

Don't set up young people to expect failure — they need an environment where disaster is not the default

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As we move into the traditional season of graduations and the start of new summer jobs, it is easy to focus on all that has been lost for young people today. Coverage of COVID-19's impact on youth employment paints a bleak picture, with references to the "Class of COVID" and characterizations of a "lost generation."

On their own, the risks of economic "scarring," disrupted academic progress and mental health crises are daunting. Add to these the lengthy time periods projected for a fulsome generational recovery, and it's no surprise that young people feel they are facing seemingly insurmountable challenges.

But this focus on despair without the presence of hope and accompanying opportunities does an enormous disservice to our youth.

Young people need an environment where career disaster is not the default — one where everyone is as invested in assisting students into supportive paths as they are in sharing predictions of doom.

When we tell a career story for youth that leaves out hope, potential and the role each young adult can play in choosing their own path to success, we prescribe the lens through which they will see the world. It's time young people and those who worry about them see how things just might be OK. In fact, their future can be brilliant.

The number of work-integrated learning opportunities available to post-secondary students in Canada — a key tool in young people's career exploration and literacy — is on the rise, as are affordable, job-related micro-credential programs. The latest federal budget pledged \$5.7 billion over the next five years to help young people access education and find jobs. Projections indicate this can create 215,000 new job skills development and work opportunities, including 85,000 internships to help young innovators succeed while supporting businesses of all sizes.

These are but a few examples of investments in young people's futures that create hope and counterbalance the dread that many have been experiencing through the pandemic. However, there is a gap in awareness. Outside of the career development sector, many are unaware of these initiatives and career options.

Empowering young people's agency to explore their career options in the world of work leads to a greater likelihood of positive employment and better career outcomes in adulthood. Learning doesn't only happen in the classroom, and young people are eager to be active in their own career learning while also earning an income.

We know that intentional career development can have positive effects on the mental well-being of young people. In "Strengthening Mental Health Through Effective Career Development," authors Dave E. Redekopp and Michael Huston highlight that "if optimism is 'tomorrow will be a better day,' hope is 'I'll be fine no matter what tomorrow brings.'" Helping young people believe "I can do that" regarding upcoming, unknown tasks builds hope-based resilience and adaptability, which are especially important in times of heightened disruption and uncertainty.

At Challenge Factory, we reap many benefits from being a work-integrated learning employer. Our students inject energy, enthusiasm and valuable perspectives into our projects and activities. Their questions also promote an environment of self-reflection and strategic thinking about how we do our work and how we can continue improving.

We can't shy away from the challenges facing young people in the wake of the pandemic. However, we do young people an equal disservice when we model only defeatism.

Rather than sensationalizing the dire straits of the "Class of COVID," let's focus on helping students, parents and other key advisers know where to find supports. Let's ensure business leaders, local communities and educational systems foster new opportunities and better awareness of employment and work possibilities. Let's base our predictions on relevant, timely labour market information, as well as concrete learning about career exploration, readiness and ownership.

Even in adversity, we can make the choice to fall or rise.

Let's not predetermine how bad the future will be for our kids. Let's help young people rise to meet this moment. Let's help them shape a future where they will thrive.

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