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Students show what it's like to be truly race-blind

RECENTLY, I was having lunch at KFC Far East Plaza when a group of St Joseph's Institution (SJI) students came in. They were rowdy, like many teenagers, so I thought nothing more of it. After all, boys will be boys. However, before long, I noticed something intriguing. In the midst of all the noise they generated, I saw Chinese, Malay, Indian and Caucasian boys in the group and they were all obviously 'colour blind'. It was a multicultural group but, remarkably, they were interacting interculturally.

Being multicultural isn't quite the same as being intercultural. We have achieved multicultural harmony, but that doesn't mean we are intercultural. A Chinese may not discriminate against, say, an Indian, but it doesn't mean he will treat the Indian as he would a fellow Chinese.

For example, as a Chinese, I may be more careful with my jokes when interacting with an Indian friend, lest my jokes, which are shaped by Chinese culture, offend him. I will bear in mind that he is an Indian and try my best to be culturally sensitive. While this is intuitively a good thing, I believe it can sometimes become an obstacle to intercultural interaction.

Looking at those SJI boys from where I was, if not for their physical appearance, I could not tell who was Chinese, Malay, Indian or Caucasian. I couldn't detect any sign they were aware of one another's skin colour. They behaved like there was only one Singaporean culture, and not many different cultures among them. I think that's something many adults cannot achieve, ironically because of our emphasis on being sensitive to other cultures.

It was amazing watching these kids. While we often define ourselves in terms of our race, the concept of race is scarcely germane to their fraternity, which to me is what it should be.

If how those boys interacted reflects an aspect of SJI's school culture, I think the school has done an excellent job in facilitating a truly intercultural community. I congratulate SJI's principal and hope Singaporeans can increasingly interact like those SJI boys, for whom race obviously means very, very little.

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