

## **THE ART OF EDUCATION AS EMERGENCY PEDAGOGY**

### **How Waldorf education enables the souls of traumatised children to breathe again**

A team of six educators, an anthroposophical doctor and a helper travelled in the name of the *Friends of Waldorf Education* to Beirut last October to help traumatised children. It was the first deployment of a new branch of our work - pedagogical emergency aid, which has the task of helping as many children as possible to stabilise themselves following trauma. Barbara Schiller who led the team, reports.

#### **Before departure**

It is strange to sit in Berlin, Stuttgart or Munich and try to imagine what emotional consequences are for children and young people, who suffered in the war between Israel and Lebanon last summer. Naturally there are also traumatised children in Germany. But what would it be like in Beirut? All of us- eight people who are normally active in various Waldorf and curative settings, thought about this in the weeks leading up to our departure.

FISTA , an organisation that represents various curative institutions in Lebanon and which has been in contact with *Friends of Waldorf Education* for many years had requested our help. The idea behind our project was that through artistic therapeutic work with the children we could gain pedagogical therapeutic insight into how we could help heal the emotional wounds of these children and youngsters. Our work was to be spread between four locations; in the curative Rudolf Steiner School, in a curative kindergarten, a kindergarten and meeting place for children in the Palastinian Refugee Camp of Shatila and in a small school in the south of Beirut.

My first thoughts on landing were: the city appeared to be quite normal. The untrained eye from the air saw no war damage. The people at the airport were all very friendly and open. The actual suffering of the people and the land would only later become apparent.

#### **A whole country is traumatised**

On our first working day we visited all the initiatives. One of our first questions was to identify the especially traumatised children. In retrospect I have become aware what a superfluous question this actually was. In the Lebanese schools no one had asked this question. The teachers who we got to know were fully occupied trying to master their own lives- they had afterall themselves lived through a 16 year civil war in their own childhood. The memories of that time were awoken again in this summer and brought fear and uncertainty...

One woman told us how she totally over-reacted and plunged into anxiety and how her five year old son was sick after every bomb attack. Another woman said that she began to shake and lost control over her body but what shocked her most was to see how her children were made fully insecure by witnessing the helplessness of their mother. One co-worker in the curative kindergarten lost seven relatives and his house and since then has suffered sleeplessness and head aches (here and in many other cases our anthroposophical doctor Renate Späth was able to help). Many other teachers had suffered similar destinies- there is no end to such stories.

In view of the sorrowful experiences and uncertain future, daily life revolves around mastering the immediate tasks. The question as to which children were most traumatised could not be asked. The

whole country is traumatised, children as well as adults. On the surface Beirut appears to be occupied with everyday matters but this peace is superficial, underneath lies a great tangible uncertainty. Everybody knows that it doesn't need much to cause the conflict to break out again. There are plenty of weapons in circulation in Beirut.

Even in the relatively stable post war situation we experienced clearly what contributes to the on-going trauma of the country. One teacher told us what a burden it is that since the war water and electricity are only unrealably available- something we soon experienced. One cannot really make any plans and this leads to continuous stress and ultimately leads to total exhaustion. Everything has become much more expensive following the war and considering the high unemployment, one wonders how people manage to stay alive.

Amongst the worst things to bear is the continuous sight of destruction. In some parts of the city it looks like a moon landscape among which fragments of empty high rise buildings reach up towards the sky. On such streets one sees a sofa, torn books, parts of a lamp, broken toys...with unbelievable cold bloodedness advertising tries to make capital out of the war. One large advertisement hoarding shows a rainbow over a broken bridge, " Hope is unbreakable. City Mall". Another poster shows the same bridge with the slogan „ Keep on walking Johnny Walker“. In contrast to this illusory world are real lives of people whose stories one can't listen to and remain unmoved. One must take them in and give them support. Where once a family lived in three rooms, now four families live ...

### **Academic challenge or artistic sensory schooling**

Because the schools could close any day and indeed are continuously being closed, the teachers try to teach as much material every day as possible, naturally using a wholly intellectual method and even military drill. The state curriculum prescribes that children should learn to read and write Arabic, English and French at the *age of three*. The sight of these small children sitting at desks and experiencing no childhood shocks me deeply. In Shatila, one of the oldest refugee camps in Lebanon the children are at least allowed to play in the kindergarten- and of course this is also the case in the anthroposophical settings. In the other settings that I saw, the children in kindergarten are already living the life of school children and receive a detailed school report three times a year and an academic's mortarboard!

Everywhere the children met us from the first day onwards with open arms. They beamed, like children do. Only one could see the signs of exhaustion under their eyes and the stress that marks their faces. One kindergarten teachers told us that as soon as the 'teaching' stops the children talk about the war.

All the kindergarten teachers rejoiced to meet us. Although we spoke no Arabic, they immediately felt helped by us, not least because they are normally alone with 25 children – which is particularly difficult after this summer of war. Language is really no problem, English and French are important. We could also use our hands and feet to communicate and anyway the artistic work with language and movement works directly from person to person.

Mrs. Myrta Faltin worked intensively with the lower senses of the children and we experienced how hungry the children were for everything we brought. Even the kindergarten teachers absorbed our ideas. Focusing on experiencing the sense of touch is something quite new for them, although there is no end to what can be experienced through the sense of touch - small bags full of lentils, beans, leather, hide, sheepskin...

The school teachers were just as fascinated and open. What an atmosphere was created! Georg Kreuer, for example, modelled in clay and the children all around him copied the movements of his hands. Erika Wickenhäuser engaged herself in working with the individual colours with small groups of children. All these activities occurred in a quiet, almost devotional mood. In the therapeutic exercises with Claudia Bartholomeyczik the children turned themselves into stones, flowers, trees and much besides. Tomon Tröndle did balancing exercises and juggling. As one girl stood at the edge of the room in a games lesson, he turned to her and started juggling with two and three balls. What a joy radiated from her eyes when she succeeded! Also Eurythmy with Sebastian von Tschammer was taken up with great engagement by adults and children.

I was greatly moved by the directness with which the children imitated movement and I experienced it as a powerful emotional hunger. What do all these artistic activities have in common?

### **A successful pioneering deployment**

Every time we paint, model, practice artistic speech, do roundelays or juggling with the children or youngsters a stone fell from their hearts, a heavy burden was lifted from them and a deeply quiet atmosphere arose in which the soul could breathe. People long to an incredible extent for this freed inner space. In creative activity the soul is quickened as if it were nourished from a refreshing spring. An inner space is created in which the soul can awaken to life-giving forces rather than merely functioning mechanically. One becomes a creator once more and not only a victim. That gives people back their dignity! And how lovingly and inwardly the children greeted us each morning, each new day.

That the kindergarten and school teachers took us in so warmly also had to do with the fact that we were simply active. We hadn't come simply to give advice. No one who has experienced such a heavy burden of destiny can bear to have someone else tell them how they should do things differently, let alone be told how they should deal with their war trauma! We were simply there to work with the children and it was just this that was so gratefully appreciated.

Since *Friends of Waldorf Education* have an official relationship with UNESCO we were able to make contact with their regional office before before our trip. Three of their officials visited us and were very impressed with our work. The Lebanese Education Minister, with whom we also had a conversation, was very interested in the work and took time to inform himself in detail what we were doing. The Lebanese Health Ministry also showed a lively interest in our work.

Overall we managed to work daily in four settings with around 300 children over the three weeks of our visit. Each day we were able to directly experience how important and necessary our work was and how we were able to help the children breathe more healthily in their souls. We could also see how grateful the teachers were to discover many new elements in their work that might be of help to them.

On behalf of the *Friends of Waldorf Education* I would like to express my hearty thanks to those co-workers who voluntarily and without any remuneration offered their time and energy- this was a priceless gift for all those involved. Our thanks too go to Dr. Merhej the founder and leader of FISTA. This experience and open minded woman is one of the key personalities who have devoted their strength and energy to supporting anthroposophical work in Lebanon and who made the contact to the refugee camp in Shatila and the school in South Beirut possible in the first place. She cared for us, accompanied us and organised our accommodation.

There is an incredible need in the world for the deployment of such pedagogical emergency aid missions and we hope that with the support of others to be able to start to meet this need more and more.

*Barbara Schiller*