

Heng: Education Can Help Close Some Gaps, But... Collective Effort Needed As Larger Forces Are Also At Work

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EDUCATION Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday that education can help to address some of the emerging divisions in Singapore society, but cautioned that there were also larger forces at work which a good education on its own cannot counter.

Citing the widening income gap, he said a collective effort would be needed to bridge it.

It would involve not just providing a good education to equip people with the right skills, but also restructuring the economy to make sure they have opportunities to thrive, he said at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspective 2014 conference.

"I will be very humble about the role education can play," he added at the conference on the differences defining Singapore society. He has already started to act, by looking "quite seriously" at introducing computer

programming in schools to prepare people for the new technological age.

The Education Ministry has started some "experiments" in schools through working with their computer clubs,

he added. It is also studying school systems that have embarked on the path.

The aim is not to make everyone a "programming geek", said Mr Heng, but to help people understand the

"basic logic" behind these advances shaping the world.

He was replying to a question on whether the Education Ministry would consider introducing more "unconventional" subjects in school to help people harness advances in technology.

Earlier, in reply to another participant's question, he spoke about how technological advances have transformed jobs, with some skills losing their premium status.

The effect of these widening divisions in society will only accelerate, he said.

At the conference, results from an IPS survey on race, religion and language showed that some residents continue to feel prejudice and discrimination. For instance, more than 20 per cent in each of the non-Chinese groups said they had encountered discrimination at work.

Also, almost one-third of the 4,200 respondents said that they felt prejudice based on nationality is more widespread in Singapore today than five years ago. Mr Heng said it was inevitable that differences exist here. The challenge is in harnessing the diversity while

maintaining unity, he said, and proposed three ways: Understand the nature of the difference; harness them as a source of creative and productive strength; and accept that not all differences can be settled "once and for all".

For lingering differences, he felt it was more constructive to set them aside temporarily and find common causes to work towards. Doing so will enlarge the common space shared by all and build trust in the process, he said.

During the question and answer session, Mr Heng was also asked how to close the gap between Singapore's future leaders and the people they lead. The answer lies in better mixing at school, he replied. "Our future leaders need to be brought up in an

environment where they can interact with students from all different groups, help to build a sense of togetherness."

Former senior minister of state for foreign affairs Zainul Abidin Rasheed asked about political contest and consensus. Replying, Mr Heng said political contest can sharpen the Government's ability to deliver policies and has a place in Singapore. But more contest does not always lead to better results for society, he added, citing the United States.

People should not view governance in terms of an "antagonistic contest", he said, but should think of other non-political ways to bring the country forward, like through self-help organisations.