

## Deschooling Society

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Comment

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THE issue of the possible abolishment of examinations will be the subject of round-table talks soon. This is indeed refreshing as the debate is long overdue. But we must first examine the context of the discussion.



**SMK Sekyzen 24 Shah Alam students during their SPM examination**

Almost 40 years ago, Ivan Illich broached the subject in *Deschooling Society* (1971) where he made a profound observation about what modern-day "school" and "education" is all about. He wrote: "The pupil thereby 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new."

This is no difference when "medical treatment is mistaken for healthcare, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work".

Given this as the context, it would seem that we may be barking up the wrong tree thinking that examinations are the root of the problem of present-day school and education. We tend to forget that examinations are just one part of an elaborate system called school and/or education, and tests are in reality about gauging the impact of the system on learning. If the system is inherently "bad", it can never be good enough, no matter how good the measure. We are missing the woods for the trees!

To further illustrate this, Illich said: "Health, learning, dignity, independence and creative endeavour are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools and other agencies in question."

*Deschooling Society* calls for a much deeper discussion on what scholarship is all about, which is particularly relevant in this increasingly dehumanising and unsustainable society that schools (including universities) are perpetuating since the emergence of the industrial revolution.

There is one historical context that is missing in today's discussion, namely the purpose of modern-day school and education. The current schooling system has evolved over time to meet the needs of the industrial age as it moved away from the agricultural age. Industrialisation was "perfected" in the 19th century to resemble a factory assembly line -- some even sponsored by the powerful and famous of the time to support production. It is therefore no coincidence that schools including tertiary institutions are organised like factories.

The "factory" metaphor is more pervasive today when the marketplace has practically taken over the *raison d'être* of modern-day education. We still hear, for example industrial demand for a tailor-made graduate who is regarded as nothing more than the "product" of the education system.

In moulding this product, examination is a mere process of "quality control" that segregates the ones who meet the "benchmark" set by the marketplace from those who do not. We talk in the language of the industry of creating "human capital" -- when education is all about nurturing a "human being". It emphasises "employability" rather than "liveability", where "earning" becomes more important the learning".

Courses that are deemed to be marketable are given priority over the non-marketable. As a result, two (of four) pillars of learning -- "learning to be" and "learning to live together" -- as advocated by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation are neglected.

Our biggest concern should be the direction that "education" is heading in the post-industrial age when "new" physical and mental structures are fast emerging to replace the old ones across the board -- socially, economically and politically.

Is it sufficient to have a New Economic Model (NEM) when education is lagging behind and based on an old, outdated and dysfunctional model? Can the transformational demands of the NEM be met with an education system that is no longer compatible? Can "inclusiveness" be effectively achieved when we fail to create a unified, if not, a singular educational system?

These are but some of pertinent questions that go far beyond the issues related to examinations alone. They strike deep at the heart of the purpose of education in the coming era.

What is more pressing is transforming the current system much like the change from agricultural to the industrial age some 150 years ago.

And this is what the present discussion should be focused on. We may well decide to do away with a few examinations but we need a transformational change in line with the needs of an advanced nation.

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