

TODAY

Let's break up the PSLE core 4



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6 HOURS 18 MIN AGO

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Children who are not academically-inclined feel that they are failures in the current education system. We cannot afford to let them believe, at that age, that they have no future simply because they are not good in maths or science or language.

Education should be about exposing students to a variety of experiences, so that each child's talents can be discovered, developed and celebrated. We need to provide a wider range of subjects and options, especially at the primary level.

If we want to develop creativity and innovation, we need disciplines that will enable them to see possibilities rather than standard answers. In his book *Out of Our Minds*, Sir Ken Robinson talks about how the narrow focus on maths and science in almost all the education systems

around the world will not be able to nurture the kind of creative, innovative people needed in the 21st century.

He recommends a balanced curriculum, where equal status and resources are given to numeracy and literacy, the sciences, the humanities, the arts and physical education.

OPEN UP THE OPTIONS

What should we consider in Singapore? For a start, the Ministry of Education (MOE) could allow grades for some of the subjects currently covered in primary school — such as music, sports and arts — to be used in the subject combinations considered when applying for secondary school places.

Instead of the current fixed quartet, MOE could allow students to select their own combination: English language plus any other three subjects, be it mother tongue, science, maths, arts, sports or music.

Let us say a child is keen to develop his musical talent in niche schools which have a Chinese orchestra or band; he could use his English and music grades plus two other subjects.

The idea is to signal to students that they are free to discover their talents and develop them to a higher standard in secondary school. (The arts should include the visual arts, dance and theatre, and I am glad the three new primary schools will have dance and performing arts studios.)

Based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, our current focus on four subjects only covers logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligences. By including music, arts and sports, we acknowledge musical, spatial and bodily-kinaesthetic intelligences.

This also means that students who are weak in a particular subject need not spend a disproportionate amount of time on it. My own children spent more time on Chinese than on the other three subjects in total, and yet they fared worst in it. It is hard to tell them that effort equates to results in this case.

Our children are often told that being an artist or musician or dancer cannot earn them a decent living if they are not top-notch. But they can be art or music teachers, dance instructors and sports coaches, among many other professions. Certainly, we would need more of such talents if we expand school subject options to include music, sports and arts.

POSSIBLE CONCERNS

Will it increase students' stress levels because they have to spend time in more areas? Most of the subjects recommended are already covered in the current curriculum but the grades cannot be used in the aggregate score. In fact, the curriculum for the current four core subjects, especially maths and science, should be significantly reduced so that more curriculum hours can be allocated to the other areas.

How do we grade music, art and sports objectively? It is tough. There will be some subjectivity, but the trade-off is for the more holistic development of our children. And a student who represents his school in competitions could be given extra points, for example. A set of criteria could be drawn up to award points based on students' participation levels, and tweaked over

time with feedback from parents and educators.

Will it erode standards if we open up the options? We should separate the issue of options from standards.

Although Chinese (as mother tongue) is one of the four compulsory subjects currently, can we say that our students' standard in Chinese language is good?

Standards will be higher when students see the relevance in the subjects, not when it is forced upon them.

If students think they will gain an edge by doing well in Chinese because of China's increasing global influence, they will study hard for it.

It also goes without saying that standards depend on natural inclinations: Those who have logical-mathematical intelligence will do well in maths and science, for example. The focus in primary education should be to recognise the diverse abilities of our students and nurture them.

Why not consider getting the aggregate of more than four subjects? We are not trying to produce all-rounders in our children. The idea is to recognise that children have differing strengths and weaknesses.

PRIMARY SCHOOL

HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT

With the inclusion of more subjects and options, perhaps it is time to change the name of the Primary School Leaving Examination to Primary School Holistic Assessment or PSHA.

This would signify a change in emphasis — on the assessment of how a child is doing by Primary 6, and not on serving as a leaving exam that determines his next posting, although that will still be the case.

Exams and assessments should be viewed as checkpoints where students understand where their strengths and weaknesses are and how to proceed from there.

The PSHA must serve the purpose of channelling students according to their strengths, and enable them to maximise their potential in the secondary school they are posted to.

With more schools offering what would in effect be Direct School Admissions, let us hope that we can truly discover and admit students based on their strengths.

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