

Happy and Peaceful Life through Dialogue at the Youth Detention Center

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the effort to confirm the possibility of human development and transformation, a case of ending violence against children especially in the boy detention center, Songkhla District 9, Thailand through the process of dialogue. The dialogue in this paper has been conducted by Mahidol University Research Center for Peace Building. One may realize that by doing dialogue, we can restore the better relationship between children and staff and among children. It may be regarded as outer work to restore peace and happiness. At the same time, the inner work is always our intention to add the religious value to make children be familiar with in order that they may have a peaceful life and inner harmony in spite of living in the limited freedom at their Youth Detention Center.

INTRODUCTION

It is believed that human beings are able to be developed and transformed into the better, happy and spiritual life. This paper deals with the realization of violence happened in the Youth Detention Center. Our intention is aimed at the peaceful method and training for children who have experienced difficulty, violence and punishment in their life. They are proposed to be trained and conduct 'dialogue' with the staff and with their children. It is the effort of this paper to introduce the process of dialogue to enable them to communicate mindfully and compassionately. Above all, it is purposive to restore their human dignity and security through participating in the experiential and transformative learning. Through creating trust, necessary knowledge and dialogue, it is hopeful that they will be able to be happy and peaceful while living in the Youth Detention Center.

Human Centered Development

Generally speaking, human beings could be developed and transformed either by the coexisted condition or by the sovereignty of God. For example, in Buddhism, human beings,

themselves are the master of their lives and destiny. 'In this one-fathom long body along with its perceptions and thoughts, do I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the path leading to the cessation of the world.' (S.I:62) Human beings could hope for happiness, better lives and peace through their actions. Moreover, it may be possible to say that most religions and spirituality encourage their followers to aim at inner human development more than material or economic development.

As we may know, there are a lot of children are in detention. Detention is keeping a child locked up against his or her will as punishment. ***The preferable assumption is the belief that these children could be trained and developed to become the moral and happy members of communities after their time in the detention.*** However, the problem is more complicated in addition to the argument whether they may be transformed or not, That is, many of them face abuse from staff and from other children. Unfortunately, children often learn to be more violent when they are in detention. In the USA, virtually every study examining recidivism among children sentenced to juvenile detention facilities has found that at least 50-70% of offenders are re-arrested within one or two years after their release. (<http://www.violencestudy.org/r27>) Why does it happen?

Violence and Children

The UN Assembly focuses on the dignity of children and accepts that

We (children) are the world's children.....

.....
We (children) are the victims of exploitation and abuse.

.....
We are children whose voices are not being heard: it is time we are taken into account.
We (children) want a world fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for everyone. (UNICEF 2006, 7)

Although there is no record related to this issue in Thailand, there are a lot of reports on newspapers on violence among children and between children and staff from time to time. Some of them escaped from the detention violently. Some of them confessed that they cannot stand for physical, verbal and sexual violence from the older or influential children in such and such detentions. Those who are younger and weaker are often more likely to suffer violence from others in detentions. Moreover, the victims of such violence eventually commit another violence called 'liberative violence' to protect and get rid of the suffering from the abuse and violence affected on themselves and their groups. Furthermore, it also seems that all acts of violence against children in detention are often under-reported for various reasons. 'Very young children lack the capacity to report violence. Children often fear reprisals by

perpetrators or interventions by authorities, both of which may worsen their overall situation.’ (UNICEF, n.d, 10) Whatever reasons are, the fact is the violence really happens with children both by staff due to a form of control, a disciplinary measure and punishment, and by peer-on-peer violence.

As we all know, violence can have a devastating impact on children. ‘Exposure to violence in early childhood can affect the maturing brain. Prolonged exposure in children, whether as victims of or witnesses to violence, can disrupt nervous and immune systems and lead to social, emotional and cognitive impairments, as well as behaviors that cause disease, injury and social problems.’ (UNICEF, n.d, 11) In case of violence in this paper, the violence in the Detention, district 9, Songkhla, the south of Thailand is more complex issue due to children’s different belief and culture. That is, this center is composed of children from the 5 southern provinces of Thailand. They are both Buddhists and Muslims. Whenever violence happens, it is not only children against children in different provinces but also Buddhist children against Muslim ones. This is a very sensitive case which will be related to the national security which the third party may use such different belief as the conditions for violence in the name of religion. Therefore it is necessary to prevent any conflicts before becoming violence.

Dialogue as a Tool of Learning and Communication

It is said that most conflicts in our time may be derived from one factor of miscommunication and prejudgments of others. It is the judgments that others are wrong and belong to the different groups. At the detention center, older children who have been living in this place longer usually control a group of young and weaker children as their followers. They even can order and violate the weak’s rights through physical, mental violence. They may injure and abuse them in accordance with their wishes including sexual abuse. Then Mahidol University Research Center for Peace Building proposed to conduct ‘dialogue’ for the selected groups of children. We believe that through the nature and process of dialogue can reduce tension and conflicts due to an opportunity to have ‘deep listening’ to the reasons, feeling and suffering of others.

How does dialogue work? David Bohm (1917-1992) a well-known quantum physicist introduces that dialogue comes from the roots ‘dia’ (through) and ‘logos’ (meaning). (Bohm,1996) Dialogue then signified ‘meaning flowing through us’. It means that though the nature of dialogue, people may be able to hear and listen to each other although our idea, thought, view point may be different. We would like to listen to and learn what others people think without judging them by their physical gesture, or working or even the words. Above all, we are encouraged to listen to each other biased on the feeling of loving-kindness.

Through 'deep listening', the older children are encouraged to listen to the weaker children with loving kindness and think along that both 'you' and 'I' are encountering suffering of limited freedom and the same harsh situations and strict regulations. Both of us would like to leave this detention as soon as we can. We are facing the same destiny, how come we would like to add more suffering to each other. Thinking and listening to others like this are based on the loving kindness mind. Then the nature of dialogue gives a chance for children to say, to share and to learn the situation, reasons and feeling of others. For example, many children complained that they experience emotional violence every time when staffs search for illegal drugs in their sleeping dormitory because they lost the 'encouraged objects' such as his girl friend's picture, their parents' letter. They also ask for the possibility to bring a note book to write in their dormitory. Then some staffs who participate in dialogue have a chance to explain why such regulation was derived from. They said this prohibition of bringing something to the dormitory was due to some children used paper for making illegal drug. Such kind of learning could happen only on the process of dialogue when both sides develop 'trust' to each other and then are able to say something frankly. Please note that this process is not easy because the staff have authority and any kind of measure of discipline to control and punish children.

Furthermore, listening to others with loving-kindness should go along well with the habit not to judge others as 'wrong', only 'different' or 'opposite' do be allowed to follow later.

The purpose to 'suspend' the thoughts (of judging others) can happen when each person is mindful to observe one's mind. It sounds too difficult for children to practice such mindfulness. In fact, there are some activities to prepare them which we are going to describe later.

Above all, listening to others on the basic thinking to respect human value and dignity are important to indicate to children in the detention. That is to say, the way to live peacefully with people especially people from different culture, belief and status, ones need to realize the 'golden rules' in most religions. 'Do to others what you like them to do to you.'

Supportive Roles of Religious Teachings in Dialogue

It is also necessary to note that most of religions of the world support one important component of 'deep listening' to with a sense of 'humaneness' mentioned above. That is, in Islam, Muhammad said, 'no one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.' (from Imam Nawawi's collection of Forty Hadiths) The same implication appears in Christianity, 'whatever you wish that others do to you, do so to them.' (Matthew 7: 12) According to Buddhist scripture, 'a state that is not pleasant or delightful to me must be so for him also; and a state which is not pleasant or delightful for me, how could

I inflict that on another?’ (Samyutta Nikaya, V, 353.35-354.2) These references confirm us that religious teachings are supportive to the process of dialogue.

Connected to these references, every child in the detention certainly never wants anyone to harm and abuse him. This rule is included the staff as well. In deep listening by emphasizing this rule, both staff and children are strongly encouraged to avoid violence towards each other.

Moreover, while each other whether staff or children have a chance to do dialogue through deep listening to learn about the unpleasant situations of each other, they may develop and grow in ‘sympathy’ and ‘understanding’ others. This understanding may change any bias, for example, such kind of walking of one child was regarded as disturbance of the senior’s identity and dignity and led to unfriendliness, conflict and violence. After deep listening and team building activities, they may cooperate to improve their better condition of living in the detention.

Therefore, dialogue provides an opportunity to have deep listening to learn, grow, change (Swidler 1987, 14) and cooperate. It is the effective way to be one condition of conflict resolution and bring peace back to the community. Whenever there is no abuse and injustice among children and between staff and children, peaceful living in spite that limited freedom may happen. Therefore, ***dialogue may become ‘a tool’ to reduce suffering of children.***

The Process of Dialogue

Conducting dialogue is a kind of experiential learning for children. That is, children will involve with *preparation stage, the actual experience* and *the reflection stage*.

Before we encourage children and staff to talk, to share and to listen deeply, we need to prepare their readiness holistically both body and mind. We ring the ‘singing bell’ to let them ‘be with oneself’ or ‘silence meditation’ for a while. We found out that the sound from singing bell attracts the concentration. Some children who have short concentration enjoy trying to ring the bell until the sound is authentic and continuously beautiful. ***The hidden purpose is the introduction of ‘the art of silence’ to soften their mind, to be happy and peaceful even in a short period.***

It is also necessary to build ‘trust’ by letting them ‘introduce’ oneself and inviting each child comes out from his comfort zone. Through arts such as drawing and painting, we encourage them to be mindful to share each one’s ‘story’ and ‘hope’ through drawn and painted pictures. They explain their stories of life and hope to their friends willingly. They have a chance to learn from each other to encounter and accept their mistake. Above all, this story telling may erase the unpreferable feeling and may prepare their mind to imagine and

welcome the new hope. By this way, healing their inner suffering may be done through a piece of their art work.

Restoring their Self Esteem

Due to the mistake in their life by committing crime, adultery, and being drug dealers, they have been kept in the detention and lost confidence and self esteem in themselves. The important stage before dialogue is providing the necessary actual experience and knowledge through various activities. For example, ‘an activity of the goodness and mung bean’ is often introduced to children for restoring children’s self esteem, encouraging children to know their human value by themselves in order that they may love others and become the good citizens. At the same time, children are expected to exercise joyful appreciation while hearing goodness of others. The process is adapted from the method of Achan Amara Sakhakorn, a lay woman meditation master as follows:

1. Distribute 2 small plastic cups to everyone, one cup is filled with mung bean seed and another is empty.
2. Let everyone be with oneself (mindfulness) and be faithful to recall his self goodness (mindful, verbal and skilful actions) performed in the past week.
3. When each child realizes a story of goodness, that one can move 1 mung bean seed from one cup to another. (It is a mark of rewarding for such good action.)
4. While each child recalls the goodness, one has a chance to practice ‘mindfulness’, and ‘honesty’.
5. After 5 minutes, let each child shares his stories of goodness to the whole group, while others have a ‘deep listening’ and enjoy joyful appreciation in listening to other children’s stories.
(listen to others with compassion)
(listen to others without prejudgment or prejudice)
(listen to others with sympathy)
6. Take turn to share and listen to such goodness of each other.

Then all children share their stories of ‘goodness’ mindfully and honestly. It is really a precious moment of pleasant feeling of the tellers and the practice of ‘joyful appreciation’ from the listeners. Therefore, in that circle is full of ‘goodness’, happiness, a mind of sympathetic imagination. In other word, after the activity, they are on the stage of ‘reflection’ to learn and ensure themselves of their possibility to become good and moral person. It is also to encourage the positive thinking and confidence towards themselves and others. *This is a way to let children be familiar with their inner value little by little so that they may encounter with the inner transformation.*

Besides, other activities to add more actual experiences and necessary knowledge for the better quality of life are also introduced to children, such as an activity to understand ‘power’, an activity of leadership and fellowship, an activity of interconnectedness and the power of working as a team in the community etc. After each of these activities, children are asked to share how they feel and what lessons they get for their better life skills.

Dialogue of Life and Action

After the preparation, the actual experiences and reflection, children may be quite ready to learn about the nature, the process and the ground rules of dialogue. Then let them do dialogue by managing the circle of dialogue. Usually we include all stakeholders who involve with the conflict and violence to do dialogue. They are staff that is composed of teachers, social workers, guardians and nurses in the detention. We firstly train the staff to understand the whole process of dialogue. Then another time, we train children to understand dialogue. The last time we invite both groups to do dialogue together on the topic related to ‘restoring peace and happiness in the detention’. This is a real dialogue of life which affects on the life and safety of everyone. The result is that *we are able to hear the voice from hearts of each side*. We can hear the discomfort and hard situations from both sides but they step further to hope for the better. For example, children complain about the staff’s mission to search for drug in their sleeping hall. Some of their belongings were massive and lost. One boy shares his story with sad face that he lost a picture of his girl friend which is regarded as ‘encouragement object’. Then other days, he found it on the top of toilette door. How suffering he experiences from this real situation! Then he asks for the cooperation from the staff to be mindful and careful while searching. Children also hope that the staff would be kind enough to help them rearrange things after the search. Moreover, during the process of dialogue, most children ask for the flexibility to allow them to bring their personal notebook or diary in the sleeping hall. Thorough the deep listening, we could hear different standpoints of the staff on the reasons not to allow such things that due to the previous situations, some children used paper from the note book to be an object to smoke and even to consume drug. While both sides have a chance to hear the different reasons and feeling from each others, it is a good time to grow sympathy and understanding each other in that circle of dialogue. It may be developed into the circle of powerful humanized relationship. This is an example of introducing ‘dialogue’ as both a tool of learning and restoration of any broken relationship in the detention, Songkhla, district 9.

Conclusion

In sum, the effort to create ‘happiness and peace’ among children in the detention is related to offering the tool of peaceful communication to reduce suffering through the powerful deep

listening of dialogue, building cooperative trust by treating each other humanly, adding more necessary knowledge for life skills, encouraging the positive thought and self esteems and confidence. Any dialogues will not be possible if there is no cooperation and two ways communication between the two partners. The children may like it more than the staff because dialogue provides a chance for them to share about their life stories in the center. Some staff who are not confident in the potentiality of children's transformation may consider the process of dialogue as the reduction of their controlling power on their duty. By this point, it is very challenging to use a dialogue as a tool to practice the inner transformation to testify how much each partner could become the authentic followers. Since all teachings propose the way of good life, good value judgment such as broad-minded, patience and honesty. It is necessary to translate these good teachings into action. In dialogue, it provides a chance to exercise these values.

Moreover, conducting such dialogue may give a chance to listen to others and at the same time to dialogue with oneself. The more children listen to other people's stories, the more they are able to learn and reflect from others. In additions, doing dialogue with oneself usually increase self understanding and self critical. ***Their human's dignity and security may be increased*** step by step as well ***then the light of happiness and peace will follow eventually*** even in the limited space as in the detention center.

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