



The Art of Education as Emergency Aid

How Waldorf Education Enables the Souls of Traumatized Children to Breathe Again

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translated by Martyn Rawson

A team of six educators, an anthroposophical doctor, and a helper traveled in the name of the Friends of Waldorf Education (Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners) to Beirut in October 2007 to help traumatized children. It was the first deployment of a new branch of our work—pedagogical emergency aid—with the task of helping as many children as possible to stabilize themselves following trauma. Barbara Schiller led the team.



It was strange to sit in Berlin, Stuttgart, or Munich and try to imagine the emotional consequences for children and young people who survived the war between Israel and Lebanon last summer. Naturally, there are also traumatized children in Germany. But what would it be like in Beirut? All of us—eight persons who are normally active in various Waldorf education and curative settings—thought about this in the weeks leading up to our departure. First Step Together Association (FISTA), an organization that represents various curative institutions in Lebanon and which has been in contact with the 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 among four locations—in the curative Rudolf Steiner School, in a curative kindergarten, in a kindergarten and meeting place for children in the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila, and in a small school in the south of Beirut.

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

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A Whole Country Is Traumatized

On our first working day we visited all the initiatives. One of our first tasks was to identify some of the most traumatized children. In retrospect I realize how superfluous this question actually was. In the Lebanese schools no one had asked this question. Teachers were fully occupied trying to master their own lives; after all, they had themselves lived through a sixteen-year civil war in their own childhood. The memories of that time were awoken again during this summer; these memories brought fear and uncertainty.

One woman told us how she totally overreacted by plunging into anxiety and how her five-year-old son was sick after every bomb attack. Another woman described how she would shake and begin to lose control over her body, but that what shocked her most was to see how her children became fully insecure by witnessing the helplessness of their mother. One co-worker in the curative kindergarten told us that since losing seven relatives and his house he had suffered sleeplessness and headaches. Many other teachers had suffered similar events—there was no end to such stories.

In view of sorrowful experiences and an uncertain future, daily life revolved around mastering immediate tasks. The question as to which children were most traumatized could not be asked. The whole country is traumatized, children as well as adults.

On the surface, Beirut appears to be occupied with everyday matters, but this peace is superfi-

cial, for underneath lies great palpable uncertainty. Everybody knows that it doesn't take much to re-ignite the conflict. There are plenty of weapons circulating in Beirut.

Even in the relatively stable postwar situation we experienced clearly what contributes to the ongoing trauma of the country. One teacher told us that, since the war, water and electricity are available only sporadically—something we soon experienced. One cannot really make any plans; this leads to continual stress and, ultimately, 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.

Among the heaviest burdens is the constant sight of destruction. Some parts of the city look like a moon landscape in which fragments of empty high-rise buildings reach toward the sky. On such streets one may see a sofa, torn books, parts of a lamp, broken toys. In contrast to this stark world are real lives of those to whose stories one can't listen without remaining unmoved. One must take them in and give them support. Where once a single family lived in three rooms, four families now live.

Academic Challenge or Artistic Schooling?

Because the schools could close any day and, indeed, are continually 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, beginning at the age of three. The sight of these small children sitting at desks and experiencing no childhood shocked 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 were already living the life of school children. They receive a detailed school report three times a year and an academic mortarboard.

Everywhere, from the first day onward, the children met us with open arms. They beamed, as

only children do. And yet one could see signs of exhaustion under their eyes and in the stress that marked their faces. One kindergarten teacher told us that as soon as the lesson 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 was really no problem, since English and French are widely spoken. We could also use our hands and feet to communicate and, in any case, artistic work with language and movement speaks directly from person to person.

Myrna 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 the sense of touch was something quite new to them, although there is no end to what can be experienced through the sense of touch: small bags full of lentils, beans, leather, hide, sheep-

skin, and so forth. The schoolteachers were just as fascinated and open. Georg Kreuer, for example, modeled with clay and the children all around him copied the movements of his hands. Erika Wickenhäuser took up individual colors 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 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 arising from a powerful emotional hunger.

A Successful Pioneering Deployment

What do all these artistic activities have in common? Every time we painted, modeled, practiced artistic speech, did roundelays, or juggled

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with these 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 for this free inner space. In creative activity the soul is quickened as if nourished from a refreshing spring. An inner space is created in which the soul can awaken to life-giving forces rather than merely function mechanically. One becomes a creator once more and not only a victim.

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

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

So what can be done to help and heal our children's nervous systems? First, I support rhythmic, harmonious, noncompetitive movement activities like walking, hiking, and swimming. I support movement therapies that strengthen balance, proprioception, and touch. These movement therapies, which are done to help integrate a child's sensory system, must be gentle and slow. Care must be taken not to further activate the sympathetic nervous system. If the movement therapies are done too quickly or too competitively, then proper pathways can't form. The child needs to be in the relaxed, parasympathetic nervous system in order to make new pathways. The child needs to be fully engaged in the moment, full of love and enthusiasm for what he or she is doing. Movement therapies cannot be prescribed like recipes from a cookbook or items from a list. The therapist needs to be present to the child's movement and fully engaged with the child in a loving way so that child can relax, move, and create neural pathways.

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Next, it is time to stop medicating our children with stimulants. These stimulant medications may dampen or inhibit pathways competing for a child's attention, but we still don't know what these drugs may be doing to that child's future capacity for learning.

I also support an educational environment that teaches our children about the world using all of their senses, including vision, hearing, and, especially, hands-on learning experiences. Our culture and even some educational institutions, with

their reliance on television, computers, and videogames for teaching, are not developing our children's minds and senses.

Competitive sports in very young children overstimulate and activate the sympathetic nervous system. Sugary foods, a lack of essential omega 3 fatty acids (found in cod liver oil, fish, walnuts, flax seed oil, algae, dark green leafy vegetables, and breast milk), inadequate sleep, a sedentary lifestyle—all make it hard for children's neurological pathways to be myelinated and formed. In addition, toxins in our environment, including mercury in some of our vaccinations, also may affect these sensitive pathways.

It is time to stop labeling our children and putting them on medications that just alter their neurohormone levels. It is time to slow down and focus on being in the present moment. It is time to start promoting a healthy lifestyle including nutritious foods, adequate sleep, and turning off television, videos, and computers. It is time to provide lots of healthy rhythmic movement for our children to do at home, in school, and out in nature. It is time to start healing our children.

Barbara Schiller is a trained lawyer, a mediator, and a Waldorf teacher.