

Executive Summary

This report examines the resiliency of young people in Singapore through protective internal factors, such as the sense of Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity based on the Circle of Courage (Brendtro, et al., 1990) as well as external factors such as willingness towards at risk activities due to peer pressure and other stress factors.

The Singapore Youth Resilience Survey was conducted in 5 local secondary schools from early 2010 to mid 2011. According to the Ministry of Education's School Achievement 2010, 3 of the schools are from the band 9 and below, while the other 2 schools are from band one and above. The data was obtained from a sample of 1,941 Secondary School students through self-administered questionnaires, which represents 0.97% of the total enrolment of local secondary students in 2009.

Survey findings found links between the resilience, stress factors, emotions at home, willingness to try at-risk behaviors and social skills. It also emphasised the need to foster greater resiliency amongst early adolescent teenagers, in order to help them cope with the stressors of their environment. This would not only reduce their vulnerability towards at-risk activities, but also provide emotional well-being critical to this stage of development.

On youth's sense of belonging, it was discovered that youth felt most belonged to their peer group, as can be seen by the relatively higher proportions who agree with the statements "I have enough friends" and "My friends support me" (81% and 77% respectively). Youth also felt a sense of belonging to their family, as most respondents indicated that they respect the elders in their lives (86%) and often spent time with their families (73%). What may be of concern however, is that less indicated that they could turn to family when in trouble (68%). Youth felt less belonged to their schools, with 66% of respondents indicated that they enjoy going to school, while 61% indicated that people at school generally liked them. Another point of concern is that youth may not feel that strong a sense of belonging to the nation, as only 57% of the respondents agreed with the statement "I feel that I am an important part of Singapore"

Respondents indicated a wide range of interests and masteries. Higher achieving youth from upper band schools were found to persist at tasks even when it was difficult, express more creative thoughts and ideas, think things through before acting and expressed that they were better at school work than youth from lower band schools.

In the domain of sense of Independence, youth generally indicated they were "in charge of their own behaviour" (81%), would happily try new things and not mind if they make a mistake (71%) as well as indicated that they were self-disciplined and able to control themselves (70%). However, it was interesting to note that only 45% of respondents indicated that they were natural leaders and 59% are confident to tell someone politely if they do not like what they are doing.

Local youth tend to indicate a strong sense of generosity, as 79% indicated a desire to want to help others, 76% indicated that they understood how others are feeling and 75% indicated that they play fairly. However, there may be a disconnect with regards to their desire to help others and the opportunities given to the youth to demonstrate a sense of generosity, as indicated by only 49% of respondents indicating that they are involved in charity work or helping others less fortunate themselves as well as indicate that other kids come to them for help and advice (59%). This is

surprising as the Community Involvement Programme in secondary schools is compulsory for all students and aims to nurture students to become socially responsible and develops their sense of belonging and commitment to the country. It may be prudent to re-examine how CIP is conducted in schools to understand if the goals of the programme are being met.

There was a consistent drop in levels of resilience from Secondary 2 to Secondary 3 and 4. This was observed in the data from all schools. Lower secondary respondents (those aged 12-15 years) tend to score higher in Circle of Courage scores, feel less stressed in school, have less total number of stressors and are willing to try less at-risk activities, as compared to upper secondary respondents. This was not surprising as upper secondary students tend to enter a critical stage of adolescent development, experiencing significant biological, cognitive, social and emotional changes and this coincides with the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary levels.

The majority of the youth (74%) indicated that they would not try any of the listed at risk activities. The more popular at risk activities that respondents were willing to try were drinking alcohol (14%), getting a tattoo or piercing (13%) and skipping school (12%), while the least popular at risk activities respondents were willing to try out were glue sniffing (3%), stealing (5%) and joining a gang (5%)

School was a major source of stress for local youth, with 55% reporting it as such. Parents (28%), peer pressure (24%), personal relationships (23%), loneliness (23%) and money (23%) were other commonly reported sources of stress.

In general, local youth in upper band schools score higher on levels of resilience and were consistently less willing to try at-risk activities. This was attributed to 3 possible factors as observed from the data, namely the school environment, the home environment and relative affluence. Youth in upper band schools tended to experience a more positive home and school environment, as well as come from more affluent backgrounds.

It was interesting to note that Normal Academic youth consistently score significantly lower in resilience scores across the 4 domains of Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity as compared to both Normal Technical and Express youth. Perhaps having similar curriculum as the express, but yet viewed as underperforming, subjects them to stereotype threat. Normal Academic youth are further disadvantaged by feeling left out at home and not liked in school, and come from less affluent households. The consistent low scoring of Normal Academic Stream youth as compared to the other streams warrants closer examination.

Data indicated that male youth are significantly more willing to attempt at-risk behaviours as compared to female youth. While gender differences in risk-taking are well-supported in research in predicting that males take part in risky behaviour as a form of "showing-off" in mate advertisement, it is unfortunate that in a modern context, many risk-taking behaviours are viewed as counterproductive or even disruptive in a school environment. It may be worthwhile to explore if avenues for healthy and adventurous activities, in the presence of peers, could be targeted at maladjusted adolescent males.

In conclusion, the study increases confidence that the principles of positive youth development and resiliency found in the Circle of Courage is as relevant today, and in our local context, as it is internationally. The responsibility of building youth capacity must be shared in collaboration

amongst families, communities, peer groups and other adults in their lives for any meaningful effect to take place. In developing the capacity to cope with stressors faced by Singaporean youths at home, at school, with peers, and in the community, we not only reduce the vulnerabilities of youth to unhealthy influences, but give them a greater chance for a lifetime of success.