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Promoting intergenerational understanding between the young and old: the case of Singapore

Introduction

Ask a youth what comes to your mind when you think of the old and young generations, chances are the term 'generation gap' will be one common association. There is little doubt that generational segregation has increasingly become a norm in today's modern industrialized societies. The social structuring of age has contributed to an extent the gap among generations. One important dimension of age segregation is 'institutional age segregation' where different age groups are isolated from the socially constructed division according to chronological age, such as the channeling of the young into day care and schools and expecting seniors to live separately in age-homogenous retirement communities. Among the various social institutions, the family is probably the only institution that is 'truly age integrated' (Hagestad and Uhlenber, 2005, 2006), however, the advent of nuclear families, more instances of divorces, singlehood, migration and so forth have increasingly limited the capacity of the family to provide cross-age understanding and connections.

In fact, we can no more assume that strong bonding will certainly exist between the generations even when three generations live under the same roof. With different pace of life and activities, it is common for different generations to live in so-called 'separate islands of activity' even when they are living in the same household. Grandparents who are alone the whole day may feel isolated in a three-generational household; even when their children and grandchildren are at home in the evening, they are likely to be tucked away in their own rooms facing their own TVs and computer screens.

Age segregation has various undesirable consequences, besides producing ageism which leads to the discrimination of young people against the old, it also reinforces the negative stereotype of the young among the old. Further more, social support network within the family as well as society is expected to weaken when horizontal connections between the same age peers are not enriched and extended by vertical connections across different ages. As the intergenerational equity conflicts of the 1980s and the 1990s in the U.S. have shown, generation gap threatens social cohesion and will lead to tensions emphasizing competition of the generations for limited resources and the fear of an intergenerational war. The gulf between the generations fear deepening with changing social patterns and demographic trends and imply an urgent need for deliberate program and policy efforts to address the disengagements of the generations.

How then, can intergenerational understanding be promoted to bridge the generation gap and enhance generational re-engagement in the family, community and the wider society? The concept of intergenerational programs as deliberate attempts to connect the old and young through program activities have shown to produce desirable outcome and increasingly recognized as an effective tool to close the generation gap (Newman et.al., 1997). This paper will discuss issues of intergenerational understanding and dialogue through the intergenerational initiatives with a focus on Singapore - an economically advanced city-state located in Southeast Asia confronted with rapid demographic transition and significant changes in household and social patterns. With a family-centric policy, the national and community efforts to promote intergenerational connection in Singapore show relevance for the discussion of policies and practice in the area. In the following, I will begin with a brief discussion on changing family trends in Singapore before moving on to delineate the development of efforts to promote intergenerational understanding on the national level. Then a discussion of some of the intergenerational initiatives from the educational institutions will follow before the paper concludes with policy recommendations for mutual understanding across generations on the local and national levels.

Changing family trends in Singapore

As a country with strong emphasis on the family as the basic building block of society and the family as the first line of care and support for its members, families in Singapore remain strong, with 96% of those surveyed agreeing that they have a closely-knitted family [i] . However, demographic and social changes are affecting family trends in Singapore. Although Singapore has expanded its population rapidly to 5 million in 2010, up from 4 million in 2000, much of the growth has occurred due to migration influx. Like most advanced countries and economically advancing nations, Singapore is also faced with aging demography attributed by an increase in longevity and a drastic fall in birth rate. Singapore is one of the countries with the fastest rate of aging, while the proportion of those 65 years and above reached 8 percent only in 1998, it is expected to increase to about 19 percent by 2030, recording a phenomenal growth rate of 3.1 percent(DOS 2002). In 2010, as life expectancy has risen to a high of 83.7 for female and 79 for male, birth rate has fallen to a new low of 1.16[ii]. Delay in marriages and a rise in singlehood continue to be two important factors affecting birth rate; with the percentage of Singaporeans remaining single between 40-44 years old rising from 11% in 1990 to 17% in 2005 for men and 10% to 15% for women.

The changing demographic trends have intersected with changes in household and social patterns to affect family trends. With the norm in nuclear households, the number of members per household has shrunk from 4.9 in 1980 to 3.5 in 2010. An increasing proportion of households have members who are at least 65 years old, a rise from 21% in 2000 to 24% in 2010; and households comprising only of older members have increased

from 2.7% to 4.6% in the same period[iii] The trends in household size and composition imply that although the older generation has increased in number over the years, less younger members are living together with their grandparents, coupled with institutional segregation, the young are connecting less with the older population.

National efforts to promote intergenerational bonding

With the family as the 'only truly integrated' social institution, it is inevitable for efforts to promote intergenerational bonding to bring focus on intergenerational relations within the familial context. In Singapore, the setting up of the taskforce to promote grandparenting and intergenerational bonding in July 2002 by the Singapore Ministry of Community Development (now expanded as the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports) could be regarded as the starting point of state effort to promote intergenerational initiatives in Singapore. However, to be more concise, developments in initiatives to promote intergenerational bonding have begun earlier as evidenced through various ground-up initiatives, as well as state policies and measures in promoting and ensuring three-generational mutual support.

In the four years where the taskforce was in existence, it has played instrumental role in raising awareness of the needs and benefits of promoting intergenerational bonding in the family and community. With the aim of strengthening intergenerational relationships in the family, it has promoted the widespread celebration of Grandparents' Day slated on every forth Sunday of November dedicated to recognize the contributions of grandparents in the family. In 2005, it adopting the theme "Bonding Generations, Binding Families" in the National Family Week, and organized a Gen3 Fund Inter-School Competition as part of the activities of the National Family Week. The Gen3 Fund provided funding to the proposed intergenerational projects selected for implementation and judged according to the extent they had achieve the objectives of bonding generations and binding families. The taskforce also provided funding to promote intergenerational activities in the community and has attracted a diverse variety of intergenerational programs which promoted intergenerational understanding through learning and fun activities.

By 2005, the state appeared ready to move on to an expanded platform in intergenerational bonding as the taskforce was restructured and renamed as "G-Connect: Strengthening the intergenerational bond" in the hope to appeal to the wider younger generations in fostering generational cohesion. On the ground, the intergenerational perspective has gradually gained recognition across services, for example, RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) initiated the RSVP Intergenerational Strategy Committee in 2003 and gathered key leaders from children, youth and aging services to explore the intergenerational strategy in Singapore society, and the Association of Early Childhood Educators has also taken on the theme of developing an inclusive society during its 2005 annual seminar, in which the workshop to promote intergenerational programs in pre-school settings had received

enthusiastic attention. However, from 2006, state interest to further intergenerational initiatives on a wider platform changed to be
subsumed under the rubric of active aging, and avenues for funding of intergenerational initiatives instead became available largely under the newly set up Golden Opportunities Fund (GO! Fund) for the promoting of active aging. The fund came to be under the management of the Council for Third Age (C3A) when the Council was set up in 2007. For youth interested in initiating community projects that may be intergenerational in nature, funding support could be obtained from National Youth Council.

The C3A soon recognizes the significance of intergenerational solidarity in active aging and became the main co-organizer of the Fourth International Conference of the Consortium for Intergenerational Programs (ICIP) in April 2010. The conference opened up new areas of intergenerational practice by including the dimension of workplace - on top of family and community - in intergenerational solidarity; this further expanded the scope of the intergenerational perspective and alerted corporations to realize the need to seriously work towards an intergenerational workforce in an aging society. The ICIP4 conference in 2010 has set the stage for new ideas and scope in intergenerational initiatives in the country to challenge the generation gap.

<u>Generational bonding initiatives</u>

To effectively promote mutual understanding across generations, it is important to create opportunities for the generations to meet and interact. Generally, such initiatives are classified according to the direction of the service (McCrea and Smith, 1997:81) such as the following that exist in Singapore:

- initiatives from the young where youth/children provide a service for the elderly, such as school visits to old folks' homes to serve as volunteers and provide companionship to the older residents, and intergenerational projects for school children and youth to initiate understanding of the older generation.

- initiatives from older persons, such as projects by the RSVP to provide mentoring program to lactchkey children after school and host programs for young international students, and intergenerational table tennis program initiated by SAGE (Singapore Action Group of Elders) (Ng, 2005).

- age-integrated centers of which the two notable age-integrated centers in Singapore are the Ayer Rajah Day Care Centre in operation since 1986 offering child care and day services for elderly, and the Tampines 3-in-1 Family Center set up since 1995 where childcare, after school care and day care service for elderly are purposefully co-located within close proximity to enhance intergenerational contacts (Fong-Chong, 2003). The co-location of services is regarded as an effective model of intergenerational initiatives as

it creates opportunities for more spontaneous interaction resembling intergenerational relations within the family (Thang, 2001; Hayer, 2003).

Another way of classifications is to categorize them according to Kaplan's (2002) "depth of engagement scale. The framework consists of a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 refers to very limited contact, and usually no actual meeting of generations. The highest level of 7 is where intergenerational engagement takes places as a function of the way community settings are planned and established. Such a site, community or society reflects values of intergenerational reciprocity and interdependence through social norms, institutional policies and priorities (Kaplan, 2002). This framework helps towards evaluating whether a program has achieved its goal of age integration, this means that co-location of services are important as the first step towards creating opportunities for interaction, but the policy of the institutions, intergenerational programs organized for the centres and the values and goals set by the institutions will all need to be aligned for a deeper level of intergenerational engagement to occur.

Among the social institutions, educational institutions where young people spend most of their time outside the family are appropriate sites for intergenerational initiatives. However, compared to the U.S., Europe, Japan and other countries where examples of multi-purpose schools providing for both the young and the old are available, such attempts are considerably rare in Singapore schools, except for those which have connected with RSVP which organizes mentoring program as a part of after-school care. The following two examples of intergenerational initiatives from/for the youth are organized through educational institutions are examples of some existing efforts to promote cross-generational understanding.

Enhancing intergenerational understanding through Community Involvement Program (CIP)

For many youth, Community Involvement Program (CIP) established since 1978 byt he Ministry of Education aiming to nurture a sense of social responsibility and inculcate among the youth a volunteer spirit to better the lives of community is significant as a first introduction to community work and volunteering. Community service at old age institutions is one common activity, however, the extent to which intergenerational understanding is fostered through such activities depends on how well the activity is organized beforehand. Some have criticized the few numbers of required hours (only six hours a year) which may reinforce the negative stereotypes of old age instead of closing the generation gap.

Nevertheless, there are examples of CIP which have yielded desirable outcomes. One promising project is the SPHERE project, acronym for "Students, Singapore Pools and HDB Enriching and Reaching out to the Elderly", a community project began since 2002, supported by Singapore Pools[iv], the Housing Development Board (HDB) and the Ministry of

Education. The SPHERE project promotes intergenerational interaction with its objective of developing the volunteerism spirit among the younger generation through care for the elderly; encourages community bonding and to bridge the gap between young and old Singaporeans through social activities to promote better understanding and sharing of experience among them. Fifty four schools participated in the project by sending their students to organize community activities for older residents living in selected HDB rental apartments and Studio apartment blocks[v].

My observation of a SPHERE project in a rental apartment block for low income persons reveals the problems and potential of intergenerational interaction in the context of Singapore. First, as the student participants (14-15 years old) in the particular project were typical of youths from middle-class, most could not speak Chinese dialects and found difficulty in communicating with the older residents.[vi] Many also experienced "culture shock" during their first visit to the homes of low-income older residents and it was common for their first meeting to be happening silence without any conversation due to the language barriers. As the project requires each student to visit the older residents at least three times in the semester, after the first awkward meeting, students decided to organize activities for the group of residents instead. Consequently, through the fun activities organized for the residents and frequent contacts, friendship has developed among some of them even when they could not communicate fully. In addition to the fostering of cross-generational friendship and developing of the volunteer spirit, the intergenerational contact promotes intergenerational ties within the family as contacts with older persons have aroused the students' curiosity with their own grandparents and the willingness to communicate more with them. For many of these students, they might had little prior communication with their own grandparents nor any interest to know more about them, especially when most live in nuclear family environment.

Strengthening intergenerational family relationships through an intergenerational service learning module among college students

In the recent years, the universities in Singapore have begun to offer service learning as a module for students. This section examines through one such service learning elective module which adopted the intergenerational perspective. Through observations, small scale survey and analysis of the texts, including reflection journals and assignments, students revealed how they have changed in their understanding of the older generations as a result of the learning experience.

The module titled "Community Service and Social Action" offered in semester 1 (August to December) 2008 is an elective course offered at a local university popular among the students and is often fully subscribed. In emphasizing intergenerational service-learning in the course for that particular semester, I incorporated an examination of service learning in a life-course perspective and a study of the development and theoretical frameworks of the

intergenerational field internationally and locally. Field visits to a community service agency and an age-integrated institution were included as part of the learning outside the classroom. As part of the assessment, students had to complete a team project which included the development of a proposal of intergenerational project, project design, execution of the project, evaluation and a final report.

For the team projects, the 31 students ranging from 19 to 24 years old were divided into seven project groups. Participants in the team projects varied in their combination of the generations, the younger generations consisted of pre-school children, primary or secondary students in different projects; and older persons came from one of the following category depending on the projects: grandparents of the pre-school children, older persons from the community, residents from old-age home, healthy seniors from RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) or parents. Almost all the projects succeeded in promoting intergenerational understanding among the older and younger participants by the end of the project. An exceptionally successful project is one titled 'Three days with Molly' where a group of 8 twelve year old students spent three days with 5 older volunteers and embarked on common activities jointly, such as art and craft projects, a skit on student lives in the past and present, discussing about things both generations like as youth, and the students teaching the older volunteers to use online social media. All the participants came away with the satisfaction of mutual learning and understanding.

In terms of the impact of the project on intergenerational understanding and family relationships, the study shows the course to have influenced students to constantly reflect upon their familial relationships with their grandparents as well as their past experience in community work involving older persons. Many discovered with regrets that they had not noticed the significance of their grandparents in their own life, and had taken them for granted. They found the need for intergenerational relationship within the family to change for the better.

Some are more proactive, such as a Chinese female student who "began to develop ideas on how I may best overcome family barriers and on how to bind my family together in a more cohesive spirit. ".. I started to act out my ideas on family cohesiveness by embarking on a project to pen a book about my grandfather's life… this will allow me to be a medium in which I can transmit my grandfather's values and beliefs to the rest of my family and to our future generations. I am also compelled to be a more filial granddaughter." Another Chinese female student wrote that during the execution of the project "A day with Grans" where grandparents joined their grandchildren in daily kindergarten activities for a few days, she recalled the time when she was in kindergarten. Like many other children, she was looked after by her grandmother at that time but she found that even with that close contact, she was actually not so close to her. She realized the need for both generations to change the form of interaction, where the connection should not be limited to fulfilling daily needs, such as to define grandparents' roles as functional in feeding the grandchildren and brining her to

school, but they also the need to have fun together. The student's reflection upon her relationship with her grandmother highlighted the over reliance on grandparents for instrumental roles in Singapore families, while neglecting the fostering of relationships for deeper intergenerational understanding through other activities such as to have leisure and fun time together.

With the program, the students also found that they have changed to form more positive perceptions on older persons, and many felt a sense of victory over breaking their perceived distance with older persons through the field trip where they visited and interact with older residents living in an old-age home. One Chinese female student interacted with an older men and was delighted that although he seemed reluctant to talk at first, he soon opened up to tell her about his younger life, and even "began to share with me his favorite songs and movie stars." Another Chinese female student confessed that she was afraid to approach the older persons at first, "I felt reluctant to even just stand beside them." She finally picked up the courage to converse with them, and as she was able to speak the Cantonese dialect, she was soon chatting with older persons who could speak Cantonese easily and learnt about their life stories.

Students in the course shows that although they may have come to the course with little understanding and awareness of the older generations around them, intergenerational understanding could be fostered with opportunities to interact and awareness through learning about the older generations. Consequently, many felt that as a s result of the experience, they have 'discovered' the existence of the older generation around them, this includes a renewed interest about their own grandparents and the desire to understand them, a more realistic perception of old age, and an awareness on life course perspective, where the elderly represents picture of themselves in the future.

Conclusion: Summary discussion and Recommendations

As the case examples on intergenerational initiatives in educational setting have shown, for intergenerational dialogue to happen, it is crucial to create opportunities for intergenerational interaction. Recently, more intergenerational activities have been organized specifically to promote grandparent-grandchildren bonding, such as the inter-generational interest groups set up by the People's Association since 2008. These interest groups cater to the mutual interests of three generations, and thus far have included groups such as parings of grandparent-grandchildren in a team to cook and share recipes, and a family yoga club where grandparents learn yoga together with link parents and grandchildren (The Straits Times, 26 October 2009). The National Library Board's project to promote intergenerational understanding - consisting the "Letters from grandma and grandpa" and "Letters to my grandpa/grandma" invited entries of heartwarming letters to foster a better appreciation of each other. The selected letters were published into books with four languages[vii]. Although not all intergenerational initiatives may achieve the goal of intergenerational understanding

and dialogue, but the opportunities to connect coupled with deliberate efforts through good planning will bear positive outcome.

Even when such activities may not bring together their own grandparents, they play a role in prompting young people to re-think about their relationships with their grandparents and other older relatives, and encourage them to turn their attention to building family bonding and understanding. These intergenerational activities also show that in Singapore, although many young people could recount that they were taken care of by their grandparents usually before they entered primary school, a relatively common childcare arrangement with the norm of dual working couples, grandparents are emphasized for providing instrumental role in caring, bathing and providing food for their grandchildren, and to a lesser extent on communication between generations. The overwhelm focus on instrumental care may be due to the fact that this generation of grandparents are still lesser educated on the whole, many may still be speaking only in Chinese dialects (in the case of Chinese grandparents), they also reflect the need for families to create opportunities for intergenerational understanding.

In the recent years, in attempts to resolve the problem of language barriers faced in intergenerational interaction, there are already in place various initiatives in community services for senior volunteers who are bilingual in English/Mandarin and dialects to provide basic dialect training to youths from schools and institutions. Youths have also shown to express their creativity in exploring ways for mutual understanding, for examples, the annual Youth service– learning awards often have entries which feature intergenerational engagements as an objective.

The 2009 Gold Award under the Secondary level won by Raffles Institution featured creative use of the new media to bridge the generation gap where youth captured the true life stories of elderly on video clips, thereby promoting an in depth understanding on aging and aged from the eyes of youth[viii].

The following are some recommendations to promote intergenerational understanding on local/national levels:

- To include courses on understanding across the life course in school curriculum at all levels so as to increase awareness of the need for generational understanding and bonding among the youth.

- To create opportunities for intergenerational engagement through intergenerational initiatives that promotes mutual understanding. This includes encouraging schools to open up for interaction with other generations in the community, enhance the teachers' knowledge on connecting youth with other generations for intergenerational understanding through the incorporation of an intergenerational perspective in teachers' training, and include intergenetaional service learning in the curriculum.

- To create intergenerational interactive space in the public domain, such as to design playgrounds alongside exercising grounds for older adults so that different ends of generations have opportunity to meet in the community.

- To provide incentives for private spaces, such as retirement community, nursing homes, childcare centres to attract other generations to its compound. This may include building a children's library inside a retirement community, a playground in the open compound of nursing home, and regular visits from seniors clubs to childcare centres for concerts, joint handicraft activities and others. The older persons should be recognized for their potential in bridging the generations through their volunteer efforts, such as mentoring.

- Community services among youth to older generations should include presentations about youth culture and perceptions to enhance understanding of differences and similarities across age.

For intergenerational dialogue to flow more readily, we should work towards a holistic approach to promote an environment that the generations can integrate seamlessly. For example, there must be space conducive for engagements, design that integrate and not segregate different generations in the same space, and programs and policies that aim at breaking institutional isolation in favor of dialogues across the generations. These efforts should synergize and move in concerted direction towards an age-integrated society where intergenerational interaction is natural across the domains of family, community and the workplace.

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[i] *Unless otherwise stated, data cited in this section are taken from "State of the Family Report" published by Family Policy Unit, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports http://www.nfc.org.sg/pdf/State%20of%20the%20Family%20in%20Singapore.pdf (accessed 20 Feb 2011)*

[ii] *http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/keyind.html (accessed 20 Feb 2011)*

[iii] *Singapore Census 2010 finds senior population increasing. www.thegovmonitor.com/.../singapore-census-2010-finds-senior-population-increasing-46509.html (accessed 20 Feb 2011)*

[iv] *Singapore Pools is a legal lottery operator incorporated by the Singapore government in 1968. It sponsors community projects with surpluses from gaming operations (http://www.Singaporepools.com.sg) and has committed S$1 million to sponsor the SPHERE project (http://www.hdb.gov.sg).*

[v] *HDB (Housing Development Board) builds and manages the public housing in Singapore, which houses over 80% of the population. It has built six blocks of 30-year lease studio apartments for older persons 55 years and above. It also leases out rental units primarily to the low-income families.*

[vi] *In Singapore, the speak mandarin campaign started since 1978 has replaced different types of Chinese dialects with Mandarin Chinese. However, many older persons still speak their own Chinese dialects and experience difficulties in communication with the younger population who has grown up speaking only Mandarin Chinese.* [vii] *See http://www.dearsingapore.sg/?page_id=253*

[viii] *See http://www.nyc.gov.sg/sl/projects.htm*