



Whistles for Whips: Positive Behaviour Management in Darfur

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Corporal punishment was the standard. Overcrowded classrooms, few supplies, inadequate school structures, a history steeped in violence and war, authoritarian teaching styles perpetuated by teacher training programs, and the need to find some sense of control in the midst of an environment where teachers had no control (food supply shortages, lack of shelter, non-payment of teacher salaries, non-recognition by the government of a teacher's status due to one's ethnicity, fear and reprisals being the norm by which military controlled IDP populations, etc.) resulted in the psychological principle of "hen-pecking" – teachers exerting violence upon the vulnerable children in their charge. In general, teachers sought a symbol of power to lead their classrooms and most often this symbol took the form of a whip (used to drive cattle and donkeys) or a large stick. On several occasions, when visiting IDP schools I observed teachers wielding sticks and whips and striking out at children. When I would arrive on the school grounds and it happened to be break-time the crowds of children would come running and swarm about me...teachers on duty would then come running out and yell while swinging whips and sticks to control the children and send them away. Usually it was the smallest of children who were struck and unable to move away fast enough compared to the older students who had long since learned to move away as quick as possible. After just one of these experiences, I knew I had to think of something creative.

Talking with teachers and headmasters only led to the nodding of heads and me walking away with the thought that I was only being humored in the attempt to appease my own anger at what I had observed. Even mentioning that my funding was targeted for programs that cared for children rather than beat them was met with little interest or concern. I knew I had to find a new symbol that provided teachers with the sense of power they desperately felt was needed to do their jobs. It was then that I hit upon the idea of whistles – still not my favorite mode of classroom management due to its association with behavioral psychology principles, but at least it was a move towards something less violent. I began at that point to take whistles on a cord with me to all schools visited.

Each time I saw a stick or whip I would take a teacher aside and show them the whistle, I also explained how a whistle could be used to send a message to students and that through consistent use they would be able to control the large groups of children. I showed them a game I used to play in my own classroom, which involved the children acting as if they were busy and talking with their friends and then when the whistle blew they had to freeze. I displayed this technique with

groups of children and always it was met with enthusiasm by the children as they pretended to talk and play with their peers until the whistle blew and then they would freeze and becoming silent awaiting the knowing compliment that came afterwards. I found that whistles needed to be of a high quality and putting them on a colorful cord made it much easier to trade the whistles for whips and sticks. It was something of value and decorative and teachers would ask for it when they saw me wearing one around my own neck. Soon my office became something of an archive filled with varying types of whips and sticks as more and more teachers traded their former tools that to me represented continued lessons in violence.

The initiative arose spontaneously and out of my own need to respond to something I could not watch or accept. By always keeping a stock of whistles in the truck as I headed out to the camps I felt too like I had some influence over a situation where before I felt helpless as I watched children beaten repeatedly just for being curious about the arrival of a 'hawadji.' Instead of me reacting in anger I now had my own tool with which I could address the situation.

At the time, IRC-Sudan was responsible for setting up Child Friendly Spaces and training volunteer animators in each site. The whistles became part of the Child Friendly Space Supply Kit and the volunteers were trained in playing the "whistle game" with the children that attended their space. Often during site visits I would arrive to find the animator blowing the whistle in repeated short bursts and the children responded, stopped what they were doing (if they were dancing they would freeze as if they were playing the game "freeze-tag") and listen for what directions the animator had next to share. The animators were taught to use this moment to positively reinforce the children whether that was through compliments or praise, later the technique was used to direct the children into new activities or share important information.

Soon, UNICEF representatives observed that the idea was catching hold and they ordered several thousand whistles in the hopes a campaign of this sort would take hold (I left soon thereafter, so it is unknown to me if the "whistles for whips/sticks campaign" ever took off).

Now I find myself in Indonesia, where it is a much different situation. Still, teachers are reluctant to shift paradigms and authoritarian principles still apply. Teachers in most cases have lost everything, their homes, family members, and books -- all of their possessions. I have observed as well the need for teachers to find a sense of control in a world where they have little external control over the environment surrounding them. Still, it is nothing like the violence I observed in Sudan; however, there is still the tendency for teachers to manage the children in their care through harsh words.

This past week, I have been working with a group of teachers and discussing the principles of psycho-social approaches to teaching. Throughout the training we have been practicing something called “thumbs up” where when I want to state something and everyone is talking as soon as they observe my thumb in the air they are to stop what they are doing and listen. The teachers liked the game and soon we were using it as a way to share information about the many activities we were involved in. The training covered a period of three days and by the final day about 1/3 of the teachers shared stories about how they were using the “thumbs up” technique with their students.

In addition, part of this training involved working with local artists on techniques that could be used in the classroom. Music became an important part of our time together and teachers enthusiastically participated in learning new songs and thinking of ways they could incorporate music into the delivery of their general classroom curriculum. It was then that I thought back to the animators in the Child Friendly Spaces in Sudan. I remembered how the whistles began to be used to play a tune of sorts when bringing the children to attention. I have been thinking now how music in this setting is so important and ways in which music could be incorporated into the classroom and used as a tool for classroom management.

Flutes, drums and harmonicas are instruments that one will run across often here, and teachers showed an eagerness to use them during the trainings. As a pilot idea I decided to provide a harmonica, tambourine and set of maracas for each teacher in the supplies provided at the end of the training. We have since talked about how we could use these instruments each day in our classroom to signal to the children that we had something to say or do. When teachers realized I had placed these instruments for each of them in the supply kit they clapped their hands, smiled and showed a genuine enthusiasm. Perhaps further trainings we will include a drum for each teacher? Now the follow-up begins to see how these instruments will actually be used. If the receptive, excited looks I noted when providing them are any indicator I expect I'll be hearing music and rhythmic thumps for the months to come!