

When students just get by

A chance meeting sparks deeper questions about ambition, compromise and the realities of career choice

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Teachertalk

SHE was going from table to table selling packets of tissues when I first caught a glimpse of her. I was about to take my first bite of the steaming *curry laksa* I ordered when suddenly I heard a familiar voice.

“Teacher...”

It was the tissue seller. I looked more closely, and there she was, a beaming smile stretching across her face.

“Nancy Lim,” I exclaimed, surprised that I could still remember her name.

I had been her Mathematics teacher in Form Five almost 15 years ago. She had a congenital physical condition that affected her gait.

Not very academically inclined, she was in one of the last classes, but was always the first to volunteer for whiteboard duties, help distribute notes or collect students’ exercise books.

She managed to complete her Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examinations with the minimum passing requirements and later secured a job at a local bookstore.

I left the school after that year, but my ex-colleagues sometimes told me they had seen her working in various places.

“Teacher,” came her voice again, “how are you?”

I greeted her, asked how she was and what she was doing there.

“Selling tissues, teacher. Only RM5 for three packets. You want to buy?”

I handed her RM5. She placed the neatly packed bundle in my hands and refused the tip I offered.

When I asked about her previous job, she smiled sheepishly and said it had been too difficult.

We chatted for a few minutes. I asked about her former classmates; she wanted to know what I had been doing. We didn’t have time for a longer chat, as she moved on to another table.

Later, when I mentioned this during a catch-up with former colleagues, Moira, who had taught English in the same class, said, “Yes, I know Nancy. I see her sometimes selling tissues



Guiding future options:

Equipping students goes beyond grades; they also need insight into making informed choices. — 123rf.com

when I go for breakfast. I gave her a good telling-off the last time.”

A telling-off? To this girl with a physical disability who was trying to earn a living selling tissues? It sounded almost cruel.

“At least she’s doing something productive,” said another friend, Linda. “And trying to be independent.”

“By selling tissues in restaurants?” Moira retorted, clearly annoyed. “Nancy has an SPM certificate. She speaks acceptable English and Bahasa Malaysia. She could do many other things – maybe even upskill herself.

“We once got her a job as a shop assistant – several jobs, in fact – but she didn’t last. I spoke to one employer who said it was not about the job or her disability. She had been one of his better workers. She just didn’t want to stay. It was the same with other employers.”

“Well...” Linda said. “Perhaps she just hasn’t found her niche yet.”

Settling vs aspiring

The unspoken question in our minds was: Did we all have the luxury of finding our niches in our careers?

What about the students who had passed through our classrooms? Did they all become what they had aspired to be, or did they settle for something else?

We know for a fact that many eventually settled for what they managed to obtain.

Some carved out their own niches, making names for themselves in careers that were not

their first choices, yet became paths they could shape and grow content with.

Was it compromising your dreams to choose something practical that paid the bills and put food on the table, especially when others depended on you?

Not everyone’s dreams were clear. When we asked students about their ambitions, the answers were often vague or unrealistic.

Without discouraging aspirations, there may be times when teachers need to identify students’ strengths, nurture their potential and guide them gently – whether towards becoming a doctor, a chef or an artist.

Dreams can also evolve midway through life, morphing into different realities.

Many former teachers from the Baby Boomer or Generation X eras may remember the blue “001 cards”, where we had to list our three preferred career ambitions.

I can imagine our teachers hiding their smiles as they read some of our childhood ambitions: beauty queen, housewife, astronaut.

Some of us may have written “teacher” but ended up in different professions. Others may not have written it but became teachers anyway.

The truth is, not all of us wanted to become teachers at the beginning but discovered our passion for teaching along the way. It is a little like an arranged marriage, where love grows steadily and surely, compared to a hasty romance that quickly fades.

Reality checks

In wanting the best for our students, we subject them to career guidance workshops and psychometric tests to discover the paths they are most suited for.

Sometimes it works, and we hear the success stories every educator hopes for.

But we do not want to see our students, able or disabled, selling tissues permanently when we know they are capable of more.

So, while equipping them with the grades needed for minimum qualifications, perhaps we must also equip them with reality checks.

Things may not always go your way. You may not always enjoy what you are doing. What do you do then? Give up, persevere, or change direction if necessary?

Coincidentally, on the same day I met Nancy, I received a call from another former student, Arvin, who had been in the top class that year. A straight-A student, he had been interested in engineering, but his father wanted him to study medicine. Arvin eventually secured a scholarship to pursue medicine and is now a doctor based in London.

“Are you happy with what you are doing now?” I asked.

“Very happy, teacher,” he replied. “It was tough at first but I am glad I made that switch.”

I didn’t ask whether he missed engineering. It was not necessary. For now, at least.

Dr G. Mallika Vasugi, who currently teaches at a local university, provides insights into the teaching profession. The views expressed here are the writer’s own.

