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FROM THE FLOW OF WATER TO SHELTER: A PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE IN A CONTEXT OF CRISIS

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Abstract: In 2024, Rio Grande do Sul faced the greatest climate tragedy recorded in the last 83 years, with more than 617,000 people having to leave their homes. In response to the crisis, various support initiatives were mobilized, including the creation of a playroom in the PU-CRS Sports Park. This space was designed by the Postgraduate Program in Education at the School of Humanities, with the aim of offering a welcoming and therapeutic environment for homeless children. Educators and volunteers were involved in a variety of activities, including games, reading and artistic expression, with the aim of providing emotional support and helping to overcome childhood trauma. This study examines the effects of these practices on children's well-being and development, adopting a qualitative methodology based on ethnography and participant observation. The results show that playful interaction and a welcoming environment play a crucial role in the emotional recovery of children affected by the tragedy. The volunteers' perceptions, obtained through forms, also showed the importance of the emotional bond and emotional support in this emergency context. The experience in the toy library reinforces the relevance of Emergency Pedagogy and Alterity Pedagogy, both of which are essential for a humanized educational welcome. The study emphasizes the need for support structures that transcend material assistance, prioritizing the reconstruction of community ties and the emotional strengthening of childhoods in times of crisis.

Keywords: Floods; Toy library; Childhood; Emergency Pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Between April and May 2024, Rio Grande do Sul went through the worst climate catastrophe in its recent history, considered the most severe in 83 years. Intense rains resulted in devastating floods, forcing more than 617,000 people from their homes. According to data from the Hydraulic Research Institute of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), around 14.2 trillion liters of water were discharged into Lake Guaíba, corresponding to almost half the capacity of the Itaipu Hydroelectric Power Plant reservoir (Stabile; Paulo; Croquer; Casemiro, 2024, online).

The last similar occurrence took place in 1941, when Porto Alegre remained submerged for 40 days and the level of the Guaíba reached 4.76 meters (Role, 2024, online). However, on May 5, 2024, this mark was surpassed, with the Guaíba reaching 5.35 meters. The state government classified the event as "the greatest climate tragedy" ever recorded in Rio Grande do Sul (Biernath; Costa; Souza, 2024, online). The disaster impacted more than 60% of the state's territory, affecting 463 municipalities and resulting in 169 deaths, 56 missing and 806 injured. In total, approximately 2.32 million Gauchos suffered direct consequences of the tragedy.

The waters, silent and impetuous, took over streets, homes and stories. The Mauá wall resisted, but could not contain the force of nature. The river, so long admired for its landscape, proved to be overwhelming. The flood erased memories, destroyed dreams and imposed a warning: negligence towards the environment takes its toll. In the midst of the chaos, schools had their activities suspended, many of them transformed into shelters to welcome the homeless.

Faced with this bleak scenario, solidarity emerged in full force. Volunteers mobilized in joint efforts to offer support to the affected populations. Everyone was affected in some

way, and the need for support became urgent. Within this network of assistance, special attention was given to children, who should never carry such harsh memories. This led to the proposal for a playroom in the PUCRS Sports Park, organized by the Postgraduate Programme in Education at the School of Humanities. The space welcomed around fifty children up to the age of, providing a safe and welcoming environment.twelve

The playroom worked with the involvement of educators, managers, undergraduate and postgraduate students and various volunteers, who dedicated their efforts to providing care and attention to the children. For six days a week, in the morning and afternoon, a variety of activities were promoted, including games, toys, reading, face painting and artistic and physical dynamics.

This article seeks to understand the impact of the activities developed in the toy library on the well-being and development of homeless children, as well as to analyze the volunteers' perception of the challenges and benefits of this work. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research is not limited to quantifying data, but goes deeper into understanding the meanings attributed to the experiences lived in the toy library (Minayo, 2001). Thus, ethnography and participant observation were used to analyze the children's interactions and their productions over the course of a month (Lüdke; André, 1986). In addition, volunteers' testimonies were collected through online questionnaires, allowing a broad view of their perceptions and feelings about the project. As a theoretical basis, the research is based on the Pedagogy of Emergence and the Pedagogy of Alterity, which guide educational actions in contexts of vulnerability.

In times of collective suffering, alterity manifests itself as a pedagogical practice that prioritizes welcoming the other in their entirety. This concept emphasizes humanizing te-

aching, based on listening to and respecting the subjectivity of each individual (Alves; Ghiggi, 2012, p. 579). Many volunteers discovered talents they had never known they had, and the experience highlighted the human capacity to reinvent oneself in the face of adversity. The toy library was organized as a space for responsible care, which required ethical commitment and sensitivity on the part of those involved (Alves; Ghiggi, 2012, p. 579). As one volunteer said: "I believe that a playful and expressive learning environment is the closest thing we can offer to comfort and welcome at this time" (V6).

While the city faced devastation, the toy library sought to preserve the essence of childhood. A safe and stimulating space was created, with a variety of materials, allowing volunteers, under the guidance of educators, to identify the children who showed the most apathy, aggression or restlessness. The aim was to provide a therapeutic environment where free expression could take place through play, reading and art. According to Emergency Pedagogy:

All emergency pedagogical interventions are carried out in the first days and weeks after the traumatic event and aim to activate and strengthen coping strategies and the child's self-healing power, in order to support them in the process of their experiences and in the prevention of trauma-related disorders. To this end, the main focus is on harnessing the child's resources (s/d, p.3, online document).

In this way, the toy library became a space for symbolic reconstruction, where the children were able to give new meaning to their experiences and find a way to deal with the trauma through play. The study presented in this article seeks to reinforce the importance of these initiatives in times of crisis, highlighting the need for an attentive and humanized approach to children in contexts of vulnerability.

In the early stages of a trauma, such as the one faced by the children in the playroom, Emergency Pedagogy aims to help them reframe the experience and integrate these events into their lives in a less painful way. We knew that a delay in assistance could make the memories of the flood, the loss of their homes and belongings even more striking, making it difficult to bond with the children and increasing the emotional impact they experienced.

The activities in the playroom were designed so that feelings, anxieties and fears could be expressed through different means. The emotional support of the adults involved was essential, providing a welcoming space where each child was listened to according to their individual needs.

It is rarely possible to process a trauma without talking about it. Expressing oneself helps to process the trauma. It is therefore important for traumatized children to verbally process their experiences and emotions, to express them and thus bring them out into the open. This is difficult for traumatized children and should not be imposed on them. But suppression and denial as defense mechanisms lead to behavior avoidance (Pedagogy Emergency, n.d., p.4, online). document

During the days and weeks that followed, we observed that the little ones were looking for ways to make sense of what they had experienced through play, art and music. Drawing and painting, in particular, became predominant languages in which each child, in their own way, expressed their perception of the tragedy that had altered their life stories.

When words are not enough to describe emotions and experiences, other forms of expression become essential. Graphic recording, writing stories and letters, creating poems and even modeling with clay are important tools for coping with trauma. Art allows children to give form to their emotions, making accessible what is often repressed (Pedagogia de Emergencia, n.d., online document).

The routine of the playroom became a space for intense exchange. As the days went by, bonds were built between children, volunteers and family members, who began to share their experiences and expectations. The concept of alterity, defended by Lévinas (1906-1995), argues that education should take place through encounters, in which human beings present themselves to others in their entirety, respecting their singularity without imposing external determinations (Alves; Ghiggi, 2012, p. 582). The volunteers' accounts show the depth of these interactions:

I thought I'd find sadness, crying (common in those who have), lost, lost their homes, family members, various but what I found were children wanting to play, wanting affection, wanting to be seen. They were grateful for everything, for the space, for toys. Then I saw how much we need to grow as a society, since they had apparently never been treated like this, being, received well. (V1)

I expected to find the children more aggressive, but I found them needing to, of affection and attention, relax and have fun. (V2)

There were times when the children would be playing and then suddenly they'd be crestfallen, probably remembering the sad situation. (V1)

Sadness (seeing the people in the gym). Love (every time I looked at a child, I picked up them) Affection. Laughter (playing different) games Guilt (wanting to do more for them). Friendship (bonds between other volunteers, coordinating, the teachers children's parents and the children). There were feelings at different times, I don't think I've ever felt so human. I felt a lot of things.

In the early days, many children chose to color in printed pictures, such as heroes, princesses and landscapes. Gradually, we encouraged them to create their own drawings, giving voice to their emotions. Initially, the strokes and co-

lors reflected the darkness of the tragedy, but as time went on, new elements emerged, such as trees, rainbows and united families.

The experience in the toy library showed that it is essential to rebuild a positive self-image in order to give new meaning to trauma. Encouraging children to take a leading role strengthens their self-esteem and confidence, helping them to overcome challenges. Respecting and valuing individual expressions is fundamental for each child to realize their ability to overcome (Pedagogia de Emergência, n.d., online document).

Over the course of the days, collectivity became part of the children's routine. The play space became a haven of hope, where the enchanted gaze of childhood prevailed over tragedy, rescuing beauty and the possibility of a fresh start.

According to the families, children under the age of two were initially not interested in graphic activities. However, as they interacted with older children, they began to explore this practice. They were still at the scribbling stage, but began to use their hands to paint, coloring not only the leaves, but also their own bodies, leaving different marks on the materials around them. They tested different materials and textures, exploring leaves, colors and their mixtures.

During the make-believe games, the most recurrent themes were care, food, family, friends and housing, almost as an implicit request for these elements to come true. The experience of the houses being flooded was also reflected in the games, as illustrated below:

There was a boy who, in the space where the toy kitchen started putting all the utensils on top of the cupboard, I think exemplifying what the family must have done in the floods. (V4)

"I want to have heard many children say things like: stay here, there's no lack of food and there's a auntie's place to play!"

"Are we going to Can water get in here, build a house? You have to call the fire department quickly so no one dies!" (V10)

While we were playing with playdough, there was a girl who said 'I've lost everything' I had this playdough in my house, but I've lost everything." (V8).

These reports highlight the importance of listening affectionately and respecting each child's time to process their losses. We followed play as a methodology, because we understood that each child had different needs, and play provided an expression of these needs, strengthening playful, creative and symbolic moments. In addition, through play, we built bonds that promoted a feeling of belonging and acceptance, making it possible to organize actions, establish personal limits and create their own rules for each game, which stimulated the children's mental development.

In moments of play, alone or accompanied by peers or adults, you can learn more about children than you might think, more than activities built in a structured and intentional way, requiring patterns, beginning, middle and end, and eventually only one answer accepted as correct. By observing play, we can see what children know, how they feel and what subjective use resources when faced with challenges or experiences. Most of the time, aspects these are not verbalized by the children, but are lived, felt and subjectivized. why That's it's so important to observe and welcome what this moment brings. Play sensitizes and humanizes, it summons us to allow the existence of exist the child that dwells and will to always some extent within the human being (Silva; Lopez, 2023, p. 147-148).

On a daily basis, the children were affectionate and receptive to the displays of affection they received. At times, they expressed suffering at being housed there, not knowing how long they would be there or what space they would return to. These feelings were evident in situations such as the following:

was I I very impressed by a boy who asked, “Auntie, when amcoming home?”, and another boy who took a pieceof fake money (from a board) gameand me handed it to, methanking for being with him, so I told I didnhim’t need it, because I was there to play, and he showered me kisses, there was no price in the world to pay for what I felt at the time! (V4)

That’s when one of them came over in the middle of the gameme, gave a hug and said, “Thanks, auntie.” (V5)

While we were in the square, two boys started talking about how they had gotten to the sports park. One said he had left home in a fire engine, the other by boat and then by police. carThey looked at me and asked how I had got there. I said I was walking home. They looked at ! meAs if they didn’t understand and asked if my house was flooded too. I no, said that I lived near there and that the water hadn’t reached it. They asked me I was doing there if my house hadn’t flooded. I replied that I was there to be with them, to play. They smiled at this answer and repeated that I was there for them. (V12)

The realization that people were there for them, willing to welcome and listen, made the children open up more and more. Gradually, they began to call the volunteers by their names, became attached to them and showed an interest in knowing when they would be working next, expressing a desire to meet them again. After a few days, there were hugs on arrival, at the start of each shift and at the end of the day. After building these emotional bonds, it was possible to establish rules for daily coexistence. The emotional bond between volunteers and children is a crucial process that can only be consolidated through trust, affection and presence.

The manifestations of affection [...] are decisive for the formation of the personality and will have an important influence on social relationships throughout life, thus determining the formation of the individual’s emotional structure. Knowing that affectivity is part of the whole structural and psychological development of the human human being, it, and that without does not develop fully, it is extremely important to demonstrate the importance of affection in building the basis of the personality in the first years of life, considering that what happens to the individual in this period will be reflected in adolescence and adulthood. The impressions recorded in the unconscious by the presence or absence of affective relationships [...] can cause serious affective and emotional disorders in children (Bairros et al, 2011, p. 1).

Welcoming people into the various institutions must go beyond food, hygiene conditions and adequate space to rest. Creating emotional bonds, being present and available are actions that generate emotional and cognitive benefits.

Accompanyingon a basis, I have seen an the children daily incredible improvement in mood and behavior. Some who didn’t speak at all before are speaking, and nowothers who were very evasive are calmer, without fear or anger, every day I’m surprised by something different. (V13)

The transformation took place not only in the children in the shelter, but also among the volunteers, who dedicated their time, financial and emotional resources. Many reported, after their shifts, the therapeutic impact of this connection with the children in times of crisis. The Pedagogy of Alterity, proposed by Emmanuel Lévinas (2000), translates well to the practice experienced in this space. This concept addresses the complexities involved in an ethical and empathetic practice, which reflects both the needs of the other and the inner world of the practitioner.

The infinity of responsibility does not reflect its actual immensity, but rather an increase responsibility as it is assumed; duties grow as they are fulfilled. The better I do my duty, the fewer rights I have; the more more just I am, am the guilty I. The "I" that in fruition we have seen emerge as a being, having in itself the center around which its existence - gravitates is confirmed in its uniqueness by emptying itself of this gravitation, which never stops and which it empty itself itself confirms precisely in the incessant effort to. This is called goodness. The possibility of a point in the universe where such an overflow of responsibility takes place defines, perhaps in the, the self (Lévinas, 2000, p. 222-223).

In this meeting of strangers who somehow became friends, the virtue of kindness was perpetuated, not as charity, but as a generous attitude, as a trait of human subjectivity, present in the small actions of everyday life in the playroom. Each volunteer contributed in their own way, taking on the role of carers, mediators of learning, emotions, fears, reconstruction and dreams. Each one had to empty themselves of something in order to overflow with kindness during the days spent there.

Acts of welcome, respect and affection undoubtedly marked the daily life of this informal educational space. Sensitivity was the key to implementing this work. Volunteers who were also facing difficulties due to the damage caused by the disaster showed solidarity with the suffering of others, and this awareness guided the entire routine of the toy library.

Everyone gave what they could. Some were involved in tidying up the spaces, others in resolving conflicts, others in making exchanges with the children and some, without knowing what to do, were there to be close to this whole. tragedy But in my opinion the most important thing is to have empathy. (V8)

The experience of this intense period of work was extremely positive, but the complexity of the context, with its urgent need for su-

pport, challenged everyone. The group of children seen in the playroom reflected the social inequality that characterizes the reality of our country. It is clear from the attitudes and speeches of these children that many, before the disaster, were already living with a lack of resources and very few educational opportunities. When we offered them materials for plastic production, many of them were delighted, but showed little skill in using these materials. Over time, we noticed that the excess of resources resulted in waste, due to the intensity with which they wanted to use everything they could.

Building rules of coexistence was essential. During interactions with other colleagues and with the volunteers, challenging behaviors emerged, especially during conflicts. Swearing and physical expressions were common, and it became clear that these behaviors were reflections of the environment in which they lived, not just the current context, but the functioning of relationships in their communities. In environments where violence, whether physical or emotional, is a constant, the need to survive often takes precedence over healthy emotional development. Children learn to protect themselves and react to perceived threats with aggressive behavior, which can be misinterpreted as disobedience or lack of discipline. The frustration built up by a lack of opportunities and a sense of powerlessness in the face of adversity is expressed in disorganized and explosive behaviour.

It is important to stress the difference between the aggression that is part of the maturing process and the manifestations of aggressive behavior[...] the aggressiveness inherent in the maturing process can be considered as a form of contact with external reality When this aggression cannot be integrated into the child's self, it starts to manifest itself in relational difficulties, in behaviours externalizing (Vicente; Serralha, 2022, p. 39).

As a result, we conclude that the lack of positive stimuli and prospects for the future reinforce a cycle of negativity and aggression. When they don't find healthy ways to express their feelings, children resort to aggression as a means of communication and defense. In the midst of the children's multiple languages, the affection and guidance of the adults were present, guiding the construction of a specific relational functioning for that space.

The initial aim of the toy library was to offer support during a period of scarcity and mourning. Over time, however, we realized that the space was much more than that. It became a home, a shelter, a school, a family and, above all, a place of affection. In addition to all this, it was an educational space, both for the children and for the adults present there. Whether playing or working, the important thing is that we were all profoundly changed by the experiences and bonds created during this period.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The biggest natural disaster in 83 years in Rio Grande do Sul has left a profound impact on the entire state, but it has also highlighted the importance of community action and solidarity in times of crisis.

Education, in its various forms, stood out as an essential tool in the response to this tragedy. The creation of welcoming spaces, such as the playroom at the PUCRS Sports Park, demonstrated the power of care and emotional support in the recovery of children who had been sheltered for long periods. The play and educational activities not only provided immediate relief from suffering, but also helped to rebuild the confidence and hope of these children, who had lost their homes and school routines.

During their time in the playroom, it became clear that it is essential to promote interventions that encourage the creation of safe and stimulating environments for these children, guaranteeing them access to educational resources, emotional support and a space for

emotional listening, taking into account the reality of their origin. Community support programs, extracurricular activities and the presence of adults who can serve as positive role models are fundamental to breaking the cycle of violence and cultural deprivation. Although it wasn't possible to completely break this cycle, we tried to offer what we call subjective resources so that the children could cope better with the routine in the shelter.

The volunteer work was a clear reflection of the ability to mobilize and the power of otherness in times of crisis. Educators, students and volunteers came together to create a safe and stimulating environment where children could express their fears and traumas through art, play and social interaction. This pedagogical approach, underpinned by Emergency Pedagogy and Alterity Pedagogy, highlighted the importance of welcoming and respecting the singularities of each child during their time at the shelter, which helped to strengthen them when they returned to their schools, homes and communities.

The tragedy in Rio Grande do Sul also serves as a reminder of the devastating impacts of climate change and the urgent need for actionpreventive. It reinforces the idea that education goes beyond formal instruction and is a continuous process of building resilience and strengthening the community. By investing in inclusive and humanizing educational practices, we are preparing future generations to face environmental and social challenges with empathy, solidarity and courage.

The action carried out in the toy library showed us that a collective commitment to rebuilding not only the physical infrastructure, but also the social and emotional ties that sustain a community, is essential. The role of education, more than ever, is essential in forming citizens who are aware of and prepared to deal with a constantly changing world. May this tragedy be a milestone towards a more sustainable and just future for all.

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