

## **Finding Purpose: What Singaporean Adolescents Are Telling Us**

Mary Anne Heng and Andrew Pereira

### **KEY IMPLICATIONS**

- School leaders and policymakers should recognise that Singapore's success as a high-performing education system should go beyond education benchmarking and performance outcomes that can narrow the function and purpose of education (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016).
- Beyond performance outcomes, schools should seek to ask more fundamental questions about what students make of school and guide students in addressing important life questions to help them find purpose and meaning in school and life.
- Youth purpose can serve as a moral beacon for life. A purpose-focused education with a connected and future-oriented curriculum may engender greater purpose in schooling as perceived and experienced by students. Such a curriculum seeks to understand young peoples' hopes and challenges for the future and to give greater focus to the educational substance, meaning, significance and value of learning.

### **BACKGROUND**

Purpose is a long-term, stable, and high-level intention to influence the world in ways both meaningful to oneself and others (Damon, 2008). Adolescents with self-

reported life purpose show higher levels of life satisfaction and school achievement (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009). While school achievement is the more common metric in education research in Singapore, self-reported life satisfaction helps educators and policymakers understand how well the school curricula are achieving policy aims as perceived and experienced by students. Asking the fundamental question about what students make of school, this study investigated the relationship between purpose, life meaning, social support and life satisfaction among adolescents in Singapore that provides important baseline understanding for educational policy, research and practice.

### **FOCUS OF STUDY**

1. What is the nature of youth's purpose and search for meaning among adolescents in Singapore schools and how have adolescents been introduced to these purposes? What is the relationship between youth purpose and life satisfaction among adolescents in Singapore?
2. What is the nature of social support systems for adolescents in Singapore schools that help them maintain wellbeing in the face of stress?
3. What can schools do to support adolescents in their search for meaning and purpose?

## KEY FINDINGS

Youth's purpose, life meaning and social support systems significantly influence school and life satisfaction. Purposeful adolescents not only have self-goals, but often have a beyond-the-self orientation. This study also suggests that if unsupported, the discovery and development of youth purpose is tenuous and left to chance. The Self- and Other-focused students as compared to those with No-orientation perceived significantly higher support from parents, teachers and people in school. Support from parents was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction. Adolescents typically turned to close friends for school issues and to parents and teachers for bigger life issues.

To support students in their search for meaning and purpose, schools could: (a) re-examine how high-stakes examinations may displace the love for learning and do more to help students develop curiosity and talent; (b) re-examine the predominant focus on inculcating ruggedness and resilience in students to include the nurture of creativity and a sense of purpose; (c) re-examine how performance measures like service points could detract from the learning of values in community involvement projects.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

### Implications for Practice

Teachers should plan lessons that are significant and meaningful to students' lives. A connected and future-oriented curriculum could adapt from the German tradition of *Bildung* (which translates as education formation) to foreground moral and intellectual sensibilities, and self-awareness. For example, a traditional lesson on the art of argumentation might focus on form and structure but a connected curriculum could focus on bringing out the educational substance in terms of essential learning and meaning, principles, significance, and value (Klafki, 2000).

## Implications for Policy

Policymakers should be cognizant that in the means-ends model of education, students' experiences may face a mismatch between education reality and rhetoric. There is a need to understand what students make of school so that education can be about school experiences that speak to students as human beings and develop young people's sense of purpose and meaning for a future where our present imagination cannot begin to envision the kinds of questions that are relevant.

## PARTICIPANTS

The sample comprised 577 students aged 15 and 16 years old from two schools.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Using a quantitative and qualitative research design, students completed four questionnaires and 28 students were interviewed individually. Ten students were interviewed individually a second time one year later to examine stability of responses and obtain further elaboration.

## REFERENCES

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