



Exams – tool or torture?

If we truly want to help students learn better, we should choose instruments that support learning instead of ones that stress our kids.

Contradictheory
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YOU know how your child sometimes is doing last-minute homework while you're trying to drive a car. And they ask you for help?

That was me the other day, trying to answer questions about gradients and y-intercepts while navigating city streets. Which is fun, in its own way.

But a few minutes of back-and-forth later, I realised something was off. My daughter didn't understand the basics. She was mixing up key concepts. What on earth were the teachers teaching her in school? Well, apparently, nothing at all. Not yet.

She explained that this was a topic they hadn't covered yet in class. The teacher had given them a pre-assessment to see what the students already knew, so she could plan her lessons accordingly. Why teach something that they already understand, right?

While most of us see exams as that big thing you do at the end of the year that you don't want to fail, that is only one type, called

the summative assessment. Have you learned what you were supposed to learn? These include SPM and A-Levels, where passing or failing might mean whether you get into university or not.

Then there are diagnostic assessments. These are done before learning begins, to identify what students already know and where the gaps are. They're not meant to be passed or failed, but to help teachers plan their lessons better. That was what the car-ride maths quiz was about.

And finally, there are formative assessments, which monitor learning as it happens. Things like quizzes, homework, and activities that give teachers ongoing feedback so they can adjust how they teach along the way.

Which brings me to the Malaysia Learning Matrix, the newly announced centralised assessment for Year Four and Form Three students. According to the government, the intention is to identify weaknesses and shortcomings early, so they can be

addressed before students fall too far behind.

I'm not really sure what kind of assessment the MLM is supposed to be. It's hard to see it as a diagnostic assessment. That is something teachers do to prepare their own individual class, not as a snapshot of the whole country. Anyway, Malaysian parents would be livid if their children were tested on content they had never been taught.

Then perhaps it is formative, with an idea that it will inform strategic level thinking of how to organise and administrate schools. But you don't need to have every child take an exam, if that's your objective.

And if it is meant to be a final, summative test, then what does failure mean? Do you have to repeat a year? Is it for streaming?

There actually are systems in which exams are taken at 12 years old that shape future academic pathways. Singapore's Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) is one exam-

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ple. Taken at the end of Primary Six, it plays a significant role in determining if a student goes to an express secondary school for top performers, a normal academic school, or a technical school.

Perhaps surprisingly, it works. Long-term studies tracking students who just missed the cutoff for academic secondary schools and were instead placed in technical or vocational tracks, show that these students were more likely to complete secondary school, more likely to obtain post-secondary qualifications, and more likely to end up in jobs that paid comparably to their peers who took the academic route. This early sorting seemingly helps Singaporeans find the most suitable academic pathway.

However, I find it uncomfortably fatalistic to tell a 12-year-old that because they didn't study hard enough over the last three months, they'll automatically end up becoming an electrician rather than an engineer.

There is also a cost to sitting exams. Singaporean studies have found that academic workload, particularly surrounding the PSLE, is a major source of distress among young students. They express concern of how the PSLE dominates childhood, "limiting play, rest, and opportunities for personal development". One study concludes that "the current education system's emphasis on high-stakes exams at an early age may harm children's mental well-being".

Why would we want to impose this on ourselves? Especially when we already have tools designed for formative assessment. Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah (PBD), or classroom-based assessment, was introduced to help teachers track progress, identify strengths and weaknesses, and adapt teaching accordingly. Studies on PBD that I can find

are generally positive about its intent and objectives, while also highlighting predictable challenges like teacher workload, training needs, and the issue of large class sizes. But these are things we can try to improve through national policy changes without needing national exams. Teachers know their students. They can better address learning gaps.

If the government's concern is standardisation (perhaps one teacher's Tahap 5 is another teacher's Tahap 4), there are other ways to address this. And if the goal is to obtain a national snapshot of student performance, then the most sensible approach would be to assess a representative sample of schools, not every child. This is how international assessments like Pisa (Programme for International Student Assessment) operate. It is cheaper, statistically sound, and avoids hundreds of thousands of children having stress-induced tummy aches and sleepless nights – my daughter was already getting stressed out in the car because an accepted answer given to her to choose was "I don't know". The point of her pre-assessment was not to label her, rank her, or predict her future. It was simply to help her teacher plan the next lesson. Yet it was still stressing a little girl.

We need to redefine what the word "exam" means, and what we want the cost of success and failure to be. If we truly want to help students learn better, we should start by choosing instruments that support learning instead of ones that risk harming our children in the long term.

Logic is the antithesis of emotion
but mathematician-turned-script-writer Dzof Azmi's theory is that people need both to make sense of life's vagaries and contradictions. Write to Dzof at lifestyle@thestar.com.my. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.