

Scrap PSLE? Let's pause and think before another big education reform

Delaying or removing exams may spare anxiety today, but risks leaving students unprepared for real-world pressure.

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I've been interviewing secondary and post-secondary students as part of research on what well-being means to them. These conversations provided me with some fresh perspectives on how they perceive and manage academic and other stresses in their lives.

While exams were often mentioned as a source of stress, many spoke about coping through self-discipline, improving time management and learning to accept what they cannot change and move on.

A few reminded me that "life is not just about academic grades". For them, relationships with family and friends mattered more. Many said their motivation to attend school came from the joy of companionship, fun with peers, and opportunities to pursue interests through co-curricular activities and school programmes.

Some even shared how they learnt to recognise when certain academic routes, such as the Integrated Programme, did not align with their interests, and chose instead to focus on areas that played to their strengths.

What struck me most was the self-awareness and resilience these young people demonstrated and the values they hold, even while juggling academic pressure and the challenges of growing up.

This was brought back to my mind when I came across *The Straits Times* Insight article, "Inside Singapore's education 'arms race': Stress, inequality and the push for change" (Nov 22). It discusses a rethink of major exams and some ideas for reform, which include exploring alternatives for the Primary School Leaving Examination and refining the current system of how children are sorted into schools.

This comes after a series of reforms in the education system over the past decade, such as the introduction of subject-based banding, the new scoring system for PSLE and the removal of weighted assessments and mid-year exams for lower-primary students. These reforms were introduced, in part, to reduce stress and allow more time for holistic learning for our children.

Stress induced by exams has long been cited by parents and academics as a major concern, fuelling heavy investments in enrichment classes from the pre-primary years and private tuition throughout the primary and secondary school years.

Yet, anecdotal feedback from friends and relatives suggests that the removal of weighted assessments and mid-year exams for Primary 1 to 3 since 2019 has created a different challenge.

Many parents and children feel unprepared when end-of-year exams begin in Primary 3. Teaching children the unfamiliar concept of an exam – completing an assessment within a set time under controlled conditions without help – has proven stressful and challenging.

Parents also find themselves struggling to coach strategies such as time management and prioritisation of questions across the four core subjects, when such skills are not required in the earlier years of primary school.

This raises a critical question: When should exams be introduced to balance preparedness with the need to reduce pressure and preserve time for holistic learning?

Answering this requires grappling with a key concern – that delaying exposure to challenges for too long may hinder a child's development of adaptability, self-awareness, emotional regulation and resilience.

THE VALUE OF EXAMS

Doing well in an exam demands more than subject knowledge. It requires understanding the questions, responding appropriately under time constraints, and deploying strategies such as tackling manageable questions first to maximise marks and returning later to tougher ones.

The skills of strategising, time management and prioritisation are not just academic – instead, they speak to the value of preparing and practising for an exam, thus cultivating perseverance and discipline in our children.

Exams are stressful because they involve risk. What if I make careless mistakes? What happens if I don't do well? Sitting an exam calls for emotional resilience and the ability to perform under pressure. How often have we heard of students faring well in



Preparing for exams trains resilience, which is essential for thriving in later adult life. The ability to prioritise tasks under time pressure, recover from setbacks and still deliver quality work mirrors the demands of the modern workplace, says the writer, noting that exams are training grounds for life. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

routine assignments, yet faltering during exams or suffering from brain freeze because they were not able to function under high-strung exam conditions?

Learning to manage this stress is itself a valuable life skill.

Beyond grades, exams offer lessons in self-awareness. They reveal to students their strengths and weaknesses, highlight areas for improvement, and encourage acceptance of one's capabilities.

Essentially, preparing for exams trains resilience, which is essential for thriving in later adult life. The ability to prioritise tasks under time pressure, recover from setbacks, and still deliver quality work mirrors the demands of the modern workplace.

Thus, when approached with the right mindset, exams are not just tests of knowledge, they are in fact training grounds for life.

THE RISK IN DELAY

Admittedly, cultivating these academic and life skills through exam preparation takes time and comes at an opportunity cost for other pursuits. However, if we view exams as a rite of passage necessary for growth, then timing matters.

A few years back, the decision was made to delay this process for lower-primary students, so that younger children can focus on the joy of learning in the earlier years of their education.

At present, the debate centres around whether the PSLE, seen as a high-stakes exam, should also be removed or replaced with alternatives, so as to better manage academic anxiety and pressure. Or we could simply be postponing this rite of passage to older adolescence, such as when they face their O levels.

If we were to do that, we might deprive our children of opportunities to develop critical skills at that life stage. There is also the risk that we may be creating a sheltered childhood that leaves our children less prepared to overcome setbacks as they transition into adolescence and adulthood.

These tensions point to a larger question: What should guide our next steps before we reshape the system yet again?

EVALUATE BEFORE MAKING ANOTHER BIG CHANGE

Singapore's education system has come a long way since the 1960s. Today, our children have diverse

pathways through institutions and schools such as School of the Arts, Singapore Sports School and International Baccalaureate programmes that cater to their strengths and help optimise their potential.

These options help ease the pressure of high-stakes exams, ensuring that exam results are no longer the sole determinant of one's future opportunities.

In fact, our education system has probably undergone more changes in the past decade than in any previous era. But despite the reforms, concerns from parents and students continue to be aired.

In today's fast-paced environment where relentless change often masquerades as progress, pausing for reflection and evaluation is not only prudent, but a strategic imperative. Before introducing yet another reform – or removing another high-stakes exam, we should take a deliberate time out to assess the outcomes and unintended consequences of recent changes.

While the full impact of these reforms may become clear only when this generation enters adulthood, there are shorter-term effects we can already examine.

For instance, how are our children and parents spending the time previously devoted to exam preparation?

Are students discovering the joy of learning and exploring creative ways to develop their potential beyond academics? Or are parents compensating for fewer exams by enrolling their children in more tuition and enrichment classes, from an even younger age?

Taking heed of these short-term indicators is important, as they may reveal that making targeted tweaks and refining existing changes could be more meaningful and impactful than introducing yet another sweeping reform.

As we strive to build an education system that nurtures resilience without perpetuating an academic arms race, we need to pause, evaluate and realign, so that future changes are guided by clarity and purpose.

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