

MY THOUGHTS

Youth can take the initiative in combating xenophobia

■ BY OW YEONG WAI KIT

WHILE on the way to class a few weeks ago, I was in the lift in one of the buildings at my university.

There were four girls in the lift with me, and two of them were speaking to each other in Mandarin with crisp Chinese accents. When they exited, one of the remaining two girls in the lift, who appeared to be a Singaporean Chinese, began remarking to the other girl about her disapproval of mainland Chinese students. Apparently, it did not matter that I was within earshot.

"All these cheena people... seriously," she muttered. "They all get scholarships and they're so ungrateful. The Government should just send them home." Her friend nodded in agreement. Then the lift door opened and the two stepped out, still engrossed in conversation.

The incident led me to realise that xenophobic sentiments are alive and well among some of our youth today. The

girl's comments probably stemmed from the recent blog post by Chinese student Sun Xu, in which he said that there were "more dogs than humans" in Singapore. The blog post led to public uproar and Mr Sun was disciplined by the university.

Nevertheless, I thought that the girl's remarks were entirely uncalled for. Surely the actions of a single individual do not represent an entire community. To call all Chinese students "ungrateful" is to commit the same mistake that Mr Sun made: imposing a blanket label that denies differences within a group.

The girl's remarks may be trivial, but they point to a deeper problem in our society. The divide between Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans seems to be widening, and this is a worrying trend that will be an obstacle to fostering a cohesive community.

Sadly, young people play a role in contributing to prejudices against non-Singaporeans. I have seen comments on social media and online forums

made by teenagers blaming foreigners for multiple social problems, ranging from crime to unemployment. Such comments only encourage intolerance and bigotry while destabilising societal fault lines.

Xenophobic sentiments, however, are difficult to eradicate. Foreigners of different nationalities are often typecast as bearing certain characteristics, most of which are often negative. Despite the natural tendency to believe stereotypes, we need to abandon simplistic conceptions about others and recognise the differences between individuals.

But it won't be easy for everyone to abandon such conceptions. Certainly, attitudes towards foreigners cannot be effectively changed by the mere imposition of rules or regulations. Instead, the role of the community is critical in promoting greater acceptance and understanding.

For instance, teachers can encourage local students to be more accepting of their non-Singaporean counterparts.

Many foreign students study in secondary schools and tertiary institutions here, and if local students befriend them, they are likely to forge lasting friendships that will better enable them to overcome prejudices.

Young people should also take the initiative in offering strategies that can bridge the divide between Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans. For instance, the community of 120 youth leaders recently established by the National Youth Council can

play a constructive role in proposing programmes that will help to encourage social cohesion.

These are just a few ideas but they would make for a good start. Perhaps with such efforts, I won't be overhearing snide commentary about foreigners in the lift in future.

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