a Muslim-majority country with its own independent culture, language and identity. Though the national language of Maldives is Dhivehi, English is widely spoken as a second

language. English is widely used as a medium of instruction and for communicative purposes.

### **Primary School Assessments in Maldives**

The school system of Maldives is structured into four main phases of schooling: two years of optional preschool education, six years of compulsory primary education, four years of compulsory lower secondary education and two years of optional higher secondary education, each phase focusing on a specific age group. With a vision of “every child is prepared for life”, the education system aims to develop successful individuals who are motivated, confident, competent, responsible and productive contributors to their own family, local community and global society.

The first Maldivian national curriculum was introduced in 1983. Till then, students were assessed based on summative assessments, unit tests and a final examination called the Promotion Test. The results of this exam were used to promote students to the next grade. Later, in 1990, formative assessments were introduced. Schools started using formative assessment strategies such as portfolios, projects, presentations in lower primary years (Grades 1–3), and only continuous assessments were used as the most accepted assessment mode, with rankings from A – F to evaluate students with descriptive explanations developed for these rankings. In primary Grades 4 to 7, marks are rated in grade scales of A – F in the final report book (Ministry of Education, 2008). In addition, MoE also introduced new report cards in schools, specifying minimum learning competencies for all curriculum subjects. In the Child Friendly Baru School (CFBS) project, CFBS indicators were used to assess students’ learning outcomes.

The new curriculum implemented in 2015 brought further development in the assessment practices in Maldives to align the existing practices with its curriculum objective, “to prepare the child for life.” The philosophy of the new assessment strategies was aimed at providing more accurate and useful information concerning student’s understanding, mastery, and use of their knowledge, skills, and attitudes while serving three main functions: diagnosis, instruction and reporting. An assessment policy was developed and published highlighting the assessment and evaluation strategies to be practised in all public schools. EDC (Educational Development Centre) also developed an assessment guide to assist teachers in implementing formative assessment effectively in the classroom. This document, *Pedagogy and Assessment Guide*, outlines formative assessment strategies, tools and best practices.

Therefore, starting from 2015, assessment practices have been changed to school-based formative assessments in primary grades and both formative and

summative tests in lower secondary to higher secondary grades. No summative, school-based or national-level examination is given to students at Key Stage 1 and 2. The learning outcomes given in the curriculum are assessed and recorded using a variety of formative assessment strategies and tools such as projects, observations, discussion worksheets, journals and others. These assessment records are managed using a learning management system called MEMIS (Maldives Educational Management Information System). Teachers regularly update student achievements after assessing each learning outcome. The teachers also reteach and reassess the learning outcomes if the students do not fully achieve the outcomes. In addition to the learning outcomes, teachers are recommended to assess the indicators in eight key competencies (Practicing Islam, Understanding and Managing Self, Making Meaning, Relating to People, Using Media and Technology, Living a Healthy Life, Thinking Critically and Creatively, Sustainable Practices) using these two methods of assessments.

In addition, starting from 2016, National Assessment for Learning Outcomes (NALO) is administered across the country using a representative sample of Grade 4 and 7 Maldivian public schools (Musthafa & Naseer, 2024). The same skills are assessed in NALO to get a clear picture of students' progress across the country. The test is administered for specific subjects including Mathematics, Dhivehi and English Language. Apart from the test, survey questionnaires are given to students and teachers who participate in this assessment to collect additional information about students' language and numerical skills and to determine the speed at which these skills are being developed. The NALO test is a World Bank-funded 5-year project to improve the quality of education and paves the way to enhance the changes that need to be brought to provide better education in schools (Ministry of Education, Maldives, 2017).

## Discussion

### Comparison of Assessment Policies and Implementation at the Primary School Level in Brunei, Malaysia and Maldives

A comparative analysis of assessment practices at the primary level in Brunei, Malaysia and Maldives may be considered along the following four themes: shift from national standardised examinations to school-based assessment; assessment in transdisciplinary curriculum; language policies in assessment; and reporting of assessment. These four themes were determined based on the curriculum documents, education policies and education blueprints of the three countries. These themes reflect the current development and direction of education in these countries. Table 3 shows a comparison of the key assessment features by themes across the three countries.

**Table 3.** Summary of key primary school assessment features in Brunei, Malaysia and Maldives

| Themes                                                                             | Brunei                                                                                                                                                                               | Malaysia                                                                                                                                                     | Maldives                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The shift from national standardised examinations to school-based assessment (SBA) | Integrate Brunei Common Assessment Task (BCAT) into national standardised exams                                                                                                      | SBA across all subjects<br><br>SBA covers cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains<br><br>No high-stake national standardised exams                     | Integrate National Assessment for Learning Outcomes (NALO) into national standardised exams                                                                                        |
| Assessment in transdisciplinary curriculum                                         | Assessment is discipline-based                                                                                                                                                       | Assessment is discipline-based                                                                                                                               | Assessment is discipline-based                                                                                                                                                     |
| Language policies in assessment                                                    | English is the language used in all assessments (except other language subjects) in national schools<br><br>Malay language is used in assessments of MIB and Malay language subjects | Malay language is the language used in all assessments (except other language subjects) in national schools<br><br>Bilingual exam papers in selected schools | English is the language used in all assessments (except other language subjects) in national schools<br><br>Dhivehi is used in the assessments of Dhivehi subject, Islam and Quran |
| Reporting of assessment outcome                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                      | SBA is based on six-level performance<br><br>School Examination Analysis System stores and generates student performance                                     | SBA is based on three-level performance standards<br><br>Learning management system (MEMIS) is used to report and manage students' performance                                     |

### The Shift from National Standardised Examinations to School-Based Assessment

School-based assessment (SBA) started in Brunei, Malaysia and Maldives in 2000 with the intention of integrating holistic assessment into the teaching and learning process. SBA in all three nations allow teachers to have a certain degree of autonomy

to conduct classroom assessment accordingly, which was impossible to achieve through centralised practice with instructions and regulations delivered top-down from policymakers. Teachers are recognised as important agents in implementing a curriculum, and their role is no longer merely as teachers (or curriculum implementers) but also as ongoing assessors through SBA.

In Brunei, SBA was introduced to shift from traditional student assessments towards mind mapping, projects, inquiry, students' self-assessment, and peer assessment so that teachers could be creative in the ways in which they evaluate students' work (Ministry of Education Brunei, 2009; Muhammad & Petra, 2021). In addition, through SBA in schools, teachers are given autonomy to conduct quality continuous assessment to determine the learning outcomes of the learners rather than an emphasis on exam-oriented instruction (Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam, 2013). In addition, the introduction of the Brunei Common Assessment Task (BCAT) under SBA allows teachers to develop and adapt standard-based criteria and rubrics to help students assess their developing knowledge and skills (Botty & Shahrill, 2015).

Similarly, in Malaysia, the shift from national standardised examinations to school-based assessment is for the purposes of decentralization, reducing dependency on summative assessment and developing human capital through assessment for learning (Abdul Malik et al., 2021; Mahmud et al., 2020). Through SBA, a holistic approach to assess students was introduced in which the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains are equally assessed. This indicates that teachers must embrace formative assessment as a new method of evaluating students and become ongoing assessors (Arumugham & Shaik-Abduallah, 2018; Sidhu et al., 2018). In Maldives, the new national curriculum was implemented to promote a holistic approach to education which includes more diversity in assessment practice (di Biase & Maniku, 2021; Fastier & Mohamed, 2015; Ministry of Education Maldives, 2019) under the NALO framework. This is one way of moving away from the high-stake assessment system known as the "Promotion Test" that created pressure on teachers to conform to school policies and parental expectations (Fastier & Mohamed, 2015).

The decentralised system of formative assessment is a democratising pedagogical strategy as referred to by Munoz and Araya (2020), which is intended to redefine the empowerment between students and teachers. It is a shift from the traditional centralised system of assessment that is not only sensitive to the local needs of the countries, but also empowers teachers to create a culture of assessment that is more focused on students' progress at the school level and the development of more self-reflective and self-aware learners (Munoz & Araya, 2020). Hence, SBA in the three countries paves the way to more democratic evaluation practices that strengthen student participation, self-regulation and diversity in classroom learning. It also

empowers the teachers of the three countries to deal with the individual differences of the students and make learning more meaningful to the students.

Moving away from national standardised examinations, SBA embeds national identity through more holistic and contextualised assessments. In Malaysia, the assessments in the core subjects such as history focus on understanding national history and heritage; celebrating multiculturalism and harmony; and appreciating the sacrifices made in gaining independence. The SBA assessments include projects, portfolios and analysis of historical places. These assessments promote civic awareness, patriotism and unity among students. In Brunei, SBA is used to assess students' knowledge about Malay customs, cultures, the teaching of Islamic laws and values as well as the monarchy system in Brunei in the MIB subject. National identity is one of the principles promoted in the present national curriculum of the Maldives. Hence, national identity and religion is embedded in the assessment of most subjects such as Dhivehi, Islam, Social Studies, Science, and English in the effort to inculcate these principles and values in students.

### **Assessment in Transdisciplinary Curriculum**

Transdisciplinary curriculum, especially in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is seen as a field that drives the development of sophisticated scientific knowledge and skills which contributes to the future employment needs of industries that fuel a country's economy (English et al., 2013). A transdisciplinary curriculum is an integrated curriculum, which goes beyond simply drawing together concepts from different disciplines, but creating new understanding that transgress the traditional boundaries of the disciplines (Smyth, 2017). There are initiatives to boost students' interest in STEM subjects in all three countries (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; Ministry of Education Brunei Darussalam, 2009). For example, in Malaysia, the Ministry of Education developed the Guideline of Implementing STEM in Teaching and Learning (*Panduan Pelaksanaan Sains, Teknologi, Kejuruteraan dan Matematik (STEM) dalam Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran*) to assist teachers design STEM-related activities in individual STEM subjects. In Maldives, non-governmental organisations organise workshops for students to enhance their STEM learning experiences (Foundation for Environment, Climate and Technology [FECT], 2022). In Brunei, the STEP Centre aims to enrich the knowledge and skills of students and teachers in STEM-related fields through educational initiatives (Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam).

Nevertheless, in terms of assessment, taking Malaysia as an example, rubrics were designed based on the requirements of an individual subject. For instance, science teachers develop a rubric with a few science-related criteria. Then, they assess a STEM-related project based on those discipline-based criteria. Researchers critiqued

that there is less integration of subjects in assessment rubrics (Belbase et al., 2022). In conclusion, in all the three countries, the assessments are still discipline-based, despite the government policies which emphasises the need for transdisciplinary learning.

### **Language Policies in Assessment**

Language policies in teaching as well as in assessment in Malaysia, Brunei and Maldives developed over time for local, historical reasons. Malaysia became independent from the British in 1957. Thus, the Malaysian Education policy, 1961 and National Language Act, 1967 affirmed that the Malay language as the medium of instruction in mainstream primary, secondary and tertiary education (Kaur & Shapii, 2018). According to Chan and Abdullah (2015), Malaysia has a unique situation at the primary level, where vernacular languages (Mandarin and Tamil) are used as the language medium in vernacular schools, while the Malay language is used in national primary schools. As for secondary schools, the Malay language is the medium of instruction, and English is taught as a subject. In 2003, a policy of using English to teach Mathematics and Science was introduced. However, the policy reverted the medium of instruction to Malay in 2009.

The bilingual development of Malaysia was discussed in Malaysia National Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (NEB). The NEB aims to provide a high standard education to prepare students for the needs of the 21st century. One of the 11 shifts in NEB stated, “Ensure every child is proficient in English and Bahasa Malaysia” (Bilingualism). Under this new blueprint, the education system has to ensure every child will be proficient in English and Bahasa Malaysia, and students are encouraged to learn an additional language. In line with the blueprint, the examination questions in the national standardised examination (i.e., Primary School Achievement Test) are printed in two languages. For national schools, the examination questions are printed in both Malay and English. On the other hand, exam questions are printed in the first language and then, English for vernacular schools.

When Brunei became independent from the British in 1984, Brunei started to introduce the “Bilingual Education System” (*Sistem Pendidikan Dwi Bahasa*) in the same year, in which both Malay and English became the medium of instruction in education. This system was fully implemented in all government schools in 1985 and all non-government schools in 1992 (MOE, 2004). Under this bilingual system, the medium of instruction follows the Ministry of Education guidelines. For preschool, all subjects are taught in Malay, except for English lessons. For primary school, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Malay Language, and Nationhood Education are conducted in Malay, while Science, Mathematics, Social Studies and ICT are taught in English. At the same time, teachers can teach Physical Education, co-curricular activities, and Arts in English or Malay.

At the secondary level, all subjects will be taught in English medium, except for Islamic Religious Knowledge and nationhood education which are conducted in Malay. Language subjects will also be introduced in their respective language mediums (Ministry of Education Brunei, 2009). The bilingual education system of Brunei maintained the state's national language as Malay, without neglecting English as the world's academic lingua franca (Muhammad & Putra, 2021). Maintaining the English proficiency of Brunei students is essential as many of them will further study overseas. "Being proficient in the English language has enabled students to enter higher overseas institutions" (Muhammad & Putra, 2021). Nevertheless, assessments for all subjects are conducted in English except for language and *Melayu Islam Beraja* subjects.

Maldives became independent from the British in 1965; the official language of Maldives is Dhivehi Bas. Before the 1960s, most of the schools taught Dhivehi language and Arabic. In 2005, Maldives converted all community schools to government schools, where all government schools used English as a medium of instruction. Back in 1960, the government of Maldives formed the first two English-medium schools at Male'. One of the purposes was to prepare Maldivians to receive training overseas to meet the nation's growing development needs (Muhamed, 2013). Currently, there are 218 English-medium schools all over Maldives, which include primary schools, secondary schools and both primary and secondary schools. Students sit for an international examination, which is Cambridge O level and Edexcel A level, at the end of the lower and higher secondary school, respectively. From the assessment aspect, the situation is somewhat similar to Brunei and Maldives. Students need English proficiency to sit for an international examination in both countries. As for Malaysia, most national stream students will sit for the national standard examination (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*, SPM) rather than an international examination.

In conclusion, language assessment in the three countries offers valuable insights into how national identity is embedded—or strategically balanced—with global educational and linguistic demands. In Malaysia, the bilingual assessment policies reflect a practical compromise in preserving national language while developing global competitiveness. Brunei aligns national identity through the selective use of Malay language in certain subjects such as MIB and Malay Language subjects, while using English as a tool to empower its citizens globally. Maldives prioritises global readiness over linguistic nationalism. The official language of Maldives, Dhivehi, is widely used as a language subject and in cultural practices, but only in academic assessments. Dhivehi is also used as a medium of instruction in pre-primary classes and in teaching and assessing certain subjects such as, Dhivehi, Islam and Quran in the other grades, preserving the national identity through the national language.

## Reporting of Assessment Outcomes

Before the paradigm shift in curriculum in all the three countries, the reporting focused specifically on the cognitive domain. Parents were briefed on the total marks obtained in each subject from the standardised exams conducted in schools. However, with the emphasis on SBA in the three countries, the classroom assessment instruments are now not only restricted to written assignments and worksheets, but also include project, performance, demonstration, field study, case study, and practical work (Majid, 2011). Although teachers are given the authority and empowerment to assess students, they still lack the sufficient knowledge and skills in SBA, especially in using various informal methods of assessment (Majid, 2011).

In Malaysia, SBA is based on six levels of performance standards that have been identified in every subject. These performance standards clearly indicate the criteria relating to the levels of students' performance from each content standard (the knowledge, skills and values the students must achieve in each subject) and learning standard (the degree of proficiency that must be attained in relation to each of the content standards). The performance standards are stratified into six bands indicated by numbers from 1–6 specifying the criteria the students must achieve for each standard to progress through the various stages of primary education.

Similarly, in Maldives, the SBA assessments are based on the learning outcomes and learning indicators of each subject. These outcomes and indicators are assessed using a set of criteria known as performance standards stratified into three levels marked as fully achieved (FA), mostly achieved (MA) and achieving (A). Hence, the students' achievements from each learning outcome and indicators are specified using the three criteria, showing how much the student has achieved from each learning outcome and indicator.

The reporting of students' performance is very similar in Maldives and Malaysia. In both countries, students' performance is reported according to the design and format provided by the Ministry of Education. In Maldives, a learning management system known as MEMIS, is used to report and manage students' performance. Teachers update the students' achievements to the system and parents and students can view the information at the end of the semester using a student login. The students' reports are also generated, and a hard copy of this report is given to each parent. In Malaysia, MOE of Malaysia provides an Excel template to record the students' achievements from the standards. The template requires teachers to complete each individual pupil's progress, and the School Examination Analysis System will then automatically generate the pupil's achievement report. The resultant printout of each individual pupil is kept in SBA files and a copy given to parents.

The reporting of student performance in Brunei differs from Malaysia and Maldives, where Brunei implements a structured assessment framework that blends formative and summative evaluations. Students receive report cards detailing the

total marks obtained in each subject, which are derived from multiple assessment components. Brunei integrates the Student Assessment Tracker (SAT), SBA and Student Progress Examination (SPE) into a unified framework. SAT evaluates literacy, numeracy, and science, guiding teaching strategies and tracking progress. SBA emphasises holistic assessment with quizzes, projects, and assignments, fostering problem-solving skills. SPE, conducted at the end of Year 8, combines SBA scores to determine upper secondary placement. Together, these assessments ensure comprehensive evaluation, blending formative and summative approaches to support academic development, aligned with Brunei national standards.

### Conclusion

This paper compared the school assessment system at the primary level in Brunei, Malaysia and Maldives. In contributing to the existing literature, it shifts how we think about policies that have affected/ are still affecting the provision of assessment and moves beyond describing to unpick the development of assessment after independence. All three countries are rich in history and their structure of education initially had a very strong colonial influence. Since independence from the British, all three countries have taken much initiative to reform their educational system, integrating local elements to develop an education system that can reflect their national identity. For instance, Brunei introduced subjects that are unique to their local context (i.e., *Melayu Islam Beraja*). It is mandatory for Malaysian students to pass the national language subject (i.e., Malay language) in the assessment to proceed to secondary school. Given that all three countries are Muslim-majority, their assessment systems also include religious knowledge assessments. The shift to SBA shows that all three countries are responding to the trends in assessment advocated in world conferences and international reports (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). SBA, as part of the assessment for learning, allows teachers to create a framework, language and tools, to shape their approach to teaching and learning (OECD, 2013). Through SBA, teachers can assess and monitor students' progressive development, helping them to take greater responsibility for their learning through continuous feedback and reflection (Munoz & Araya, 2020).

This study has some implications for policymakers and teachers. For policymakers, this paper provides insights into the development and structure of assessments at the primary school level in different countries. We analysed policy papers and curricula documents, which led to the conclusion that assessment is constantly being improved in all countries to develop a holistic person, rather than a student who only excels in high-stake examinations. It is crucial for policymakers to take into consideration different philosophies, local needs and global development to design meaningful assessments to benefit young primary school students.

For teachers (Abdul Malik et al., 2021; Ramasamy & Lee, 2022), this study provides a guide on the direction of assessment in terms of empowering teachers in the assessment process. Teachers can play a more active role in designing and implementing assessment to further enhance their professional knowledge and skills.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

This article compared paradigm shifts in assessment at the primary school level in Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia and Maldives. There are similarities and differences between primary school assessments in the three countries. Future studies can delve further into factors contributing to the divergence of the education system in these countries since they gained their independence from the British. The focus of these studies can be on how local contexts drive the shifts in assessment from the lens of sociology. Besides, future studies can also discuss primary school assessment policies from a theoretical lens to strengthen this descriptive comparative study. This will allow this paper to move beyond description to explain how and why the four themes emerged from the data, improving the validity of the research findings.

In addition, this study relied on secondary sources and official policy documents which may not have captured classroom-level realities. Thus, future studies can discuss the impacts of paradigm shifts in assessment on different stakeholders. Empirical data can be collected from school leaders to gain insights into how they adapt to these shifts. For instance, interviews can be conducted with school principals and teachers to understand how they cope with school-based assessment when this new assessment approach was introduced into the system. This information can help the Ministry of Education to better support school administrators, teachers and students when they transition into a new policy or system.

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