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# Understanding adolescent purpose in the context of high-performance schooling in Singapore

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## ABSTRACT

International education achievement indicators potentially obscure students' localised experiences of school. This paper examines adolescent purpose to understand what drives students' learning experiences in high-performance schooling in Singapore. Purpose is a long-term intention to engage with the world in ways meaningful to oneself and to others. Using clinical interviews, the authors analysed students' perspectives of the purpose of schooling and learning against the tensions of preparing students for performance-focused outcomes in schools. Findings indicated purpose clusters with prevalent self-oriented academic achievement goals. About one-third of the students with forms of support had nascent beyond-the-self life goals. To think about teaching and learning in a more integrated manner, this study shows it is important to look closely into students' learning experiences, as these provide critical insights into how policies are implemented in schools, and how curricula can be made significant and meaningful in a more humanising vision of what schools might become.

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## Introduction

As an influential education reformer and philosopher, one of John Dewey's greatest contributions to the field of education is his insistence on taking a broader, deeper, more complex and integrated view of education. Dewey's vision of the finest outcome of education is an individual willing and able to engage, adapt to and shape the changing world and act with integrity (Dewey, 1897/1972). Dewey's vision of education more than 100 years ago remains relevant in challenging educators to create schools that will benefit the continuous growth of all students (Gordon, 2016). To engage intelligently and ethically with a changing world, recent calls are for a paradigm shift in the role of education from one that is primarily about academic excellence to one that is more humanistic and sustainable (Shirley, 2017).

Among nations, economic Gross Domestic Product indices of national wealth have reportedly failed to reflect important but subjective human indices such as life quality and personal wellbeing (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018). International education measures like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in

International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) measure the quality of educational performance and have powerful global impact in shaping policies and accountability practices for high performance. Scholars, however, have cautioned that performance-focused outcomes in the context of market-driven, test-based accountability indicators can narrow the function or purpose of education (e.g. Biesta, 2009; Deng & Gopinathan, 2016). This narrowed form of education is characteristic of *high-performance schooling*, where the growth of the student as a person is curtailed to meet functional economic ends, and the worth of a school and its activities is tied to the attainment of measurable achievement outcomes (Fielding, 2007).

One of Dewey's criticisms of the formal school curriculum is that it is simply academic, with an emphasis on 'skill or technical method at the expense of meaning' (Dewey, 1916/1985, p. 235). This leads to the inability to connect 'labor and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind, [and] mental states and the world' (Dewey, 1916/1985, p. 234). Contemporary education reform scholars like Shirley (2017) similarly argue that education should not only be about academic knowledge and meeting assessment milestones, but about instilling 'aspirations for a life of meaning, beauty, and purpose' (p. 126), where educators and their students bring their whole selves to encounter one another with dignity and respect. Noddings (2015) argues that the narrow focus on intellectual and academic content restricted to the instrumental formulation of objectives, instruction, practice and assessment is 'deadly' (p. 235) where much of the learning soon becomes forgotten when it has outlived its usefulness for high-stakes examinations. Instead, Noddings argues that there is a need to stimulate intellectual processes aroused by curiosity for *why* particular content is taught in schools through careful investigation, observation, reflection and evaluation.

A new imperative for educational change thereby calls for both the academic *and* human purposes of education (Shirley, 2017). Opposed to a narrow conception of education, a more humanistic and sustainable education seeks to ask more fundamental and compelling questions about what students make of school to guide students with important questions on purpose and meaning in school and life (e.g. Biesta, 2009; Shirley, 2017). Opposed to a narrow form of intellectualism based on high-stakes testing, a purpose-focused curriculum could be envisioned as providing students with an internal compass to find purpose and flourish (Fielding & Moss, 2011). Indeed, Shirley (2017) argues that it is an existential imperative for education to help students find meaning in their lives. Education is not something that is done to students, but with students in eliciting insights into what matters to students' achievement and learning in school. In other words, meaningful and sustainable educational change is not only about what and how to do things differently, but about helping students learn to live and thrive in larger, increasingly complex and diverse communities in and beyond school.

In these times of global uncertainties, the present criteria for success may not be valid for the future, and it is crucial for schools to guide students to make important decisions about what students consider useful, successful and ethical (Willbergh, 2015). In this paper, we seek to uncover the criticality of what really matters in high-performance schooling contexts such as Singapore through investigating what students consider important in their school experiences and learning. We seek to shed light on the tensions of preparing students for success in the globalised economy while striving to understand students' perspectives of the purpose of school and learning. We argue that an

understanding of what students make of school and consider as purposeful (or not) provides a rich pedagogical context for teachers' own development and growth to teach for purpose. Two research questions guided this study: What is the nature of youth purpose among adolescents in Singapore schools? How is adolescent purpose shaped by the context of high-performance schooling in Singapore and why does this matter?

## The case for adolescent purpose

Education success within 'world class' education achievement indicators potentially obscure students' localised experiences of school (Alexander, 2010). An important start towards a deeper and person-focused conception of educational purpose lies in taking a deeper look into the complexity of students' learning and lives in the design of meaningful educational experiences. Internationally, there is growing scholarly interest in youth purpose research to understand what drives students' experiences and motivations in school (e.g. Moran, 2017; Tirri, Moran, & Mariano, 2016).

Purpose in life is an intention over the long term to accomplish something that is meaningful to the self and leads to engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Notably, purpose is a goal that is far-reaching, high-level and stable. Purpose is not a low-level aim such as winning a football game. Second, one's purpose is always directed towards an accomplishment, a defined end towards which one can make progress. Although purposeful accomplishments may be attainable or unattainable, external or internal, measurable or non-measurable, what is important concerns not its attainability, but the sense of direction in making progress towards a purposeful objective. Third, purpose is part of one's personal search for meaning, but it also has an external component that involves an aspiration to contribute in ways larger than the self. Purpose is thus a central life aim that drives the self-organisation of plans and actions, and serves as a long-term motivator and compass to orientate one's life goals towards prosocial aims (Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon, 2008). It is this self-organisation that makes purpose a self-articulated beacon that catalyses engagement to accomplish a mission to benefit others beyond the self (Damon, 2008).

Having a sense of purpose thus provides a focus for one's efforts, connecting between present and future intent, and gives meaningfulness to the pursuit of beyond-the-self engagements (Damon, 2008; Moran, 2017). Having purpose can also serve as an organising frame for good character, personal motivation and drive (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017). Finding and developing purpose has beneficial qualities for physical and mental health, lower engagement in risk behaviour, greater civic engagement and greater protection against adverse life circumstances (Burrow, Hill, Ratner, & Sumner, 2018). Purpose has also been argued to be a second-order or meta-virtue for human flourishing in that purpose moderates and enhances the performance of other first-order virtues (H. Han, 2015).

In education, having a sense of purpose makes schoolwork relevant and meaningful while acting as an internal compass for school and life goals (Damon, 2008; Damon et al., 2003). For most students, the discovery of purpose may not happen on its own (Damon, 2008). There is thus a need for teachers to understand students' responses to the challenges of the school curriculum to help students' growth and socialisation into

whole persons (Noddings, 2006). Damon (2008) argues that it is only when students discover personal meaning in school do they apply their efforts with focus and imagination.

Purpose research studies in the United States show that youths with clear purpose are in the minority, with only about 25% stating their own life aim that motivates them towards contribution (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Damon, 2008). In the US studies, four purpose clusters emerged: (a) no orientation towards life path; (b) self-orientation, prioritising making money or personal success; (c) other orientation, with concerns to make the world a better place; and (d) self-and-other orientation. The self-and-other oriented youths had higher life satisfaction (Bronk & Finch, 2010). Most youths show a precursor form of life aim in which meaning, future orientation, engagement and a beyond-the-self orientation are not apparent (Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009). This is a concern as it suggests that the majority of youth lack a sense of purpose or an internal compass for life's goals.

A study of adolescents from Singapore and Israel (Heng, Blau, Fulmer, Bi, & Pereira, 2017) sought to contribute to much-needed cross-national research on youth purpose (Hill, Burrow, & Summer, 2013). Heng et al.'s study yielded similar purpose cluster profiles as the Bronk and Finch (2010) study, except that the No Orientation purpose cluster was absent in Israel, while there was an observable No Orientation purpose cluster for 18% of the participating Singapore students in the study. For both countries, the purpose groups differed significantly on school and life satisfaction: Self- and Other-focused were highest, followed by Self-focused and Other-focused. The No Orientation group in Singapore was lowest in school and life satisfaction. Notably, Israeli adolescents reported significantly higher school and life satisfaction than Singapore adolescents. To advance the field of purpose research, Heng et al. and others in the field have called for qualitative studies to provide deeper insights into students' sense of purpose for further theorisations and deeper understandings into the concept of youth purpose (Burrow et al., 2018).

In developing a sense of purpose, or *telos*, of education, teachers should play a central role in understanding what drives students' learning and engage with the question of what is educationally desirable and meaningful (Biesta, 2012). The teleological nature of education implies that education is a matter of judgement and involves engaging with fundamental questions: What is education for? For whom do schools exist? What matters to students and why? To think about curriculum, teaching and learning in a more integrated manner, it is important for teachers to connect with their students and learn how students are able to experience the curriculum in ways that are important, meaningful and personally relevant. Such work with students informs teaching and seeds pedagogical change in the classroom in a more humane vision of what schools might become.

To revisit the fundamental purpose of school, it is not enough to describe education change and to focus on 'what works' (Biesta, 2010). Educators, researchers and policy-makers would need to find the underlying forces that shape and drive change. In light of recent youth activism and unrest around the world to do with climate change, political and socioeconomic issues, and the speed with which digital media can spread ideals and influence, it is urgent that we seek a better understanding of common, positive and aspirational purposes as well as divergent purposes among youth in different countries and cultures.

## The research context

Singapore is a nation state with 5.7 million people, approximately 7866 people per square kilometre, made up of 74.4% Chinese, 13.4% Malay, 9% Indian and 3.2% from other racial groups (Singstats, 2019). Singapore's education system has undergone extensive reform to prepare students for the globalised economy. Policy initiatives like the Character and Citizenship Education framework instil personal values like confidence, self-awareness, grit, determination to succeed and moral values like respect, responsibility, care and appreciation towards others (Mokhtar, 2011). However, commentators argue that Singapore's moral education develops students in national values important for social cohesion and economic success, rather than develop intrinsic commitment to the understanding and practice of values (Tan & Chew, 2004; Tan & Wong, 2010).

Perhaps an inadvertent consequence of this instrumental view of education in a high-performance education system like Singapore is that it would not be surprising to find a relatively low sense of purpose among adolescents (Heng et al., 2017). A report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on life satisfaction and performance across international benchmark indicators provided intriguing comparison data showing that East Asian nations like China and South Korea which consistently top the academic achievement charts, rank low in life satisfaction (OECD, 2015, 2017, 2019). In the OECD studies conducted in 2015 and 2018, life satisfaction data were not available for Singapore students, and so the Heng et al. (2017) study was significant, for it was the first study to provide some indication of the sense of purposelessness and low school and life satisfaction among Singapore adolescents. The Heng et al. (2017) study was also significant for its first cross-national comparison between Singapore and Israel. Despite Singapore students' consistently high performance in international benchmark tests and Israeli students' relatively lower achievement scores, albeit in what is well known as a creative and 'start up' nation (Hussain, 2016), the significantly lower school and life satisfaction and sense of purposelessness among Singapore adolescents were both surprising and worrying. In this paper, we therefore seek to shed some light on the hidden side of Singapore's academic achievement culture and underscore the urgent concerns raised by educational scholars (e.g. Shirley, 2017) who question time and again if young people's wellbeing and mental health should be sacrificed for top test score results. This research also seeks to move beyond private morality to a sense of integrity that is attentive to contexts and formed in communities of thinking (Hardt, 2008).

Indeed, Professor Tommy Koh, Singapore's former ambassador to the United Nations and the United States, highlights the need for a stronger sense of community and higher social capital in Singapore. He points out that the current 'top-down hierarchy and individualistic culture' has left Singaporeans 'selfish, self-centred ... and having low regard for other people' (Cheong, 2016, p. A8). This study thus seeks to look beyond the international benchmark indices of TIMSS and PISA to go deeper into uncovering students' experiences of school in Singapore. At a foundational level, this paper seeks to re-examine what should be of value in education (Biesta, 2009) to open up discussions about what is good education and reconnect with the central questions of purpose and meaning of school for a more humanising vision of schooling.

Reflective of education reforms elsewhere, Singapore has become a new 'reference society' for how education policies in other systems are used to justify and legitimate the

necessity of domestic reform (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p. 464). Beyond the broad generalisations of Singapore's education system, this study situates Singapore as a bellwether and test case for youth purpose development and wellbeing in the context of high-performance schooling and seeks to generate deeper insights for education in Singapore and elsewhere. The contribution of this paper thus lies in investigating adolescent purpose development within the context of a high-performance education system in Singapore to foreground the criticality of a more human education experience of schooling.

## Method

The sample for this study was drawn from a larger project involving 577 predominantly ethnic Chinese students aged 15 and 16 years old from two schools in Singapore (46.6% female, 77.7% religious, 22.3% secular). The two schools are public, government-run schools, with the sample ethnicity distribution representative of Singapore's mainstream education.

In the larger project, students completed two surveys: (a) the Life Goals Questionnaire that required students to rate 17 items on a 7-point Likert scale based on the prompt: 'The purpose of my life is ...' (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Roberts & Robins, 2000). The items reflect serving one's own needs (e.g. make money, be successful) and prosocial interests (e.g. help others, make the world a better place), and some that do not indicate a clear orientation (e.g. do the right thing, fulfil my obligations); (b) Satisfaction with Life Scale, with five items on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g. 'In most ways, my life is close to my ideal') that measure a global sense of life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Since this study is on students, we added one item to measure school satisfaction: 'I am satisfied with how I am doing in my school.' Adding single items relevant to a particular domain or situation is common with this measure (e.g. Cheung & Lucas, 2014). Including this item slightly increased reliability ( $\alpha = .880$ ).

This study reports two phases of individual interviews. In the first phase, a total of 28 students who obtained the highest or lowest overall scores from the Life Goals Questionnaire and Satisfaction with Life Scale were identified for individual interviews. The highest or lowest overall scores were computed by summing the frequency ratings on the questionnaire items. The driving rationale was the potential for rich learning and insights. This is sometimes a superior criterion to representativeness as one may be able to learn a lot more from an atypical case than from a superbly typical case (Stake, 1995). To ensure credibility, dependability and confirmability of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), the second phase of individual interviews involved 10 students who were interviewed for a second time one year later to examine the stability of individual student's responses and to obtain deeper understandings. To ensure trustworthiness of data, purposive sampling to provide contrasting cases with maximum variation was used to select the 10 students for a second interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Students in mid-adolescence were deemed sufficiently mature and reflective to provide a range of responses. Ethics approval was obtained from the university. Informed consent was obtained from students who volunteered to participate in this study as well as their parents, and confidentiality assured.



Drawn in part from the Youth Purpose Study (Damon, 2008), the Youth Purpose Interview has participants reflect on the most important things in their lives, their long-term goals, what matters most to them at present and in the future and why, and people in their lives who have contributed to their formative experiences. A central feature of this study is the use of the clinical interview method originally developed by Piaget and used in cognitive developmental research and education (Ginsburg, 1997). The clinical method is a methodologically constructivist approach that seeks insights into students' construction of reality and meaning-making experiences (Ginsburg, 1997; Heng, 2017; Heng & Sudarshan, 2013). Using flexible questioning for theory building and testing, the clinical interview helps educators and researchers uncover and use information about students' thinking and motivations to improve teaching as well as develop working theories about particular aspects of students' learning and experiences. The aim of the 'clinical' aspect of the method is to seek an understanding of a student's underlying thinking, while being sensitive to the student's personality and affect throughout the interview.

In this study, each individual interview was about an hour long and conducted in the school outside of curriculum hours. The interviews were semi-structured and students were probed for further responses, where necessary to get at deeper understandings. The first author conducted all the interviews, and the second author was present to take notes as well as ask further questions, as needed. The interviews were audio-recorded.

Students' responses were categorised under salient and emerging codes and subsequently refined into broader themes. Reference was made to the Youth Purpose Interview Codebook (Malin et al., 2008). The data were coded for: (a) accomplishments, which could be an intention or goal; (b) engagement in terms of current and future action; and (c) reasons for the engagement (i.e. self-oriented or prosocial). Both the first and second authors who conducted the interviews independently coded all the interview transcripts, with an inter-rater reliability of about 0.80.

## Findings

Adolescents in this study were in four purpose profiles (Table 1): Beyond-the-Self life goal (28.5%); Self-oriented life goal (28.5%); Dreamer (11%); and Drifter (32%). The youth purpose profile groups were similar to that in the Mariano, Going, Schrock, and Sweeting (2011) study. Although nascent and tenuous, adolescents in this study, particularly those with beyond-the-self life goals conceived of purpose as the 'good life' comprising strong personal relations with loved ones, work-life balance, and the establishment of a positive legacy. In all cases, students' sense-making of their schooling and lives were made against the prevailing tensions wrought from an instrumental and high-performance school culture in Singapore.

Reflective of the national ethnic distribution and the increasing presence of international students in public schools in Singapore, the 10 students who were interviewed twice one year apart included eight local students (six Chinese, one Malay and one Indian) and two international students from China and Pakistan. The demographic indicators of race, gender and religion were not significant in this qualitative study, and this corroborates with the quantitative findings of the larger study.





**Table 1.** Frequency and percentage of adolescents exhibiting purpose forms (N = 28).

| Purpose form              | Frequency (%) | Criteria  | Examples of students profiled   |
|---------------------------|---------------|---|---|
| Beyond-the-self life goal | 8 (28.5%)     | Students with both self- and other-oriented long-term goals, with evidence of current actions and accomplishment driver | Alina (immigrant Pakistani)<br>*Zee (immigrant Chinese)<br>Raj (local Indian)<br>Matthew (local Chinese)<br>Peggy (local Chinese) |
| Self-oriented life goal   | 8 (28.5%)     | Students with self-oriented long-term goals, with evidence of current actions and accomplishment driver                 | Joseph (local Chinese)<br>*Zee (immigrant Chinese)  |
| Dreamer                   | 3 (11%)       | Students with largely self-oriented long-term goals, but with no clear evidence of current actions                      | Kevin (local Chinese)   |
| Drifter                   | 9 (32%)       | Students whose self- and other-oriented goals are unclear or lacking  | Shawn (local Chinese)   |

Note: \* First profiled as having a self-oriented life goal, but showed a notable positive shift towards a prosocial, beyond-the-self life goal one year later.

## **Purpose profiles**

A portrait of the nature of youth purpose among adolescents in Singapore schools is presented through short case studies of four Grade 10 adolescents: Alina (immigrant Pakistani) and three local Chinese students, Joseph, Kevin and Shawn. We then look into the sources of influence on youth purpose and examine adolescent purpose in the context of high-performance schooling, drawing on these case examples and other relevant examples of students profiled.

### **Case 1: Alina (immigrant Pakistani), beyond-the-self (BTS) purpose**

In terms of overall school and life contexts, BTS adolescents seemed to be living relatively purposeful lives with concrete BTS actions. Long-term aims were expressed and there was evidence of a clear current accomplishment driver for these aims. Alina presents possibly the most significant but traumatic case. An immigrant Pakistani student studying in the Express<sup>1</sup> stream in Singapore for five years, Alina aspires to be a lawyer to advocate for women's rights and education. Alina is influenced by Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize laureate and says: 'Malala didn't have much but she still spoke up for her rights. That's part of the reason why I want to do law. I can help women in Pakistan.'

Alina's words have much significance, particularly when one learns of the traumatic experiences that have served as turning points in her young life. Alina shared two shocking events in her early years in Pakistan that made her 'see the other side of the world'. These included a random drive-by robbery and murder of a young mother who was gunned down in front of her own child that Alina witnessed and a young neighbour's sexual assault. Alina also shared about her father's marital infidelity to her mother, and said that she is inspired by her mother as a role model in handling life's challenges.

For Alina, life purpose stems from life-changing experiences *together* with sources of influence such as her mother. Alina is keenly aware of her family's circumstances and she acknowledges her mother's sacrifices in putting up with her father's infidelity, foregoing college education and providing stability and support for the family. Alina's BTS aspirations to be a lawyer and human rights advocate are grounded in current accomplishment drivers as she uses her IT skills to set up a small online home-based bakery business for her mother to gain a measure of financial independence. Alina's BTS life purpose can be seen as an expression of moral courage. Adolescents such as Alina with strong familial support and influence have developed empowering mindsets and resilience to handle life's challenges and transform adversities into prosocial forms of purpose.

### **Case 2: Joseph (local Chinese), self-oriented life goal**

Self-oriented adolescents spoke about the importance of working hard for a good career and a life that seems premised on economic viability and material stability. Happy, seemingly well adjusted and from the Express stream, Joseph showed a clear self-oriented focus in life, which he described as about living life to the fullest and having a good career. Joseph does well at school, aims to be at the university and establish a good career in finance. He shared that family and close friends are most important to him. Youths in this cluster have long-term aims that are more instrumental in nature and related to personal gains.

### **Case 3: Kevin (local Chinese), Dreamer**

Neither a journey nor a destination, Dreamers have emerging self-goals and do not take current actions to achieve their dreams. A student in the Normal (Academic) stream, Kevin spoke about being a software engineer and possibly even an education minister to make the Singapore education system less stressful. Kevin said he interacted more with his group of about 15 friends than with his parents. He did not find it easy to approach his parents as his dad works overseas and his mother works long hours. He added that he feels his parents do not think he is as smart as his two other brothers and treat him a little differently.

### **Case 4: Shawn (local Chinese), Drifter**

Students who are Drifters tended to be self-oriented and preoccupied with their current school and life challenges. Brought up by his aunt, Shawn resents his biological mother and accuses her of abandoning the family when he was young. He hardly sees his father who works overseas. From the Normal (Academic) stream, Shawn expressed surprise that he was selected for an interview with the research team. He considered himself not a 'good person' as he said that the school regarded him as a 'trouble-maker' who gets into fights and arguments with others. He works out at the gymnasium to build a bigger physique to counter students from the higher ability (Express) stream who used to intimidate him physically. Shawn emphatically stated: 'I have no other talents or hobbies ... no other meaningful stuff.' Practically inconceivable to Shawn, questions of purpose and meaning are 'very deep' and 'I never thought about it.' Attending the vocational Institute of Technical Education (ITE), when he was interviewed a second time one year later, he described his experiences as ranging from 'very toxic, the people here [and the smoking in the school toilets]' to very '*sian*' (Chinese dialect for boring and routine). It seems that the various socialisations in the lower vocational education stream with issues of stigmatisation and labelling leave individuals like Shawn seeing little worth in what they do. Moreover, adolescents like Shawn lack sources of support and influence to deal with life's challenges.

Hence, while different purpose clusters could be discerned in this study, students' perspectives of purpose are a mixed picture, with the search for purpose largely left to chance. Although some Singapore adolescents demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in constructing various personal philosophies about life purposes, the sense and construction of purpose is by and large tenuous, particularly among students who lack social support and sources of influence.

### **Sources of influence on adolescent purpose**

Reflecting the mixed picture of youth purpose in this study, the sources of support and influence on adolescent purpose were also mixed. Students in this study generally turned to parents for personal and life decisions, and to teachers and friends in school for help with their studies. Albeit nascent, adolescents with beyond-the-self (BTS) purpose considerations in this study were able to draw from various sources of support in their lives. Sources of influence (e.g. people in the family and community, and traditional and social media) helped adolescents to negotiate and transform negative and traumatic life events into life's turning points. For example, BTS students such as Alina showed that purpose

development can stem from negative experiences as an emotional response to act on concerns, reflect on social and moral values, and learn from adverse situations (Malin et al., 2017). For Alina, her mother was a strong and steadfast source of influence and Alina sought to work towards her life goal to advocate for women's rights and education for marginalised communities.

For several students, their parents served as important role models for purpose development through involvement in charitable and religious activities. At the same time, there were challenges stemming from a lack of work-life balance where both parents and children are respectively busy in career and academic pursuits. For example, Raj (local Indian) who was profiled as having BTS purpose considerations, lamented the lack of family bonding due to busy lives. Additionally, Raj said he was reluctant to discuss school matters at home as he did not want to burden his overworked father and cause him to worry.

Teachers in this study were understandably focused on academic matters, and although teachers have a pastoral role, they were invariably drawn towards an academic focus in a high-performance culture of schooling. It was unsurprising, then, that students shared they would like teachers to talk to them about their learning experiences in school. Students indicated that schools should go beyond a primarily academic orientation and do more to help students develop curiosity and talent in broader domains through varied learning opportunities. For one student, however, the teacher played an important role in purpose development. For Zee (immigrant Chinese), profiled as having a self-oriented life goal after the first interview, we saw a notable positive shift towards a more prosocial, BTS purpose orientation following the second interview that was largely attributed to the positive influence of a Chinese Language teacher who made the learning of Mandarin come alive with rich experiential learning approaches. A few other students shared fondly about the special role played by their favourite sports coach in school who instilled discipline and shared life lessons.

Beyond the proximal sources of influence, students were also influenced by people in the larger community. For example, historical world figures such as Lee Kuan Yew and Margaret Thatcher, the former prime ministers of Singapore and the UK respectively, as well as significant others in the community (e.g. church elders) were influential. Additionally, adolescents demonstrated remarkable agency and resourcefulness and developed their sense of purpose by drawing from other sources of support in the form of traditional media (e.g. books) and new social media. For example, Matthew (local Chinese) with a BTS purpose profile shared that books like *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451* afforded him with visions of alternative worlds and possibilities to widen the envisioning of present worlds. While critical of social media and how these could be sources of misinformation and distraction, several adolescents said they were inspired by TED talks and websites like Zen Pencils and Tumblr, which are image-based inspiration blogs.

Hence, for these BTS adolescents, a sense of purpose brought about protective benefits and a sense of thriving as they showed an understanding of mutuality and interdependence of self and their place in the larger community (Macmurray, 2012). It is heartening to note that BTS adolescents such as Matthew envisioned legacies of 'changing the world' as he spoke about the world that 'we leave behind for others'. Matthew believes strongly in the need to change people's mindsets and he says:

people are very self-centred now. “I just want this and that, I am going to do this and that.” It is not about them anymore, it is how we can change the world. We are living in the world, not as ourselves.

Matthew’s ‘not as ourselves’ dissatisfaction with being ‘self-centred’ shows a strong sense of duty towards positive transformation and the betterment of society, and reflects a deeply relational view of the self where human experiences are seen as shared and interconnected (Fielding & Moss, 2011).

In contrast to BTS adolescents, students in this study who were profiled as Drifters tended to be preoccupied with their personal challenges. These adolescents tended to lack sources of support and were thereby unable to engage in prospective thought. For example, Shawn’s self-worth and self-perception seemed to be largely in economic terms and potential earnings. There is a sense of purposelessness as he described his school environment as ‘toxic’ and his school, the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), as ‘It’s the End’ (making a play on the ITE abbreviation). Poignantly, Shawn’s situation presents an urgent case for engendering and developing purpose. The next section addresses the second research question on how adolescent purpose is shaped by the context of high-performance schooling in Singapore and why this matters.

### ***Adolescent purpose in the context of high-performance schooling***

With high-performance schooling driven by economic prioritisation in Singapore, the pragmatic and instrumental socialisation may eclipse ethical considerations and meaningful engagement of student learning, and present challenges to purpose development among Singapore students. Stemming from school reforms to enhance economic competitiveness and resilience, the high-performance socialisation and pressures of Singapore schooling have led to accountability issues that have tended to detract from authentic schooling and learning.

### ***Schools as examination preparation centres***

Students in all the purpose cluster profiles in this study noted that performance and academic stress are felt foremost within high-performance schooling. Matthew, profiled as having self- and other-oriented life goals, provided a timely reminder that schools should be places of learning but lamented that at present, school resembles more of an ‘exam preparation centre’. Matthew elaborated on the predominant focus of Singapore schools on examinations and achievement results where ‘everything you do in school is always O-levels this, O-levels that, which is just not good for our students.’ Instead, he said that schools should focus on developing curiosity and love of learning.

Across school subjects, students may perceive some subjects as more abstract. The willingness of teachers to spend time engaging their students with curiosity and significance of what is taught would go a long way in engendering purpose, meaning and significance of learning. For example, Matthew perceived a more traditional pedagogy in mathematics with application of formulae for problem solving without understanding how concepts work. He contrasted this to English where the teacher ‘forces you to think’ and shows how the thinking can be applied to real-life scenarios using mind maps in situational writing.

### ***Schools as a battleground requiring a battle plan***

High-performance schooling requires some students to conceive of school as a battleground requiring a battle plan. When asked how she dealt with difficult academic subjects and dismal grades, Peggy (local Chinese, Self-and-Other purpose profile) replied: ‘Chemistry, I just cannot [pass]. But as I studied more, I became more interested in chemistry. In Secondary 4, I started “*chionging*”.’ ‘*Chiong*’ literally means ‘charge’ (as in a battle cry in Chinese dialect). Similar to being in a battle with a survivalist stance, *chionging* in school connotes a determined, single-minded and survivalist approach to studying. The *chionging* mode arguably narrows the purpose of education to one of examination preparation. The *chionging* focus also has stark implications for a search for greater purpose where its rather single-minded fixation on achievement outcomes obscures the importance of more holistic intellectual and moral growth. Hence, the experiences of students in Singapore schools are often not consistent with education policy rhetoric about developing passion, curiosity and creativity in learning (Ng, 2004). This points to the need both to bridge the rhetorical gap between policy and practice as well as to listen more closely to student voices that reflect the realities on the ground.

### ***Schools and accountability measures***

The imperative of accountability measures is another facet of high-performance schooling in Singapore. Community Involvement Projects (CIP) and the current Values in Action (VIA) programme in Singapore schools aim to ‘support students’ development as socially responsible citizens who contribute meaningfully to the community’ (MOE, 2019). These initiatives are no doubt valuable and facilitative of noble purpose development. However, the insights provided by the students in this study indicated unintended consequences that detract from the overall meaningfulness of doing a CIP given its compulsory nature with its incentivised measures. Even Alina, who has demonstrable BTS qualities, stated bluntly: ‘The reason I do CIP is not because I want to help people but mainly because I need the specific number of points.’ Furthermore, Alina added that she ‘did not learn anything for CIP’, and provided ‘politically correct answers’ to student reflection tasks. It is thus worrying that students may learn undesirable lessons in giving inauthentic feedback for the sake of compliance and expediency.

Given that Singapore teachers work in a competitive environment with the multiple demands of responding to a steady stream of educational reform agendas (C. Tan, 2008), teachers need time and inclination to reflect on practice in terms of the rationale and meaningfulness of what they do. In other words, teachers should see themselves not merely as curriculum implementers required to produce measurable performances and to ‘improve’ outputs, but as having a ‘rationale for practice, account of themselves in terms of a relationship to the meaningfulness of what they do’ (Ball, 2003, p. 222). Teachers in Singapore schools would do well to re-examine the authenticity of student feedback on community-based projects and explore ways to better engage students in meaningful reflection about their learning experiences.

Hence, the development of youth purpose among the adolescents in this study has been brought into tension with performance stress and accountability measures in high-performance schooling in Singapore. Beyond responding to the policy drivers of education that prioritise academic achievement outcomes, it is important for teachers to have a vision of education that encourages young people to develop their humanity in the very

experience of schooling and living (Hansen, 2006). This requires that teachers have the courage and open-mindedness to think critically about the intent of the curriculum as planned, and develop a state of mind to observe, listen and study available evidence for intentional interpretation (Shirley, 2017).

## Discussion

The purpose of schooling is not a single concept. Context matters. This study has shown that the school and life goals of adolescents in Singapore are largely self-oriented with a focus on the immediate goals of school achievement. For many students, the development of youth purpose is ad hoc and left to chance. About one-third of the students showed nascent beyond-the-self or prosocial qualities, and these were students who had forms of support ranging from people in the family and community to traditional and social media.

The cases in this study presented a composite picture of the tensions that lie with adolescents' aspirations for meaningfulness and engagement with learning on the one hand, and the challenges and inherent demands and expectations in high-performance schooling contexts on the other. An explanation for the tensions in purpose development among Singapore adolescents in this study may lie in Singapore's pragmatic socialisation of adolescents for social cohesion and economic success (Tan & Wong, 2010). According to commentators like C. Han (2009), such an education model promotes a loyal, passive citizenship and a productive workforce, rather than critical, creative citizens capable of independent thought. The weight of the pragmatic focus with high expectations for academic success to contribute to Singapore's economic development places a large psychological burden on students (Han, 2009). It is perhaps under this weight that adolescents forego or postpone the search for personal purpose and meaning during their school years so as to focus fully on striving for academic outcomes that would lead to viable economic futures.

Significantly, this self-focused and achievement-oriented syndrome in Singapore is known as '*kiasu*' (Chinese dialect for being 'scared to lose'), which is a cultural signifier developed from the national habitus of survival amidst crisis construction and preparedness so that Singapore's economy might not lose out to others (Koh, 2010; Koh & Kenway, 2012). Similar to the phenomenon of *Fear of Missing Out*, a pervasive form of social anxiety that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, the Singapore syndrome of *kiasu* connotes a more severe form of anxiety, which includes the fear of being left behind or coming in last in a society that puts a premium on achievement and goods. Hence, where existing research (e.g. Damon, 2008) has argued that youth purpose development is unlikely if unaided, this study also identifies possible competing cultural socialisation forces and ways of thinking in highly competitive school systems and societies such as Singapore that may be averse to prosocial or BTS considerations.

## Conclusion

Our purpose is about why we do what we do (Renshaw, 2017). Our values come from a deep sense of purpose. If schooling is about both the academic and human purposes of



education, we need to look more closely into the human aspects of schooling. Despite prevalent school reform efforts worldwide, there is uncertainty about what this looks like in the classroom. International indicators of high-performing education systems provide a broad metric of the health of school systems. But it is vital to look more closely into students' learning experiences, as these provide critical insights into how broad policies and curricula are implemented in schools, and serve to bridge the gap between policy rhetoric and ground-level experiences.

High-performing school systems work hard to remain at the top of international benchmarking indicators. Tensions arise from school systems seeking to keep ahead in the achievement race on the one hand, and students' experiences of the quality and meaningfulness of measurable and non-measurable learning outcomes on the other. Youth purpose research offers a critical lens to understand what drives students' experiences and motivations in school (and what does not). The formal school curriculum, long described by Dewey (1916/1985) and others as emphasising technical skills at the expense of meaning, may increasingly be under threat of irrelevance if educators continue to ignore the big and deep questions about the purpose of school. As this study has shown, this is especially so from the perspectives of students who are the recipients of the enacted curriculum within the dynamic and complex intersections of formal and informal learning brought about by globalisation and the internet.

Educational policy reforms have often focused on seeking practices that work (Biesta, 2010), with the aim of solving problems and seeking closure. In the face of a changing and uncertain future, the challenges posed by complex educational issues require school leaders and teachers to revisit the fundamental questions of education to ask what education is for and what constitutes good education (Biesta, 2009). Significantly, more can be done in schools to make education personally meaningful (Ginsburg, 1989) and purposeful. Given the complexities of globalisation and economic prioritisation, the case of Singapore holds valuable lessons for countries undergoing similar education reforms. What can schools do to reconcile the academic and human purposes of education? What are the fundamental questions of teaching, learning and assessment that need to be revisited so that school leaders and teachers do not ignore the big and deep questions of educational substance, significance and value of school learning? We offer several considerations.

To get to the heart of teaching practice, Hansen (1999) speaks about *intellectual attentiveness* in getting close to students in terms of what they know, think and possibly even feel in their engagement with subject matter. Hansen also speaks of *moral attentiveness* as teachers show care and concern for students in their learning of the subject and the 'persons students are becoming' (p. 175). When teachers attend to students' responses of subject matter and help students make visible students' thinking and learning experiences, the enacted curriculum emerges as a rich collection of lived and living experiences (Aoki, 1993). In other words, teachers would need to be intentional and persevering in helping students go beyond intellectual knowing that comes from the head, and towards a more integrated form of knowing that involves the self and other, head and heart, and the formal and informal. The reconceptualisation of curriculum from the traditional notion of a planned curriculum to the lived curriculum is therefore a necessary and important interplay between students, teachers, subject matter, classroom activities, and the larger culture of education in school and beyond.

Moving beyond the academic and performance-oriented goals of schooling, a second powerful idea is for curriculum leaders and teachers in schools to ask the reciprocal question, 'How does the curriculum that is learnt influence how curriculum is taught?' (Heng, 2017). The rich insights that come with seeing student learning and thinking deeply about what this means have important bearing for teaching. Eisner (2005) reminds us that the curriculum that is taught influences how curriculum is learnt and vice versa. Teaching and learning are interrelated. More than asking whether their teaching is effective, the larger question teachers should ask should concern the educational effects of their actions and what they can learn from students' responses to their teaching.

Third, relevant to developing a curriculum of significance and meaning, the German tradition of *Bildung* has an emphasis on self-formation and provides great affordance for the cultivation of sensibility, self-awareness, liberty and freedom, responsibility and dignity (Hopmann, 2007). We illustrate with an example of how teachers could reflect on the purposefulness of their teaching so as to be more deliberate in opening up the educational meaning of subject matter (Tirri et al., 2016). Not about personalising learning for any student, but still having the means to encompass Alina's beyond-the-self aspiration to be a women's rights advocate, for example, a teacher with intellectual and moral attentiveness could raise purpose-focused questions that would encourage deliberations about justice and equity issues and give importance to the educational substance, meaning, significance and value of learning (Klafki, 2000). Issues about justice and equity are after all universal concerns and all students can benefit from critical awareness and engagement. Hence, the *Bildung* approach of self-formation is about how meaningful, rich and authentic content is enacted in a classroom where the teacher provides opportunities for students to reflect upon what is meaningful to them in relation to their current thinking, and school and life goals (Tirri et al., 2016). Hence, humanising knowledge and teaching (Hansen, 1999) requires a more person-focused understanding of students, which becomes not a means to an end, but an integral part to meaningful teacher development and growth.

Fourth, the ideas from cosmopolitan education hold much promise in the quest to illuminate one's doing and being in the world (Hansen, 2010). Where Singapore schools have done well to develop human capital competencies for success in the global economy, Choo (2018) argues that there is now a need to move beyond student development and wellbeing, and embrace cosmopolitan capacities that include real-world problem solving and demonstration of global consciousness and engagement. Crucially, the development of meaningful growth is not only about the flourishing of the self, but also about seeking to understand the concerns of others. Beyond the attainment of quality grades, the humanising of knowledge and teaching calls for the development of students' critical-ethical capabilities to deal with different value systems and moral ambiguities that arise from an increasingly interconnected world (Choo, 2015). Thus, cosmopolitan education is no longer about imparting knowledge and values, but helping students examine the ways in which global processes are creating conditions of economic and cultural exchange that are changing our identities and communities (Rizvi, 2009).

In seeking to understand students' perspectives of the purposes of schooling and the meaningfulness of their learning experiences in the context of high-performance schooling in Singapore, this study has sought to illuminate the tensions in preparing students

for success in the globalised economy and educating for an uncertain future. Future research would need to examine the multi-ethnic and multicultural aspects of youth purpose especially in light of globalisation so as to better understand the commonalities and divergences of purpose in different cultures (Moran, 2017). Ultimately, if schooling is to be an experience that speaks to students as human beings, it is imperative that educators look beyond international performance indicators and engage in honest and critical deliberations about the deeper purpose of school and learning to help engage students in finding purpose and meaning in school and life. What youth tell us about their sense of purpose in school learning can become much more than a guidepost or inspiration. These indicators tell us about the wellbeing of our children and can become an organising principle for curriculum decisions, educational policy and greater global consciousness and engagement.

## Note

1. Singapore students in the Express stream in secondary school take the General Certificate of Education Ordinary (GCE 'O') level examination at the end of four years of secondary education. Students in the Normal Academic stream take the GCE 'N' level examination at the end of four years in secondary school, and take an additional year to prepare and take the GCE 'O' level examination at the end of five years in secondary school.

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