

Integration a work-in-progress

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In the end, it came down to a show of hands to make a point.

More than 300 local and foreign students took part in a dialogue at Nanyang Polytechnic yesterday to commemorate this year's Racial Harmony Month.

After student presentations on ways to promote community integration, dialogue facilitator Farid Hamid asked the audience: "Who here was born overseas?"

A quarter of the students raised their hands.

"Who has parents who were born overseas?"

More now – about half.

Students turned their heads and gaped; maybe there was something to all this talk about national integration after all.

Those who still had a nagging doubt were persuaded when Senior Minister of State for National Development Grace Fu took the stage.

"Now," she asked, "how many of you have grandparents who were born overseas?"

Hands filled the air.

Ms Fu, who is also Senior Minister of State for Education, smiled

and said: "Me too.

"We are a very young nation, and our families are very recent immigrants. This whole issue of assimilation and integration, it's really a work-in-progress."

During the dialogue, chaired by OnePeople.sg vice-chairman Gerald Singam, stories were exchanged about the strengths and stresses of living in a diverse society.

Ms Fu told of how one foreign firm decided to locate its call centre here because of Singapore's multi-ethnic, and thus, multilingual society. "We have a diverse group of workers here. It's an advantage."

In another example, she described how quick thinking by grassroots leaders helped defuse a run-in between a Chinese family who wanted to hold a wake at the same void deck that was to host a Muslim wedding.

"It could have turned into an ugly incident between two races, two

religious groups."

Many of the questions struck at the core of the experience growing up in a multicultural society.

Do Singaporeans merely pay lip service to integration? Is censorship a necessary trade-off for social harmony?

One student wanted advice: "What should I do when someone makes fun of my race, and it's hurtful, and not funny to me?"

Law professor Eugene Tan, one of the panellists, said: "Go to an adult, a teacher. They are useful and necessary, and can help you.

"But it is also important for you to say to that person: 'You are being abusive. It's not right.'"

Fellow panellist Mark Featherstone, an interim dean at Nanyang Technological University, was given a tough one: Had he ever encountered racism?

Yes, he said, when after watching a movie with his Chinese wife

Check against prejudices

"If you walk along the street at night, and you see a man with tattoos all over him, running towards you, what do you do? You run. But what does that mean? It means you have stereotyped him based on his appearance, but that gives you a self-defence mechanism. You're probably more wise to run than to say, 'Hey, hi, welcome to Singapore.' We can't go about our daily lives without some sort of stereotyping. But we must always check ourselves against prejudices."

SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRACE FU

one night, three Chinese women heckled her for marrying a Caucasian. "But this was just one small incident in the last four years I've lived here," he added.

Panellist Chan Soo Sen, chairman of the Inter-Religious Harmony Circle, said most Singaporeans valued one another, regardless of

race or religion.

He spoke of how, during a Haj send-off that took place soon after the Sept 11 attacks, more than 300 Joo Chiat residents turned up to say farewell to their Muslim neighbours.

"They told me they didn't want them to feel isolated, that this was the time to show solidarity."