

EO Files (August 2015)

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

Learn to respect different views

York Chow says that, given Hong Kong's turbulent times, it's especially important to teach children respect for others' views even when we disagree, and to be ready for dialogue

Today is International Youth Day, with this year's theme focusing on “Youth Civic Engagement.” The topic is indeed fitting for Hong Kong, given that our young people have, over the past year or so, attracted much attention locally and internationally due to their active and, to some, radical participation in our city's political and social issues. While some may perceive our younger generation as impractical in their idealism, I believe they can be a force to drive the advancement of equality in our society forward.

Throughout my career and as a parent, I have had numerous conversations with young people on issues relating to social justice and civic responsibilities. These thoughtful dialogues reaffirmed my belief that young people will play a key role in defining our city's human rights landscape in the years to come.

Indeed, we are standing on the precipice in the way that we, as a society, must define ourselves and our core values. In many respects, we are well-equipped for this task. As a cosmopolitan city and an international centre for commerce and business, we have long been a place where East meets West, where diverse values and traditions co-exist and thrive. We are proudly a leader in the region with regard to our legal infrastructure for the protection of individual rights, including the right to equality and non-discrimination – universally recognised as one of the main pillars for all other rights. And we are one of the few places in the region with specific anti-discrimination laws, which gives us a good infrastructure of legal protection as well as a foundation to build on when looking to extend such protection.

Certainly, by comparison with other Asian jurisdictions, Hong Kong has a relatively strong track record in supporting minorities, such as rehabilitation services for people with disabilities, and ensuring we have universal access to education, healthcare, and gender mainstreaming in the Government.

But that does not mean we should be complacent. After all, the conceptualisation of “human rights” is always evolving. For Hong Kong to continue to thrive, we must be ready to adapt accordingly and allow our laws to catch up. That means we must enable the next generation of leaders to continually seek solutions to address areas that are still vulnerable to discrimination.

For instance, currently, people facing multiple discrimination due to a combination of characteristics, such as disability and race, may struggle to access appropriate support. Upon closer examination, many groups of women and children continue to face inequality. Women are still paid less on average across different jobs, and are underrepresented in senior leadership positions, while many children live in poverty, especially those new-arrivals from the Mainland. At present, religion, language, citizenship or nationality are not specifically protected grounds under the Race Discrimination Ordinance. This is one of the reasons that the EOC has embarked on the comprehensive review of the discrimination laws, which we expect will help us to strengthen our existing legal framework.

But beyond reviewing the laws, we must also begin to draw our own roadmap for the shifting equality landscape, including in raising public awareness. For example, we still have no specific anti-discrimination ordinance on the grounds of age or sexual orientation.

These are issues that impact young people in their daily lives, and will continue to do so over multiple generations. It is time that we proactively address them head-on, including how these rights can be concretely and realistically realised at different levels of society, taking into account the disparity between them.

Our galvanised youth, full of passion to serve and coming from a variety of backgrounds, can surely make an important contribution to the discussion. To achieve this, we must equip our young people with the skills to look at these concerns with empathy, mutual respect, and an open mind.

First of all, we must inculcate in our youths a willingness to engage in dialogue even in disagreement, and an ability to balance between various priorities and values. In a diverse society, opposing positions and views must be expected. By not getting bogged down by competing ideologies, one can focus on creating safe spaces for discussion, compromise, and common action. It is important to teach young people to ask questions and seek answers for themselves. It means enabling each to listen and learn from multiple sides, before sifting through competing ideas and forming their own opinions, while remaining open to adjustments.

In order for young people to gain respect and support across many generations and agendas, they must aim to do so through constructive engagement alongside self-reflection, learning both necessary traits if they wish to effect real changes in society. They should impress with their intellectual prowess, not antagonism. Indeed, a society which lacks the ability or desire to self-reflect, or to learn and change, will be at-risk of stagnation, incapable of rationally determining its own future direction.

We must also do more to nurture among our youths a sense of empathy and compassion, particularly on issues which do not appear to directly impact them. In fact, such values must form the basis of our educational system. Beyond academic success, we must instil in our children a dedication to treating others with respect, offering a hand to those in need, and standing up for others who may be in a precarious position or belong to a minority group.

A good starting point should be a shared commitment to inclusive values, to ensure that our diverse population can access the opportunities provided by this great city. We certainly can do more to give our children and our fellow Hongkongers a clear voice against injustice due to irrelevant factors

like their race, disability, or sexual orientation. And on such an important issue, the focus must be on stimulating sharing, discussion and learning, that we can build a better world. Even one small step forward is often just what is needed to turn up the momentum, so that we can all move the right direction.

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