



Help all kids feel they belong

During Racial Harmony Day and other such events, watch out for hidden biases and blind spots that can spoil the fun for some students.

Every Racial Harmony Day, many students and teachers wear beautiful ethnic clothes in schools across Singapore. There are concerts with songs, dances, and stories from different cultures. This is one day when we showcase how multicultural our nation is. Teachers also help students to think more deeply about diversity and what it means to be different.

For all children, learning about other cultures is an important step towards respecting those communities. For children who are ethnic minorities, it is a chance for them to share something of their less-known cultures.

Biases creep in

However, hidden biases and cultural blind spots may creep into Racial Harmony Day, spoiling the experience for some children. A bias is an unfair way of thinking. Some of our biases are hidden: we ourselves are not aware of them. But, these biases creep into what we do and say; there will always be tell-tale signs.

Take a look at what these three

Singaporean students shared about what they experienced on Racial Harmony Day.

“My friends didn’t believe me when I said that my sarong kebaya was my ethnic dress. Don’t they know that we, Peranakan Chinese, have our own unique culture?” said Geok Choo.

“When we sing a Tamil song during assembly, kids giggle and mimic what they think are our head movements,” said Meena.

“I said I could teach them a Kristang dance for our concert, to represent the Portuguese-Eurians. They said it was not local! But, my great-great-great-grandparents were born here,” said Martin.

Geok Choo, Meena and Martin were not complaining that their schoolmates were being directly rude to them. The other kids were not purposely being mean. The classes were genuinely eager to celebrate

VOCAB BUILDER

belittled (say “bee-lit-l’-d”; verb) = treated something as less important.

peoples (say “pee-pl-s”; noun) = ethnic groups or tribes of humans.

diversity. However, biases and blind spots led to words and actions that did hurt the feelings of Geok Choo, Meena and Martin.

Feeling side-lined

Geok Choo’s class **belittled** the

A sense of self

You know your name, age, school, and class. These are the sure facts about you. There is far more to you though. There is your sense of self. Your sense of self is about knowing who you are deep inside, how you feel about being you, and how sure you are about your identity.

From the moment you were born, you started to form your sense of self. You saw in mirrors what you looked like. Adults helped you to figure out, bit by bit, that you are human like them. Then, you developed your group identity as you noticed how you were like some people and different from others.

What if a baby does not have all these clues? Think about Mowgli in the *Jungle Book*, the Disney movie based on Rudyard Kipling’s stories. Bagheera

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Talk about biases with your close friends. Where did the biases come from? What can you do about them?
- Whenever your class commemorates Racial Harmony Day, be mindful not to side-line anyone.
- Examine your own sense of self. Do you know who you really are? How do you feel about who you are? Are you clear about your identity? These questions are good to ask at any age.

uniqueness of her ethnic culture. Meena’s classmates mocked her language. Martin’s class failed to respect the smaller minority **peoples** who are indeed local because they have been here for generations.

The RHD experience for these three kids was spoiled because they felt their cultures were less valued. That is the opposite of what RHD is actually for.

We can expect to see more and more families from different ethnic backgrounds coming to our local schools. There are also more mixed-race children. All this makes planning for events such as Racial Harmony Day far more exciting than ever before. This is also a good time to examine our hidden biases and blind spots so that we can make all kids and adults at school feel that their communities are respected and valued.

— By MARY GEORGE

the Panther and Baloo the Bear teach baby Mowgli many things. But, they are not able to help him learn that he is human. There is nothing around him — no people, no books, no photos — showing him what he is until, years later, he comes across a little girl in her village.

If Mowgli were growing up in Singapore, he would be surrounded by other people. So, he would have no problem figuring out that he is a human being. That would be the easy part. It might be harder to help Mowgli develop a strong sense of his ethnic identity. That is because he would be a minority here. If a Mowgli lands up in your class, would you make sure that he does not feel his ethnicity is side-lined like those of Geok Choo, Meena, and Martin?