

The way we define success makes it hard to raise children in Singapore

A deeper issue is a culture that treats childhood as a high-stakes project and success as a narrow, unforgiving race.

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Singapore's fertility problem is often framed as a question of costs, time and support.

Housing prices, childcare availability and parental leave all matter. But they do not fully explain why many couples, including those who are financially stable, delay having children or stop at one.

Beneath these practical concerns lies a deeper issue: the way society defines success.

Raising a child in Singapore has become both expensive and stressful. Parenting is increasingly experienced as a high-stakes project with timelines, milestones and strong expectations. Within this frame, children are not seen simply as persons to be nurtured, but "projects" to be optimised. Parents themselves feel constantly evaluated.

On Feb 26, Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong announced during the Budget debate that Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) has sunk to a new low of 0.87, sparking fears of an irreversible decline in births.

While there have been calls by the Government to ease the pressure, parents are merely responding to a competitive environment that encourages them to pour ever more time, money and attention into each child. This competition has a predictable effect: families have fewer children and/or invest more

in each one.

A low TFR is not a failure of individual priorities, but rather a structural outcome of how success is organised, measured and rewarded.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

The Government recognises the issue and has pledged to tackle the education "arms race", including measures such as reviewing exam difficulty and how PSLE scores are used. These are welcome steps. But they do not fully address the root of the issue.

Parents routinely say they want happier, less stressful childhoods for their children and that they value multiple pathways to a fulfilling life. Yet many families remain invested in chasing after narrow measures of academic success.

The contradiction persists because while parents see the value of less academic pressure, opting out individually still feels risky in a system where success is equated with visible achievement within a tight and well-defined hierarchy.

As long as this remains, softening one metric risks a familiar paradox. The implicit message becomes that grades still matter, but are no longer enough. Students will feel compelled to compete harder for leadership

awards and sports medals, just to stand out. The academic race simply spills across more lanes.

What needs to change, therefore, is not only how we assess children but how we understand success itself.

Cultural shifts do not happen simply because someone makes a compelling argument. They happen when the old ways of seeing stop explaining what people repeatedly experience. When belief and reality diverge often enough, people are forced to revise how they see the world.

We have seen this process at work before.

Long-standing beliefs about who could do certain kinds of work, particularly along gender lines, did not change just because societies suddenly became more enlightened.

They changed because reality kept contradicting the script. Women's sustained presence and success in roles once deemed unsuitable – from skilled manufacturing to professional and technical work – gradually made old assumptions untenable, forcing a rewriting of the gender script.

A key insight is that the definition of success is itself a social construct we have invented.

CATALYSTS FOR A CULTURAL SHIFT

In modern society, success is often measured by what we own. In Singapore, this is commonly summed up as the "5Cs". But this reflects only what society chooses to value, not what truly matters in a life.

On this front, Gen Zs are already charting lives that extend beyond the 5Cs towards broader measures of quality of life.

Material conditions still matter to be sure. But they are no longer seen as sufficient. The aspiration is not to reject success, but to define it more fully to encompass well-being.

There is no reason success should be confined to material gain. Why should kindness, solidarity, contentment or mastery of a skill – even one dismissed as "low-skilled" – or being at peace with oneself, count for less than visible achievement?

Acting with consideration for others, for instance, is rarely treated as a marker of success, while visible achievement is celebrated, even if it came at a cost to someone else.

We suggest three kinds of experiences that can bring about a cultural shift.

First, when someone you respect thrives despite not having "won" the race early on.

Many of us might know

someone who was never top of the class or part of an elite group, but who grew into a competent, respected and fulfilled adult.

These stories of late bloomers should be shared widely and celebrated. Normalising such narratives helps us see ability not as a fixed trait revealed in childhood, but as something that evolves over time, in different ways, at different speeds.

Recent changes in the gifted education programme reflect this shift. Moving away from a one-off selection process towards school-based enrichment, with opportunities for entry at multiple points, acknowledges that potential can emerge later and should not be locked in early.

By renewing access rather than granting it permanently, the system places greater emphasis on growth than on precocity.

As similar patterns take hold across schools, workplaces and institutions, the assumed link between early academic success and future success is gradually challenged.

When people repeatedly encounter capable, respected adults who did not excel early, the old story weakens and eventually loses its hold.

Second, when you notice more high achievers choosing paths that do not maximise status.

A powerful and persuasive mismatch occurs when people see individuals with stellar academic records choosing directions not conventionally associated with prestige.

Think of people pursuing excellence in a trade, a craft or a skill, such as urban farming, genealogy or photography, which may not be in line with traditional educational achievements, but which require hours of practice and fine-tuning.

This means that students need exposure to a wide variety of co-curricular activities, and access to recreational tiers with no need to pass a selection trial.

Specialisation at earlier ages should be de-emphasised in favour of more opportunities to roam and explore, to learn something for its own sake, rather than to get a leg-up on the academic race.

Independence, flexibility and adaptability are needed more than ever, especially in an era of industrial turbulence, where business models are ever-evolving and sticking to traditional forms of learning no longer guarantees career success.

Multiplicity of pathways softens the assumption that the purpose of academic success is always to ascend the same one hierarchy. They show that achievement can



Parenting is increasingly experienced as a high-stakes project with timelines, milestones and strong expectations. What needs to change is not only how we assess children but how we understand success itself, say the writers. ST FILE PHOTO

lead to many kinds of meaningful lives.

For all that to work, we need the third – and most powerful experience – seeing and treating

people with dignity regardless of class or status.

Schools already have a powerful tool in Character and Citizenship Education, which helps the next generation acquire the ethical reasoning skills they need to introspect and grapple with the meaning and purpose of achievement, and to develop concepts of success that are more community-oriented than self-oriented.

What is needed is more curriculum emphasis and

adequate time to teach these concepts and values, and to count them as equally esteemed measures of success.

These skills allow students to put their studies in perspective, not just as a mechanical means to success, but as an opportunity to gain abilities beyond the classroom that will ready them for navigating human relationships and life itself.

Here, not just schools but all of society has a role to play. When workplaces, institutions and

communities treat individuals with respect, regardless of credentials, something shifts internally.

Change the environment, and minds gradually follow in order to stay consistent with lived experience. It gradually changes what the eye sees, until the brain updates how it interprets the world.

Such profound and broad-based changes are difficult to push and will be slow. But they are necessary if Singapore is to be a

place where people can raise children with confidence and care.

This requires letting go of a single, unforgiving measure of success, and broadening our understanding of what counts as a good life.

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