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Marcus Hall with students at YHKCC

BREAKING THE DIVIDE

Marcus Hall, teacher of philosophy and religious studies at YMCA of Hong Kong Christian College, examines the spirit of tolerance and inclusion seen within Lantau schools

Hong Kong can legitimately be seen as a great example of multiculturalism. Famously known as Asia's world city, we live in a place that thrives on our cultural differences. The 2016 census highlighted that only 60% of the population was born here. It also revealed that there was an increase in international immigration from previous years. Although that is hardly surprising, it does show the ever-evolving diversity of Hong Kong.

We can see cultural diversity here on Lantau, with places like Tung Chung and Discovery Bay being a melting pot of many different cultures. With increasing races and cultures living here in Lantau, it's interesting to consider how this is influencing the youth of today. After all, they will be a product of their surroundings. It then makes sense to investigate the impact of multiculturalism at the place where children spend so much of their time – school.

Is racial diversity an issue here in Hong Kong? What influences students' perception of race and identity? What can we do to ensure that we continue to develop as a multi-cultural society?

Embracing multiculturalism

Currently, I teach philosophy and religious studies at YMCA of Hong Kong Christian College (YHKCC) in Tung Chung. Before I moved to Hong Kong, I grew up and taught at mixed-race comprehensive schools in the East End of London. Although London is also a multicultural city, I would argue, possibly controversially, that in recent years it has not embraced multiculturalism with the same ease that Hong Kong has. As a result of this, my experience of diversity within the London schooling environment was very different to what I appreciate here in Hong Kong today.

If I was to perform a sort of brief comparison between my experiences back home and my current experiences, I would argue that there are fewer examples of racial divides here. We see less evidence of bullying, segregation or neglect of people from certain ethnic groups.

Of course, students attending the big three Lantau schools – YHKCC, Discovery College (DC) and Discovery Bay International

School (DBIS) – could be seen to be at an advantage because they are surrounded by people from other cultures and, as a result, harmonious integration seems to come naturally to them. If asked the reason for this, I'd reiterate that they are the product of their surroundings. They attend class on a daily basis with students from all over the globe and may well have done so since kindergarten. Many grow up with mixed-race parents, so racial diversity is not an issue at home.

This may not be the case in other world cities, where racial groups may be segregated into geographical areas. This in turn makes it harder for teachers overseas to foster the same kind of racial tolerance in students.

Unity in diversity

The big three Lantau schools have an impressively mixed demographic. At YHKCC around 70% of students are international students, at DC 84% and at DBIS 95%. At each school more than 40 different nationalities are represented.

At schools like these, race does not feel like something which needs to be explicitly spoken about to avoid conflict. Similarly, it does not feel like it needs to be tip-toed around either. The different races simply seem to interact harmoniously.

This is also helped by the inclusion of 'outreach' service trips at these schools. For example, at the end of the school year, I took a group of Form 3 students to Bangkok to serve the local community there. This type of activity gives students a sense of caring for society and for others around the globe. I hope that from such endeavours

students learn that all human life is of equal value and should be respected as such.

Another important activity through which YHKCC promotes multiculturalism is the annual International Fun Fair; every December, over 4,000 people come together to enjoy a range of world-cuisines, music and culture. DBIS does something very similar with its International Food Fair in March, as does DC at the Discovery Culture Festival in April.

These events are held to celebrate the vast cultural diversity of each school and also to promote the importance of cultural integration and respect. But I believe that it is the narrative around events like these which shows unity in diversity. The students aren't told to be ashamed of their cultural backgrounds or to hide them, but rather to celebrate and share them for the betterment of their school's society.

If you were to YouTube videos at these events, you would be amazed by the pride students take in their own heritage. It is heart-warming to see a genuine appreciation and celebration of differences.

There is still work to be done

Alternatively, some would argue that the organic integration we are seeing between our young people and their different cultural groups is due to the fact that many of them do not have that strength of nationalism that we may see from children who are brought up in their 'home countries.' Many children living on Lantau have mixed-race parents. Many have been brought up in a country which they cannot relate to culturally or would not identify as their own. ▶



This lessening of national identity means they do not see race with the same lens. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is certainly an important factor in students' exposure to race-related issues.

Of course, Lantau students are not living in a utopian example of a multi-cultural society. I would argue that there is still work to be done in ensuring that we are valuing and appreciating all cultures and traditions to be of equal worth and standing.

The reality is that there is still racism here in Hong Kong, largely directed at people from mainland Chinese, Filipino, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and African backgrounds. As teachers we need to be particularly mindful that students from these backgrounds are welcomed into our schools, and aware that this may be challenging to their contemporaries who regularly hear them spoken of poorly, perhaps even at home. It is by developing well-rounded individuals with their own appreciation of the world we live in, that we can ensure that we continue to develop as a multi-cultural society.

We are clearly headed in the right direction and ultimately it is education and acceptance which will result in a stronger sense of community cohesion here in Lantau, in Hong Kong and around the world. 🌐



FIND IT

- Discovery Bay International School, www.dbis.edu.hk
- Discovery College, www.discovery.edu.hk
- YMCA of Hong Kong Christian College, www.ymcacc.edu.hk



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