

Karlsruhe, 20 December 2010

## **School as a “Safe Place”**

### **Waldorf Pedagogy as Emergency Pedagogy in the interethnic conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan**

**At the end of November 2010, an eleven person emergency team<sup>1</sup> from the “Friends of Waldorf Education” carried out a fourteen-day long trauma pedagogy crisis intervention in four schools in the south Kyrgyz provincial capital Osh. For this intervention, the Friends worked with the employees of the anthroposophical-special education institution “Nadjeschda” in Bishkek. The emergency pedagogy mission came about after the Kyrgyz education minister invited the Friends. Organisational preparations for this mission were made by the Kyrgyz education department.**

### **Ethnic Cleansing in Southern Kyrgyzstan in Summer 2010**

Severe unrest occurred during the dissolution of the Soviet Union Already in 1990, especially in Southern Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Of the 5.3 Million citizens of Kyrgyzstan, about 15 percent have Uzbek roots. In Southern Kyrgyzstan though, the Uzbek proportion of the population is much higher.

In the night of June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010, violent conflicts occurred in the southern Kyrgyz city Osh between Kyrgyz and the Uzbek minority. The conflict is believed to have been started by radicalized Uzbek youths after a disco visit. Hours later, whole city quarters stood in flames. At least 400,000 people fled according to the UNHCR, of them 90% women and children<sup>2</sup>. The remaining Uzbeks holed themselves up in their living quarters. 70% of the buildings in Osh were damaged, whereby about 2,000 Uzbek houses were burned to the ground<sup>3,4</sup>. There were hostage takings, mass rapes, plundering, and murders by snipers. Many of the affected persons are traumatised due to the terrible violent attacks.

### **Children and Adolescents as Perpetrators and Victims.**

Children and adolescents took part on the bloody conflicts as both perpetrators and victims. Perpetrators and victims live in part on the same streets and go to the same schools. They were force to watch as relatives and neighbours were murdered as well as houses plundered and burned down. Many fled. Altogether 1,200 pupils<sup>5</sup> were affected by the pogroms. Almost all of them suffer from the psychical affects of traumatisation.

After traumatising large scale events, like for example interethnic conflicts, nothing is as it was before for the affected persons. Everyday life is severely compromised by the affects of traumatisation. This of course also affects the life processes of the school organism. School as usual no longer functions, because pupils and teachers too suffer from the effects of trauma.

### **Emergency Pedagogy in Osh schools**

*“Our pupils are suddenly unconcentrated, passive, unmotivated, and strangely dependent. They do not have a desire to learn and cannot follow rules anymore. Most of the pupils are skittish, teary, and have strong fears. Our teachers have noticed many illnesses in the pupils: nausea, headaches, eating problems, and sleep disorders!”* reports school director Hpdjiburaeb Avazbek Hatamjanovich about the changes in his pupils’ behaviour after the events in the summer of 2010.

From this backdrop the “Friends of Waldorf Education” sent an emergency pedagogy crisis intervention team at the request of the Kyrgyz Education minister Sadykov Kanat Jalilovitch. In cooperation with the colleagues of the special education institution “Nadjeschda” from Bishkek, children and adolescents are helped to overcome their traumata on the foundations of Waldorf pedagogy. Besides this, methods of pedagogical trauma work were introduced into especially hard-hit schools in the conflict region. The mission was organised by the Kyrgyz education department under the direction of former presidential candidate and representative of the education ministry Gaisha Ibragimova

In the city of Osh there are 46 schools with about 44,000 pupils. 35 schools are designed to be mono-ethnic (15 Kyrgyz and 20 Uzbek schools). Eleven schools work as multi-ethnic schools. The Uzbek school number 20 was destroyed during the conflicts by a fire.

The emergency pedagogy crisis intervention was carried out in altogether four schools each with about 350 children. Each intervention lasted three consecutive days.

### **Pedagogical Trauma Work with Pupils, Parents, and Teachers**

At the centre of the emergency pedagogy crisis intervention were art, rhythm, and movement. The structure of the interventions was ritualised and the daily routine rhythmised to give the pupils stability, safety, and a new orientation through external structural elements. Each day began and ended with communal opening and closing circles consisting of songs, eurhythmy exercises, and sayings. In between, two workshop units were carried out, where form drawing, rhythmic exercises; eurhythmy, art therapy, and experiential pedagogy were offered. On each of the last work days, short presentations of the results of the workshops were given during the closing circle. The teachers at the schools were integrated into the work with the pupils as much as possible in a “Learning-By-Doing-Method”.

Parents often no longer understand the behaviour of their children after traumatic events and usually react with inappropriate pedagogical measures. For this reason, individual parent advising took place at the schools in Osh and some children were introduced to the doctor and psychologist by their parents. Furthermore, psycho-education and parental advising in the form of a parent seminar took place, with the goal of establishing a parent-teacher-self help group.

Teachers too are traumatised. For this reason, three-day long seminar work with the teaching staff took place in addition to the work with the children, adolescents, and parents at each location. The topics of the work included psychotraumatology, emergency pedagogy, and questions about designing lessons for traumatised pupils. In addition to the subject input, artistic activities, movement and rhythm exercises were at the centre of the seminars. A day-long seminar unit for the teachers of the four schools was focused on the question, how to design schools as “safe places”.

### **School as a “safe place”**

In order to process traumatic events and to be able to integrate them into one’s biography, a place, where one knows they are safe, is necessary, because protection and safety heal! School can become such a place of safety, where stabilisation can begin. For this certain elements on the structural level, which allow a school to become a safe place, have to be considered<sup>6</sup>.

On the **physical level**, the clear structuring of space can bring relaxation and stabilisation to traumatised children. This includes the stimulating creative design of outdoor areas with movement and play zones as well as quiet spaces. By the same token, the architectural forms of the buildings and colour design should be considered. Colour and form influence, create boundaries, and have an effect. This also applies to the structuring of the rooms. A set seating plan is just as important for traumatised children as the reduction of objects and materials in the room. They also require concrete guidelines for the structuring of their notebooks. Closed and tight spaces can very easily overwhelm traumatised children. External order works against inner chaos, prevents distraction, and helps children with sensory disorders maintain an overview of the room. Therefore closed closets are preferable to open shelves. In addition to space structuring, a clear framework includes formulated rules for behaviour. Clarity, transparency, and aesthetics heal!

On the **level of time**, rhythmitising and ritualization of the individual lessons, the daily routine, weekly routine, monthly and annual life cycles are important. Every lesson unit should be infused with a rhythmic breath, which in addition to free discussion opportunities (circle time) includes cognitive (subject matter) and rhythmic elements (songs, poems, rhythmic exercises) and the activities of children and youth (action elements). Rhythm and ritualization heal!

On the **psychical level**, relationship structures are of utmost importance. The best pedagogical techniques cannot replace the caregiver-child relationship, which is the foundation and prerequisite for all learning processes. Relationships heal!

On the **biographical level**, a school can become a place where traumatising experiences can be corrected. A school must turn into a space for positive new experiences. Experiences of loss of power must be replaced by experiences of self-efficacy and competence, relationship termination by new bonding experiences, and self-worth problems by strengthening trust in oneself. Such correction of traumatic experiences heals!

#### CONCEPTION

Language can heal too! Language has often harmed traumatised children. They react very sensitively to how they are addressed. They pay more attention to nonverbal aspects such as intonation, gesture, body posture, and facial expressions. On the **level of language** the teacher must be sure to use vivid, concrete language with simple sentence construction and a positive formulation. If space, time, relationship and biographical structures as well as language structures are respected and considered in the design of lessons and schools, school can become a “safe place”.

#### **“Thank you for bringing joy back into our lives!”**

The success of the crisis intervention was perceptible to everyone at all four schools. The initial scepticism of the Kyrgyz colleagues about the “playful methods” gave way no later than the second day in light of the clearly visible changes in the pupils.

The mission also became a media success. Over 20 journalists took part in an hour long press conference. Three Kyrgyz television broadcasters as well as newspapers and news magazines reported in detail about the pedagogical work of the emergency team.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, 2010 the Kyrgyz education minister Kanat Sadykov travelled from Bishkek to a half-day visit with us, to learn about the emergency pedagogy work. In a one hour conversation the minister thanked us on behalf of the Kyrgyz Republic and honoured the emergency team with a certificate of recognition from the Kyrgyz government: *“The ministry for education and science of the Kyrgyz Republic expresses their deepest thanks and appreciation to the international fund the “Friends of Waldorf Education” for their aid which they gave to the children and teachers after the tragic events in the summer of 2010 in the south of our country. The rebirth of the country after militaristic and ethnic conflicts always begins with the teacher, with his self-less work, the courage and power of the mind! You and your colleagues have provided us with very valuable assistance for this!”*.

The highest praise for the emergency team though, came from the children and adolescents themselves. *“If we had worked together in that way, the conflict would have turned out differently!”*, said a 16-year old pupil of school number 30 after an experiential pedagogy training for social competences and her classmate added: *“Thank-you for bringing joy back into our lives!”*.

Bernd R u f

**Annotations:**

1. The emergency pedagogy team consisted of: Monika Görzel-Straube (Waldorf pedagogue), Christiaan Liedorp (Waldorf pedagogue), Lukas Mall (experiential pedagogue), Grit Malsch (Waldorf pedagogue), Kristina Manz (coordinator), Yoko Miwa (psychologist), Bernd Ruf (special education teacher and mission leader), Anna Slavinskaya (interpreter), Ulrike Preisser (doctor), Dmitri Vinogradov (Eurythmist), Heidi Wolf (art therapist), Sulfia Fossilowa (Waldorf pedagogue), Bakytbek Shorojew (Waldorf pedagogue), Gulnur Adshibekowa (Waldorf pedagogue).
2. According to the UN over 400,000 refugees. ORF 16.06.2010.
3. Otr, dpa, apn: Hunderttausende flüchten vor blutigen Unruhen. Spiegel Online, 17.06.2010.
4. Bensheim, Marcus; Böhm, Andrea; Voswinkel, Johannes: Menschenjagd. Die Zeit, 16.06.2010
5. So that the text is more easily readable, only the masculine form is used.
6. Jacob Bausum, Lutz Besser, Martin Kühn, Wilma Weiß (2009): Traumapädagogik. Weinheim/München.

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