

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

February 2018

This month, Dora Ayora-Talavera, Taos Associate shares with us a special project that was funded by the Taos Institute Associates' Grant program.

Teachers of Love and Resilience: Social Constructionist Practices with Children



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In September 2015, I began working in an orphanage with children who have been sent to it by government agencies. Children can stay in this institution indefinitely; some may be there for few weeks, and others may stay there for months or years, depending on the options for being adopted by a family.

All of the children come from abandoned, violent or sexual abuse situations. There are 16 children living there now, between the ages 4 and 16 years old. Without shame, the boys and girls show scars on their arms and legs, and the other scars that lie in their hearts.

Last July, my team and I proposed to the principal that we embark on an ambitious project that would help the children construct promising futures for themselves. Yet, at the beginning we did not know what the children needed and wanted. We just started sharing time with them, introducing artistic performances and cultural activities to promote positive relationships, and to create spaces to open dialogue about the children's needs, worries and interests.

Because this was a new collaboration, it took us some time to create relationships with the children, to gain their confidence, and especially that of the principal. Eventually they all knew that we were not going to disappear, but that we would be there on a regular basis. We've been there for more than a year now, visiting and sharing ourselves with the children. In this time, we have learned that they value presence, love, conversation, time, and fun.

Together with the children we have developed artistic and cultural activities and through this, space for dialogue. We have combined reading poetry and short stories; doing spelling games; and watching movies and documentaries. We read books that have been donated to the orphanage. We held a workshop on music



improvisation, and we introduced a writing activity called “Life’s Story Books”, in which they started writing stories of their own lives as well as fictional stories. We have also participated in birthday celebrations, which are highlights for all of us. Recently the principal asked us to do some additional individual sessions and group interventions that would focus on lying, violent behavior and how to help the children develop more respectful relationships among themselves. Whatever activity we do leads us to be together with the children, share our mutual interests, and feed our growing friendship.

During the past eighteen months of this program, we have developed very close relationships with the children. They are as interested in us and our lives as we are in theirs; they ask about our health, how we are doing, what we did when we were away, and if one of us does not go to visit them that week, they ask, where is she/he? Is he/she fine?

Last week, we made a collage about “Being Respectful.” Every child prepared a presentation. The beauty of their voices was a gift to all present. At the end of the presentations, most of them thanked us for our interest in them, and for our time and the love we share with them. When we ask ourselves, are we really making a difference here? The answer is Yes!

When we think about our work, looking at whether or not we are making a difference, three basic assumptions arise for us:

1) **Human connection** - we are seeing a very committed connection with them as human beings and their needs, seeing them as people in special conditions, without feelings of pity toward them; we value them and their stories; we talk with them honestly and openly. We take care of their need to develop confidence in themselves.

2) **Presence and continuity** - it has been very important that we let them know that we will be there, every week. They teach us the importance of constancy and stability, as a way to build trust, to be together, and to face the uncertainties of life.

3) **Conversations** – the children have been our best partners for dialogue, asking simple questions that challenge every preconception that we have of them and talking to us about “how to work with kids”. Every week our conversations are freer, closer and more intimate.

At the end of the day, these children have been our teachers - teachers of love and resilience, teachers of appreciation and gratitude, teachers of acceptance - because of the ways that they give of themselves without conditions and the ways in which they receive gratefully.

