

Carol reports on her experience in teaching Montessori in Haiti.

When the Peter-Hesse-Foundation first started Montessori education in poor communities in Haiti, it was a walk-uphill-backwards without-shoes-battle. It really was! Everything about the school system was the exact opposite to Montessori. While the Montessori teacher is the 'keeper of the environment' who is there mainly to facilitate the children's self-conducted learning process, the Haitian teacher is the ultimate authority with the right to deliver corporal punishment and verbal abuse.

The first Montessori class that I set-up in Cap Haitien was situated in an elementary school. In the classrooms around me, I would hear, at least once a day, some poor victim being called out in front of the class, and with outstretched hands, palms up, would receive blows with a whip. This was so normal, that parents doubted my ability as a teacher since I did not have a whip, and elected one of the fathers to bring me one. When I complained to a psychologist attached to the ministry of education, her Pavlovian explanation was "since Haitian children are used to being beaten, they would not take me seriously if I did not hit them".

When the Peter-Hesse-Foundation moved from Cap Haitien to the capital, one of the schools I opened there, happened to be on the same street as a traditional Haitian school. Again the difference made people wonder if my school really worked. The problem this time was they did not hear the children reciting their lessons as is the norm in Haitian schools, where knowledge is measured by how well a given text can be repeated word for word. My school was too quiet, and for the curious who looked in, the children were playing with toys! Even some of the parents of the children attending the school were concerned that their children would not learn to read since they had no books.

Their whole concept of school was challenged. Where were the benches? Where was the blackboard? What was the teacher doing, or rather not doing? Children were moving around - a virtual impossibility in a normal Haitian classroom anyway where often there are 60 children squeezed into benches that are attached to tables. Movement in this case consists of filing in and out of the benches, and going to the front of the class for punishment, or writing on the blackboard- Where were the books? Where was the whip?

Then those Montessori miracles started happening. Children would go home and write a word, or read a street sign, or numbers off a licence plate. Proud parents would come in with all the stories. For me the most touching stories came from illiterate parents, who, even they could not read and write themselves, recognised that their children were experiencing true learning. My sleepless nights of wondering how to convince teachers who were so far removed from a child-centered approach to education, there is another way, was resolved by those children and their parents.

Although the Foundation helped set up over 50 Montessori preschools, our story of Montessori in Haiti is far from over. In fact, after the earthquake destroyed our teacher training centre, we decided to build back a better one. We built a new teacher training campus with emphasis on renewable energy, water catchment, composting and the planting of trees. The new training center has sleeping facilities, so that teachers from different parts of Haiti can be trained and sent back to their villages to open school. This is an important venture in a country where over 60% of the population cannot read or write.

It is not too late to get involved, with your help we can go a long way. You can help by volunteering, or by supporting the training of a Montessori teacher, or by making a small donation towards Montessori materials or school supplies. No effort is too big or too small to contribute towards changing the lives of children for a better and more peaceful world.

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December 2012 – www.solidarity.org – www.amiesf.org -