

Education has played a major role in Singapore's transformation but we must not let the emphasis on examination success consume us

# Living the life less exam-ined

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In the quest for academic success, do we under-emphasise the broader goals of education such as personal growth and development, the nurturing of curiosity and learning as a lifelong habit and skill?

All stakeholders, especially parents, educators and employers, have to rethink why and how the education system educates in our competitive society.

Parents naturally want the best for their children. But how we get there (the journey) is just as important as the eventual outcome (the destination).

In Singapore, education is

portrayed and regarded as a key mode of achieving social mobility. Given the heavy government and family investments in education, learning in our schools and tertiary institutions has to contribute purposefully to what Singaporeans make of learning, work, citizenship, and life.

The education system has played a major role in Singapore's transformation. The emphasis on academic excellence, skills acquisition and technical competence has enabled Singaporeans to get good jobs domestically and abroad, contributing to our economic prowess.

Nevertheless, the education system's emphasis on examina-

tion success has also consumed many households. Is examination success prioritised over learning as a lifelong skill and a way of life, depriving us of the full benefits of our heavy investments in education?

If so, education becomes a series of assessment hoops one has to jump through in which the rewards of doing well are narrowly associated with a comfortable life in future.

Such an approach focuses on the short-term and instant gratification rather than on learning as a craft for the long haul.

No surprises then that examinations have become an arms race in Singapore.

Consider the booming tuition industry, estimated to be in excess of \$1 billion annually, the popularity of brand-name primary schools, the growing sleep deprivation among students and the toxic stress unwittingly imposed on our children, resulting in growing incidence of psychological and psychiatric illnesses.

In the drive for academic achievements, our students must not develop jaundiced views about education and learning, particularly seeing learning in instrumental terms,

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which will compromise their holistic development. Their well-being cannot be a dependent variable of their grades.

To be clear, examinations are important in the learning process. But the attainment of the academic achievement is but one measure only.

Discipline, teamwork, and the imbibing of positive traits, values, and habits are equally

important outcomes of education.

Studies have pointed to character and personality traits, not grades, as better predictors of success in higher education and in life. This has repercussions for lifelong learning and for satisfaction and fulfillment in life.

Students have to be equipped with not just knowledge, skills, technical competence and mastery but also the hunger to be innovators and creators.

## DO NOT FEAR FAILURE

Failure can be an integral part of learning and growth. We must not fear making mistakes or failure. If we do, we deprive ourselves of opportunities for risk-taking, grit, resilience, and imagination that can sustain our students for life.

Put simply, education is not merely an individual endeavour but about learning and fulfillment within a community.

We need to look at learning as a craft to be learned and continually honed, a lifelong habit in which work, growth and satisfaction are intertwined.

The education system must not only ensure strong domain knowledge but also instill values and ethos that will enable them to develop an inner compass and moral purpose as to who they are and what they stand for, including a strong nation-building orientation and a commitment to the greater good.

Amid the persistent income and wealth inequality, those who thrive in our examination meritocracy must not dwell in the self-belief that their success was deserved because of their own efforts only.

If we nurture a generation who care only about their own contentment, well-being and success but lack empathy, then we would have failed in the profound moral responsibility of instilling spirit and soul that will strengthen them and our society.

A learning and resilient individual and nation will be able to take on challenges with confidence, purpose, and integrity.

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