

MAIMED, DESPAIRING, DISTURBED AND DESERTED

Emergency Pedagogy for traumatized children in Haiti

On the 12.1.2010, an earthquake which reached 7,0 on the Richter Scale, shook the poorest country in the western hemisphere – Haiti. According to official estimates, this natural disaster cost over 300 000 people their lives. How many victims are still buried beneath the rubble, we'll probably never know. Millions of people were injured and lost their homes. Everything is lacking: drinking water, food, tents and medical help. According to the British aid organization "Save the Children", two million children are in acute danger. Many of the smallest victims of the earthquake have been left alone. "They wander without orientation through the streets and sleep next to corpses at night. The earthquake traumatized many of Haiti's children and made them into orphans"[1]

From the 10.02 until the 25.02.2010 the "Friends of Waldorf Education" performed a Emergency Pedagogy crisis intervention operation in orphanages, hospitals, schools and tented camps for the homeless in Port.-au-Prince and Leogane.[2] In addition to the direct help for about 600 children, we were able to train 150 pedagogues in Emergency Pedagogy first aid measures.

Trauma changes lives

"When the earth shook our orphanage collapsed. The ceiling fell onto us and trapped us. My care giver (Pierrot, 53 years old) was lying directly under me. We could hardly breathe. After two days he stopped praying. I felt him struggling with death. Suddenly his body went limp. That made it easier for me to breathe. After two and a half days I was dug out. Since then I cannot sleep. I am terribly afraid, cannot stay indoors and constantly think about the time under the ruins."

Many children in Haiti are in a similar situation. Like the 13 year old Maclaye, their lives have been changed their traumatic experiences. 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 overstimulation. 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.

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. Trauma changes lives.[3]

Emergency Pedagogy can help

Crisis intervention through Emergency 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 Emergency 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.

In the orphanages of Port-au-Prince

The Emergency Pedagogy team met Emanuel Philip Joseph by chance in an outlying suburb of Port-au-Prince. He is the director of the orphanage Oreleph, which was founded six years ago.

In a ruin we met 30 unkempt children between two and seventeen years of age. A further 170 children from the surrounding area are also looked after. The contents of the orphanage consisted of one chair and two old mats. Drinking water was lacking, not to mention food. Many of the children and teenagers were sucking at their fingers. Some had their whole hands in their mouths. All of them immediately sought attention and bodily contact.

Problems with fine motor coordination and a lack of concentration became apparent through the first finger games. In form drawing, all attempts to make the lines cross, failed. The eurythmy gesture "A" was too much for most of the children. A ten year old boy, who lost his whole family in the earthquake, drew a dark sky with no ground at the bottom and a church which looked like a grave in the centre. Aggressive behaviour was very noticeable amongst the smaller children. The teachers seemed tense, exhausted and depressed

In an orphanage in Santo, an outlying suburb of Port-au Prince, we met Marie Jose, the founder of the Haiti **Children's Aid**. She is the head of five homes with over 200 children. On the grounds in Santo we met 53 children. Orphans, aids orphans and street children. Ernsen (12) came limping along on crutches. He didn't want to place any weight on his injured leg. Nicodem (12) had injuries on his left thigh and bad bruises on his ribs.

"When the earthquake started, Franky (a 24 year old care giver), Ernsen and I were on the balcony on the second floor. Franky wanted to save himself by jumping down, but he didn't, because he didn't

want to leave us alone. Then the house collapsed. It felt like we were all being squashed together into one big body. We couldn't move. Herrig (a student) spoke to us for many hours from outside. After over twelve hours were dug out and driven to the hospital in the school bus. I saw many children with bleeding head injuries. Many died on the way to the hospital. Franky died in hospital. The doctors thought Ernsen and I were dead. We were laid with the corpses. When we regained consciousness we crawled back to the hospital. Every night I dream that I can't move. Then I call my brother, Master, who turns me over. Then I can go back to sleep."

Whereas Nicodem can describe his experiences well, Ernsen cannot remember anything. He speaks very softly, gives only one word answers and clings desperately to his crutches.

The children of Santo are all afraid. They no longer want to live in houses. *"At night they snuggle up to me like cats. They cling to me when I want to go somewhere,"* said Marie Jose. Constipation and diarrhoea, eating disorders, sleeping problems, memory loss and infections were further reactions to the traumatic experiences.

In the paediatric hospital run by the organisation "Our little brothers and sisters" in Port-au-Prince

In the largely intact paediatric catholic hospital of St. Damien, which is run by the organisation "Our little brothers and sisters" –right next to the American Embassy – doctors, nurses and volunteers from the whole world were working hard, to support the exhausted Haitian personnel. There was an interrupted stream of injured people. They were driven in by international emergency aid teams, brought by relatives by bicycle or carried in on somebody's shoulders. The spacious grounds were filled with makeshift hospital tents and were guarded by the Italian army. The Mexican social worker, Alfonso, was working in the surrounding area. He and about 80 teenage helpers were looking after hundreds of children in the surrounding slums. The contact between the paediatric hospital and the Friends of Waldorf Education came about through the partner organisation of the hospital, which is in Karlsruhe. During the early planning of our operation, the organisation offered us the hospital as a base for Emergency Pedagogy. For two days we worked there with about 100 children, using outdoor adventure pedagogy and art therapy.

The "child friendly space" in a refugee camp in Leogane

Following a recommendation from Aid for Children, the "Friends" team opened a further base for Emergency Pedagogy in the almost completely destroyed town of Leogane. Many German aid organisations had already put up camp around the supply base of the THW (Technische Hilfswerks) on the grounds of the "New Mission" school: Humedico, Caritas international, Malteser and many others.

The doctors and nurses from the German aid organization Navis[6], were treating hundreds of patients everyday in their tented hospital. Another one run by Cubans stood right next to it. At four in the morning people were already crowding to get in. New emergency cases were constantly being brought in. The screams of pain often woke us up at night. The same went for the tremors reaching 5,6 on the Richter scale and the scratching of the tarantulas that were trying to take over our tents.

In the camp in Leogane we met Edwin Ferdinand, a teacher. Due to the traumatisation of her sister, who was buried when her house collapsed, she felt a desire to help children to work through their experiences. With a further 30 teachers and the local nongovernment organisation, Acrederp, we began to build up a "child friendly space" – a protected space for Emergency Pedagogy work with

children. The chosen place was cleaned; wooded posts were planted into the ground and plastic sheets and ropes were used to create shaded areas. Teenagers plaited palm leaves together to make a boundary. With the financial support of Caritas international, we put up a kitchen so we could also feed the children. The drinking water came from the THW, the food from the Children's Aid and the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ).

Once the 320 children between two and seventeen years of age had been registered with name, age, gender and medical comments, the work could begin. The first important point was to lay down a regular, rhythmical daily structure with set meal times and alternating phases of movement and rest, within the protected space. This should help to reorganize the missing inner and outer order and to support the natural rhythms. Every ritualized form or sequence of events, creates security in the inner and outer chaos in the aftermath of the earthquake and gives the children orientation and new stability.

The children stood in a big circle. A song was sung, followed by rhythmical clapping and stamping exercises. Then the circle started to move, making a form which spiralled in and out. After that came the eurythmy exercises. Then breakfast was eaten and water shared out in the big circle.

From the big circle the children went to the workshops in an orderly fashion. In the form drawing workshop lemniscates were drawn, in the painting group the children painted with water colours and in the drawing workshop experiences were expressed in pictures. Meanwhile in another group, a story was told and others sang songs. In the outdoor adventure pedagogy group, various exercises were used to strengthen trust in oneself and in others. The children practised concentration by balancing along a rope which was lying on the ground. Social competence was built up anew in a playful manner. The basal senses –in many cases seriously impaired by the earthquake - were also stimulated by modelling with clay or wax and by jumping rope.

The toddlers group used the Waldorf kindergarten as an example in planning the daily structure. Projects were created for teenagers. Girls and boys from 13 to 16 could speak about what happened on the 12th of January on camera, if they wished. Some teenagers spoke of their terrible experiences, while sitting on the ruins of their houses and told of their hopes for the future.

After the workshops it was time for lunch. This was often the only opportunity for the children and teachers to have a warm meal. We placed a lot of worth on hygiene and mealtime rituals.

A closing circle with rhythm exercises and a final song marked the end of the daily work. The children were bid farewell and dismissed in an orderly fashion.

Medical assistance

Many children in the "child friendly space" in Leogane needed medical treatment. Due to their weakened immune systems, traumatized children often suffer from infections. Some react with psycho somatic headaches or stomach pains. Other children are simply seeking attention from an adult through their complaints. With an expression of bliss Jennifer (10) let the curative eurythmist massage her tummy with oil. Steven (8) visibly enjoyed the efforts of the doctor, who was trying to find the cause of his back pain.

Some children were suffering from infected wounds, which weren't healing properly. Others needed to go for surgery in the nearby Navis tented hospital. How grateful the children were to hold the

hand of a care giver during the treatment! That too, creates new trust in one's fellow human beings. For their part, the Navis doctors called us, when traumatised children were brought to them.

When the Navis tents were taken down before their departure, three patients were left in their beds. The doctors and psychologist from our team were asked to look after them. Jean (26), who had to have his leg amputated, was soon fetched by relatives. Pierre Vilbiere (70), who had lost everything and was completely alone, we took with us to Port-au-Prince. There we bought him a bus ticket back to his village, Corner Valley, which was 80 km away.

The third patient, Blaise (37) was lying with his son Lorwensky (4) and his daughter Lorie (7) in a bed outside. His wife (22), two children, as well as his parents and siblings, all lost their lives when their house in Leogane-Bonyote collapsed.

"My son and I were buried for two and a half days. The bed shielded us from the weight of the falling ceiling. I protected my son with my body. My back was bleeding and there was blood coming out of my mouth. At some point, I lost all sense of time. Finally, my son saw torchlight. We were freed. Now I suffer from heart pain. My heart is broken. I have problems with my breathing and can't sleep."

Blaise led us to the scene of the catastrophe. On the ruins of his house, by the holes where his dead relatives were dug out, he showed us photos of his family again and again. *"My children often ask me where their mother is. They think she is going to come back. They often cry for her."* Blaise couldn't tell his children that their mother is dead.

We left one of our tents behind for Blaise and his children. At least it will give them some protection during the coming rainy season.

Training in Emergency Pedagogy

Parents and teachers are often unable to understand the changes of behaviour in the children after a trauma. They are helpless in the face of the children's reactions to the trauma and the symptoms of traumatisation. For this reason, one of the most important tasks of crisis intervention through Emergency Pedagogy is to inform the parents and teachers about psycho trauma. They need to know about the causes, the development and the possible results of psycho traumatisation and also to learn Emergency Pedagogy strategies, which can be used to deal with traumatisation. One must consider, however, that the pedagogues too, are often severely traumatised in war zones or areas where a catastrophe has taken place.

"My older sister, who was eight months pregnant, had come into my room with my little brother to call me to the table, when the quake began. All three of us were squashed under the rubble. My sister screamed, because she couldn't get enough air. Then she died. People were walking around on the ruins over us. Each step squashed us even more. A man, who was buried beneath us, spoke to us. We said the Our Father. Hours later we were dug out. My little brother's feet were stuck. The rescuers wanted to amputate his legs. I begged them to try and lift the piece of concrete. At first they left him behind, in order to go and help others. Finally they came back and managed to free my little brother. Fifteen inhabitants of the house died. "

The Emergency Pedagogy training seminar took place in Port-au Prince. About 120 teachers and pedagogues took part. The seminar consisted of lectures about psycho trauma and Emergency Pedagogy and discussion groups, where the participant could speak about their experiences. In

addition, there were workshops on outdoor adventure pedagogy and art therapy and a closing forum. The training course was framed by a warming up session and a closing circle.

The participants came from the hospital of the organisation “Our little brothers and sisters”, the Oreleph orphanage and the orphanages of the Haitian Children’s Aid. The 13 teachers from the “Colegio Waldorf/Steiner also took part. The school was founded a few years ago, after Waldorf education was discovered through the internet. Today there is a kindergarten and three classes. The emergency team discovered the school’s sign by accident in the ruins of Port –au - Prince.

In Leogane, 30 local teachers were involved in the daily work with the children and teenagers. The daily structure for the “child friendly space” was planned with them and the mealtime rituals were practised. In addition, the teachers actively took part in the various workshops. On six afternoons, a seminar on psycho trauma and Emergency Pedagogy took place. Amongst the seminar participants we found 15 teachers and five care givers, who were prepared to continue the waldorf based “child friendly space” project from the 25th of February onwards.

Sustainable results

The crisis intervention through Emergency Pedagogy performed by the Friends of Waldorf Education has shown sustainable results. All in all 600 were reached and about 150 pedagogues were trained in Emergency Pedagogy.

In cooperation with the Children’s Aid and the local NGO Acerderp in Leogane, the “child friendly space” was built up and equipped. Acerderp will continue to run the camp for the next seven months. It will be financially supported by the Children’s Aid and the Friends of Waldorf Education will continue to supervise and offer pedagogical advice. Fifteen teachers, five pedagogical assistants, a cook, two kitchen helpers and an administrator were appointed to continue the project. All the children and teachers will receive breakfast, a warm lunch and drinking water every day.

Two trips are already planned for the next few months. An emergency team from the Friends of Waldorf Education will visit the project and also offer further training courses for the pedagogues in Port-au-Prince. However, we can only then continue our work in Haiti, if we receive sufficient donations to finance it.

If the project develops in a positive manner, then the period of seven months will be extended to two years.

Bernd Ruf

Notes

[1] Haiti after the earthquake. Stern, 15.1.2010.

[2] The members of the Emergency Pedagogy team: Christof Doll (pedagogue), Juliana Hepp (outdoor adventure pedagogue), Julija Kudrevataja (eurythmist), Lukas Mall (outdoor adventure pedagogue), Kristina Manz (coordinator), Yoko Miwa (psychologist), Adelin Moelo (nursery school teacher) Mechthild Pellmann (art therapist), Bernd Ruf (remedial pedagogue and leader of the operation),

Annie Sauerland (outdoor adventure pedagogue), Dr. Michael Schnur (medical doctor), Dr. Elke Schmidt (medical doctor), Birgit Stoewer (nursery school teacher) und Heidi Wolf (art therapist).

[3] Clemens Hausmann (2006): Einführung in die Psychotraumatologie, Wien. (Introduction into psycho traumatology, Vienna).

[4] Harald Karutz, Frank Lasogga (2008): Kinder in Notfällen. Psychische Erste Hilfe und Nachsorge. Edewecht. (Children in emergencies. (Psychological first aid and post traumatic caring measures).

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