

EO Files (May 2013)

"THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief"

Equal Chance

York Chow says while Hong Kong may not be the world's most racist society, prejudice - often at a subconscious level - still pervades the city, and the problem needs to be tackled at all levels

Recently, there has been much media coverage over the results of the global World Values Survey, which seemed to indicate that seven out of 10 Hongkongers do not wish to live next to someone of a different race. For a few days, it appeared that Hong Kong was the most racially intolerant of all the places surveyed.

It has now been revealed that the data was wrong; in fact, the figure for Hongkongers should have been around 27 per cent. While the corrected result is undoubtedly better, we nevertheless must contend with the fact that more than a quarter of respondents still said they do not want a neighbour of a different race. For "Asia's world city", this figure is unacceptably high.

When I was in my local high school some 50 years ago, we had Indians, Pakistanis, Portuguese, Malaysians and Thais as classmates. We all learned Chinese together, and some even studied it as their major at university. They became senior civil servants, executives and professionals. We valued the multicultural school environment, helped each other, played in the same sports teams and enjoyed lasting friendships. Ethnic acceptance and respect was natural and spontaneous.

Unfortunately, surveys and studies by the Equal Opportunities Commission, the government and other organisations in recent years still point to the existence of bias against our ethnic minorities and the prevalence of racial discrimination. In a survey last year by Hong Kong Unison, a non-governmental organisation, fewer than half of the respondents said they accepted Africans, Nepalis,

Pakistanis, Filipinos and Indians in their personal lives, including as friends or spouses for themselves and their children.

While such prejudicial attitudes may be subconscious, they can manifest themselves in unequal treatment in various areas of daily life. For instance, in the 2009 Thematic Household Survey on Racial Acceptance, commissioned by the EOC and conducted by the Census and Statistics Department, approximately one in three respondents found it unacceptable to lease premises to an African, South Asian or Middle Eastern tenant.

Since the Race Discrimination Ordinance came into effect in 2009, nearly three-quarters of the complaints handled by the EOC under this law have been unrelated to employment; most were about access to goods, facilities and services. Last year, 55 per cent of respondents in a survey by Time Out said they had witnessed or experienced racism in admission to facilities, services, restaurants or shops.

In addition, many people from ethnic minorities still face serious systemic barriers to equal opportunity in areas such as education and employment. In 2011, the EOC released the report of our Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities, which describes how the mainstream education system has failed the majority of ethnic minority students, particularly in supporting them to master Chinese when the language is not spoken at home.

This issue was also highlighted in March by the UN Human Rights Committee in its concluding observations on Hong Kong's third report in light of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It noted its concern that "ethnic minorities are underrepresented in higher education and that no official education policy for teaching Chinese as a second language for non-Chinese-speaking students with an immigrant background in Hong Kong has been adopted".

These obstacles have devastating implications for generations of ethnic minorities and their ability to pursue their aspirations. By not

taking prompt action to ensure equal opportunities in education, the government is damaging ethnic minority children's prospects over their entire lifetime. Many who received insufficient support in learning Chinese during their school years now find themselves unable to meet the Chinese-language requirement for various jobs and are relegated to low-pay work.

In turn, this contributes to a perpetuation of a cycle of poverty and poses a hurdle to social integration. And despite recent moves by the Civil Service Bureau to open up government job opportunities for ethnic minority applicants, a substantial number still struggle to access them.

In fact, thus far, the solutions offered by the government have been piecemeal and largely reactive. What we need is a multi-pronged, holistic approach to a systemic problem. The government must take the lead to address the issue with conviction, based on the recognition that true equality may require accommodative measures to level the playing field.

A starting point must be the introduction of an alternative standardised Chinese-language curriculum and assessment framework for non-Chinese-speaking students to enable them to compete more fairly against native speakers. The Education Bureau should also review its policy of designated schools, which is not conducive to integration and effective Chinese learning, and strengthen language support for ethnic minority students starting at the pre-primary level as well as for their families.

It is worrying to witness the various local xenophobic comments and behaviour towards ethnic minority groups, recent immigrants and mainlanders. Discrimination is usually a result of ignorance, misconception and a lack of experience. Our government, society, schools, institutions, and goods and service providers need to work together to tackle this growing epidemic through appropriate public education, policies and organisational codes of practice.

While it is true that racial violence in this city is rare, assumptions,

often subconscious, about those of different cultural backgrounds or ethnic origins remain common.

This is to our own detriment as an international city and business hub. It is also contrary to our core value of openness and to our long history as a place where talents of different backgrounds mix and mingle, fuelling innovation.

While we can breathe a sigh of relief that Hong Kong is not the most racist society in the world, we also need to remember that we can still do far better to eradicate racial bias and discrimination. We must work together to build a truly equal community of which we can all be proud.

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(Note: This article was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 25 May 2013.)