

Not a snowflake or strawberry: S'pore youth not that different from previous generations

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Singaporean youth today are not so different from previous generations. There is common ground for working together to create a shared future.

It is normal for any generation to make judgments of the next - a point that is relevant to examine this July, which is Youth Month. This generation of youth is hardly the first to be called entitled, soft or spoilt by the previous one, and those of us who are older can be overly quick to identify anecdotes of "snowflakes" or "strawberries" to back these claims.

It belies an attitude of not valuing young people for who they are, and not cutting them some slack even though they are on the path of discovery, as those before them once were.

Our youth are not that different from previous generations. The values and aspirations of our millennials and Generation Z are quite similar to those of the Merdeka and Pioneer generations.

Similar values across generations

In the ongoing long-term Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth Steps) by the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Institute of Policy Studies that started in 2016, 4,000 young people aged 17 to 24 were asked which values were important to them.

The top 10 values that Singaporean youth prioritise (on a scale of 1-7, with 7 being the highest priority, while 4 is neither important nor unimportant) are filial piety (6.72), perseverance (6.40), independence (6.39), law and order (6.38), security (6.37), enjoying life (6.37), honesty (6.33), politeness (6.33), consideration (6.29) and graciousness (6.28).

Our youth attach high importance to values affiliated with self-determination and sense of community, which were also rated highly by the older population in similar questions posed in the Our Singapore Conversation survey in 2013.

There are some differences - young people place more value on enjoying life, compared with older people.

Also in Youth Steps, Singapore youth rated attitude and values (6.49), hard work (6.17), drive and ambition (5.99), having relevant skills (5.66), intelligence (5.62) and knowing the right people (5.57) as the most important factors to succeed.

In contrast, getting a degree (5.00, ranked eighth) and studying in a good school (4.19, ranked 12th) were less important. One's family background (indicators ranked between 13th and 17th) and innate attributes like race, gender and appearance were deemed of little importance (all scored below 4, and ranked between 16th and 19th).

The data suggests that young Singaporeans value personal agency and understand the need to strive and put in effort. It is heartening to know Singapore youth do not look at

forging their future through rose-tinted glasses. This is contrary to the "entitled" label some have generalised them with.

GROWING UP IN A DIFFERENT WORLD

But for all the similarities with previous generations, Singapore's youth are growing up in a different world, characterised by an unprecedented pace of change fuelled by rapid technology advances. In this context, older generations do not necessarily "know better", and sometimes in making comparisons with how previous generations overcame the issues of their own time, they inadvertently brush aside the unique struggles that Singapore youth face.

The NYC has been running a Youth Conversations series (via physical engagements and digital polls) since April last year to tease out youth concerns, with the aim of moving conversation to action under the SG Youth Action Plan, which started in April this year.

Eight thousand young Singaporeans came forward to share their concerns - the top three were cost of living, employment/ work (opportunities, future uncertainty) and education/pathways to success. Following closely and still within the top 10 were social justice (inclusivity, inequality), environment/sustainability and mental health/well-being.

These responses reflect a keen awareness of the realities, juxtaposed with strong mindfulness of social-civic issues. They balance the duality of Singapore pragmatism and youthful idealism, but while level-headed, there is still a strong desire to lead lives with passion, meaning and purpose.

Consequently, some young Singaporeans start ground-up initiatives to tackle social and environmental issues. For example, the National Youth Fund administered by the NYC has seen a rapid uptick over the last three years in the growth of youth-led ground-up projects, from under \$1 million to \$3 million over a broadening portfolio of social, community and youth issues.

The number of mental health projects has trebled with a fourfold increase in funding, while environment/sustainability projects have doubled with a threefold increase in funding.

However, while Singapore youth hold on to many values similarly cherished by previous generations, they face new obstacles and could do with more support from older generations. There are opportunities for older generations to mentor, empower and collaborate with Singapore youth.

1. Encourage youth to forge new paths, redefine success

Singaporeans are highly concerned about success and failure as a society. As a country, there is not too much room for mistakes. Nevertheless, too much of a high-stakes environment is counter-productive, and having too narrow a definition of success will hold Singapore's youth back from exploration and fulfilling their potential.

They value hard work and drive - they are a realistic and pragmatic lot. So instead of setting expectations, hovering over them and smothering them with advice, they should be provided with opportunities to build confidence and resilience, as well as be exposed to broader challenges to develop coping skills and a growth mindset.

Through Youth Conversations, young people also indicated that they feel the tension between society's definition of success and their own dreams.

Maybe there is less structure to how they perceive growth and progression, and a desire for more serendipity and exploration to stretch their potential. The point is, older people may not know any better and society can afford to expand its notion of success and allow young people to define the success narrative for themselves. In the process, the older generations can provide mentorship and the support to discover what gives greater meaning and purpose.

2. Embrace our roles as parents and family

Young people in Singapore see family and filial piety as critically important. Besides the Youth Steps findings, maintaining strong family relationships has shown up consistently as the top life goal in the past three waves of the National Youth Survey since 2010.

Parents and family, however absent or dysfunctional, have significant bearing on young people's developmental outcomes and life trajectories. In Youth Conversations, many shared how making their family happy is important to them, even if it meant sacrificing personal goals.

Parents, role models and mentors must recognise how much influence they have, and utilise that responsibly to shape the next generation.

3. Give youth a stake in shaping Singapore's future

With their deep sense of community, young people have a vision, not just for their own future. Youth Steps showed that three in four young people have at least one policy area they would be willing to contribute more towards, especially in areas that benefit others, like eldercare and healthcare.

Singapore needs its youth. They possess broader goals and horizons and are better equipped than previous generations to help Singapore evolve and stay ahead. The Government wants their voices and participation in shaping Singapore, through youth empowerment platforms like the SG Youth Action Plan and also the #shapeyoursomerset initiative, a series of interactive conversations, studies and activities held this year for those aged between 15 and 35.

Every generation desires a better Singapore, and this shared willingness to improve society is common ground for the different generations to work together.

Singaporeans across all generations should truly value the country's youth and give them a tangible stake in shaping its future.

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