

Rethink the education system

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Article

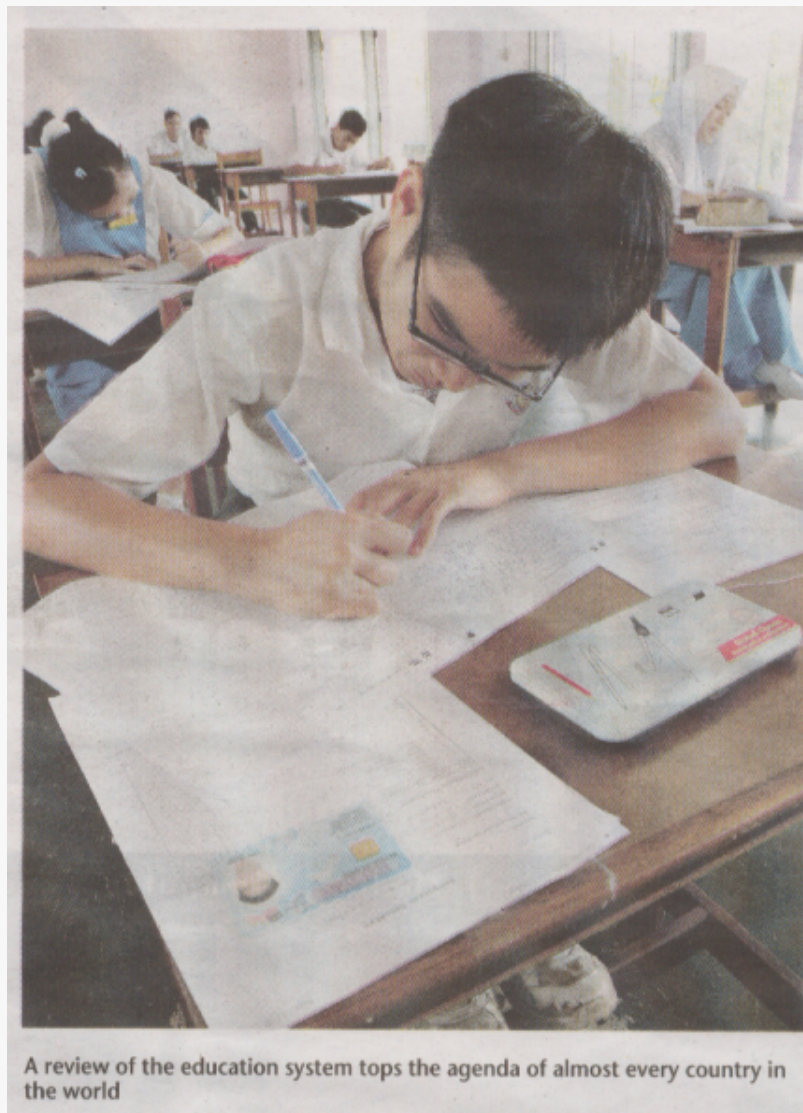
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THE recent report on the crashing of the roof of the library at the 184-year-old Malacca High School is an eye-opener — not in a direct sense but in an oblique way, especially in light of the national debates on whether the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) and Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examinations should be abolished.

Although the outcomes of the round-table talks have already been made known, the debate is by no means over. This is where you can draw an analogy between the “crashing roof” event and the debate.

There is a larger issue in the discussion on ways to improve the education system other than examinations. The roof is a symbol of the education system where all things are embraced, examinations included. Could it be while we are busy talking about the merits of UPSR and PMR, the entire education system is the one that needs urgent attention because it is about to crash?

Some feel that examinations are a necessary evil. The question then is whether the education system is worthy of its purpose? If not, what we must do about it?



A review of the education system tops the agenda of almost every country in the world

A review of the education system (of which examinations is just the tip of the iceberg) tops the agenda of almost every country in the world.

According to McKinsey (2007), the world's government spent US\$2 trillion (RM6.4 trillion) on education in 2006 in an ambitious attempt to improve the performances of school systems. Sadly, many have barely improved in decades.

Admittedly, changing the hearts and minds of millions of schoolchildren is no simple task, noted McKinsey. Yet some countries made quite consistent strides while others have not. The question is why? And how?

This is where the McKinsey findings from a study of 25 school systems in the world, including top 10 performers, are instructive. What the high-performing school systems have in common and the tools they use to improve student outcomes are not as complex as we think.

Three things that matter most are: getting the right people to become teachers; developing them into effective instructors; and ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child. Examinations per se is not part of the three factors.

Hong Kong completely revamped its education system since September 2009 to prepare students for future challenges. Called the New Academic Structure, "all students will have the opportunity to study up to Secondary Six".

"Students with different abilities, interests and aptitudes can give full play to their talents through the broad and balanced senior secondary curriculum.

"The curriculum breaks the barrier of traditional arts and science streaming. The subjects are diversified. They suit different students' interest, aptitudes and abilities.

Through the participation in Other Learning Experiences, students can acquire learning experiences of moral and civic education, community services, physical and aesthetic education and career-related experiences, for example."

The new curriculum can also foster a broader scope of views and lifelong learning abilities.

It was recently reported that key personnel of leading British universities were positive in their consideration to admit Hong Kong students completing the new secondary education diploma for direct entry to three-year undergraduate programmes from 2012.

With such bold initiatives by other countries, you begin to wonder whether we are doing things differently to arrive at the same point?

Can we stand back and rethink the ongoing debate to see where we will end up? This is even more crucial in light of the McKinsey research that concludes that the three things that matters in education reform work "irrespective of the culture in which they are applied".

"They demonstrate that substantial improvement in outcomes is possible in a short period of time and that applying these best practices universally could have enormous impact on improving failing school systems, wherever they might be located."

Given that time is running short, this looks like a doable framework that goes beyond myopic concerns centred on UPSR and PMR. Using their newly endowed political muscle, teachers can transform our school system as suggested by McKinsey. We don't have to wait for the roof to fall!

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