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Problem of social divide extends beyond the school

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Raj Nadarajan/TODAY

The challenge of social mixing and interaction could be addressed at different stages, not just at the secondary school level, a reader says.

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I refer to the letter, “**Erasing social divide: It's more than just about putting children of different backgrounds in same classroom**” (March 4).

While class- or school-based integration is not guaranteed by “putting students of different learning abilities and socio-economic statuses in the same classroom”, Singapore has to confront the problems of inequality and social divide which extends beyond the school.

It could be argued that primary and secondary schools — by bringing together students of varied demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds — already offer, to some extent, one of the country's most important sites for social interactions.

The policy focus should shift from streaming within secondary schools to distinctions across schools, to greater engagement among students of different schools and institutes of higher learning, as well as to increased porosity across these educational pathways.

We have to go beyond the sole emphasis on streaming as the core problem and its removal as the cure-all solution.

First, the much-ridiculed “every school, a good school” slogan has to translate into tangible changes — through the distribution of resources such as teachers and student opportunities, and by addressing the heavy reliance on academic grades or performance as the yardstick to measure all students.

Second, with or without streaming, students rarely get the chance to interact with students from other schools.

And those from low-income households are less likely to have access to or to afford other social networks, whether these be the work or professional communities of their parents, enrichment or extracurricular activities, and religious or recreational institutions, for instance. This means they cannot gain social capital in these ways.

Apart from advising parents and training teachers, there could be joint-volunteerism projects to allow students from dissimilar schools to interact and to work together.



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Even more broadly, the challenge of social mixing and interaction could be addressed at different stages:

- At pre-school level, where young parents should have access to mentors and healthy environments, so that the household is healthy for their children
- At university level here and overseas, where elitism has the potential to manifest and where access can be further broadened
- At the workplace and in the community, where Singaporeans should ideally identify themselves as belonging to a more active citizenry

Crucially, the responsibility is not — and should not be — all on the Government.

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