

DEVELOPING INTERRELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING AND PEACEBUILDING AMONG LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THROUGH COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROGRAM IN THE MOSLEM COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Differences between religion and ethnicities can be problematic without any effort to understand. Without understanding about the issues, conflict and violence could emerge. Thus, an activity which introduce those different groups to each other is needed, in order for them to have mutual understanding and able to live together in peace. One of the way to provide peace education is through cross cutting affiliation in the society, such as through Community Outreach Program (COP) provided by Petra Christian University.

COP 2013 is a service learning program for international students in a Moslem populated Petungroto Village in Kediri, East Java Province. In COP, the students from seven countries lived for a month with the local villagers. They help developing the local community through education and public facilities. COP can be a tool to actualize inter-religious understanding and enable an interfaith dialogue among the participant of the program. Stereotyping based on different religions and ethnicities happened in COP. According to Swidler, interfaith dialogue happens in three areas which are practical, spiritual, and cognitive. Utilizing qualitative approach with data collection through focus group discussion, interview and field notes, the researchers focus on some key problems such as the process of international and local students in overcoming the conflict arise from different religion and ethnicities during COP, and the process of peacebuilding through understanding among the students.

The research produces several findings. First, the conflict was overcome through the adaptation process of the students. The students adapted through accepting the local traditions and participating in the local activities, such as attending religious ceremony and preparing food for breaking the fasting. Second, dialogues about religious aspects took place among the students. This is a form of effort to comprehend the different religious values. Third, the mental preparation from training prior to joining the COP, enabled the students to cope with the problems.

Keywords: interreligious understanding, ethnicity, peacebuilding, Community Outreach Program, Moslem community

INTRODUCTION

In the global world, inter-religious and inter-ethnicities interactions are unavoidable. Yet, conflicts were susceptible to happen. Certain cultural groups may assume that their worldview and behavior as the best, thus other parties behave differently with their culture, will be seen as lower in culture.¹ Other than culture, religio can be one of the cause of conflict.² Religions give

¹ Permata, A. et.all. (2012). *Buku Ajar Pendidikan Perdamaian untuk Perguruan Tinggi*. Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana University Press, p.12.

² *Idem*, p.20

emphasis to certain doctrines, which resulted in claims' justification against certain religious beliefs. Based on research in Surabaya City studying groups with different religions and ethnicities, conflicts occurred from those differences resulted in prejudice. The Chinese ethnicities were called "Cina" which connotated with insults, minority and low group. Of prejudice discrimination, the example was the manufacturing of letters will be compounded.³ The result, this group was wounded and triggered new conflict with fight against condition which do not favor them. Thus, effort to build peace among the diverse tribes and religions needs to exist.

Cross cutting affiliation is one of the effort to build the peace. It can establish the loyalty inside the diversity because of the bond between the doers. A research pointed out, they who went to public schools, a heterogeneous communities, were easier to interact with different groups than they who went to a homogeneous schools.⁴

Community Outreach Program (COP) was also one example of an activity resulted in cross cutting affiliation. COP is an interdisciplinary program, in which students from different cultures, nations and religions learn to live together in a remote area and performing various humanity activities.⁵ Through this program, students learned to understand each other, overcoming prejudice, overcoming conflicts to be able to accomplish their specified task.

By examining the students experiences, this study was able to look into interreligious understanding and the effort of peacebuilding among the students.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

From the background, the research focused on the prejudices arising before joining the COP, the influences of cultural and religious differences on their social interactions, the students' adaptation process to different cultures and religions.

METHODS

To obtain the answer through this research, a qualitative approach was used. The researchers were utilizing a case study method to understand the complex phenomena at hand.

³ Kuntjara, E. et.al (2012). *Project Report on: Encountering the (Ethno-Religious) Other: Towards Inter-religious: Understanding and Peacebuilding Initiatives*. lppm.petra.ac.id, p. 18.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 20

⁵ Community Outreach Program Handbook, Petra Christian University, p.17.

According to Yin a case study method, “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events- such as individual life cycles...international relations, and the maturation of industries.” (2003, p. 2). The researchers seek to understand the how and what kind of understanding of peacebuilding achieved by Indonesian students and foreign students through interaction between cultures and between religions that occurred at COP.

Aspects of the research were examined through three methods of data retrivals. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted towards Indonesian students and foreign students from Japan, South Korea, Netherlands, Hongkong and China. They were participating in COP and were placed in four different sub-villages (Suweru, Winong, Dileman and Pucangan Kepet). Data collection also implemented on the documents related to the activity, namely the students reflection book and short open-ended question questionnaires. The data collected then analyzed and conclusion derived through a process of theories’ cross examination, and discover the multi aspects of prejudice, the influence of the cultural and religious differences, and the students’ adaptation process on those influences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Prejudice among the COP participants

Before attending the COP, the participants have a certain prejudice against participants from other countries. Prejudice was the result of information obtained from previous participants. Prejudice is the assessment obtained without a valid and proper proven fact, but rather premature and was judge too hastily. Also involves emotional element, liked or disliked, which strengthening the assessment.⁶ There are five degrees of action according to Allport which is a form of prejudice, namely: Anti locution, conditions in which the majority of people who have prejudices discuss other groups. They talk among groups or peers; Dodge, members of the group tried to escape from the group perceived as negative or disliked by their own group; Discrimination, group members perform different actions or asymmetry toward the group that was denied them; Physical assault, members of the group physically attack another group when

⁶ Putra, Idhamsyah Eka & Pitaloka, Ardiningtiyas. (2012). *Psikologi Prasangka*. Bogor: Ghalia Indonesia, p. 6.

the emotional and hatred level were hard to contained; Extermination, murder or genocide occurred against the hated group.

The research found that some of the prejudice contained among the participants of COP were, the Netherlands students speak up a lot and like to impose their will; Indonesian people are often late and inefficient at work. Other prejudice, in terms of physical appearance. The Netherlands participants did not expect to have a lot of Chinese-descent-Indonesian students, so they did not feel interacting with Indonesian when they face Indonesians with Chinese descent. For participants from other countries, the assessment is more on the positive. For example, the Japanese and Korean were hardworking students, and better appreciate their own culture and local culture.

Prejudice regarding religion did not appear. In the students' mind, the Indonesian Moslems are very strict in religion. But in reality, some of the people they met were not doing their religious duty, for example, not all Moslem fasting during the month of fasting. Students' opinion about Moslems was that Moslems do not eat pork. About religious issues, the Indonesian participants tend to not want to talk about it because it was considered too sensitive, while the participants from Japan do not really care about religion.

The Influence of Cultural and Religious Differences in Social Interaction

The cultural and religious differences affect the students in the terms of communication and daily livelihood. The Netherlands students were accustomed to short meetings and straight to work, which was different with the meeting style led by the Indonesian participants. The Indonesians used almost three hours of meeting time for brainstorming process. One incident occurred, when the Netherlands student walked out during the initial meeting. For them, the content of the meeting had gone wide and time consuming. While, the Asian participants tend to withstand and stay in the meeting until it finished. The Netherlands participants were more comfortable joining the meeting if there were written materials, not only verbal discussion. However, other Asian participants did not consider written materials or verbal messages as problem.

Other findings about communication was, the Netherlands students spoke with direct tone and tend to push their ideas. However, the Korean participant only heard the guidance of their

Korean mentor. The Japanese students tend to stay silence, but at the same time gathering their own ideas. When the Japanese felt that their methods and ideas were suffice, they speak out their opinion. Language was a big hurdle for all of them, because it triggered misunderstanding and resulted in conflict.

The religious differences influenced the Korean participant, whose sleep disturbed by the call to prayer at dawn (*Azan*) from the mosque. This difference can be a vessel for interfaith dialogue, such example came from the Hongkong participant. He was amazed to see Indonesian participant praying numerous times and with a long duration. He asked to whom the Indonesian pray and what he prayed.

Adaptation process to the Cultural and Religious Differences

The awareness of the existence of differences which potentially hinder the communication process, will assist to initiate interaction. The cultural differences may started from some important aspects of the culture, such as preconception, the different worldview of collectivism and individualism, the concept of face, hierarchy, life experiences and history.⁷ For the informant, knowledge of the culture they would met before really interacting with it is important to prepare themselves. The fear of facing new and different culture could turn into excitement and spirit to know other culture.

Nevertheless, prior knowledge is not always an absolute must-have for informants, because there were informants who do not know the details of the conditions to be faced remains eager to follow the activities of the COP. What is interesting is, there was an early awareness that culture can be different, the mindset of people from other cultures may be different. The acceptance of such differences show readiness of participants to interact with participants from other cultures. In fact, the purpose of the participants followed the instructions of the COP became a form of readiness of participants to interact with the culture of COP. As revealed from Y (Pucangan Kepet), participants from Japan, he was worried it would be difficult to communicate with his group friends. However, Y also unveiled his objectives following the COP as, "one goal following the COP is to know about peace (what is peace), attained peace (how to achieve peace)." Both of these seem paradoxical, but related. David W. Kale,⁸ stating that human

⁷ (Novinger, 2001)

⁸ (Samovar and Porter, 2003, p. 480)

beings trying to make peace and not have conflicts with people from different cultures. He stated that "As such it is unethical to communicate with people in a way that violates their concept of themselves or the dignity and worth of their human spirit." " The importance of peace raises the understanding that a person is considered unethical when his/her way of communicating with other people violate the concept and self-esteem of the other person.

Other method of adaptation was to accept what can not be changed. An example of Korean student who has trouble listening to the call to pray in morning. After one week of learning to accept the call, she stopped feeling disturbed. The mental attitude to accept and appreciate differences, helped the participants to be able to adapt.

CONCLUSION

The Community Outreach Program was proven to be a good medium to study interreligious and understanding and preacebuilding. The participants had heard about their cultural and religious differences. They were also affected by these differences. But they also could eventually overcome these differences and gain mutual respect. Some attitudes that support peacebuilding were respect for others, and willing to learn from others, including the study of religion of others. This could be seen when they followed the breaking of fast and wanted to wear a skullcap attributes for men and headgear for women. The ability to see the good things of the culture of others, for example, that western culture with their communication style helps provide a solution when all is silent. They also can provide an effective solution. Also according to them, Moslems have an open-mind attitude, willing to accept people who are different from them. For example, they were still providing full meals during the fasting month. The other thing is, participants focus on achieving the goal of COP do work together. They are trying to understand each other in order to complete the task in the field.

The COP participants were able to carried it out well, because most of them already have knowledge of other cultures and religions. The knowledge obtained through debriefing from their respected universities or the result of independent searching for information. Thus, orientation process and debriefing to face the cultural and religious differences are important. The debriefing will prepare students' mental attitude which support the peacebuilding process in COP.

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