

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Assessment has been the focus of controversy in most education systems. Much of this debate is entrenched in the desire to move away from the traditional role played by assessment, that is as a tool for measurement, towards an assessment culture which provides a more multidimensional and authentic description of the learner (Burke, Fogarty, & Belgrad, 1994; Engel, 1994; Valencia, 1990). This debate on testing versus alternative forms of assessment derives its roots from dissatisfactions that have arisen from the shortcomings of a testing culture since the time of Lindquist:

If measurement is to continue to play an increasingly important role in education, measurement workers must be *much more than* technicians. Unless their efforts are directed by sound educational philosophy, unless they accept and welcome a greater share of responsibility for the selection and clarification of educational objectives, unless they show *much more concern with what they measure* as well as with how they measure it, much of their work will prove futile and ineffective (Lindquist, 1901 – 1978, in Stiggins, 1994, p.1).

A number of issues on educational assessment were raised by Lindquist. The first issue is that all developments in educational assessment should be grounded by 'sound educational philosophy', which according to Elkind (1989) may be either a developmental philosophy or a psychometric philosophy. These two philosophies differ on four aspects: *the learner, the learning process, the knowledge acquired, and the goals or aims of education*. According to the developmental philosophy, mental abilities of the learner are regarded as *developing*, whereas according to the psychometric philosophy, the learner's abilities are regarded as *measurable abilities*. The learning process according to the *developmental philosophy* is supposed to be dependent on the content to

be learned. However, the psychometric philosophy regards learning as a set of principles and skills to be acquired, independent of the content to be learned. On the aspect of knowledge acquired, the developmental philosophy views knowledge as a construction that results from the interaction of the subject (the learner) and the object (the content). The psychometric philosophy on the other hand views knowledge as something acquired and that can be measured independently of the process of acquisition.

The aims of developmental education, according to Elkind, are to produce creative and critical thinkers, whereas the aims of psychometric education are to produce high scorers on achievement tests. Thus, it seems likely that when Lindquist mentioned a 'sound educational philosophy', he was probably referring to a developmental philosophy, one that emphasises the development of the child mentally, physically and emotionally rather than a psychometric one, which regards the child as an object to be assessed. Elkind (1989) also emphasised the role of a sound philosophy of education in determining educational reform when he argued that true educational reforms could only come about when educational practices are derived from a developmental philosophy of education as opposed to a psychometric one.

The second issue raised by Lindquist is on the shared responsibility for determining educational objectives. For education to take on a holistic approach to educating the child, teaching, learning and assessment should be linked to one another. Thus, if assessment is linked to teaching and learning, then the assessor should also be involved in not only implementing the curriculum but also developing it. As such, assessment personnel should also share the responsibility of determining the educational objectives.

The third issue raised by Lindquist is on the 'what and how' of assessment. His concern is that more thought should be put into what is being assessed as well as how it is being assessed. This brings forth the question of the purpose of the assessment. Stiggins (2002) says that assessment basically serves two purposes: assessment of learning, which serves to determine the status of learning; and assessment for learning, which on the other hand serves to promote learning. Hence the 'what and how' of assessment is determined by the purpose of the assessment. For example, if assessment is meant for the mere purpose of determining the status of students' learning, that is, to measure students' achievement in a particular task, then standardised testing is suitable. This is because to determine the status of students' learning there would be a need to compare the performance of students against each other or against a set of standards or criteria. However, if the purpose of assessment is to promote learning, then school-based assessment is more appropriate. This is because in school-based assessment, the teacher decides what to assess and how to assess and the purpose of the assessment is to inform the student and the teacher about the student's learning.

These important issues about assessment thus rightfully concern Lindquist. Lindquist's concern and views on the role of measurement in education add some historical perspective to the current debate on the need for assessment reform. The need to revisit assessment practices in view of current developments internationally was echoed by Broadfoot (1994) when she said that in recent years there had been an emergence of new assessment paradigms that focused on promoting learning rather than the measurement of it. Assessment is an activity that affects every one of us everyday either formally or informally. Students and adults alike are involved in the assessment

process either as assessors or the assessed. Educational assessment according to Popham (1995, p.3) "... is a formal attempt to determine students' status with respect to educational variables of interest." Popham's definition of assessment can be interpreted as a deliberate and planned way to determine the ability of students at the time of assessment with regard to their knowledge, skills and attitudes. Popham's definition of assessment fits the purpose of assessment 'of' learning rather than assessment 'for' learning as he mentions that assessment is to determine the status of students' learning. Glaser (1991, p.28) on the other hand, regarded assessment as a:

... measure of skill and dispositions that are essential to further learning. Once mastered, the skills and knowledge of a domain can become enabling competencies for the future.

Therefore, Glaser (1991) regards assessment as a measure of the important components of learning, which once acquired, will act as a catalyst for future development. This definition points towards a definition of assessment 'for' learning. From Popham's (1995) and Glaser's (1991) definitions of assessment, it can be said that both Popham and Glaser regard assessment quite differently. Popham (1995) regards assessment as the end of a process (of learning), as a means of informing students of their achievement and performance whereas Glaser regards assessment as a means to an end, to service learning.

Taking Glaser's definition of assessment a step further, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) (1996) proposed nine principles of good practice for assessing students' learning. The first principle is that good assessment needs to be linked to educational values. The 'what and how' of assessment, that is, what is to be assessed and how the assessment is to be undertaken will be determined by these values. This was one of the issues that Lindquist had earlier raised. The AAHE's concern is that it

assessment is devoid of values, then assessment practitioners will most probably only assess what is easiest to assess at the expense of what is actually important and valued.

The AAHE also mentions that an effective assessment assesses learning that is multidimensional, integrated, and has occurred over a period of time. Learning, which is a complex process is manifested by what students know, as well as can do with what they know. Learning engulfs all aspects of development including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Hence a comprehensive assessment of learning should accordingly encompass all these aspects. Effective assessment needs to employ a diversity of methods including assessment of actual performances, and these performances must have taken place over a period of time. Assessment of this nature is able to project growth and the *integration of knowledge, values, and skills.*

*Clear assessment purpose was another principle of good practice for assessing learning proposed by the AAHE. This is because assessment, which is a goal-oriented practice, basically involves comparing performances with purposes and expectations. Hence when the purpose of assessment is unclear, the focus of assessment becomes blurred. Students and teachers will not know where to focus their teaching and learning and what standards to use. A good assessment practice therefore needs to define its purpose clearly and ensure that all parties understand and agree to it. In addition, good assessment practices must be such that they can be implemented.*

Assessment needs to focus on either the outcomes or the products of learning as well as the processes that the learner undergoes to achieve that learning. This is important because by knowing how students learn, teachers and students have the capacity to *improve learning.*

Yet another principle of good assessment practice is that it needs to be ongoing as opposed to a one-off practice. This is because when students are assessed continuously over a period of time it is possible to map the progress of individual students or track the performance of different cohorts of students. In this way it is possible to take steps to improve students' learning. Besides that the process and methods of assessment itself can be improved along the way, based on feedback from students' performance.

The AAHE suggests that assessment can enhance improvement when more people from across the education community are involved in it. This would provide students with a more all rounded assessment of learning as all those who would like to contribute to the improvement of students' learning have a share in the assessment of the student. This interested party could include students themselves, administrators, librarians and others involved in the education of the student.

Good assessment practices, says the AAHE, deal with useful issues and highlight information that is of importance to people. In other words, it is important that the task itself deals with some matter of interest so that the information collected to answer the task is meaningful and useful especially to students and not trivial or unrelated to students' interest.

Assessment is also more likely to bring about improvement if it is linked to some necessary conditions in the change process. For example assessment is linked to teaching and learning and hence decisions to improve teaching and learning would rightfully have an effect on assessment and vice versa.

Lastly, the AAHE is of the opinion that assessment is the medium through which educators meet their obligations to students and the public. Besides reporting on students

performances, the more important obligation faced by assessors is to improve education. The audience for whom the assessment information is prepared, correspondingly, have a reciprocal obligation to support these activities that promote improvement.

While these principles were proposed for higher education, they are universal principles for promoting good practice in the assessment for learning and are therefore applicable to all levels of education including primary education. The principles characterised by the AAHE, hence were used as guiding principles in the development of the Portfolio Assessment Package.

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

In Malaysia, after the achievement of independence in 1957, the National Education policy at that time emphasised a common curriculum and examination that carried nationalistic elements, for all schools (Hussein, 1993, p.230). This shows that the priority at that time was to attain racial unity through uniformity in education. This was also reflected in the objectives of the Fifth Malaysia Plan (1986-1990), which linked education, with national unity and national development:

The overall objective of education and training is to promote national unity ... the role of education and training in Malaysia is to produce knowledgeable, trained, and skilled individuals to meet the manpower requirements as well as the growing social needs. (Government of Malaysia, 1986, p. 483)

Subsequently, the Cabinet Report of 1979 made several recommendations for changes to the education system. The Report saw the introduction of the New Primary School Curriculum (NPSC) in 1982, better known as 'KBSR' (*Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah*). Here, the emphasis was on the wholesome development of the individual

student, with special attention on the acquisition and utilisation of basic skills like reading, writing and arithmetic. In line with this, the NPSC introduced continuous assessment in the classroom (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1988). The 1990's saw the reformation of the NPSC as a result of which the Integrated Primary School Curriculum (IPSC) or the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah* was introduced. Among the changes that this new curriculum brought was the split in the subject Man and His Environment (*Alam dan Manusia*) into two separate subjects, namely Science and Local Studies (*Kajian Tempatan*) in 1994/95. This was necessary in view of the developments and the current needs of the country. In attempting to keep abreast with development, it was found that Science, a crucial subject was missing from the curriculum. Hence, Science was introduced as a new subject in the IPSC. At the same time the policy makers also realised that nation building would be futile if the citizens of the country had little knowledge of the country's political, cultural, and geographical background. This contributed to the introduction of Local Studies as another new subject in the IPSC. The aim of Local Studies is to strengthen students' knowledge and skills in understanding and valuing local events; to introduce to students the background and identity of the country so that they will develop a love and pride for the country and its people; and to inculcate patriotism among students so that they can contribute towards nation building and the future of Malaysia (Lee, 2000). Local Studies is an integration of geography, history, citizenship, culture, and religion. In the Integrated Primary School Curriculum (IPSC) there are two forms of assessment: a school-based assessment by teachers, and a centrally administered standardized examination managed by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate. The former is called School-based Assessment for Primary Schools (*Penilaian*



*Kendalian Sekolah Rendah*) while the latter is called Primary School Assessment Examination (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah*). According to the Information Book on the Integrated Primary School Curriculum published by the Curriculum Development Centre, Malaysia (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, n.d.), the School-based Assessment for Primary Schools (SBAPS) is a continuous assessment of students' achievement and development with the aim of ensuring the wholesome development of the individual student in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects. The assessment includes application of skills, acquisition of knowledge, internalisation and practice of values, attitudes, interest and talents. It consists of both formative as well as summative assessment. This assessment is planned and carried out by teachers using methods like observation, and oral and written assessments. The assessment instruments are to be constructed and administered by the teacher at the school level. Information that is obtained through this assessment is to be used by the teacher for follow-up action either immediately or at the end of a learning unit. The Primary School Assessment Examination on the other hand, is intended to test the achievement of Year Six students at the end of their primary education. This examination places emphasis on cognitive skills especially the acquisition of basic skills like reading, writing and arithmetic.

Centralised examinations are important in the Malaysian educational system as students from different geographical and cultural backgrounds compete for places in local and foreign institutions of higher learning, or for certification purposes to enter the job market. However, equally important is providing a wholesome education for the development of the individual student. This can be achieved through school-based assessment because school-based assessment focuses on the development of individual

students and not on comparing achievement between students. Unfortunately this is also the area where much *tension* exists between the assessment policy or its intentions and the actual practice of assessment in schools. First, school-based assessment is supposed to see the decentralisation of assessment from the federal level to school level to plan, prepare, administer and mark the various assessments. In practice however, school-based assessment is a duplication of the Primary School Assessment Examination, at the district level. This is because although it is mentioned that school-based assessment is to be planned and managed by teachers, the State Education Departments have their own interpretation of this assessment type and have chosen to keep a tight realm around it, by producing common tests for all students in the district. In the process, teachers have lost control over the management of school-based assessment and students especially those who are academically weak have become victims of the system. When school-based assessment is practised in a centralised fashion, the needs of individual students are usually overshadowed by the administrative needs of the schools. Schools tend to use students' academic performance in centralised examinations to measure and compare the performance of schools. Stiggins (1988, p.368) highlighted the need for classroom teachers to be directly involved in developing and using their own assessments for classroom and school purposes when he said that, "the assessments that count – the assessments that most influence student learning and academic self-concept – are those developed and used by teachers in the classroom". Wiggins (1989, p.704) too agrees that tests developed by teachers have an effective point of leverage. He said this when describing "a true test" as one that offers students a genuine intellectual challenge and is developed by teachers.

Second, the SBAPS is supposed to ensure the wholesome development of the individual student. However, the assessment methods administered by the teachers tend to tip the scale towards lower levels of cognitive assessment. Even the choice for continuous formative assessment seems to favour objective tests (for all subjects) and essay writing (for the languages). Hence, the emphasis is usually on the cognitive development of the student as it is easier to grade test questions to assess students' factual or declarative knowledge compared to questions that require students to organise relevant information to put forth a coherent idea, or questions that promote critical thinking (Chiam, 2001, December 16).

Third, the SBAPS is supposed to be a continuous assessment. However, much of what poses as continuous assessment (*practice exercises, informal and formal question and answer sessions and quizzes*) is usually not recorded nor reported as the teacher uses the "memory approach" (Brualdi, 1998). In the memory approach the teacher relies totally on his memory to determine the student's performance as no written records or notes are made during observation. This approach therefore cannot play its role in informing the teachers and students effectively of their respective progress and weaknesses, upon which follow-up action is supposed to be based. Furthermore, students' progress in school-based assessment, be it formative or summative is usually presented in the form of a mark or grade. This merely provides information on how a student has fared in a particular test or exercise. It does not describe the student's performance and does little to inform the student about his/her strengths and weaknesses in the task and how he/she can go about improving him/her self. *The Information Book* (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, n.d., p.55) states that school-based assessment is supposed to be

used "... to identify strengths and weaknesses of students, and the effectiveness of the teacher's instruction ... With the information obtained the teacher can plan suitable follow-up action in accordance with the student's level of ability". However, the type of information generated by the present school-based assessment practices cannot perform this function effectively. Wiggins (1989) said that in order to ensure that a student is fully examined, the teacher should gauge the student's understanding. In order to do that the student's answer should be explored and it may entail a discussion between the teacher and the student.

Fourth, in the School-based Assessment for Primary Schools (SBAPS), the same assessment is used for two distinctive purposes, that is for formative and summative purpose. Gipps (1994) emphasised that assessments for summative purposes have different properties and qualities compared to assessments used for formative purposes. She also stressed that when formative assessments were used for summative purposes, *the formative role is retarded and does not play its role anymore*. This is what is happening to classroom assessments in primary schools when summative purposes are attached to supposedly formative assessment.

In fact one glaring feature of the assessment system in Malaysian primary schools is that in practice assessment has basically remained detached from instruction and learning. In fact Willis (1993) blames the failure to relate learning and assessment for the mismatch between policy documents that carry what can be described as desirable high quality learning and the actual practice, which produces poor quality learning. The other glaring feature of the assessment system in Malaysian primary schools is the way in which information about assessment is relayed to the parties concerned. Parents, teachers

and students have for years seemed satisfied to receive marks and grades, which actually tell them little about the students' progress and development. Teachers tend to give more emphasis to grades and marks and underemphasize the role of giving useful advice to students to help them with their learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998a). Wiggins (1994) says that letter grades should supplement and not replace achievement reports. He suggested that what is needed is a reporting system that includes a description of the student's successes and struggles accompanied by a backdrop of scores, grades, norms and work samples.

Glaser (1990, p.475) expressed the need for new assessment approaches to bring about improvement to education.

Assessment and testing so strongly influence our lives that, unless we examine their impact and consider new approaches to their design, we neglect a major opportunity to improve education.

This study supports Glaser's view on the need for new assessment approaches by suggesting portfolio assessment as an alternative to the present practice of school-based assessment. In order to do that a Portfolio Assessment Package was designed. Glaser (1990) said that assessment should be designed for the purpose of promoting learning rather than merely to indicate past and present achievement. The Portfolio Assessment Package is designed to assess Local Studies, in Year Five. It is designed with the intension of promoting learning in three ways: by encouraging students to perform higher order thinking, to perform self- and peer-assessment, and to use teacher feedback to guide future learning. These three aspects form the cornerstone of the Portfolio Assessment Package.

## 1.2 Rationale

The rationale for carrying out this study lies in the answer to this question: “Why do we need a new assessment approach for local studies in primary schools?”

Firstly, our present school system is too examination oriented. This view has been reiterated time and again by politicians, academicians, and even parents. In the year 2000, the issue of overemphasis on examinations was raised by the then Malaysian Deputy Education Minister, Datuk Hon Choon Kim, when he said that the “... exam-oriented culture must be phased out in schools” (Hon, 2000, July 4). The Minister of Education himself, Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, again raised this issue in the year 2003 when he said “We want to make the education system less exam-oriented and are looking at increasing school-based assessment as it would be a better gauge of students’ ability.” (Gomez, May 7, 2003, p.3). Chiam (2001), a well-known academician, said that: “In our country, the future of its children depends almost solely on examination results, especially results of the national examinations” (Chiam, 2001, December 16, p14). Schools however cannot do away with examinations totally. So to overcome the overemphasis on examinations, the assessment process can be made more student-friendly, thus removing the stress and tension from taking tests. Crooks (1988) said that empirical evidence showed that a large portion of a student’s time was spent on evaluative activities. Crooks quoted two studies (Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1986; Haertel, 1986) that showed that five to fifteen percent of the students’ time on an average was spent on tests; the lower figure indicating primary level while the higher figure representing secondary schools. Also this figure merely represents time spent in formal testing. Gullickson (1985) said that much of student time was spent on other forms of evaluative activities, both formal and informal

especially at primary levels. The Portfolio Assessment Package is designed with the hope of making assessment a more student friendly activity. A student friendly activity, in this context, is taken to mean, that the assessment tasks will be delivered to students as part of a classroom learning activity. Besides that, the students need not 'isolate' themselves when completing the assessment tasks. In fact, they are encouraged to interact with the teacher, peers and learning material, to gather information in an inquiry and discovery atmosphere. Another student-friendly characteristic of the Portfolio Assessment Package is that it encourages students to revise their work based on the feedback that they have received from themselves, their peers and as well as their teachers. Besides that assessment is a shared responsibility between the students and the teacher, when using the Portfolio Assessment Package.

Secondly, we need a new assessment approach because the present approach, which depends largely on multiple-choice questions to assess students' achievement, does not assess thinking and understanding in Local Studies, efficiently. Multiple-choice questions usually focus on the "right" answers as opposed to the process of how students arrived at their responses (Fischer and King, 1995). Standardised tests have often been criticised for examining students' declarative or procedural knowledge but providing little information about students' understanding of the subject and the quality of their thinking (Fleming and Chambers, 1983). Glaser (1990) commented that it is poor practice to assess only declarative knowledge. Assessment activities need to include application of knowledge and skills to solve problems, reason, and acquire more information so that students can use what they have learnt to achieve further growth and development. Nickerson (1989) voiced his concern about the present state of assessment when he said

that the lack of assessment tools for assessing higher order cognition, which is supposed to be a major goal of education, means that we are unable to assess education as a whole. Besides that, the problem of determining if students' thinking has improved as a result of instruction, will influence teachers to avoid teaching thinking skills in the classroom. In fact the desire to create a new generation of 'thinking' Malaysians was raised by Datuk Hon Choon Kim, in his capacity as the Deputy Education Minister at that time (Hon, 2000, July 4). In order to create a generation of 'thinking' Malaysians, we need to design and develop an integrated teaching, learning, and assessment system that will allow students to among other things, think critically and creatively, to solve problems and make sound decisions, and to apply what they have learnt.

Thirdly we need a new assessment approach especially for Local Studies because there is a tendency for Local Studies to be 'neglected'. For example, in Cempaka National School, Seri Intan, where this study was conducted, only three periods a week was allocated to teaching Local Studies, although the Ministry of Education's recommendation is that four periods a week be devoted for the teaching of this subject. The one period taken from Local Studies was instead used to teach students computer skills. This shows that schools have a tendency to overlook the importance of this subject. This is partly because Local Studies is not included in the Primary School Achievement Examination (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah, UPSR*) (Mansor, 2000). Thus, a new assessment package designed specially to promote Local Studies will help to boost teaching, learning, and assessment of the subject. Local Studies, which comprises subjects like geography, history, citizenship, local cultures and religions, is the foundation for similar subjects at the secondary school level. Thus students need a



sufficiently strong foundation in this subject to enable them to cope with similar subjects at the secondary school level.

Hence, it can be said that the time is right for us to develop a new assessment approach for Local Studies, based on the concept of developmental assessment. Portfolio assessment promotes the development of learning because it records students' progress over a period of time and the evidence of students' learning is shown through their work samples. Besides that the Portfolio Assessment Package is also integrated with the curriculum, hence it has attributes of developmental assessment (Klenowski, 2002).

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

The Curriculum Development Centre of Malaysia has mandated two types of assessment for the Integrated Primary School Curriculum. They are the Primary School Assessment Examination, which is a standardised examination conducted centrally by the Local Malaysian Examination Council and the School-based Primary School Assessment, which is conducted by the school. In other words, two types of assessment are mandated to cater for the different purposes that assessment is supposed to serve. However, as Black and Wiliam (1998a, p.142) pointed out, researchers all over the world have found that "high stakes external tests always dominate teaching and assessment". Hence, when implemented together with low-stakes school-based assessment, high-stakes external tests always overrides school-based assessment. That is precisely what has happened in Malaysian primary schools. Klenowski (2002) suggested school-based assessment or teacher assessment as an alternative to an over-dependence on a single terminal examination as the only judge to students' achievement. Therefore, there arises a need to

balance the assessment practice to Malaysia so that relevant assessment types are used to serve different purposes, such as school-based portfolio assessment to enhance students' learning, and centralised assessment to measure students' achievement.

The types of teacher made tests that dominate classroom assessment are usually multiple-choice tests. They usually test declarative knowledge because it is easier to mark while questions that require students to organise ideas or to think critically are more difficult to grade hence are not popular (Chiam, 2001). Although Chiam acknowledges that declarative knowledge is just as important as procedural and conceptual knowledge, but an overemphasis on the assessment of declarative knowledge leads to rote learning. She considers it a waste of effort as students soon forget the facts learnt. Hence, there is a need for assessment approaches that allow students to practise higher order thinking like reasoning, creating new ideas, and making judgments.

Presently the sole judge of any assessment, be it centralised examination or some form of classroom assessment, is the examiner who in most instances is the teacher. In other words the entire decision, to pass or fail a student, or to judge the quality of a student's work is in the hands of the examiner. In centralised assessment this decision is, of course guided by stringent marking schemes and there are moderation sessions to check on the assessors, which increases the reliability of the tests. However, in the case of school-based assessment, the teacher bears the entire responsibility. Wiggins (1991) recommended multiple judges. Current learning theories promote active participation of students in *learning as well as assessment* (Klenowski, 2002). Self- and peer-assessment based on clear and acceptable criteria, will see assessment responsibility *shift from the teacher to the student*. Self-assessment according to Lamme and Hysmith (1991)

encourages students to be more autonomous learners whereby they can assess what they learn and how they learn best. Self-assessment and self-reflection will encourage students to view themselves from a different perspective – through the eyes of the assessor. In Marcel Proust's words, "A real journey of discovery consists not of seeking new landscapes but of seeing through new eyes." (in Stiggins, 2002).

In the present assessment system the feedback that students receive is usually in the form of grades, stars, and ranking. According to Black and Wiliam (1998a), research has shown that this kind of feedback has negative consequences on learning. It makes students pursue high grades at the expense of improving their learning. Furthermore students tend to avoid difficult questions for fear of making mistakes and spend valuable time looking for the right answers. They also avoid asking questions because they fear that it might lead to their failure. Ultimately it affects students' self-esteem as they interpret difficulties encountered in learning as an inability to learn. Black and Wiliam say that this negative attribute can be corrected if feedback is delivered the right way. They suggested that feedback should inform students about what is good about their work and offer them advice on how to improve their work. Teachers can encourage students by providing scaffolding to help them so that students can perform at their optimum potential and then fade away so that students do not become dependent on them. Stiggins (2002) feels that the kind of tests that students undergo once a year is insufficient to provide teachers with the necessary information about their progress, which is so detrimental in planning instruction. What is desperately needed in place of these tests is classroom assessment that provides teachers with continuous information about students' achievement. Hence, what is lacking presently is an assessment system that offers

students and teachers constructive feedback from various sources, namely the students themselves, peers, and the teacher and an opportunity to utilise the feedback received to improve teaching and learning.

Presently assessment is very much an individual activity. Students take their tests individually and interaction with peers or the teacher is not encouraged and in most cases prohibited. Hence the test examines what the students can do on their own in terms of answering the test questions. It does not allow students to show what they can do with guidance from peers and the teachers. This also detaches assessment from learning and instruction. In the real world problems are usually solved collaboratively. Therefore collaboration and interaction is important and current learning theories advocate teacher student interaction in learning and assessment to promote learning (Klenowski, 2002). Thus, what is lacking presently is an assessment approach, which links teaching, learning and assessment and allows students to interact with their peers and the teacher.

In view of these deficiencies in the present assessment approaches practised in schools, a new assessment approach that can offer these features is deemed necessary. Portfolio assessment is proposed as an alternative to the present practice because it can encourage students to practise higher order thinking, self- and peer-assessment, and give and use feedback to improve learning. Hence, it makes it compatible with the current educational needs. The Portfolio Assessment Package was designed for this purpose. It consists of assessment tasks, which are designed to encourage students to perform higher order thinking. The inclusion of student self-assessment and peer-assessment will shift the responsibility of assessment from the teacher to a shared responsibility between the teacher and students. Students will be able to receive feedback from multiple sources that

is themselves, their peers, and the teacher and they are encouraged to utilise these feedback to revise their work and to plan future learning.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to develop and evaluate a Portfolio Assessment Package for Local Studies in primary schools. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. design and develop an assessment package that includes :
  - assessment tasks that promote higher order thinking; and
  - criteria for teacher, peer- and self-assessment.
2. evaluate the Portfolio Assessment Package based on Stufflebeam's process and product evaluation model, to ensure that the package provides an alternative means of assessing students in Local Studies, in primary schools.

#### **1.5 Research Questions**

The primary purpose of this research is to develop and evaluate the Portfolio Assessment Package. The Portfolio Assessment Package is designed and developed to provide teachers with an alternative method to assess Local Studies in primary school.

The study will answer the following research questions:

1. Is there evidence of higher order thinking in students' responses to the portfolio assessment tasks?
2. What evidence of self-assessment do students exhibit when performing portfolio assessment?

3. What are the characteristics of teacher assessment and feedback available to students during portfolio assessment?
4. What are students' perceptions of the Portfolio Assessment Package?

With reference to the research questions, evidence of higher order thinking includes, but is not limited to the following: interpreting and applying (paraphrasing, interpreting, citing examples, making inferences, applying principles), organising and creating (questioning assumptions, making comparisons, categorizing, organising and integrating information, creating), and making judgments (selecting and providing reasons, making value judgments using criteria).

Evidence of self-assessment includes, but is not limited to the following: students' ability to recognise their strengths, their weaknesses, and ability to make recommendations and suggestions to overcome weaknesses; students' ability to reflect on their tasks in order to select a best piece of work, a most unsatisfactory piece of work and a piece of work from which they learnt the most and gained the most experience; students ability to give reasons for their selection; students' ability to identify strengths and weaknesses when assessing the work of their peers; students ability to make suggestions to their peers on how to overcome the weaknesses identified in their work.

The characteristics of teacher assessment and feedback include, but are not limited to the following: types of teacher feedback, frequency of teacher feedback, and how often do students utilise teacher feedback.

Finally, students' perceptions of the Portfolio Assessment Package include, but are not limited to the following: Their perceptions on assessment, the assessment tasks,

self-assessment, peer-assessment, teacher assessment and feedback, and finally the Portfolio Assessment Package as a whole.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

In this study a Portfolio Assessment Package was developed for Local Studies Year Five and evaluated by the users of the package, in a classroom setting. Hence, this study is significant because Portfolio Assessment Package provides Local Studies teachers in particular with a ready made package as they embark on a new assessment approach. School-based assessment has been proposed by the Ministry of Education, in their effort to reduce the emphasis on examination (Gomez, 2003, May 7).

Over the years, several studies have been conducted to investigate the implementation of portfolio assessment. Kehr (1999) studied the effects of a longitudinal standard portfolio system on the instruction and assessment practices of elementary teachers. Sonnier (1999) examined teachers' attitudes and beliefs about using portfolio assessment in the classroom. Bryant and Timmins (2000), investigated the use of portfolio assessment as an innovation to assess problem-based learning in Hong Kong schools. However, in these studies, a portfolio assessment program was already implemented in the schools chosen for the studies. The studies did not require the researchers to develop a particular Portfolio Assessment Package and introduce it to schools. In Malaysia, portfolio assessment is still a relatively new concept of assessment. Hence, no study has been conducted as yet on the development and evaluation of a Portfolio Assessment Package to assess Local Studies in Year Five. As such the findings

portfolio assessment, the need to allocate funding for on-going training, the need to provide resources like accessibility to Internet so that information is readily available to students and teachers, and the need to know how to interpret and use the information generated through this new assessment approach. How this information about students' learning and progress is interpreted and used by school administrators and teachers forms the essence of school-based assessment. The interpretation and use of data is what differentiates school-based assessment from centrally developed standardised examination.

Third, this study can act as a guide to Local Studies teachers on how to assess students in Local Studies using portfolio assessment. Local Studies is a non-examination subject and in many schools a 'neglected' subject (Mansor,2000). Very little attention is paid to teaching and assessing the subject. Hence the Portfolio Assessment Package, which is designed specifically to assess Local Studies, will give the subject a new life. Teachers can use it as a starter kit to practise portfolio assessment in Local Studies. Later they can use it as a stimulus kit to produce their own material according to the needs of the students and the resources available in the school. Other subject teachers can also use it as a guide to produce their own teaching, learning, and assessment material.

Hence, this study is significant as it is in line with the Ministry of Education's call for more school-based assessment. It provides a working example of how such an assessment approach can be undertaken. What is equally important is that the study also includes the evaluation of the assessment package. Based on the findings of the evaluation, changes are recommended so that the package can be introduced into schools with minimum hitches.



## 1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study, which involved the development and evaluation of a Portfolio Assessment Package for Local Studies in Year Five, was carried out under actual school conditions. Hence, this study faced the following limitations:

1. During the period of this study, teachers and students were subjected to other forms of testing as well, as imposed by the school itself as well as the Department of Education. Teachers had to devote some time and energy to prepare test questions, prepare students for these tests, administer the tests and mark students' answer scripts. These caused the teacher to delay assessing students portfolio assessment tasks as well as administering the assessment tasks to students. Students also delayed doing their revision based on the feedback they received, as they were busy preparing for their class examinations. These tests were usually multiple-choice tests and had little to do with the Portfolio Assessment Package. However, they were likely to influence teachers and students as students' grades were determined by their performance on these tests.
2. Portfolio assessment is undeniably more time consuming compared to traditional tests. As this study was conducted with a regular class of students in the school, the teacher and students involved had to contend with the extra workload that was generated as a result of the demands of portfolio assessment. Therefore, teachers and students were sometimes agitated by the need to spend extra time to complete their work. This could have resulted in the teacher and students devising 'short cuts' in order to save time. However, it was necessary to conduct this study under actual

school conditions, as this will provide valuable information about the practicability of the package.

3. This study also required the teachers involved in the study to undergo an eight-hour preparatory training program before embarking on using the Portfolio Assessment Package in the classroom. This training period is rather short to provide the teachers concerned with sufficient exposure to the Portfolio Assessment Package. However, a longer training period was not possible due to time constraint. Vitali (1993) in his study emphasised the need for proper training of teachers when using a new assessment approach. He said that a sound professional development is likely to help teachers with the new assessment method and it is likely that with training, teachers will change their instructional practices to suit the new assessment method (in Guskey, 1994).

## **1.8 Conclusion**

This study explores the use of an alternative form of school-based assessment to assess Local Studies in Primary Schools. It examines portfolio assessment in particular and offers an assessment package whose design is based on three elements: assessment tasks that promote higher order thinking; self- and peer-assessment by students; and availability of teacher feedback to students and the utilisation of this feedback by students. The next chapter will examine several cases of portfolio assessment implemented in different locations. The literature on these cases will serve to provide an insight into the dominant features and concepts that influence the design and development of portfolio assessment, in their specific locations. Some of these features

and concepts will be adopted and adapted for the development of the Portfolio Assessment Package.