

Child Friendly Spaces

Protected spaces based on the principals of Waldorf Education for traumatized children in Haiti.

On the 12.01.2010 an earthquake hit the poor house of the Caribbean: Haiti. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed and millions injured and left homeless. When flying towards Port-au-Prince the countless shacks, which sprouted up again after the earthquake, are not to be overseen. In the camps, which are not more than a makeshift shelter for the people who lost their homes in the devastating earthquake, there is hardly any space to move. Due to the mighty thunderstorms the inhabitants often spend the night standing under their sheets of blue tarpaulin in several centimetres of water. Afterwards everyone is up to their ankles in mud. This is the rainy season in Haiti. The hygiene in the camps is catastrophic. Despite many efforts, there are still not enough toilets. People are still dying due to bad hygiene or lack of medical attention.

As always after a catastrophe, the children have the worst of it. According to the British aid organisation "Save the Children" two million children are in severe danger due to the earthquake.[1] Many of the littlest victims of the earthquake are still alone. The earthquake traumatized and orphaned countless children. The small orphanage "My Father's House" is now home to eleven month old twins, Ericson and Erica. Their mother was pregnant at the time of the earthquake. The children are ridden with infections and show conspicuous signs of malnutrition. Their gaze is empty and unresponsive. The 50 other children have oedema and seem apathetic.

Those who have to give the children the protection, security and orientation that they so urgently need are often under enormous strain or traumatized themselves: parents, teachers, social workers, therapists etc. They all urgently require material and emotional support.

In February and May 2010 the "Friends of Waldorf Education" carried out two Emergency Pedagogy crisis intervention operations in orphanages, hospitals, schools and camps for the homeless in Port-au-Prince and Léogâne. In addition to the immediate assistance for 600 children, we were able to train 300 pedagogues in Emergency Pedagogy first aid measures.

In May 2010 a one day seminar for about 120 pedagogical assistants took place in the St. Damien's Hospital, which is run by the aid organisation "Our little brothers and sisters" , in Port-au-Prince The participants work in the 16 slum-like emergency shelter projects in the capital city. Teachers from the "College Waldorf Steiner" in Port-au-Prince also took part in the seminar. At a further seminar in Petit Goave over 100 co-workers from various children's aid camps and teachers from the waldorf orientated school " L'école du village" in Torbeck near Les Cayes took part in an Emergency Pedagogy course.[2]

Four weeks after the earthquake the "Friends of Waldorf Education", together with the "Emergency Aid for children" and the local NGO "Acrederp", were already able to open a protection centre for children, based on the principals of Waldorf Education. This Child Friendly Space is in the town of Léogâne, about 40 km west of Port-au-Prince. Ninety percent of the town was destroyed by the earthquake. There 320 children between two and seventeen years of age found a protected space. Thirty teachers from the area took part in a intensive one week course to prepare them for their work in the child friendly space. Since then a second camp, "Terre force", for a further 300 hundred children has been opened in Mariannie near Léogâne.

Nothing is the same after a trauma

A psychic trauma is an emotional wound. The course of a psychic trauma follows a particular pattern. After the shock phase, which lasts about two days, various symptoms can appear. The traumatic experiences change the lives of those affected. They suffer due to the terrible memories, which overcome them over and over again, causing terrible fear (flashbacks). They cannot forget. For others, their experiences were so unbearable, that they have suppressed the memories of what happened and cannot remember anything at all (amnesia). Disturbances in the natural rhythms, like in the relation between remembering and forgetting, are common after a traumatic experience and also show themselves in the form of eating disorders, disturbed sleeping patterns and digestive problems. These experiences can also result in a lack of concentration, accompanied by anxiety and over-stimulation. Many children are sad, depressed and seem paralyzed after traumatic experiences. Others are angry, aggressive and hyperactive, while some are numb or feel empty inside. The connection between the members of their being has been loosened. Thinking, feeling and willing are disassociated. Some people have panoramic visions of their past. It is easily understandable that children, who have had such terrible experiences, try to avoid anything which might remind them of the traumatic events (trigger). These could be places, people, smells, objects, colours, sounds, etc. The avoidance strategies, as well as irrational feelings of guilt, restrict their daily lives and place strain on their social relationships. Nothing is the same after a trauma. [3]

After an earthquake roughly 75% of the traumatized persons gradually return to normal. The symptoms slowly disappear over a period of four to eight weeks. If this is not the case, then one speaks of a post traumatic stress disorder and therapy becomes necessary. About 25% of the traumatized persons reach this phase. If it becomes chronic, it can cause permanent change in the personality, which usually leads to an abrupt break in the biography.

Disaster pedagogy can bring stability and stimulates the ability to heal

The intervention after a trauma must be orientated on the course of the trauma. The actual trauma therapy usually begins in the post traumatic stress phase six to eight weeks after the traumatization. The time before this point is the stabilization phase, which must take its course before a therapy can begin. It is during this time that the crisis intervention through Emergency Pedagogy can help by activating the ability of the victims to heal

Crisis intervention through disaster pedagogy can stabilize traumatized children. It can help them to process their experiences and integrate them into their biographies. [4] [5] Even the simplest methods can be of help. Flashbacks can be interrupted by steering the movement of the eyes and panic attacks be tempered by slow breathing. Nightmares can be changed through patient and careful counselling. Compulsions can be positively influenced if a pedagogue and a child seek creative solutions together.

There is a German saying that a shock sits in the limbs. Cramps and stiffness caused by trauma can be released by massage. Eurythmy, games, sport, hiking and even going for a walk can combat the paralyzing lack of desire to move and help to process the psycho trauma.

Rhythm and rituals are two further key words for Disaster Pedagogy. Rhythmical exercises create stability and activate the ability to heal. Building up a regular and rhythmical daily structure, helps to bring new order into a broken and chaotic world. Rituals give the children new stability, orientation and security

Usually, traumatic experiences can only be dealt with when one learns to speak about them. In articulating oneself, one can gain distance. Children, however, cannot be forced to do so. If they cannot speak about their experiences, other, more creative methods of expression must be found, like painting, drawing, music and dance.

One particularly traumatic experience is that of powerlessness, which is felt by people buried under the rubble, for instance. They are left with the feeling, that they are not able to take hold of their lives. In addition they become fixated on the past and cannot look towards the future. Planning and carrying out small projects or deeds of charity can help people (and particularly teenagers) to regain trust in their own abilities.

Waldorf Education, with its holistic and artistic methods, and the anthroposophical therapies are particularly well suited to deal with the symptoms of the trauma, stabilize the victims, and activate their ability to heal. In this way a post traumatic stress disorder can be prevented.

Traumatized children need secure and structured spaces

An earthquake doesn't only shake the outer world. Inner worlds are also destroyed. The earthquake is followed by a "soulquake". The ruins in the outer landscape are answered by the destruction in the landscape of the soul. The outer chaos is also a picture for the inner chaos. Not only outer rebuilding is necessary, but also reorganisation and restructuring within the victims.

In addition to immediate and competent aid[6], children need inner and outer security after a catastrophe. A child must be in safety and must also *feel* safe. Without this feeling of security the emotional wounds cannot heal.

For this reason aid organisations started creating Child Friendly Spaces[7] in catastrophe zones some time ago. In these structured and secure places children can receive assistance, meet one another and play. A child friendly space should also be a place in which the physical, social and spiritual needs of the children are taken into consideration. The children can gain abilities there that help them to deal with the consequences of the traumatic events. A child Friendly Space is an attempt to reach as many children as possible after a catastrophe and to help them to deal with the trauma in a way which is appropriate for their age group. It is a pedagogical protection centre that can give the children a feeling of security and continuity and so help them to regain trust in themselves, their fellow human beings and their environment.

Child Friendly Spaces are usually run by local teachers or social workers. They are willing to accept all children - handicapped children, street children, girls and boys. Political, religious, cultural or economic background plays no role. When possible the Child Friendly Space should be integrated into the social and cultural conditions of the local environment.

The outer facilities for a Child Friendly Space can be a school, a church, a community centre, a tent or an open field. The vital requirement is that the children feel themselves safe within the space.

A Child Friendly Space offers children inner and outer security. The outer space and the timetable are clearly structured (daily rhythm and rituals). There is space for play, artistic activities and projects, as well as movement (sport, gymnastics, dancing and games).

Traumatic experiences need to be expressed verbally in order to be dealt with and processed. However, this cannot be forced. For this reason, the children must be offered opportunities to express their feelings in other ways (drawing, painting, theatre, dance and music).

In addition to hygiene and health education, it is important to inform the children about certain aspects of psychology, for instance the fact that their experience was not normal, but their reaction quite normal.

As schools are usually in ruins in a catastrophe zone and lessons cannot take place, a Child Friendly Space also serves as a school. In addition to the informal education, formal education must take place. Holistic methods of education have proved more suitable than academic programmes.

The parents often cannot understand the way their children react after a traumatic experience. It is therefore important to inform them about the consequences of trauma and tell them about the activities in the Child Friendly Space. It is a good idea to create a meeting place on the outskirts of the Child Friendly Space, where the parents can meet each other and offer one another help and support.

In a Child Friendly Space it is also possible to identify the children that are injured, sick or in need of some other kind of assistance and also those children that are so badly traumatized that medical attention or therapy seems urgently necessary.

And finally, it is vitally important that the children that come to the Child Friendly Space are registered. This is the only way to identify the children who have lost all their relatives or who have been reported missing.[8]

Protected spaces for children based on the principals of Waldorf Education in Léogâne

Together with the “Children’s Aid” and the local non-government organization “Acrederp”, the “Friends of Waldorf Education” opened a Child Friendly Space in the completely destroyed town of Léogâne in February 2010. Based on the principals of Waldorf Education it became a protected space for 320 children between two and seventeen years of age.[9] On the grounds of the “New Mission” a suitable area was found. It was cleaned and marked off with ropes and plaited leaves. Within the space separate areas were created with sheets of tarpaulin as protection against the sun. A kitchen was put up and fitted out with the necessary utensils. About 30 local teachers were appointed and prepared for their work during a one week intensive training course.

Later, when the church community wanted to resume their activities on their property, the Child Friendly Space moved to a nearby property where there were more trees to offer us shade. In Mariannie a second Waldorf orientated Child Friendly Space for 300 children was opened.

A rhythmical daily structure with many rituals was set in place for the Emergency Pedagogy work with the children.

- **Internal morning circle for the pedagogical helpers**

The day in the Child Friendly Space begins with a verse that is spoken by the helpers. Then the daily organization is discussed. A reflection and a song mark the end of the morning circle.

- **The children are divided into groups according to age**
In each camp there are about 7 groups, each of which has an individual name. Each group is lead by two pedagogues. The children sit in a circle on a canvas sheet.
- **Registration of the children**
The name, age, gender, place of origin and medical particulars of each child is registered.
- **Cleaning the space**
Everyone helps to clean the space. This is not only for hygienic reasons, but also to educate the children about health and the environment.
- **Morning circle for everybody**
From the single groups the children are led in an orderly fashion into a big circle. A song is followed by rhythmical clapping and stamping exercises, dances and more songs. Then everyone moves in a line that spirals in and out. After a last song the children are led once again back into their groups.
- **Workshops**
After breakfast workshops take place in the various groups. In the form drawing workshop the children practise drawing lemniscates, in the painting workshop they paint with water colours, in the drawing workshop they can express themselves in picture form. In the eurythmy group the children do eurythmy with carved sticks and practise the actions of clenching and releasing with the whole body. Meanwhile in another group a story is told and another is busy singing. In the outdoor adventure group the children build up new trust in themselves and in others. At the same time they practise their ability to concentrate and social competence is learnt in play. Jumping rope, balancing exercises and modelling with clay and wax help to care for the basic senses, which were seriously impaired after the earthquake in many cases.
- **The midday meal**
After the workshops it is time for lunch. Group by group receive their food. In many cases this is the only place for both children and teachers, where they can have a warm meal. During the meal worth is placed on hygiene and rituals. Grace is said. Through trauma research it is a well known fact that the cultivation of a spirituality and religion is a protective factor in dealing with a trauma. After the meal the children are lead by their helpers into the closing circle.
- **Closing circle**
The activities of the day end with rhythm exercises, eurythmy, dancing and a final song.
- **The children leave**
The helpers say goodbye to the children and then they may leave in a orderly fashion.
- **Meeting for the pedagogical co-workers**
The pedagogical co-workers review the day in the Child Friendly Space.

Rituals and a rhythmical daily structure help to support the reorganization of the disturbed inner and outer rhythms. Repetition and structure give the children security and orientation. This is the basis for new trust in life.

Taking the aspects of developmental psychology and age-specific trauma symptoms into account, the work with the children in the Child Friendly Spaces in Léogâne was differentiated.

The group for the smaller children from age two to six followed a daily plan similar to that of a Waldorf Kindergarten. The school children from the age of seven to fourteen were divided into groups and the youth group "Novell Vision" for teenagers from the age of fifteen did their own activities in the workshop time. For instance, they had a video project in which those who wished to

were filmed and interviewed by other group members on the ruins of their houses. They spoke about their experiences and their hopes for the future.

Medical attention for the children and their care givers remains a necessity

In the Child Friendly Space in Léogâne there are regular consulting times at the doctor. It is quite clear that many children and care givers are in need of medical attention. However, there are no doctors in the entire region of Léogâne. Traumatized persons often have infections, due to their weakened immune systems. Some react with psych-somatic headaches, stomach ache, back ache, asthma, allergies, digestive problems or lack of appetite. Some suffer due to infected and badly healed wounds. The infected and maggot infested wound of one of the teachers would certainly have been fatal if his condition hadn't been noticed by our doctor.

For some children their physical complaints are merely an excuse to seek attention from an adult. Their enjoyment is almost reverent when the therapist gives them a massage or when they can observe the efforts of the doctor who is trying to find the source of their back pain.

From aid in an acute situation to the rebuilding of infrastructure

The two Emergency Pedagogy crisis intervention operations that were carried out by the "Friends of Waldorf Education" have already showed sustainable results. In the midst of the chaos in the aftermath of the earthquake, child protection centers based on the principals of Waldorf Education were created. Their inner and outer security for the children could be provided and maintained. The Emergency Pedagogy trauma processing, which could be described with the key words: loving attention, joy, play, rhythm, rituals, creative activity and movement, was successful in helping the children and teenagers to deal with their traumatic experiences. Hundreds of pedagogues, teachers and care givers in Port-au-Prince, Léogâne and Petit Goave took part in courses on psychic trauma and Emergency Pedagogy. The concept of the "Friends of Waldorf Education" has received national and international recognition.

In order to achieve sustainable results in the chaotic circumstance in Haiti, it will be necessary to move the emphasis from aid to rebuilding. Well differentiated goals and strategies must be developed for the further work in Haiti.

The further training of the young camp helpers in the slums of Port-au-Prince around the St Damien hospital run by "Our little brothers and sisters" will certainly need a different emphasis to the further qualification of the pedagogical co-workers at "Aid for Children" in Haiti. The seminars for the teachers at the Waldorf orientated schools in Port-au-Prince and Torbeck/Les Cayes will need to fulfill once again completely different needs and will bring their own challenges.

Then there is also the task of supervising the daily work in the Waldorf orientated Child Friendly Spaces in Léogâne. The courses for the pedagogues must be continued and deepened and the cooperation within the staff improved. The structures for the administration must be stabilized. The goal of the work of the "Friends of Waldorf Education", the local NGO "Acrederp" and the "Children's Aid" is to develop the Child Friendly Space into a Waldorf orientated school with a kindergarten.

This perspective could also lead to an intensive cooperation between the Waldorf orientated schools in Port-au-Prince and Torbeck/Les Cayes and the Child Friendly Spaces in Léogâne. The foundation was laid at the courses in May.

Financial support and suitable pedagogues are being sought so that Waldorf Education can play a role in the process of rebuilding in Haiti. It will certainly require great personal effort and financial means in order to make a contribution in the educational sector under chaotic circumstances. But it is clear that the children of Haiti need our long term support. They are the future of Haiti. The work in Haiti, the poor house of the Caribbean, has only just begun.

Bernd Ruf

Notes

[1] [Haiti nach dem Erdbeben. Zwei Millionen Kinder sind in Gefahr. Stern.de, 15.01.2010. \("Haiti after the earthquake.Two million children in danger" in the newspaper "Stern" on 15.01.2010.\)](#)

[2] The members of the Emergency Pedagogy team were: Eric Hurner (social worker), Juliana Hepp (outdoor adventure padagogue), Julija Kudrevataja (eurythmist), Christiaan Liedorp (pedagogue), Kristina Manz (coordinator), Johannes Portner (medical doctor), Bernd Ruf (remedial pedagogue and team leader), Annie Sauerland (outdoor adventure ppedagogue), Birgit Stoewer (teacher) und Heidi Wolf (art therapist).

[3] Clemens Hausmann (2006): Einführung in die Psychotraumatologie, Wien. (Introduction into psychic trauma)

[4] Harald Karutz, Frank Lasogga (2008): Kinder in Notfällen. Psychische Erste Hilfe und Nachsorge. Edewecht. (Children in Emergencies)

[5] Jo Eckardt (2005): Kinder und Trauma. Göttingen. (Children and Trauma)

[6] Andreas Krüger (2008): Akute psychische Traumatisierung bei Kindern und Jugendlichen. Stuttgart, S. 29 (Acute psychic trauma in children and teenagers)

[7] [Save the Children: Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies. A Handbook for Save the Children Staff.](#)

[8] [Worldvision: Child Friendly Spaces in Crisis Situations.](#)

[9] Bernd Ruf (2010): Verzweifelt, verstört und verlassen. Notfallpädagogik für traumatisierte Kinder im vom Erdbeben zerstörten Haiti. In: Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners, Rundbrief, Frühling 2010, S. 8ff.