

HOW THE ARTS, MORAL EDUCATION AND SERVICE EMPOWER CHILDREN AND PARENTS TO ADDRESS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

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Abstract: This paper describes how the Unity in Diversity Program (UDP) overcame a racism issue among children and families in Jenjarom, Malaysia. Offering moral and character education to children and youth from a community center, the UDP used the arts to bridge racial gaps between Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. The paper analyses UDP by describing the inputs, outputs and expected outcomes of the program. The authors apply the Theory of Change Model to guide analysis and examine the perceived outcomes of the Unity in Diversity Program.

Background

The Unity in Diversity Program (UDP) is nested in a unique ethnic and educational context, supported by an adaptable curriculum and conceptual framework and sponsored by a local faith group. Although it is situated in a unique context the educational activities described here are adaptable to diverse settings. The setting is the small and bustling town of Jenjarom, Malaysia, located one hour south of the capital Kuala Lumpur. Jenjarom was unsettled forest until World War II when a small village sprang up as Chinese emigrants fled mainland China for the Malaysian peninsula. Although Malaysia has a large Malay (Muslim) population, Jenjarom is a historically Chinese village composed of 90% Chinese residents with the remainder being of Indian ethnicity. These two peoples do not historically fraternize outside of formal business relationships as longstanding assumptions about the “other” have prevented the Chinese adult population from creating genuine friendships with Indian residents in the town. This racial distancing is a key backstory behind UDP and the efforts described here to build a united community.

In 1996, a community-based moral and character education program with classes for children was initiated by the local Bahai community, a faith-based organization (Haslip &

Haslip, 2013). A primary goal of the program (called Children's Class for ages 4 – 11 and Junior Youth Group for ages 12 – 15) was to foster unity in diversity, the creation of genuine friendships among all people, to build community and empower children and their families. Today, there are more than 200 children and youth participating in these classes. The first author was one of the original teachers of the Children's Class providing moral, spiritual and character education. Classes first started with neighbors and relatives because of generally large and clustered families. The challenge of integrating Chinese and Indian children into a common program quickly became apparent and led the first author and others to experiment with using the performing arts as a unifying feature.

Performing arts activities emerged as significant and effective in teaching moral and other constructs (unity, courage, beauty, love, creativity) to children and provided a venue to bring previous strangers together. The arts were instrumental in helping the program to grow by capturing child and adult interest and allowed topics to be explored on stage that may not otherwise be discussed. The experimental approach to invite Indians to perform traditional Chinese dances and songs, and vice versa, and to perform in front of a mixed audience, created a change in perception among Chinese and Indian parents, one to another. This approach opened doors for further integration to occur both formally and informally, through additional program activities and by natural extension into the community, in spaces such as the farmers market, local shops and schools.

The Unity in Diversity Program expanded in 2003 to include home visits and service in the community, weaving a network of connection between Chinese and Indians to foster genuine community beyond the children's classes and curricula. Prior to the arts-based UDP (the intervention analyzed later in this paper) being incorporated as a key feature in the children's classes and junior youth groups, racial prejudice was visible. It was not uncommon for Chinese parents to avoid sending their children to the community-center housing the program if Indian children were also in attendance. Feelings of exclusion also quickly caused Indian children to feel uncomfortable attending as well. The expected outcome of the UDP intervention was to enable Chinese and Indians to attend and participate together in the classes in the learning center so that both groups would benefit from this ongoing moral and character development program. The program aimed to create opportunities for cross-racial friendships between the Chinese and the Indian students. Pettigrew and Tropp (2000) have indicated that such interethnic friendships play a crucial role in reducing prejudice.

The following sections investigate the inputs, linkages and outputs of this program by applying implementation theory (Weiss, 2000) to describe five activities in UDP. We identify

one micro-step to explain how each activity led to the expected output. We also analyze one problematic linkage related to each activity and explain how the problem was addressed for each connection between activity and output.

Theory of Change

The Theory of Change Model is useful for unpacking an intervention like UDP to describe the processes of social change by investigating inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, impacts, assumptions, micro-steps, problematic linkages and mechanisms. The Logic Model Development Guide (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004) defines inputs as resources needed to implement the activities; activities are the “processes, techniques, tools, events, technology, and actions of the planned program” (p. 8); outputs show the “direct results of program activities” (p. 8); outcomes are the changes in individuals that result from the activities; impacts are “organizational, community, and/or system level changes expected to result from program activities” (p. 8). Assumptions, as explained by Weiss (1995), are theories “on which current initiatives are based” (p. 67). Micro-steps are described as something that had to occur between two steps in the theory of change and, if not met, might undermine the effects of the program (Weiss, 1995). Problematic linkages are the assumptions or micro-steps that vitiate the theory of change. Finally, mechanism is an intrapersonal and psychological change of the individual, the means by which change happens. The Theory of Implementation (or Theory of Change) for UDP is diagrammed in the Appendix and is explained below.

In considering how to use the arts to bridge racial divides in Malaysia, the assumption was that the Chinese students who were involved in the moral and character program had a misconception, influenced by their parents, about Indian students. This misconception led to a rejection to play and mingle with Indian students. Therefore, Activity 1, a lesson on the “oneness of humankind” was carried out (Appendix) through direct teaching about the need for unity among people of different backgrounds. This lesson aligned with Berkowitz (2011), a renowned moral psychologist who defines direct moral teaching in this way: “explicitly teach about character, morality, values, and virtue.” To implement this lesson on the oneness of humankind, inputs included teachers, Chinese students and a curriculum. All teachers mentioned in this article were of Chinese ethnicity. Activity 1 taught the value of racial unity to help prepare Chinese students to welcome Indian culture and provide motivation to overcome misunderstandings towards Indian children. A quotation derived from the Bahai Holy Writings in the curriculum was discussed during this activity, “so powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth” (Ruhi Institute, 1995). Based on this quote, the

concept that unity is a powerful force for well-being, the teachers discussed with Chinese students why unity was important and how it would change individuals, the community and the world.

The micro-step in Activity 1 was encouraging Chinese students to talk privately about why they did not like the presence of the Indian children in the Children's Class. The problematic linkage was that the Chinese students did not feel comfortable to disclose their prejudicial views towards the Indians because they did not want to lose the image of being "good students". To address this problem teachers used self-disclosure, sharing the truth about their own previous prejudices towards Indians and assuring the Chinese students that they would not be judged for speaking openly and that this was a safe place for everyone to share personal views. With the teachers' assurances, Chinese students started to share their opinions more freely. One of the misperceptions was that Indians were "dirty people" because they ate with hands rather than utensils. Teachers then explained the history of the Indian culture and the rationale behind eating with hands. Another misperception was that the Indians smelled "weird." Teachers explained that the smell was a fragrance from the incense used during morning prayers in Indian homes. Chinese students felt touched by the Indians' sincerity and devotion to God. The output of this lesson on racial unity, which had included such open discussion, was that it introduced Chinese children and youth to the daily practices of Indian families and began to lift cultural misunderstandings.

A further assumption led to Activity 2, also illustrated in the Appendix, which was that arts could serve as an intervention to bridge the gap between these two ethnic groups. Teachers, Chinese and Indian students, and music, were the inputs behind Activity 2. During this activity, the teachers exposed the Chinese students to Indian music and the Indian students to Chinese music. Separately, teachers trained the Chinese to perform Indian dances and the Indians to perform Chinese dances. Multicultural experiences are known to help reduce racial prejudice (Tadmor, Hong, Chao, Wiruchnipawan, & Wang, 2012). The two groups were first separated during dance instruction was to give each ethnic group time to acclimate to different cultural music. Then, the two groups were merged to learn one Chinese and one Indian dance together. The process of Activity 2 took about eight sessions spread over four weekends to complete. The output of Activity 2 was to create the first interaction experience between these two racial groups. For both activity and output to take place, the micro-step was that parents had to enroll their children in these arts classes. Indian parents, as expected, allowed their children to participate. There was a problematic linkage when some Chinese parents did not enroll their children despite children's interest in the arts class. When

asked why, the Chinese parents explained that they could not commit to sending their children to the community center twice a week or every weekend. To solve this issue, we arranged to have Chinese children picked up by other parents whose children already participated in the arts class. Activity 2 turned out to be very successful because music became a mediator between the two groups and allowed them to interact with each other in a sustained and meaningful way. Such multicultural experiences are known to help reduce racial prejudice (Tadmor, Hong, Chao, Wiruchnipawan, & Wang, 2012).

The assumption that Chinese parents did not welcome Indian students to join the Children's Class led us to Activity 3 (Appendix). Chinese parents have a substantial influence on their children's perceptions and activities so we recognized that Chinese parental involvement would be necessary to minimize and eventually eliminate racial prejudice. Therefore, in Activity 3, we invited Chinese parents to watch multicultural performances (the mixed Chinese / Indian student group) at the community center. The resources (inputs) included in Activity 3 were costumes for performers, a stage for performances and contact numbers of families to call and invite to the event. The output of Activity 3 was for the Chinese parents to feel comfortable with, and then accept, the presence of Indian children and youth in the community center. The micro-step allowing Activity 3 to reach the desired output was completing the performances, not once, but in different settings. One problematic linkage was the possibility that Chinese parents would not attend any future performances after attending the first one. To solve this possible problem and encourage ongoing Chinese parental involvement, we first had the Chinese children dance on the stage, delighting their parents. But the Chinese children were also performing an Indian dance. This created Chinese parents' first positive experience with Indian culture through the Indian music and dance their children performed. In the second performance, both ethnicities performed a Chinese and then an Indian dance together. During the third performance, only Indian children were performing a Chinese dance. By this time, Chinese parents had been well entertained and uplifted by both Chinese and Indian children and youth. The performances took place in multiple settings, allowing for gradually increasing cross-cultural exposure and enabling Chinese parents to show an initial acceptance of the presence and involvement of the Indian children in the community center. Soon after Activity 3, we were able to enroll six Indian students into the Children's Class on a permanent basis which was an important start towards real integration.

Teachers also made an assumption that these two groups of children would automatically connect on a personal level without further instruction or mediation. It was assumed that a free, friendly and supportive social setting would do the work of friendship

building. This proved untrue. Teachers learned that purposefully integrative activities still needed to be planned and implemented to weave together social connections both inside and outside the classroom. To create a social space for both ethnic groups to mingle in natural settings, home-visit activities were initiated. Home-visiting aligns closely with contact theory research which proposes that real-life interaction is one of the most essential and effective ways to overcome prejudices (Allport, 1954).

Activity 4, home visiting, emerged to encourage friendship in the natural setting of the home. Teachers accompanied Chinese students to visit the Indians during cultural or religious festivals. For instance, the Chinese children visited their new Indian friends during the Hindu New Year, Deepavali. The inputs (resources) were students, teachers and bicycles. Everyone gathered at the community center and then used bikes to ride to different homes. The students who had bicycles could take another child with them on their bike. The output of Activity 4 was strengthened relationships among Chinese and Indian children and families. The micro-step that allowed this to happen was the willingness of Indian families to open their house and allow these children to converse and interact with each other, building connections and relationships. There was a possible problematic linkage: parents might not be willing to open their house to visitors. However, this concern was solved by having at least one teacher accompany the students during the home-visits because in the local culture, teachers are highly respected and parents always receive them during home-visits. Indian parents often welcomed Chinese teachers and students into their home by serving a meal, which was an encouraging sign of hospitality.

The Unity in Diversity program maintained a further assumption that both ethnic student groups would further embrace each other's cultural differences if they learned to work together in the community. Activity 5 engaged all students in shared community service projects. During Activity 5, all children participated in making drinks and sandwiches for the children in an orphanage and for elderly people in the Jenjarom Retirement Home. The resources (inputs) required to implement this service activity included teachers, students, money, supplies needed to make food, and transportation to different places of service by some teachers who had offered to drive. The output of Activity 5 was that both ethnic student groups became more active community members who contributed to local well-being. The micro-step between the activity and the output was the process of planning, action and reflection (PAR). The PAR process was crucial in facilitating students' continuous participation. Lacking this process would create a problematic linkage, and students would not participate actively in the community service. PAR provided a systematic schedule of

guidance and assistance to students so that they 1) understood why and how to complete group projects (planning); implemented their ideas effectively (action) and then shared what they had learned, clarified misunderstandings and reflected on what worked and why (reflection). By carrying out community service using the PAR process students were empowered to continue as active community members.

Organic Process

The Unity in Diversity Program was an evolving educational process as it moved from Activity 1 to Activity 5. First, Chinese students learned about racial unity through the creation of a safe space for open dialogue to allow racial perceptions to be described and re-examined by the students, with teachers clarifying cultural misunderstandings. Second, the two ethnic student groups mixed for the first time by learning one another's dances and songs. Third, they performed for Chinese parents, which allowed these parents to accept the presence and involvement of Indian children in the community center. Fourth, home-visits allowed both ethnic groups to interact with one another in real-life, strengthening relationships. Finally, the previous activities prepared all students to serve together in community projects for the betterment of society. These activities gradually emerged through an organic process of change, assisted by cycles of planning, action and reflection over a period of four years. This process brought about the culminating outcome whereby both ethnic student groups participated openly and happily in the Children's Class program at the community center (Haslip & Haslip, 2013).

Conclusion

The impact of the Unity in Diversity Program is noticeable. UDP created a more harmonious micro-community in Jenjarom, a place where both the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups are able to learn, socialize and serve together. Such systematic and consistent Indian-Chinese fellowship, outside of business relationships, has not been observed anywhere else in Jenjarom. Today, a new community learning center housing various character and moral education programs has been built and more than 200 children and youth from the local area participate in education, arts and service projects on a weekly basis (Haslip & Haslip, 2013). As the five activities described in this paper progressed, 20 Indian students began participating in the moral and character development program. During special occasions, up to 50 Indian children and their parents now participate in community center functions. Indian involvement has gradually been accepted by Chinese families who support the character

education programs. Despite relying on volunteer teachers, who are sometimes just older youth, the spirit of unity provides a moral power that propels experimentation with new patterns of cooperative life among diverse people. By incorporating the performing arts, community service and home visiting, character education programs like UDP transform traditional relationships and create meaningful opportunities for empowerment.

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Appendix

Theory of Implementation for the Unity in Diversity Program (UDP)

