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Not all Dropouts are Lost Learners

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By, Shafizan Mohamed

Every year, thousands of Malaysian students quietly disappear from our school system. They're not making headlines, yet the impact of their absence ripples across families, communities, and the country's future. This is the hidden crisis of school dropouts — a crisis that's not just about education, but about inequality, generational shifts, and systemic relevance.

According to the Ministry of Education, the secondary school dropout rate fell to 0.83 percent in 2023. While this may seem minor, it still reflects over 15,000 teenagers leaving school prematurely. Add to this the 8,000 students who registered but did not sit for the 2024 SPM, and the pattern becomes harder to ignore.

But to understand this issue clearly, we need to make an important distinction: not all who leave the school system are dropouts — some are system opt-outs.

From Dropout to System Opt-Out

In Malaysia, the term *school dropout* typically refers to students who permanently leave the national government school system before completing secondary education. However, this definition does not account for those who pursue alternative learning paths — such as enrolling in tahfiz institutions, private schools, homeschooling, or online platforms. These students are not disengaging from education entirely; rather, they are opting out of a formal system they no longer find meaningful, relevant, or responsive to their needs.

This narrow definition contrasts with how some other countries approach the issue. For instance, in the United States, dropout statistics often include students who leave both public and private institutions without completing a diploma or equivalent certification. In Finland, the concept of dropout is more holistically framed within a youth support system that tracks educational engagement across various types of institutions and vocational pathways, ensuring fewer learners fall through the cracks.

While systemic issues such as poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and limited internet access continue to be major contributors to dropout in Malaysia — especially in rural and marginalized communities — there is a growing recognition that new, less visible forces are at play.

Today's youth are shaped by generational shifts and postmodern dynamics. Many come from families that now prioritise individuality, mental health, spirituality, and flexibility over rigid academic pathways. Parents are more informed and more willing to seek out models of education that align with their child's personality, pace, or belief system — whether that means a religious learning environment, a homeschooling schedule that accommodates emotional well-being, or digital education that fosters independent exploration.

The Media's Role in Shaping Perceptions

In today's hyperconnected world, media and digital culture are powerful forces shaping how young people view education, success, and identity. Students no longer take cues solely from teachers, parents, or textbooks. Their worldviews are constantly influenced by what they see on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and streaming platforms.

Popular media narratives often highlight extraordinary success stories — college dropouts who become tech billionaires, school-leavers who become full-time content creators, or gamers who make millions before turning 21. These stories, while rare, dominate the online space and are presented as attainable alternatives to conventional schooling. For impressionable minds, they plant the idea that formal education is optional, and that success can be fast-tracked through digital savvy, virality, or entrepreneurial flair.

This shift is compounded by the fact that digital platforms often reward traits not traditionally cultivated in schools — such as charisma, trendiness, risk-taking, and instant responsiveness. Students see influencers gaining wealth and fame by being "authentically themselves," while formal education can feel rigid, slow-moving, and irrelevant to the digital economy.

This creates a disconnect: while schools are meant to prepare students for the future, many feel they are being prepared for a version of the world that no longer exists — or at least, not the one they're most exposed to.

At the same time, algorithmic media tends to promote extreme narratives — the genius who succeeded without school, or the student who rebelled and found freedom. Rarely do we see balanced representations of the hard work, structure, and discipline that underpin most long-term success stories, including those of school graduates. This imbalance subtly erodes the perceived value of staying in school, especially among students who already feel unseen, uninspired, or underserved by the current system.

Public School is Still Relevant

This is not to say that Malaysia's public school system is irrelevant. For many, it remains a place of social development, stability, mentorship, and a gateway to higher education and employment. Therefore, we need to rethink and revitalise formal schooling — making it more flexible, inclusive, and relevant. This means tracking opt-outs as seriously as we do dropouts. It means recognising and supporting alternative education models. And it means ensuring that school becomes a place where all

students feel seen, valued, and inspired to stay — not because they are forced to, but because they truly want to.

Because when students walk away from school, we shouldn't assume they've walked away from learning. Often, they're simply walking towards something more meaningful to them.***

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