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NST Leader: Exam vs assessment

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A PUBLIC debate on primary and secondary education is brewing.

On one side are those who want the Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) and the Pentaksiran Tingkatan Tiga (PT3) revived, while on the other — which is not an insubstantial number of people — are those see no benefit in reintroducing them.

But before we lose sight of the forest for the trees, we need to settle on what really is the purpose of education. Learning is the one-word answer.

Obviously, the learning that gets done at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels is different. But the learning at these various levels must prepare the child for the life ahead.

Knowing oneself and the world is part of the preparations. Consider primary school education.

The minimum learning that must get done there is a level of literacy and numeracy skills fit for primary school stage.

But how do you test whether that learning has happened? Here is where the roads diverge.

Those who want the Education Ministry to revive the UPSR and PT3, both abolished two years ago and replaced with class- and school-based assessments, say only examinations can accurately gauge whether or not such a learning has taken place.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and former education minister Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid point to the 10,177 Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia dropouts as an example of the "unexamined" minds, pardon the pun.

They have a point. To be fair, even during the years when there were examinations at primary and secondary levels, there were students who didn't quite master literacy and numeracy.

Some left school without being able to read or write after six years of schooling. Admittedly, the numbers didn't add up to 27 per cent as they do now.

Something is amiss somewhere and we must be serious enough to cure it. Only a deep dive can come up with the right solution.

Very often we tend to go granular before we consider the big pic ture. To us, parents wouldn't mind either an exam- or assessment-based early education, provided the required learning happens. Right now no meaningful assessment happens.

Examinations and assessments have their own success story. China, Japan and Singapore are global league table-toppers when it comes to examinations. But Finland is a road-less-travelled-by story.

It has found great success in an assessment-based schooling system. The closest to an examination is at the matriculation level and that, too, is by choice.

Finland's education system has received global attention. We may have looked that way, too, for our assessment-based schooling. No harm here. Only that we wish it was a deeper dive than it appears to have been.

Take teaching in Finland. It ensures that no child will be left behind. And they mean it. If one falls behind, for whatever reason, the child gets all the attention needed. Call it royal tutoring. Sometimes, the child is held back a year to make sure that the learning happens.

The 10,177 found struggling with literacy and numeracy skills indicate one thing: tutoring, royal or otherwise, didn't happen. Be it exam- or assessment-based, our education system must strike the right balance between excellence and equity.