

# What Top Social Entrepreneurs Are Telling Us: Early Changemaking Stays with You for a Lifetime

Claire Fallender & Ross Hall 30 November 2018

## Introduction

Ashoka Fellow Kritaya Sreesunpagit of Thailand started her first social change initiative in high school, convincing her peers to help a community build a new reservoir.

Ashoka Fellow Christoph Schmitz of Germany started his first social business at 12, growing Christmas trees on a plot of his family farm to benefit the local orphanage.

Kritaya and Christoph are just two of nearly half of Ashoka's leading social entrepreneurs worldwide who knew they were changemakers before the age of 21. Their stories emerge from the 2018 Global Fellows Study which underscores a key finding: Over Ashoka's 40-year history of finding and investing in the world's top social entrepreneurs, there is a clear pattern of changemakers taking the lead from an early age.

In fact, the majority of Ashoka Fellows (65 percent) started their changemaking journey by joining someone else's social change efforts before the age of 21. What's more, 48 percent of Fellows actually started and led their

own initiatives in their teenage years. This finding lies at the heart of Ashoka's efforts to share stories of successful business and social entrepreneurs as well as young changemakers in their teens who "lead young" for the good of all. As we explore the Fellows' responses in this article in more depth, we begin to see why the importance of supporting young changemaking -- indeed, the mantra *LeadYoung* -- may serve as the guiding principle for anyone who influences the education and development of young people.

## **The New Game**

Why is young changemaking significant? Imagine the following scenario: you grew up playing baseball. For years you practiced batting, throwing the ball, and catching with a glove. You show up to the field one day to play and instead of baseball, there is an entirely different game going on. They are playing soccer. There are no bats, no touching the ball with your hands, and a whole lot of running. The team dynamics are different. The skills needed are different. Even the pace of the game has quickened. If you don't know the rules of the new game or if you have never practiced the skills you need, you are certainly going to be disruptive to the other players on the field -- and will most probably be taken out of the game.

This is what a large portion of people around the world are feeling today: they've woken up and the game has changed. Our world is drastically different from the world

of our parents and grandparents. It is no longer a world of repetition where you learned a skill, trade, or profession and repeated it over and over. Instead, the rate of change and the degree and extent of interconnection are increasing exponentially. According to a report published in 2017 by Dell Technologies, 85 percent of jobs in 2030 haven't been invented yet.<sup>1</sup>

So how are we preparing young people for this new game, which is defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and hyper-connectivity?

Problematically, our institutions are still largely rooted in the past. Schools continue to focus on literacy and numeracy, academic attainment, and employability as the primary indicators of "success." Policies, curricula, assessments, teacher training, and many other systemic mechanisms often reinforce this highly individualistic and narrowly economic focus. This needs to change. Schools and the wider education system need to find a new definition of success -- a definition that is centrally about empowering young people as empathic changemakers, who live for the common good. New policies, assessments, teacher training programs, and other systemic mechanisms will be vital, but just as important is the need to change mindsets.

We need to pay attention to make sure that every young person becomes equipped and inclined not only to *adapt* to change, but to create *positive* change. Without this

attention, we risk the alternative: feeding the tendency in the face of uncertainty toward fear and anger that is dividing our societies. Instead, once a young person has become empathic, identified a problem they care about, created a solution, built a team, and changed their world, they will have the confidence to be a changemaker again and again.

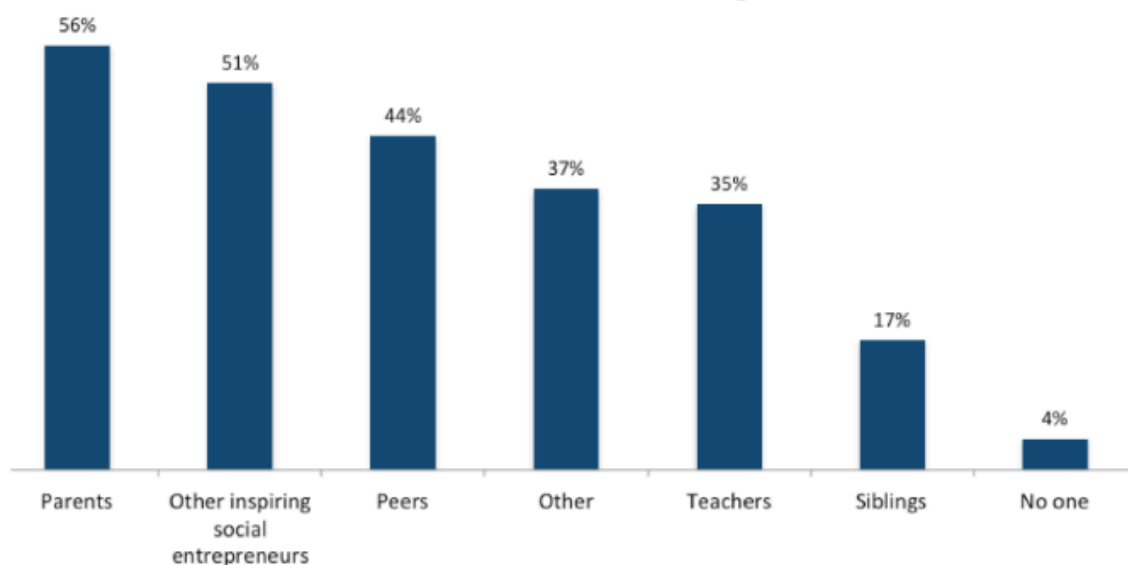
Ashoka Fellows have been quietly leading this movement to empower people as changemakers for nearly 40 years, creating pathways for young people to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that are essential to living for the common good and to making our new world a better world. Ashoka Fellows spread their ideas for solving the most difficult social problems in their societies by getting that solution into the hands of as many people as possible. This includes young people.

When we look at *how* to support young changemaking by building a society that supports young people to practice changemaking at an early age, we look to Ashoka Fellows -- both their own childhood experiences and their work today with young people -- to see how it's done. All Ashoka Fellows go through a rigorous selection process that demonstrates their mastery of key changemaking skills (like empathy and leadership). What insights can we learn from the Global Fellows Survey about these Fellows' lead young experiences that could determine best practices and insights for all young people?

# Social Entrepreneurs Lead Young

Ashoka's Global Fellow Survey provides us with key insights around providing young people with the space and support to thrive in a world defined by change. We asked all Ashoka Fellows what people/groups were most influential in supporting their development as a person who creates social change. The top influences were parents, other social entrepreneurs, peers, and teachers (See **Table 1** for breakdown). Perhaps not surprisingly, among the Fellows reporting leading change at an early age (i.e. starting their own social change initiative before the age of 21), the influence of parents (67 percent) and teachers (40 percent) was most prominent.

Which people/groups were most influential in supporting your development as a person who creates social change?



N = 800

We also asked a subset of Fellows to share more about their early childhood experiences in qualitative interviews.

The following common patterns emerged across Fellows from diverse backgrounds who were “leading young.” First, home environment was most important in terms of being encouraged to question the “status quo” and take creative action to solve problems around them. Second, respondents who “led young” as changemakers were encouraged early to take on leadership roles at school and with other organizations. Thirdly, Fellows were exposed to a diversity of people, cultures, and experiences.

While there is a need for future studies to compare this rate of young changemaking to other professional groups, the results show an important pattern that, despite some regional variations ([see Article by Irene Wu](#)) holds true across geographies, gender, and culture: early changemaking can lead to a lifetime of leading and adapting to change. Moreover, these leading social entrepreneurs have lessons for how to help every young person practice changemaking as a central experience of growing up.

## **Social Entrepreneurs Empower Others to Lead Young**

Beyond leading young themselves, an important pattern across Ashoka Fellows is that they put young people in charge as a way to create positive social and environmental change. According to the 2018 Ashoka Global Fellow Survey, of the Ashoka Fellows working with

young people, 77 percent reported that they put them in charge of leading initiatives within their own organizations. According to one Fellow, Kritaya Sreesunpagit, of Thailand, the reason for giving young people the experience of starting their own social innovations is precisely because early changemaking experiences often create a pattern -- and direct a pathway -- of changemaking for life. "It really forms who you are," says Sreesunpagit. "What you are exposed to during those years will form how you lead your life afterwards."

What's more, an even higher percentage of Fellows, 84 percent globally, reported encouraging young people (defined as 0 to 18) to create independent initiatives to spread and scale the Fellows' work. The reasons for this are interesting. While helping young people benefit directly from the experience, many respondents cited the idea that young people add significant value to the Fellow's own strategy. Some Fellows noted that young people inject new perspectives into their work where adults may be limited in their thinking. Others saw the leadership of young people in their organization to create their own initiatives as a key way to ensure the sustainability of their idea for the future.

## **How to Nurture Changemaking**

So what does this data show us about how to foster and support young changemaking? The following are some recommendations drawn from the the qualitative evidence

about the key influences in the lives of the Fellows that led them to pursue social change work.

***Engage parents to create a home environment that encourages questioning, debate, creativity, and positive action***

Growing up, Fellows' home environments were the most important factor in their empowerment as changemakers. Usually, the influence of one or both parents, or a close grandparent/aunt/uncle, gave the Fellow the support and encouragement they needed to take risks and start something they cared about. Fellows told us that their families encouraged them to question the status quo, to debate, and to experience the freedom of being creative. Fellows often mentioned their parent's own career or lived experience (sometimes as educators, psychologists, or as members of marginalized groups, like refugees) as influencing their focus on social impact and in developing a "can do" entrepreneurial mindset. Fellows also specifically mentioned their family's emotional support as a significant factor in their development as a changemaker.

***Trust and encourage young people to take responsibility and leadership roles***

Fellows were encouraged by their families and teachers to join other people's initiatives at a young age. This gave them opportunities to explore their passions and to take

responsibility and leadership roles. Contributing to other peoples' initiatives gave them the opportunity to practice building teams and leading in a way that empowers others.

***Increase exposure to individuals, communities, cultures and ideas that are different from their own***

The third most common experience that Fellows said was important for leading young was exposure to individuals, communities, cultures, and ideas that were very different from their own. Some of these experiences involved trips or families moving to a new country that turned the Fellow into an "outsider" in their new environment. Fellows explained that this experience of being an outsider enabled them to see social structures and problems more clearly, and to gain empathy for populations they previously had not encountered.

## **Conclusion**

In surveying some of the world's leading social entrepreneurs we see critical insights for everyone around the world involved in supporting young people especially parents and those responsible for designing institutions and systems addressing their needs. The implications of these insights from leading social entrepreneurs seem especially relevant when we consider the exponential rate of change across all disciplines and fields. First, for individuals to thrive, they must become empowered to

create positive change in service of the public good. And, for this empowerment to take place young people need powerful learning experiences through which they become empathic, face up to the world's problems, find their purpose, take the lead, and work with others in creatively solving those problems. Given the challenges we face locally and globally, we believe there is nothing more urgent for the future.

To address this urgency, Ashoka is currently investing in a set of strategic initiatives -- called "4 Drivers for Mindset Shift" -- that draw out these insights and make them tangible for any organization or group to engage with and be part of the broader Everyone a Changemaker movement.

First, Ashoka has recently begun to do exactly what 84 percent of its Fellows working with young people have done: put young people in charge of independent initiatives to help spread their work. The Ashoka Young Changemakers program identifies top young changemakers in their teens who not only have started their own ventures and are empowering other young people as changemakers but who have the desire and capacity to co-lead the movement for an Everyone a Changemaker world.

Next, we are sharing what we call LeadYoung stories that is, stories of social entrepreneurs, young changemakers, and other successful system leaders that provide clear

examples, role models, and pathways of young changemaking with the aim of establishing the young changemaker mindset as the new norm.

To support this movement, Ashoka is prototyping a third "driver" -- a Peer-to-Peer mechanism for young changemakers to connect and support one another. Additionally, in a concerted effort to make this work visible to organizations and leaders from all sectors and industries, Ashoka has also developed the YourKids program, a workshop model that provides a mindset-changing experience for adults that helps bring to life and personalizes the power and urgency of the Everyone a Changemaker vision.

The insights from Ashoka Fellows have always guided Ashoka's work. But with this urgency to change mindsets about changemaking and growing up, the learnings from Fellows about leading young become even more relevant and critical in driving our collective impact towards a better world.

## **Works Cited**

<sup>1</sup> "Emerging Technologies' Impact on Society and Work in 2030." *Dell Technologies and Institute for the Future* (2017).

[www.delltechnologies.com/content/dam/delltechnologies/](http://www.delltechnologies.com/content/dam/delltechnologies/)

## **Author bios**

**Claire Fallender** is the Director of Global LeadYoung Initiative at Ashoka. Claire leads Ashoka's Global LeadYoung Initiative, a storytelling campaign that creates awareness and social demand for the new definition of what constitutes success in growing up -- every teen knowing they are a changemaker -- and the framework for getting there. In this role, Claire draws from her expertise in social entrepreneurship to build and cultivate teams, establish strategic partnerships, and develop key content for Ashoka's framework change efforts around young people. Previously, Claire served as Director for Global Venture and Fellowship, Ashoka's largest program that identifies and supports leading social entrepreneurs around the world. Claire holds a Master of Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University and a B.A. from Yale College.

**Ross Hall** is a Leadership Group Member of the Europe Youth Years at Ashoka. Ross has founded and grown more than 20 businesses around the world. Over the past eight years, he has focused his energy on building a groundbreaking education program that aims to empower and incline young people to be changemakers -- to make a better world. The Better World program aims to develop a sophisticated understanding of what quality of life actually is -- and a deep knowledge of our inner powers that most determine our quality of life. The program is currently live with 500,000 children in Zimbabwe and Tanzania, and is now being extended to Ghana, the UK,

and Mexico. This grew out of earlier projects that Ross conceived and led for Pearson (under the banner of Education for Economic and Social Development), which involved ministries, employers, and educators evaluating and improving the effectiveness of education systems, institutions, and programs around the world.