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Raffles Institution (RI) celebrates the bicentenary of its founding this year. It also marks the tentative beginning of formal education in Singapore.

RI's bicentenary is not so much about the venerable institution itself; it is certainly not about the founder of Singapore and RI, Sir Stamford Raffles. In fact, until the 1860s, RI was known as the Singapore Institution.

Instead, it is an apt occasion to reflect and to update the role of education in a multiracial society in an ever-changing world, including how schools like RI can contribute to the betterment of Singaporean society and the world.

Having established a British settlement here in 1819, Stamford Raffles ambitiously sought to create a pioneering educational institution to educate the sons of the local elites, to teach local languages to the British East India Company officers, and to research the history, culture and resources of Asian countries.

Singapore's education landscape has changed significantly since RI's founding.

The colonial administration was often content for the various racial and religious communities to establish their vernacular schools and government-aided schools (more popularly, "mission schools").

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Singapore's self-governance and independence necessitated a national school system as part of the nation-building endeavour, enabling the growth and development of an improbable nation-state.

**RIGHTSIZING ROLE OF EDUCATION**

Academic excellence is to be expected of top schools which attract academically inclined students.

But if this is the only benchmark, then our top schools would be underperforming. Much more is expected of them.

Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, RI's most well-known alumnus, put it well in 2011: "Graduating from a top school like RI does not mean that one will necessarily succeed in life. Academic ability must be matched by people skills, the capacity to adapt and change with changing circumstances, and to keep on learning.

"Rafflesians must understand their own limitations, in order to continue to improve themselves. They need to collaborate with people from different backgrounds to work together and to get tasks done."

Moreover, education has long been regarded as a social leveller in our society.

With a premium placed on educational achievements and a narrow appreciation of what constituted merit, it is not surprising that an educational arms race has developed and with that concerns of elitism among the successful.

Our meritocratic system is premised on equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome. But the real question is whether every child, regardless of his or her socio-economic background, is able to access the opportunities available.

Given finite fiscal resources to share among schools, it is crucial that the effort to cater to different learning needs must be directed at levelling up rather than levelling down our schools.

The principles of being student-centric (rather than school-centric) and of equity (rather than equality) must be the north star in funding students' growth opportunities regardless of which schools they are in.

A cookie-cutter approach of reducing funding for special programmes in schools will affect less well-off students disproportionately as their better-off peers have access to home resources to further develop their talents and interests.

The ongoing national efforts to reduce the high stakes parents and students place on national examinations and to broaden the definition and understanding of success are necessary. But this desired shift in mindset will take many years to come to fruition.

In the meantime, popular schools like RI must be the vanguard of this generational shift. Our top schools must remain beacons of hope for social mobility in Singapore and its pupils representative of Singapore.

Lee Kuan Yew noted that "RI must always remain a school that admits students on the basis of merit, and not on their parents' status or wealth. They must be able, whatever their race or social backgrounds."

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At RI's 200th Founder's Day on Sunday (May 28), Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged the institution to continue exemplifying Singapore's "inclusive spirit and egalitarian ethos".

"RI needs to uphold its long egalitarian tradition of gathering able and promising students from diverse backgrounds to join the school, and give them all the opportunity to excel and inspire them to serve," said PM Lee in a speech delivered on his behalf by Education Minister Chan Chun Sing.

**INCULCATING AN ETHOS OF SERVICE**

Beyond mastery of knowledge in their chosen fields, it is imperative that our brightest students inculcate an abiding sense of duty and of service to others.

Mr Chan at a recent lecture at RI, his alma mater, stressed that our schools must cultivate a strong desire for service in our students, to give back, and act to address the needs of the times.

This spirit of service in all facets of life is crucial as Singapore seeks to strengthen its social compact under the Forward Singapore exercise spearheaded by prime minister-in-waiting Lawrence Wong.

To this end, our schools cannot be inward-looking communities, engrossed with their own achievements and sense of well-being while paying lip service to being part of the community.

What has left an indelible mark on me of my deeply-formative time in RI was its diversity and being immersed in a community that thrived on the commitment to excellence and self-belief. Among my peers, our home backgrounds did not matter.

Obviously, today's RI is different from the RI I attended in the 1980s, in the same way that the Singapore of yesteryear and today are.

But fundamentals like the relatively abundant opportunities to self-discover, grow in belief, lead, contribute, and the pervasive egalitarian ethos must be entrenched within the school ethos and psyche.

The diversity in our top schools must be enhanced. PM Lee noted that RI draws its pupils from more than 120 primary schools, "a wider trawl than any other secondary school in Singapore".

Young Singaporeans, including those in our autonomous universities, need to develop a strong sense of duty and empathy and recognise that their success is built on the efforts of many stakeholders and the abundant opportunities provided.

The quest to extract and create value from education must never come at the expense of abiding values. In moulding the character of our young in the classroom or the playing field, our schools cannot just think of values but must also think and act with values.

Our school curriculum needs to emphasise values in action, enabling students to give voice to values. For instance, they should not measure purpose and success in terms of their achievements and accolades, important as they are.

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Rather, they must rally young Singaporeans to look beyond their own interests and priorities. This means contributing to the community and society in various ways.

Failing which, we will certainly see two Singapores — comprising the haves and have-nots and both at odds with each other — come to pass.

Young Singaporeans must use their talents and competencies for the greater good and solemnly recognise that it is a privilege and immense responsibility to serve.

Only then, as RI's motto exhorts its pupils, will the next generation of Singaporeans be the hope of a better age, for Singapore and the world.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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