The Star

End of the rote?

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Noor Azimah

Rigid marking of exam papers encourages rote learning, which consequently stunts a student's motivation and self-esteem, said Parent Action Group for Education (Page) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim.

Rote learning, became even more prominent with the introduction of the Academic Session Final Test (UASA) in 2022, she said.

UASA is a test given at the conclusion of the academic year to strengthen classroom-based assessment (PBD) and school-based assessment (PBS), and to replace end-of-year exams for those from Years Four to Six and Forms One to Three.

UASA, said Noor Azimah, was likely brought in to appease parents who are more familiar with the grade system which is better designed for academically inclined students.

Rote learning has become the standard practice because it is easier to follow the 'default mode' than to instruct students on how to think critically, given that many teachers were themselves a product of the rote learning system, she added.

“Teachers have to adhere to the ministry’s directive which itself is a flaw as Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) requires that students be taught critical thinking.

“It restricts the exploration of creative and abstract responses by limiting vocabulary, confining students to think within boundaries, and forcing them to limit their imagination.

“The how and why rather than the yes and no questions will encourage students to think more critically leading to more stimulating ideas, broadening vocabularies and exploring avenues,” she said, adding that teachers should not mark students wrong for trying to express themselves.

Calling for the PBS to be reviewed, she said parents remain unconvinced of its effectiveness.

“Classrooms should not revert to simply reciting facts and inflexible grading systems as this is against the purpose of conducting assessments,” she said, suggesting that marking systems for all exams be made public.

What is upsetting, said Biology teacher Geetha Nair Balakrishnan, is how students tend to overthink the way they answer questions to tailor it to the marking scheme.

Students write long answers yet do poorly as marks are capped if points outlined in the marking scheme are not included.

“Students often ask how they can collect more points. Whatever happened to understanding a topic well and writing academic answers to the best of one’s ability?” she said, adding that students often feel pressured to impress their relatives, peers and society.

When we constantly celebrate high achievers, we create a competitive and stressful learning environment where students think they have to perform well at all costs, she explained.

“This will push students back to rote learning strategies, which does not help if we want to move towards a system that encourages intellectual curiosity and fosters critical thinking,” she said.

Skilled teachers



Sawittri

While teachers, through the introduction of HOTS-oriented questions and PBD, have been trained to guide students in answering such questions, Teach For Malaysia (TFM) head of fellowship Sawittri Charun said they may not be equipped with the skills to effectively measure critical and creative thinking. “If teachers are in the habit of accepting only one correct answer, students will quickly learn that they can do quite well through memorisation.

“We have noticed that how teachers teach is closely linked to how students are expected to perform in high-stakes assessments.

“Where the stakes are high, for example in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), low-proficiency students often take months or even a year to prepare for the exams by memorising key facts, or even entire essays to score,” she said, adding that while this might work to increase the chances of students passing exams, the learning that has occurred is most likely short-term and does little to develop enduring, lifelong skills.

While teachers recognise that learning is maximised when they adapt to different preferred learning styles, Charun said rote learning can still take place while catering to auditory, visual and kinesthetic learners.

“This is evident in the use of videos and gamified learning in many of our classrooms.

“One can use movement-heavy games (kinesthetic learning style) to help students to memorise facts for a History test, or one can use songs (audio learning style) to help students memorise chemistry facts.”

In both lessons, students may show high engagement — games and songs are fun — but they are not really developing HOTS, she said.

The priority, Noor Azimah said, should be to ensure that every student’s foundation is solid from the onset.

“If this requires employing teaching assistants, then it should be done, considering that it takes only a short time to teach children to read and count, and with a bit more effort, to make them enjoy it,” she said. — **By JAAYNE JEEVITA**