Teaching racial understanding to medical students

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Abstract

Aim: To facilitate and promote racial understanding among medical students as part of their training

Methodology: A descriptive study comprising of opinions of students and foster parents about the home stay programme and its influence on racial understanding.

Results and Discussion: 229 medical students and 47 foster parents participated to state their opinions regarding living with other races, the home stay programme and racial understanding. Results showed a positive change post home stay among the students and foster parents on these three domains. There was also a significant change in the mean scores of the students' perception about the villagers and their own skills and ability post home stay. Majority of the foster parents experienced moderate improvement of their understanding of the different races and their cultures.

Conclusions: The home stay programme has made a positive change in the perception of the participants on racial understanding. It is particularly of importance because the students are in training for an important profession; that of a medical doctor.

Keywords: homestay programme

Introduction

Racism is a belief that some races or ethnic groups are superior to others, which is then extended to justify actions that create inequality (Bhopal, 2000). Racism is a serious problem affecting all the countries of the world (Walker, 2000; Thomas, 1998) Governments across the globe are investing substantially in promoting racial and cultural acceptance (Witenberg, 2009).

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Malaysia is a multi racial and a multi cultural country with a population of 26 million comprising mainly of 66% Bumiputeras which consist of Malays, Orang Asli's (aborigines), Sabahans and Sarawakians, 26% of Chinese origin and 8%, of Indian origin, all of whom practice different religions, customs, rituals, language and belief systems (Kuppuswamy, 2006).

Since the 10th century CE, Malaysia has been a centre for trade and commerce due to its geographical position. Chinese immigrants can be traced to the 16th century when the Chinese traders settled here and later to the beginning of 19th century when the British invited the Chinese for tin mining. The majority of Indian immigrants are originally from South India and were brought by the British for the plantation and railway sectors.

Although racial tolerance is practiced in Malaysia, racial integration has been a very slow process due to the differences in culture and religion. There were racial riots between the Malays and the Chinese on May 13, 1969, and in the following year a new economic policy was introduced as affirmative action. The policy was made to offset the imbalance between the minority Chinese who control the economy and the majority Malays who where farmers and fishermen (Kuppuswamy, 2006).

The current level of racial integration and understanding in Malaysia is becoming a great concern as schools are becoming more racially oriented. Racial cliques are practically the norm in universities and schools. This behaviour may sow the seeds of misunderstanding and mistrust later in life (Abdullah, 2004).

Racism in medicine is present not only between medical practitioners but also among medical practitioners when treating patients, and the same attitude is likely among some doctors in Malaysia. Unconscious racial bias may influence the doctor's decision to treat patients and the use of certain medical procedures (Green, 2007). Racial discrimination is evident in many factors that affect health including emolument and social security and wealth inequalities. Racial discrimination in healthcare is an obstacle to ethnic minorities achieving their full health potential (Bhopal, 1998). In the United Kingdom, studies have shown discrimination against medical students from ethnic minorities, overseas doctors and British trained doctors with foreign sounding names (Bhopal, 2000). Understanding racial tolerance and acceptance is important. New communication technologies do not necessarily make it easier to collaborate and communicate inter-culturally (Livonen *et al.,* 1998). More than just legislation is needed to root out racism in medicine. This paper describes the effort of a medical school in promoting racial understanding among medical students as part of their training.

Methodology

Description of Programme
As part of the MBBS curriculum, all third year medical students of the Faculty of Medicine, AIMST University, Malaysia are posted to the Community Medicine department for a period of 4 weeks. During this period they appraise the health status of a chosen community. This community diagnosis is planned in the classroom before students are posted into the selected villages.

An 'Anak Angkat' or 'Home Stay' component is an integral part of the survey to understand the socio-cultural structure of the community. In this part of the programme the students were required to stay with the villagers, with each foster family having two to three students under their care for five days and four nights. Besides conducting the survey, the students live as a member of the family, participating in all their daily activities, and sharing the meals and the bedroom with the other children. Very often the students were given a pet name by the families. The foster families treat the students as members of their own family and no special privileges are accorded to them. At the end of the fourth day the students along with the foster families organize a farewell dinner. The villagers cook the meal and the students organize a cultural show comprising of songs and dances of their respective cultures and skits to show the funny side of their experience during their stay in the village. On this night the students wear traditional Malay costumes called "Baju Kurung" for the female students and "Baju Teluk Belanga" for the male students which are given by their foster parents.

The objective of this programme is to enable the students to better understand the background of the medical and the social problems of the community and to understand the effects of different cultures to these problems. It was also hoped that the understanding and perception of the students and the villagers of different cultures will change for the better.

Subjects and setting
The faculty of medicine, AIMST University is a private university situated in northern Malaysia surrounded by villages comprising mostly of Malays. To date, nine batches have undergone the above programme. A total of 229 students from four batches, majority of whom were Indians and Chinese from urban areas, participated in this study. A village entirely made up of Malays, with a population of 337 was chosen for the home stay programme. The heads of 47 households where the students stayed were the respondents.

Data collection

A questionnaire developed specifically for this study concerning the perceptions on race was given to both the students and the foster parents before and after the home stay. The head of the family answered on behalf of the family. The questions consisted of sets of dichotomous responses on three dimensions to capture perception on living with other races, racial understanding, and on the home stay programme. On "living with other races" the respondents were asked four questions a) if they perceived any difficulty in staying with other races, b) if given a choice, would they stay with their own race, 3) their willingness to stay with a different race and 4) whether in their opinion people should stay among their own race. Six items related to perception on racial understanding were also asked. These were a) which word "Acceptance" or "Tolerance" described the racial situation in Malaysia b) whether cultural differences were too wide and c) if these differences were detrimental to achieve racial integration d) if racial integration would occur e) their willingness to play a role in racial integration and f) whether the Government should play an active role in integration. On the home stay programme, the students were asked about a) their apprehension about the programme and b) whether the programme would benefit in their understanding of different races.

Students were also asked to rate their perceptions of the villagers on a 10 item Likert scale and about themselves on a 9 item scale. In addition, the foster parents were asked to score on a 5 item Likert scale on the influence of the home stay programme on their perception on racial understanding. At the end of the posting students were also asked to give verbal comments on their experience.

Ethical aspects

This study received the ethical approval of the university research and ethics committee. The questionnaires were coded and confidentiality of the participants was maintained.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to explore the data and results were analyzed using SPSS version 13.0. Cross tabulation and a paired analysis was done using the Mc Nemar's test to compare perception on living with other races, racial integration and home stay for the students and foster parents. The Mc Nemar's test captured the shift from one category to the other on a dichotomous variable. Paired t test was used to compare the scores of the scales before and after the programme for the students. The analysis was done separately for the foster parents and the students.

Results

A. Students

a. Descriptive

A total of 229 students over four batches were involved in this study. 3.5% (8) were less than 20 years old, 88.6% (203) between the ages of 21 to 25 and 7.9% (18) above the age of 26. Indians made up 66.4% (152), Chinese, 29.3% (67) Malays, 3.1% (7) and 1.3% (3) were from other races. The majority of 96.1% (220) were from urban backgrounds and only 3.9% (9) were from a rural background. Three fourths, 77.7%, (178) were educated at National schools where they were taught in Malay. The rest were educated at vernacular schools, 14.4% (33) from Chinese schools and 7.9% (18) from Indian schools.

b. Analysis of students' perceptions
(i) Living with other races

As shown in table 1, there was a significant change in response post home stay from yes to no to the questions; if they had difficulty in staying with people of another race; the preference of staying with some one of the same race and that people should live amongst their own race. For those who responded that they were not willing to stay with some one of a different race, there was a significant positive change post home stay.

Table 1: Living with other races (students)

Variable	Shift from	Difference	95%CI (-)	95%CI (+)	Chi square	Significance
Difficulty of staying with other races	Yes to No	10.92%	4.48	16.08	10.868	0.001
Choice of staying with same races	Yes to No	23.14%	14.76	30.12	26.7	<0.001
Willingness to stay with different race	No to Yes	5.24%	0.89	8.1		0.0169*
Should live amongst same race	Yes to No	10.48%	3.21	16.78	8.015	0.0046

* Binomial distribution used

(ii) Racial Understanding

Students appeared ambiguous on the question "Which word best described the race situation in Malaysia - acceptance or tolerance". Equal numbers changed their opinion. There was a significant change in students who responded from yes to no post home stay to the questions: was the cultural difference too wide; and was the cultural difference too great to achieve racial integration. There was also a significant change in students' response from no to yes for the question whether the government should play an active role in racial integration post home stay. Although statistically not significant, there was a change in response from no to yes to the question of the possibility of racial integration ever happening and their willingness to play a role in racial integration. These are depicted in table 2.

Table 2: Racial Understanding (students)

Variable	Shift from	Difference	95%CI (-)	95%CI (+)	Chi square	Significance
Word describing race condition in Malaysia	Acceptance to Tolerance	1.31%	-6.93	9.46	0.047	0.828
Cultural differences too wide	Yes to No	15.72%	8.3	21.83	16.6	<0.00001
Cultural differences too great to achieve racial integration	Yes to No	12.66%	4.77	19.5	9.92	<0.05
Possibility of racial integration to happen	No to Yes	2.62%	-3.57	8.46	0.54	0.46
Willingness to play role in racial integration	No to Yes	6.11%	0.17	11.16	4.02	0.04
Govt. should play active role	No to Yes	4.37%	1.21	5.22		0.006*

* Binomial distribution used

(iii) Home stay

Post home stay there was a significant reduction in the number of students who had apprehensions concerning the home stay programme (table 3). Although not significant statistically, there was a change in response from no to yes to the question whether home stay benefited their racial understanding.

Table 3: Opinion on home stay programme (students)

Variable	Shift from	Difference	95%CI (-)	95%CI (+)	Chi square	Significance
Apprehension about home stay	Yes to No	31%	23.24	36.93	46.6	<0.0001
Home stay benefit in racial understanding	No to Yes	3.06%	-0.17	4.58		0.06*

* Binomial distribution used

Table 4: Students' perceptions on villagers -pre and post home stay

	Mean scores		Paired difference in Mean scores	t test	Sig.(2 tailed)
	Pre homestay	Post homestay			
Way people live	2.61	2.36	.253	3.963	.000
Economic status	2.44	1.99	.445	7.982	.000
Health status	2.45	2.29	.157	2.705	.007
Environmental condition	2.46	2.13	.332	5.872	.000
Housing condition	2.47	2.16	.310	5.209	.000
Willingness to cooperate with people of other races	2.72	3.20	-.480	-7.068	.000
Food	2.51	2.40	.110	1.970	.050
Health knowledge	2.15	2.06	.096	1.568	.118
Education	2.40	2.07	.332	5.274	.000
General awareness	2.28	2.17	.118	1.925	.055

c. Perception of students on villagers

There was a statistically significant shift in the perception of students regarding the way the villagers live, economic status of the villagers, their health status, environmental condition of the villagers, housing conditions, the willingness to cooperate with people of different races, food consumed, education and the general awareness of the villagers (table 4). The perception about the willingness to coorperate with people of different races showed the maximum change. The difference in the perception of health knowledge showed the least change and the difference was not statistically significant.

d. Perception of students about themselves

There was significant change in the students' perceptions about their outlook and skills concerning their ability to work in a rural environment, relationship with patients, considering patients concerns, putting people at ease and rendering comfort, better racial understanding, appreciating cultural diversity and acceptance of racial differences which is indicated by the differences in the paired mean scores pre and post home stay. The difference in the domain of showing empathy was not statistically significant (table 5).

Table 5: Students' perceptions of themselves pre and post home stay

	Mean scores		Paired difference in Mean scores	t test	Sig.(2 tailed)
	Pre homestay	Post homestay			
Ability to work in rural environment	3.77	3.97	-.197	-2.712	.007
Relationship with patients	3.95	4.17	-.218	-3.340	.001
Showing empathy	4.00	4.14	-.140	-1.870	.063
Considering patients concerns	4.06	4.41	-.354	-5.108	.000
Putting people at ease and rendering comfort	3.79	4.17	-.384	-5.303	.000
Realizing and admitting ones errors	3.63	4.15	-.524	-7.743	.000
Better racial understanding	3.81	4.34	-.533	-8.152	.000
Appreciation of cultural diversity	3.97	4.32	-.349	-4.381	.000
Acceptance of racial differences	3.97	4.34	-.376	-4.670	.000

e. Opinion of students
Some of the chosen remarks are as below:
"…a life changing experience…."
"…it goes to show how people of different ethnicity, culture and religion can come together…."
"Being born into a family which is racist, I was very skeptical about the programme. However, it was a real eye opener. ….we are always afraid of what we don't know…now I can bring the experience and share it at home"
"…a truly rich experience…"

B. Foster Parents

a. Descriptive
A total of 47 foster families participated in this programme, all of whom were Malays. The heads of each household were the responders. 27.7% (13) had primary school education, 70.2% (33) secondary and 2.1% (1) had tertiary education. 38.3% (18) were working in private companies, 29.8% (14) self employed, 27.7% (13) government employees and 4.3% (2) had other occupations.

b. Analysis of Foster Parents Perception
(i) Living with Other Races
Overall the opinions expressed by the families were similar to that expressed by the students. There was a significant increase in foster families who said that they have no difficulty in staying with someone of another race post home stay.

Though not statistically significant, there were changes in responses post home stay from yes to no to the questions whether they prefer to stay with someone of the same race and whether people should stay amongst their own races. Similarly although not significant there was a change of response from no to yes post home stay to the question whether they were willing to stay with someone of another race (table 6).

Table 6: Living with other races (foster parents)

Variable	Shift from	Difference	95%CI (-)	95%CI (+)	Chi square	Significance
Difficulty of staying with other races	Yes to No	23.40%	2.53	37.3		0.02*
Choice of staying with same races	Yes to No	17.02%	-6.27	36.27	1.89	0.16
Willingness to stay with different race	No to Yes	12.77%	-7.85	29.45		0.26*
Should live amongst same race	Yes to No	12.77%	-8.75	30.71		0.28*

* Binomial distribution used

(ii) Racial understanding

There was a significant change among the foster parents with reference to two elements. The first was the perception on the word describing racial integration. There was a change in their opinion from "acceptance" to "tolerance". A significant number felt that cultural differences were not too great to achieve racial integration after the home stay. Although statistically not significant there were changes from no to yes post home stay to the questions: was there a possibility of racial integration happening and are they willing to play a role in racial integration. Similarly there was a change in response from yes to no to the question was the cultural differences to wide. There was no change in the response to the question, should the government play an active role in racial integration (table 7).

(iii) Home Stay

There was a significant change from yes to no post home stay to the question whether they felt uneasy having guests of a different race (Table 8).

Table 7: Racial understanding (foster parents)

Variable	Shift from	Difference	95%CI (-)	95%CI (+)	Chi square	Significance
Word describing race condition in Malaysia	Acceptance to Tolerance	23.40%	6.09	30.86		0.007*
Cultural differences too wide	Yes to No	10.64%	-12.06	30.72		0.42*
Cultural differences too great to achieve racial integration	Yes to No	23.40%	2.53	37.34		0.02*
Possibility of racial integration to happen	No to Yes	14.89%	-8.77	35.16	1.333	0.24
Willingness to play role in racial integration	No to Yes	4.26%	14.74	21.81		0.81*
Govt. should play active role	No to Yes	0%	-11.68	11.68		1.00*

* Binomial distribution used

Table 8: Home stay (foster parents)

| Variable	Shift from	Difference	95%CI (-)	95%CI (+)	Significance
Feel unease with guest of a different race	Yes to No	23.40%	2.53	37.34	0.02*
Home stay benefit in racial understanding	No to Yes	2.13%	-7.52	9.52	1.00*

* Binomial distribution used

c. Foster parents' perceptions of racial understanding post home stay
A Likert scale was used to further gauge the racial understanding of the foster parents post home stay. Majority of the foster parents experienced a moderate change of better understanding the different races and their cultures in the domains of acceptance, diversity, appreciation, understanding and interaction of different cultures (figure 1).

Figure 1: Racial understanding scale
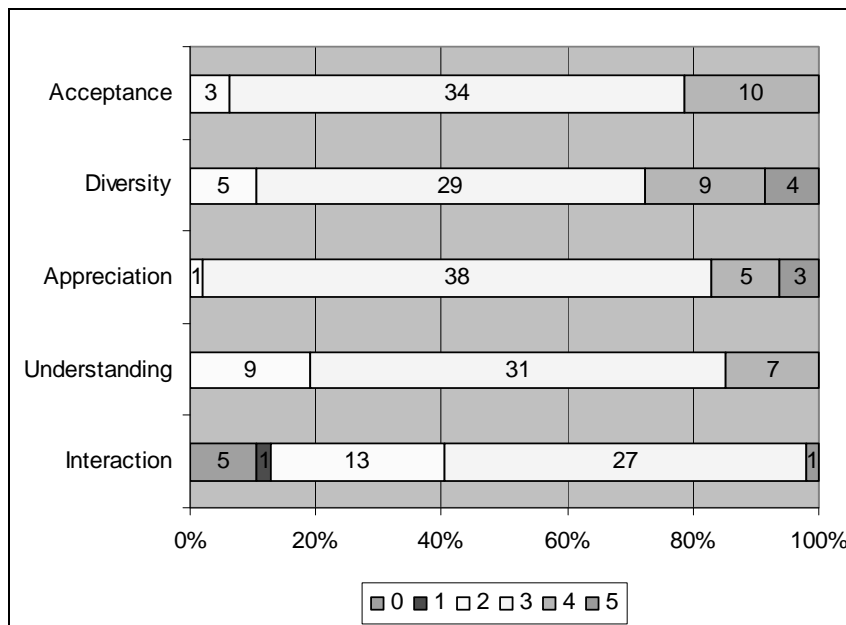
Discussion

People have many different ways of responding to cultural differences. They may be ignored thinking that focusing on these differences may make the problem worse or they may choose to recognize the importance of dealing with it and manage cultural differences and learn to appreciate various cultures.

It is usual for people to fear the unknown, some may perceive people with a different culture to be somewhat evil (Adler, 1997). A telephonic interview conducted in 2006 by the Merdeka centre for opinion research (Kuppuswamy, 2006) found that the majority of the races in Malaysia found comfort and security in their respective ethnicity. In this study we found that the number of students and the foster parents, who found difficulty staying with other races and preferred staying with someone of their own race and believed that every one should stay amongst their own race, reduced after experiencing staying with each other. Similarly the number of students and foster parents who were willing to stay with some one of another race increased post home stay.

In the same telephonic interview it was found that the majority of the three main races had little knowledge of the culture

and traditions of the other races. The lack of exposure to different cultures breeds ignorance which causes undue fear and apprehension of a different culture which results in people not understanding each other. This vicious cycle can only be broken if efforts are made to expose people to different cultures. After exposure to the different cultures in this programme both the students and the foster parents perception of cultural differences as being a hindrance to achieving racial understanding improved and more were willing to play a role in racial integration after the home stay experience.

In the same telephonic interview, more than 50% of the participants blamed politicians for racial problems. In a country where political parties are based along the racial lines, it is only logical that political parties play on issues of race for their benefit, and hence the state of racial tension in this country. Government can and should do more to educate the population to recognize each others similarities and appreciate the differences and strengths (Abdullah, 2004). Interestingly after only five days of living with each other, the students felt that the government should play an active role in racial integration.

In this study both foster parents and the students felt that tolerance was the best word to describe the race situation in this country. It is tolerance that makes differences possible. Acceptance of these differences is usually tested because of the limited ability to reduce prejudice and discrimination which generally breeds from ignorance (Robinson, Witenberg & Sanson, 2000; Vogt, 1997; Witenberg 2000; Aboud, 1993; Aboud & Doyle, 1996). The most common accepted definition of tolerance emphasizes forbearance or endurance without interference whereas acceptance of differences and diversity entails enthusiastic endorsement of differences (Witenberg, 2009). Ideally the acceptance of diversity should be strived for.

The study has its limitations in the sense that the foster parents who participated were only of Malay ethnicity. Further studies with multi ethnic foster parents will be able to highlight if similar results are found.

Conclusions

The present state of affairs is due to the environment which, though not by design, has caused people to socialize only among themselves. The young should be encouraged to experience different cultures. There should be more opportunities for the different races to mix. The youth should be encouraged and motivated to participate in integration efforts and in order to do this, the programmes must be exciting, enjoyable and appealing to the younger generation. This 'home stay' programme though conducted for a short period of time has helped achieve a better understanding of the different cultures and has made a positive change in the perception of the participants. It is particularly of importance because the students are in training for an important profession; that of a medical doctor.

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