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No effective link between world of school and world of work

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I SAW it on television. I read about it in the newspapers. Each time I shuddered. J. Lakshmi, a young girl, committed suicide when she felt deprived of an affordable higher education.

A generation ago, she could have been a celebrity in the neighbourhood. But today in an inflation of As, two distinctions, seven credits and a 7D in Bahasa Melayu is a prescription to end one's life.

Someone has robbed this child of her life. The thief, I believe, could be anyone of us, who are part of the system. We need a frank admission of our moral conscience when we look at this case as a symptom of a high-pressure education system.

We cannot look at this situation in isolation. We should personalise it, as if it is looming in the horizon waiting to happen to any one of us. We have to be clear-sighted when looking at this from a larger perspective. Not with jaundiced vision blurred by class, race or the temperaments of this particular child.

Blaming the education system or societal pressure is not a generalisation of the problem. Such suicides are symptoms of stress created by the pursuit for success from all directions.

Many of us are aware of the problems in the education system. In our country, higher education is still a privilege.

Private tertiary education can only be afforded by the elite, and the poorer students' only option is the local universities, where due to limited seats many of the deserving are sidelined.

Or shall we blame the education system that ill-prepares the children to face the world: a system that is dependent on how well one can amass, reproduce and regurgitate facts. A system that invests so much time merely on examinations so as to compete for the national record of As.

Or is the culprit the 7D in Bahasa Melayu which formed a noose around Lakshmi's neck, and tightened itself when society reinforced the notion that without a credit she was doomed?

Or perhaps we shall blame the girl - a child who needed to break the continuity of her ordinary status. To break the endless loop that kept her within a closed circuit of socio-economic inequalities. Her only dream of doing so was through higher education. For ordinary people tertiary education is about upward mobility - a leveller of socio-economic opportunities.

Nonetheless, this young Indian girl was not the only one who was lost at the crossroads of her future where there were so many roads available in the journey into the future but hardly any were signposted.

After last week's STPM and SPM results, thousands of school-leavers too found themselves at the crossroads, wondering where to move on from here. Some are fortunate that they have scholarships awaiting them. Some have money.

But there are still thousands of others who are stranded in spite of good results. They have no idea where they are heading. Very few are sure of what they are good at, and what should be their career choice. Many are lost and confused.

Under our present system there is no effective linkage between the world of school and the world of work. Secondary schoolchildren are not really guided and equipped to choose what interests them and suits their abilities.

Very few schools offer counselling to enable students to choose the best for themselves with a clear perspective. Schools do not equip students with the capacity to realise their potential in creative work.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is shifting his paradigm in education, aware that there are gaps in the present policy. The test of the right education today should be whether we are chiselling good global citizens. We should modify our vision of education for the 21st century in view of a world citizenship.

To do that, we must replace some of the illusions about education that have continued from one generation to the next. Our minds are conditioned with the old vision, so much so that we ourselves have become obstacles in the way of changes.

There are always clashes between politicians and educationists in their struggle to reform education, to use education as a platform for promoting their self-interests. We must do away with excessive political control and intervention for the sake of our children.

Education is about our children marching forward with confidence to be on par, or even better than the rest of the world. It is about giving children what they deserve, what they need and what they aspire for without any prejudices.