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WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO CO-FOUNDED INTEGRATED BRILLIANT EDUCATION LTD., AND HOW DOES YOUR PERSONAL BACKGROUND RESONATE WITH THE MISSION TO EMPOWER MARGINALIZED NON-CHINESE SPEAKING STUDENTS THROUGH QUALITY EDUCATION?

To quote the United Nations - 'Education a Birth Right, Not a Privilege'. That the best anti-poverty program is quality Education, is a well established fact. The delivery of this responsibility is as reliant on the socio-economic capacity of a government to provide for it, as it is on the society's stakeholders to deliver it with utmost commitment.

That said, it is not uncommon to come across the phenomenon that the factors of socio-economics, social class and the social status are critical influencers to a child's ability to access inclusive and equal educational opportunities. Whilst, in Hong Kong, the government has dismantled such socio-economic factors, by making 15 years of schooling free for all eligible children of Hong Kong; years ago, we observed that despite the Government of the HKSAR's best efforts to prioritise the funding and resourcing of education, there was a clear mismatch when it came to the delivery of the same for the children.

Our belief was reaffirmed when in March 2021, an Audit Commission report on education support measures for non-Chinese speaking pupils listed many areas for improvement. Then in December of 2022, the Education Bureau found in its annual review of schools that many had failed to provide sufficient support for teaching Chinese to ethnic minority students.

On a personal level, in our families and cultures education has always been given the absolute top priority and that reflects in most of my family members being accomplished and skilled professionals - be it as engineers, doctors, educators, journalists, executives in the corporate world.

This was the underlying thematic synergy that encouraged me to address the language based educational exclusion of Hong Kong's underserved ethnic minority children.





CAN YOU DESCRIBE A SPECIFIC OBSTACLE YOU'VE ENCOUNTERED IN YOUR JOURNEY AS A CO- FOUNDER AND CEO, AND HOW YOU OVERCAME IT TO ADVANCE THE MISSION OF INTEGRATED BRILLIANT EDUCATION LTD.?

One of the bigger challenges that I have consistently encountered is to impress upon the wonderfully supportive philanthropic community that the best way for any society to eliminate poverty is to ensure inclusive and equal educational opportunities for its children. One must absolutely address the root cause, or we will keep exhausting immense amounts of time, effort, money and resources in the exercise of trying to address the symptoms i.e. poverty, unemployment, underemployment, homelessness, mental health, crime and the such.

Closely aligned with this, are our efforts to provide a reality check to the potential donors that genuine alleviation can only materialise with a multi-year funding partnership, as such a support ensures consistency of relief services and the sustainability of IBEL's solution providing model. To expect one year tenured and ever 'new' projects do not make much of a dent in the macro level scheme of resolving social ills.

At this juncture, when we are past 9 years of operations, whilst some respect and generously support our philosophy, the struggle to engage a wider segment of the philanthropic community continues.



CAN YOU RECALL A SPECIFIC MOMENT OR EXPERIENCE THAT REINFORCED YOUR COMMITMENT TO PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT TO THESE UNDERSERVED STUDENT GROUPS?

Over the past almost 9 years of frontline operations, one has been fortunate enough to witness several gratifying moments. Every time the children share their impressive school academic reports { especially in subject(s) demanding Chinese language proficiency } with pride, it is a moment of pride for IBEL too; every time the children and their parents are brimming with joy at securing

admissions into Hong Kong's Band 1 schools or gaining admission into the universities in Hong Kong, is a moment of immense joy for us at IBEL too. Every such small accomplishment, which defies the odds and helps move the needle of educational exclusion and marginalisation; makes our commitment to frontline solutions - even more resolute.



WHAT ROLE DO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS PLAY IN ACHIEVING THE ORGANIZATION'S OBJECTIVES, AND CAN YOU PROVIDE AN EXAMPLE OF A SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION THAT HAS BENEFITED MARGINALIZED STUDENTS?

Collaborations and partnerships are quintessential to the progress of humanity and to ensure strengthening of sustainability. This fact is best reflected in the centuries old philosophy of 'ubuntu' which epitomises the humility of 'I am because of who we all are'.

When it's a matter of helping a community or state in overcoming the deficit in its social deliverables, it is critical to develop synergistic collaborations amongst like intentioned organisations with skills, resources and abilities that support and complement each other. For IBEL, the key priority of establishing any such collaborations, has always been to prioritise the beneficiaries, to find and deliver solutions and to raise respectful awareness.



IBEL's continually evolving model has curated several such successful and novel partnerships. One such is our blossoming partnerships with various international schools in Hong Kong, that provides the children of socio-economically empowered families to engage with IBEL's beneficiary children, be it in the avatar of tutors or as sports experience providers. This not only sensitizes the

younger generation towards the socio-economics of life, it also helps correct any misdirected perceptions that they may have formed owing to misguided narratives and thus helps build bridges. For IBEL's beneficiary children, it is a wonderful opportunity to make friends across different socio-economic demographics, cultures and feel more included.



IN YOUR ROLE, HOW DO YOU PROMOTE A CULTURE OF INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSITY WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION, PARTICULARLY WHEN WORKING WITH STUDENTS FROM VARIOUS CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS?

Being a core educational NGO, IBEL appreciates that Language is Culture and Culture is Language. In Hong Kong's local education system, owing to less-than-suitable pedagogies and reluctant teachers, the barriers to language learning have impeded the appropriate supportive environment for the young ones, thus actively contributing to the lack of integration, inclusion or immersion, and from a very early age at that. Whilst the logic of the wonderful gift of 15 years of free schooling by the Govt. of the HKSAR was intended to provide an inclusive and equal language learning environment for the non-ethnic Chinese children, the deliverables have been below par, leading to their educational marginalization on the basis of language based exclusion.



Thus, the first critical step is to ensure inclusion. Such a nurturing environment promotes cultural appreciation and inter-cultural appreciation. That is the best way to promote respect towards one another and weave a cooperative and cohesive social fabric. A key aspect for promoting multicultural appreciation is to encourage IBEL's eco system to venture and explore each other's foods and festivals. These all have always formed an integral part of any human's social DNA. And the more IBEL's

constituents become more aware of these aspects, the more worldly-wise and balanced their life outlooks become. At IBEL, we try to live out the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of 'let us unite, not in spite of our differences, but through them. For differences can never be wiped away, and life would be so much the poorer without them. Let all human races keep their own personalities, and yet come together, not in a uniformity, that is dead, but in a unity that is living.'



WHAT STRATEGIES HAVE YOU EMPLOYED TO ENGAGE PARENTS AND GUARDIANS IN THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY OF THEIR CHILDREN AND ENCOURAGE THEIR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN IBEL'S PROGRAMS?

As a routine, we prioritise transparency and tangible deliverables as regards our social and professional commitments as an organisation. Our track record proved it's mettle by remaining undeterred through months of disruptive environmental challenges faced by Hong Kong and thus helped continue to earn the respect of the parents. Given our commitment to transparency, tangible deliverables and a high degree of professional work ethic, the parents feel assured that our socially innovative initiatives are always designed to prioritise the child. Our teaching staff adopt an approachable attitude, constantly discussing the child's development and areas of support with the parents. Time and effort is made to help the parents appreciate the school academic content and the challenges that it may be presenting to their child. Our staff encourage parental feedback, so that we may continue to evolve and be even better at helping the child. The important messaging to the parents is to continue to prove to them that IBEL is an 'all weather' organisation, committed to supporting their children's schooling and Chinese language learning journey.





PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANOJ DHAR

HOW DOES IBEL ENSURE THAT THE SERVICES OFFERED TO MARGINALIZED STUDENTS ARE ALIGNED WITH THE LOCAL EDUCATION SYSTEM'S REQUIREMENTS AND STANDARDS?

IBEL's learning center model is designed to support the local schooling structure and to not only help the child better comprehend the language driven curriculum, but also to bolster their ability and confidence to keep pace with it. The routine endeavour by the teaching staff is to develop

innovative solutions so as to re-engage the excluded children with Chinese language learning, to convenience the language learning experience and thus to regain their academic self esteem.

This naturally translates into them gaining admission into well reputed and well resourced schools and universities of Hong Kong. Thus, the yardstick of the efficacy of IBEL's pedagogy and it's KPIs are very transparent and easy measurable, per the child's academic performance at school.

IBEL is happy to not only shoulder the responsibility of nurturing the children to maximise their academic potential but also to fend off the spectre of exacerbating educational poverty and learning deficit, which are a dire threat, more so, owing to the covid pandemic.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANOJ DHAR

AS AN EDUCATION LEADER, WHAT LONG-TERM VISION DO YOU HOLD FOR THE FUTURE OF INTEGRATED BRILLIANT EDUCATION LTD., AND HOW DO YOU PLAN TO REALIZE THIS VISION?

I am in absolute agreement with Nelson Mandela's quote 'The true character of society is revealed in how it treats its children'.

With the inclusive and equal educational opportunities providing Kindergarten school project coming to fruition , IBEL remains committed to delivering the Education Bureau's aspirations of nurturing tri-linguists (Chinese including Putonghua and English) during early childhood years. Integration can best be achieved via the mastery of Chinese language and by providing an inclusive learning environment.

To innovate and facilitate the beneficiary children's educational empowerment, provide them with equity in education, replicate and scale of up our successful models to serve more such children remains IBEL's priority. And the only way we can achieve this via wider community engagement and support.

We will continue to inspire Hong Kong's philanthropic community with the African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child'

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