Leave no student behind

It is that time again for the nation to celebrate our students who had studied hard for their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia examinations. Many have excelled, while many more are sad, confused and depressed.

Last month, I asked why the focus was on students who scored straight As. It is not wrong to do so, but it is also important to focus on others who did well but were not the best. They need the guidance and support, too, and not just the high-achieving students.

Some students studied hard but did not score straight As. They might have missed the teknik menjawab soalan (techniques for answering questions) workshops or did not go to tuition classes that provided better preparation for the examinations. I wonder if these students would excel at university and, later, in working life. I hope they do, in order to sustain and develop Malaysia into a more holistic nation.

Some did not study and did not do well. They just could not, as they might have learning disabilities that was not detected.

My focus here is on students who did well but not well enough to obtain scholarships offered by government and corporate bodies. And what about students who had never passed any paper during their school lives but managed to get one or two passes in SPM? These are the students who need greater celebration and appreciation, as they have cognitively developed over the years, and shown signs of wisdom. They may be the most well mannered student, but, because of their inability to be receptive in cognition, they are just passing clouds in the Malaysian school system.

Let me share about some of my students who underwent SPM when I was teaching at a secondary school two decades ago. Because they were weak in academics, or worse still, might have some learning disabilities that teachers, including myself, were not equipped to identify and rectify. They were considered failures. I am still trying to find which is the failure: these students or an education system that focuses only on exams.

These students could not concentrate for long hours, and were a "pang" to traditional teachers, who focused on nothing except "study, study, study". Imagine the trauma that these students underwent for 11 years of their formative lives because of a system that excluded their abilities and potential just because they were not academically inclined. As I always believe, teachers make or break students. But the education system also makes teachers.

When I taught Moral Education, and realised that these students were weak in their studies, I would try to identify their strengths and work on them. Slowly, we built trust, and students who were troublemakers in other subjects, started liking Moral Education.

One of my students failed all of his subjects in SPM, except for a weak pass in Moral Education. I was the proudest teacher, and he was the proudest student as he showed off his single pass to his friends, who had failed all subjects. Years later, I met him at a big building. He was head of the security guards in that building. He told me that during his interview, the company's security director selected him because he had passed his Moral Education; perceiving that he might have good character and leadership qualities.

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As part of the success of our country? When are we going to learn?

In New Zealand, where I am currently doing my post-doctoral studies, students study up to the NCEA13 level, which is equivalent to our Form Six. They then go into university, and there is no brouhaha over who got straight As or otherwise.

They enter university according to their points and their passion for a course. Those who can't get into university apply to technical college or learn a craft. It is a natural process in all developed nations.

However, if there are students who do not qualify for university but have the passion, they go into bridging programmes, which every university in New Zealand offers. Why can't we provide such opportunities for our students?

We, in Malaysia, have got to transform our mindset from academic excellence to holistic excellence. We must always provide
our students and children with plan A, B or C. There is no need for sadness or frustration if one did not do well in SPM or STPM. There are alternatives in life, and making the right choice with the right ability is what we are lacking.

Hopefully, the focus on inclusive education and formative assessment brings a change to the celebration of examination results in Malaysia.

Dr Vishalache Balakrishnan,
Hamilton, New Zealand