How will Covid-19 shape the way children see Singapore in future?

By ADRIAN W J KUAH

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What will Singapore look like in the post-Covid-19 future, say in 2030, the author asks, noting that the young adults of 2030 are today's tweenagers, who will emerge from the crisis in different ways.

Whenever I read a report that is titled "The Future of X" — and "X" could be society, education, technology, food, whatever — I am reminded of the sci-fi writer William Gibson's pithy aphorism: "The future is already here; it's just not evenly distributed".

Covid-19 has plunged us into a world of profound, persistent and perhaps even irreducible uncertainty. The disruptions to all aspects of our existence have forced us to revisit all the assumptions we make for our long-term future, even as it has radically altered our lived everyday experiences.

The abbreviations WFH and HBL are part of our daily vocabulary and require no explication, and "Zoom" is no longer just an onomatopoeia.

To the extent that Covid-19 is an existential crisis, we should now all be asking existential questions of the broadest kind. What will Singapore look like in this post-normal future and say, in 2030? Returning to the Gibson quote, perhaps the future is present in the present, in embryonic form.

The young adults of 2030 are today's tweenagers, give or take. These boys and girls have just spent the better part of the last few months locked down at home, sheltering in place, trying to survive a pandemic.

For months on end, they have endured isolation and anxiety. They have missed the physical human contact of friends and loved ones beyond their immediate families. Because many of them are "digital natives" and omnipresent on social media, they have tracked the "daily Covid-19" numbers.

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An existential crisis told in numbers. Many of them did so at first with trepidation and even fear, and now, with the inevitable de-sensitisation that comes with being inundated with those numbers, with a resigned numbness.

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“What are the numbers like today, Daddy?” My kids asked me that every night, in the early days of the pandemic. Without fail, every night.

But then they stopped asking. Covid-19 simply became an unremarkable part of the “new normal”.

During the lockdown, many of them did not eat out in a restaurant, food court, or hawker centre. They did not go out shopping in a mall or watch a movie in the cinema.

I don’t suppose many of them have bought a new toy recently. Some might have been upset by all this deprivation, assuming they were able to enjoy these things in the first place.

But some of them, perhaps, came to a realisation that they can do without. While some suffered the claustrophobia and immobility of the lockdown, maybe others came to revel in the slower, simpler pace of life.

Some will wonder, if Covid-19 broke the world, brought economies to a standstill, then how come the world looked even more beautiful. Bluer skies. Fresher air. Wild flowers. The spectacular sunrises and sunsets.

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These children will emerge from the Covid-19 crisis in different ways. Some will see their parents lose their jobs, perhaps never to find another. They will see up close and personal the excesses, imbalances and unfairness inherent in the system.

For example, through Zoom classes, they literally looked into the private world of their friends’ homes, and saw, in equal measures, luxury and deprivation, wholeness and brokenness.

For some of them, they learned gratitude and empathy. For others, bitterness and envy. For most of them, a realisation of disparity.

As they grow up, these boys and girls will see the connections between the pandemic, our privileging of the “economic” over other issues, the environmental crisis, and injustices suffered by so-called essential workers who are treated as anything but, and the indispensable strangers in our midst, the migrant workers.

Certainly not all of these children, but some, will go on to ask if there might be a better scheme of things. They will test our usual way of explaining away these things, with the well-practised world-weary shrug that says: “Well, what can we do? It is what it is.”

For some, such answers no longer suffice. I already get this sense from speaking to today’s undergraduates, and there is good reason to believe that their juniors will be more critical.

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As they grow up, and as the crises come fast and furious, some might come to realise that, to a large extent, these crises are of our own making.

These crises — economic, climate, health, and others — are the result of choices made that reflect a particular values system. Ours.

Not all, but enough of them might start to question if our ways are necessarily the ones they would want to adopt.

If that were to occur, then this questioning of the established order of things should be seen as the successful culmination of policy initiatives to inculcate critical thinking in our students that can be traced back to 1997’s “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” initiative.

And yet this questioning often proves paradoxically inconvenient for the status quo.

In his 1971 lecture “The Order of Discourse”, the philosopher Michel Foucault said: “Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry.”

More often than not, the system tilts towards the former rather than the latter.

But if we are truly living in this time of maximum uncertainty, and where the tried and tested methods might no longer work, then in the spirit of humility and fallibilism, we should acknowledge that the solutions to these looming challenges may come from this inconvenient quarter.

If you remember the song by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, “Teach Your Children”, there is a verse that was a twist on the song title:

“And you of tender years

Can't know the fears

That your elders grew by

And so please help them with your youth

They seek the truth before they can die

Teach your parents well

Their children's hell will slowly go by

And feed them on your dreams

The one they pick, (is) the one you'll know by”

Not only is it unclear whether we, the proverbial adults in the room, can teach our children, but more importantly, I wonder what they will teach us.

And would we, who are still in positions of authority and power, be willing to learn?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr Adrian W J Kuah is director of Futures Office, National University of Singapore. He is a father of three boys aged nine to 16. This is his personal comment.

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