

EO Files (March 2011)

“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief”

Different but Equal

Our young people need to know that the Hong Kong dream is possible for all, whatever their ethnic background.

Hong Kong has proudly claimed itself to be “Asia’s World City” – a nod, in part, to our racially diverse population. Not long ago, I had the opportunity to chat to a few bright and eager ethnic minority girls at an event in Yuen Long. They were fine examples of a world citizen: multi-lingual and multi-cultural. Speaking in Cantonese, they talked about their efforts to integrate into Hong Kong society and their career aspirations. Despite their efforts, they wondered aloud if they could get into the academic disciplines of choice at university, since their written Chinese is not strong. Would they ever be able to build a career in this City, they asked.

The future of our young people is an issue that concerns the entire community. We as a society must do more to ensure that our young people, regardless of their different backgrounds, have equal opportunities to pursue their dreams. For ethnic minority youths, the problem is made more difficult by cultural differences and lingering prejudices. In a 2009 Government survey, almost one in four local respondents, almost all Chinese, said offering a job to qualified applicants of South Asian and Middle Eastern descent was unacceptable. Nearly half do not think it acceptable to send their children to a school where the majority of students are South Asian, Middle-Eastern, or African.

In difficult times, the ethnic minority community is also more affected. South Asian men, according to a 2009 survey by the Hong Kong Christian

Service, were particularly hard hit by the most recent financial crisis. Unemployment rates rose, while those who kept their jobs put up with worse conditions and less pay.

Given this scenario, it is no wonder that a young man chillingly told his interviewer during a recent TV programme on ethnic minorities, “Do not talk to me about aspirations.”

Mother Teresa once said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

As one community, we must do more to rekindle the hope of these youths, our young people. And the government must lead the charge to level the playing field.

To begin with, the government should review the civil service’s language proficiency requirement and its implementation across different departments. Many departments still oblige applicants to take additional written test in Chinese above the basic entry requirement. Such extra conditions put ethnic minority applicants at a distinct disadvantage.

I have spoken to a number of South Asian youngsters who harbor ambitions to become a member of Hong Kong’s disciplined forces. The cultural background and extra language skills they can offer would be invaluable. The government has pledged its commitment to respect diversity, and I know some bureaus and departments are proactively seeking solutions. I wish they would let ethnic minority youngsters know that their dream of serving their home city is not a false hope. It would be a crucial example to set for the rest of Hong Kong.

We must learn to embrace our differences and understand that diversity fosters innovation and creativity – the keys to Hong Kong’s progress. Too often, we remain mired in unfair stereotypes. Such biases only reinforce

the arbitrary segregation of this city's many ethnic parts, and prevent us from coming together as a whole.

In truth, we share a common experience: most of us are immigrants ourselves, or children of immigrants, who came in search of a better future. Despite our differences, we all experience struggles and hardships in pursuing our dreams. In this sense, we are one.

As one, we must encourage the youths of Hong Kong to believe that with hard work, the Hong Kong Dream is possible. With this goal in mind, the Equal Opportunities Commission launched a new mentorship programme, called "Uniquely Me", in December last year for ethnic minority young people. The programme aims to empower them to break down stereotypes, pursue their aspirations and embrace their individuality.

We need to ensure that everyone, irrespective of ethnic background, has a voice and equal access to services and support. To this end, the EOC has set up a Working Group, spearheaded by our Commission Members, to identify and facilitate targeted responses to issues faced by the ethnic minorities, especially on education opportunities and related issues.

In addition, those who face discrimination due to their race in the areas protected by the Race Discrimination Ordinance (RDO) are urged to seek redress through the EOC by filing a complaint.

American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place."

Those girls from Yuen Long and many others like them deserve hopes and dreams, and they want to believe that those hopes and dreams are

possible in this great city. It is up to all of us to do better to make sure that everyone has a future they can aspire to.

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(Note: This article was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 21 March 2011.)