

**Children, Literacy and Mass Trauma  
Teaching in Times of Catastrophic Events  
And On Going Emergency Situations**

**Text: Denny Taylor**

**Photographs: Taro Yamasaki**



The child in the photo reminds us of the uncertainty of children lives. The greatest discovery that human beings could make in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is how to ensure the survival of their children. It's a discovery that will necessitate the dissolution of racial and ethnic divides, crossing national and cultural borders, and mending religious and political rifts. Scientists in every field, discipline and paradigm would need to work together with physicians, politicians, business leaders and philanthropists. This is unlikely to happen but for longer than we can remember teachers have been working for the dissolution of human divides, crossing borders and mending rifts. There is much that we can learn from them,

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## **Author's Note**

This article focuses on children living in areas of armed conflict, catastrophic events and on-going emergencies. Based upon my ethnographic research I want to try to share some insights into the complexities of the world in which children sometimes have to fight to live. My intent is to create a space in which a discussion can take place and to make room for voices that are seldom heard. I know from previous encounters, both within the academy and society at large that some of the ideas I will share make readers uncomfortable. Up front I want to make clear that the focus is on children, any child anywhere, children everywhere, regardless of their gender, race or ethnicity, nationality or religion. I want to encourage conversation, critical thinking, original ideas, creative thinking and imaginative thought that is accepting of a diversity of ideas, and addresses pejorative controversy and disagreement. It is with this in mind that I share some of my thoughts about children, teachers, catastrophic events and mass trauma.

The photographs that you see here attest to the important role that teachers play in the lives of children who have experienced catastrophic events or live in areas of on-going emergencies. Taro Yamasaki is the photojournalist who took the photos. Taro and I are working together in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza and in St. Bernard Parish, Jefferson Parish and New Orleans in Louisiana in the on-going emergency situation that has resulted from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Taro received the Pulitzer Prize in Journalism for his photographs on life in a maximum security prison. For most of his professional life he has photographed children living in poverty, sick and dying from treatable diseases, and coping with unspeakable wounds in places of armed conflict.

Taro's photos accompany this text but not as illustration. While we have maintained our separate identities, I will write mostly in the first person and Taro will present himself through his photographs. Together we have attempted to use the photos and the text to create a semiotic space for deep contemplation of the issues that we both agree it is imperative that we address. We hope that the text and photos together are more than either text or photos can be separately. You will find that the captions that accompany the photos reflect the different traditions of photojournalism, visual anthropology and activist ethnographic research. We have resisted creating an artificial uniformity and the captions are in keeping with the time, the place and the purpose for which they were taken.

The work is published here in Perspectives on Urban Education because of the unwavering support I have received since the late 1970's for my ethnographic research. The University of Pennsylvania Ethnography Forum has always been a place where I can participate in conversations and take risks in my presentations. Here, in this virtual space, as we approach the twentieth anniversary of the practitioner inquiry day, I write with the ethos of the forum in mind, and invite Taro into the community. Taro's photos span the last thirty years of his life as a photojournalist. Some of the photos he has included will be difficult to look at, just as some of the text might be disturbing, but there is nothing gratuitous. These are the lives that children live and we should not shy away from looking at them or reading about what has happened to them. While we are pushing boundaries both real and perceived, because of the fragility of the political contexts in which we all live and work today, both of us have used restraint. However, we work with the shared understanding that we live and work at a time when for children nothing less than everything is at stake, and that each

of us must work to sustain their lives without compromise. It will come as no surprise to those who know me to learn that the article is now over 200 pages long and that this publication is an abridged version. Taro and I hope that the manuscript, both text and photos, will be published as a book next year. In the meantime readers are welcome to contact me at [taylor.d@att.net](mailto:taylor.d@att.net). Due to the volume of e-mail I receive I cannot guarantee that I will answer every e-mail but I promise to read and learn from them.

In my ethnographic work which focuses on children in regions that have experienced catastrophic events or on-going emergency situations I have used three organizing principles. These principles are explored in greater depth in the longer version of this text. Essentially, each principle requires a shift in positionality, encourages alternate interpretations of science, necessitates resistance to dominant media driven interpretations of events, and minimizes bias in situations of conflict. The first organizing principle focuses on *children* and the importance of positioning ourselves beside them. Thus, children are at the center of any discussion which focuses on their struggle to live in areas of extreme poverty and public health emergencies, places of conflict or post conflict, and in parts of the world in which there are natural and social disasters. We cannot “take sides” if we want to stand side-by-side every child. In a similar way to Brewerton (2006) I have used *trauma* as the second organizing principle (Taylor, 2006). I have spent many years studying trauma, both social and cultural, and in the last five years I have focused on the psychological and medical. This does not make me a trauma specialist or therapist; however, I do think that there are insights that can be gained from the work. I have used *literacy* as the third organizing principle. The literacy frameworks that are the

basis for using literacy as a point of entry have been documented and presented (Taylor, 2004) and are the basis for a book I am finishing which focuses on complexity and fragmentation in literacy research (Taylor, 2006). By entering the research from these three vantage points, research on children, trauma and literacy, there is much to be learned about the ways teachers and schools can use literacy to support children who have experienced both traumatic events and/or live in areas where mass trauma occurs. I will begin by focusing on children and the current world situation.

### **Teaching Children in Emergency Situations**

I am writing about teachers and researchers who are scholar practitioners and our engagement with the world. At the time I write, families I have met in my ethnographic research on children and socio-cultural trauma in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza and Lebanon are caught up in the escalating violence which has the potential to become a full scale war. Some of the children I know are already coping with complex developmental trauma and other serious health issues. Their everyday lives have been and continue to be deeply affected by the armed conflict which is taking place. Thus there is an urgency in our engagement, for the role of teachers is of critical importance to the lives of millions of children in the Middle East and around the world. The need for our engagement is also urgently needed in Louisiana, here in the United States, following the catastrophic destruction of Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the levees, which was so quickly followed by the devastation of Hurricane Rita. In the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, in Jefferson Parish and St. Bernard Parish, and in Baton Rouge where evacuees still live, families are struggling. In my ethnographic research in

Louisiana I am working in communities where there is no electricity, water or sanitation. Even now, one year later, the search for bodies continues and many bodies have been found in homes that were destroyed by Katrina when the levees broke.



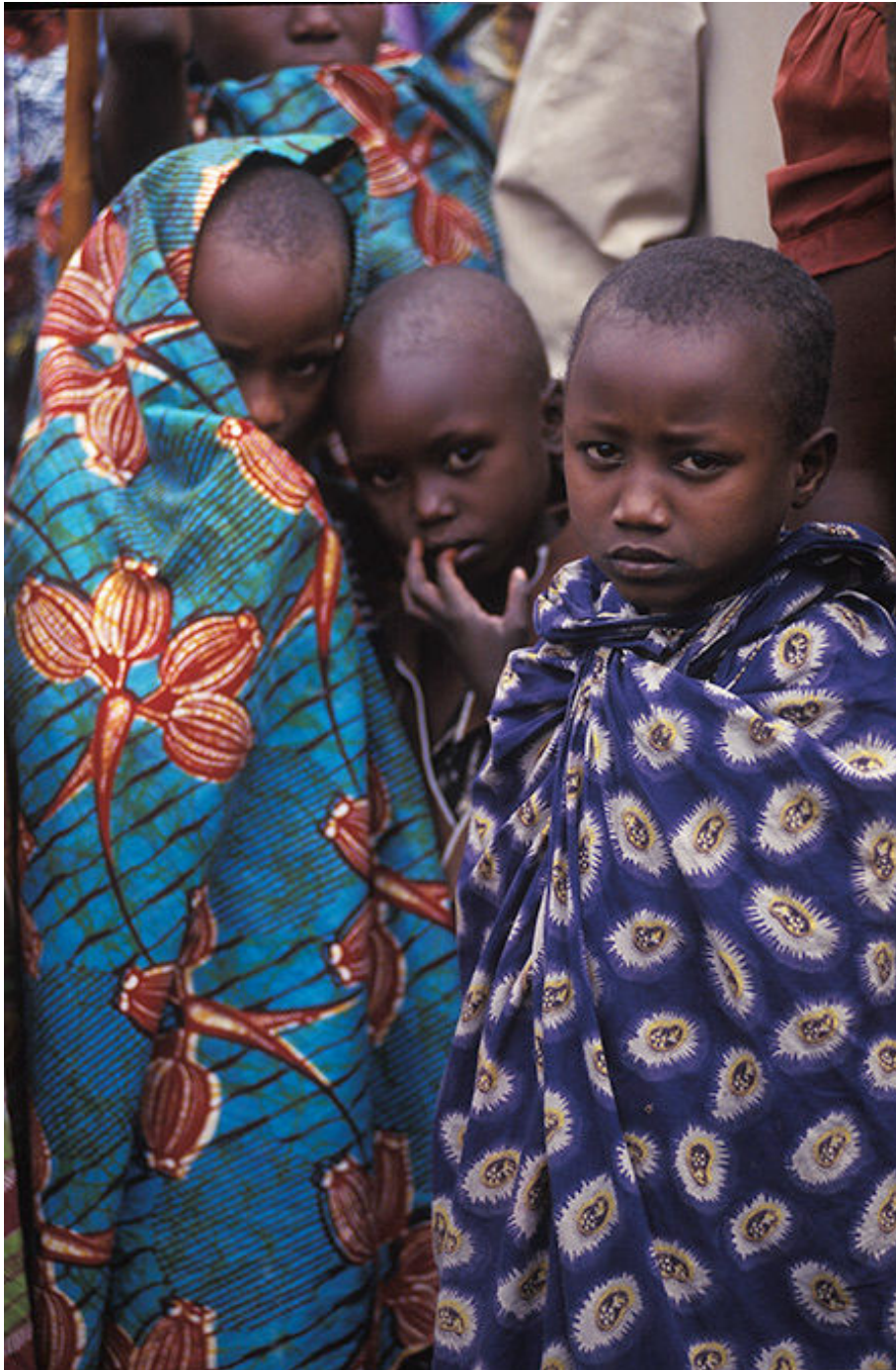
Gen'til was in labor when this photograph was taken. She did not want to bring her baby back to the River Center Shelter in Baton Rouge where she and her daughter, Shanuja, had taken refuge and lived for five weeks after Hurricane Katrina, so she was trying to delay the birth of her baby.





“We’ve been in the shelter for four weeks and it’s not easy,” Rosetta says, “but Mikeil is adjusting very well.” Rosetta said that neither she nor her granddaughter Mikeil had received any medical care.

## For Children Nothing Less Than Everything is At Stake



These boys are Tutsis who fled to Zaire during the genocide in Rwanda and have returned to Rwanda. They are in the Gisenyi Relocation Center established by the UN. They are given flour, sugar and other staples, and blue UN tarps to make tents. Their family names are recorded as the UN attempts to document how many Tutsis fled.

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“This is military base, not a refugee camp,” a soldier says in the movie *Shooting Dogs*, which is set in Rwanda at the time of the genocide. “Actually, it’s a school,” a teacher replies, “my school.” We teach at a time when schools are used as military bases, bomb shelters, refugee camps and hurricane shelters. Schools have become places of nightmares and desperation, as they were in Rwanda, and places of comfort and refuge, as they were in Louisiana.



In Israel, children go to school knowing they will be expected to enter the military before attending university. Children take part in national drills and are trained on how to respond in emergency situations. Every school has a bomb shelter or miklot, which is a cement construction, usually located under the school yard or playground. Children and their families live with the constant threat of bombs and military activity (Laor, Wolmer and Cohen, 2001). Children have been killed or injured. In Tel Aviv, the bombings that occurred near the Bialik School killed and injured many people, and while no children from the Bialik School were injured in the blasts, the school was closed because of structural damage.



In Gaza there are 50 boys in this first grade English class. Children experience recurrent exposure to traumatic events due to military activity. Many children have been killed or injured. Some children's homes have been demolished and many children have witnessed the death or injury of family members. Schools have been damaged and some have been closed. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is both widespread and severe (Thabet, Abed, and Vostanis, 2002).



In Vietnam 3,600,000 people were killed during the war. Traumas and related war induced psychiatric problems were/are prevalent (August and Gianola, 1987). In 1991 a young woman in a school in Saigon participates in a high school class. Education became a major focus during the reconstruction after the Vietnam War. The war left a legacy of conditions that complicated the goal of universal primary education and access to higher education (Anh, Knodel, Lam and Friedman, 1998).





On the first day at the Kate Middleton Elementary School in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, Alexander, who is seated on the right, studies tornados. Alexander grew up in the Ninth Ward and his family's home was destroyed when the levees broke in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Alexander and his family spent five weeks in the Superdome in New Orleans and then moved into a room in an old abandoned motel in Gretna. In June, 2006, he moved into a trailer in the front yard of his family's house in the Ninth Ward. His mother and father are working full time and rebuilding their house in the evenings and at weekends. They began the reconstruction without help from FEMA.

In St. Bernard Parish, Chalmette High School became the last place of refuge for 1,500 members of the community (Elliott and Taylor, 2006; Warner, 2006). "There were married couples, extended families with children, and older people with no families," Wayne Warner, the principal says, "and the sick and disabled, and people who had no means or no transportation to go anywhere else" (p. 82). The electricity went out and the backup generator failed. The



supplies were lost in the five and a half feet of water, a mixture of mud, oil, gasoline and sewage, which flooded the ground floor of the school. On the second floor of the school building windows blew out and parts of the roof were torn off. Except for some small packets of breakfast cereal and a limited amount of bottled water there was no food for five days. The toilets did not work. There were no medical supplies. There was no oxygen, no possibilities of dialysis, and no refrigeration for insulin for those who needed it, just the high sugar of Fruit Loops to keep everyone alive. When Wayne Warner talks about the ways in which the teachers and administrators responded to the needs of those that found shelter at Chalmette High, he says, “that’s what school people do.”

After the storm those that sheltered in the school could see out of the windows that no buildings were left standing. Their whole parish had been destroyed. Reflecting one year later, Cookie Mundt, the assistant principal says, “We know our teachers. We’ve stuck together like glue. Teachers know how to work with people. I honestly believe that we saved lives.” It was the administrators and teachers who cleaned up the human and animal waste on the second floor of the school, and prepared the school to reopen eleven weeks after the hurricane. After the storm teachers drove three hours each way in grid lock traffic from Baton Rouge as they prepared to reopen the school. It’s a journey I made several times to Jefferson Parish with Taro Yamasaki and Cindy Elliott who are working with me (Taylor and Yamasaki, 2005; Elliott and Taylor, 2006). We got up at 4:00 a.m. and often did not reach the school in which we were working until 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. In the afternoon the journey back to Baton Rouge took a similar amount of time. Imagine the toll on the teachers’ lives who made that journey everyday when their own homes were destroyed. Think of the impact of

the loss and destruction on their personal lives and their courage and endurance in returning to school each day to teach.

Before the storm there were 8,800 students in St. Bernard Parish. On November 14, 2005, when Chalmette High School reopened, there were 334 students who were able to return. Their parents, like their teachers, got up before dawn to drive from Baton Rouge. “Every day was a mini reunion with tears of joy and relief,” Cookie Mundt says. “The classrooms were a good place to be. We always went in the direction of making life good for the kids. Doris (Superintendent Voitier) knew it was important to the community for the school to come back. We kept asking, ‘What can we do for our kids?’ We wanted the parents and the community to know that not only is there a school, it’s a good school. It’s working well. Ninety percent of the teachers had lost their homes and so when FEMA did not come through the Superintendent took out a loan and bought trailers for the teachers and administrators.” Wayne Warner smiles, “Mine is fine for one person,” he says.



At Chalmette High School students return one year after Hurricane Katrina. There were three high schools in St. Bernard Parish. Now there is one. Nearly all the students at Chalmette High lost their homes when the levees broke. Few homes have been rebuilt but the students have returned to the school which is playing a central role in the rebuilding of the community.

One year later, on the anniversary of the Hurricane Katrina there are 1,800 students in St. Bernard Parish and two trailer parks for teachers, at Chalmette High School and another at the Andrew Jackson Elementary School which reopened at the beginning of this academic year. The parish is still devastated, mostly uninhabitable, and many students still commute. There has been very little help from the federal government and most families are coping on their own. For the community Chalmette High School has become a place of hope and

possibility. “It’s like it used to be but different,” Cookie Mundt says. “And that’s okay.”



In St. Bernard Parish, one year after Katrina, the second school to reopen is the Andrew Jackson Elementary School which has opened its doors to preschool children. “We held registration and didn’t know what to expect,” Cookie Mundt says. “We had to make it safe for kids because we were a construction site. Parking was a problem so every teacher went out with an umbrella as big as we could get so the children could get into school without getting wet.”





At the Andrew Jackson Elementary School after school programs have been established so that even the youngest of children can stay at school until 6:00 p.m. while their parents whose homes were destroyed by Katrina and then contaminated by the Murphy oil spill begin to rebuild their lives. “No other district had 100% devastation,” Cookie Mundt says. Even when the teachers were given trailers there were no gas stations, no places to buy food, no places to eat. They considered us homeless for a while so they fed us. They gave us breakfast and lunch. Now the kids are coming back so fast one of the second grade teachers begins every morning by asking who’s new.

In the United States, as in countries around the world, when catastrophic events take place it is teachers who are at the epicenter of the recovery. It is their unwavering commitment to children and their families that makes the difference. At Andrew Jackson Elementary School there is a banner in the entrance which reads, “Great Things Happen Here.” On the notice board in the front office there is a notice which says, “Welcome to our family. We are learning with the stars.”

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There is a rocket in the middle of the notice board with the Superintendent “Ms. Voitier” printed on it. The rocket is surrounded by lots of stars with the names of all the teachers in the school. Outside in one of the parking lots there are rows of trailers where the teachers live. Between the rows of trailers you can see the American flag. Being in the company of such teachers of courage leads to deep contemplation of what it means to be a teacher in times of catastrophic events and on going emergency situations.



Teachers live in trailers in the parking lot at the Andrew Jackson Elementary School. There is another trailer park across the road from Chalmette High School. Wayne Warner, the Principal at Chalmette High School, says that 90% of the teachers lost their homes and that most of the teachers will be living in the trailers at least until the end of May, 2007.

Teachers not only teach but together with the children in their classes they create and recreate life sustaining communities that are constantly growing and

changing in response to a constantly changing everyday world. In other countries too, teachers play a similar role. Humanitarian aid workers and volunteers have spoken with me about the work of teachers in Afghanistan, Rwanda and Sri Lanka, and I have experienced first hand in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza the important role of teachers who create safe places for children and their families. Teachers hold communities together. Whatever the difficulty, whether extreme poverty or public health emergency, armed conflict or natural or social disaster, teachers are always present.

### **One of the Most Critical Problems of the Twenty First Century is the Increasing Exposure of Children to Complex Trauma**

Most casualties of war and natural disaster are children. Children die of starvation and treatable diseases every minute, every second, of every day. In rich nations, as well as poor, child abuse is at epidemic levels threatening the emotional health, physical well being and intellectual development of millions of traumatized children. This includes three million children in America who are coping with complex developmental trauma.



In a Muslim refugee camp, near Split Croatia, Smaich is crying because her grandson, Bernes, says he is going to take care of his little brother, Eldon, but that first he has to go and find his father. Smaich's husband has been killed and she is crying because she fears that her son is also dead. In the background another mother looks on. She has a two year old child and her husband is also dead.





In Mostar, Bosnia, half the population has fled. The Old Town is mostly destroyed. No one goes out and the children play inside. In a peaceful moment ten month old Sanin's mother takes him into the garden. There is artillery fire. Sanin has shrapnel wounds and both legs are broken. His mother is also hurt.

In the US child abuse is endemic in all social classes and in all cultural, racial and ethnic groups, and the deprivations of poverty have not changed that much since James Agee wrote *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The work of Jonathan Kozol makes that clear in *Rachel and Her Children* (1988), *Savage Inequalities* (1991), and *Shame of a Nation* (2005). The five volume series on *Children of Crisis*, by Robert Coles, published between 1967 and 1977, makes a similar case. I know from my work with families living in abandoned buildings and men and women living on the streets, both black and white, that extreme poverty, inhuman treatment, benign indifference and malignant neglect are a part of this country as they are any other country.

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Iulian, who is five years old, has been left at the Hirlau Orphanage for the Irrecoverable in Iasi, Moldavia, because he has “crossed eyes.” He is placed in a crib with Petru, who is also five. Petru has been in the fetal position since he entered the institution. Iulian withdraws and begins to rock.

It is essential that we recognize that the lives of children living in the US are connected to the lives of children around the world and that suffering is not continent or country specific. In Central and Eastern Europe almost 1,500,000 children live in public care (UNICEF, 2006), and, like the US, in both Eastern and Western European countries childhood experiences of trauma are unacceptably high.



“There was room after room after room chuck-full of old metal cribs, wire mesh like cages, with cracked peeling paint, one next to the other and all full of children, standing or sitting or lying, with sagging mattresses, all of them,” Barabara Bascom says. Bascom is a physician who was working with orphans in Romania in the 1990’s. “There was a terrible, overwhelming odor because the mattresses were soaked in urine, they had no plastic covers,” she says. “The blankets were wet, because they had no proper drying facilities. The children didn’t have proper clothing. They were dressed in little night shirts, and the little babies in a sort of pantaloon that serves as a diaper, and they were swaddled tightly, mostly for warmth, so all you could see was little eyes. They lived in their cribs, they were given no opportunity on the floor, no play time. They had no toys. They never went outside,” (Nolan, 1990, p.6).



In an orphanage in Romania an aid walks along a hall with three young children. High up on the walls are teddy bears and tigers and other stuffed toys kept out of reach of the children so they will not dirty them.

The mistreatment of children is a worldwide pandemic. UNICEF focuses on the urgent need for the protection of children from violence, exploitation and abuse. UNICEF states in a recent report:

Children without the guidance and protection of their primary caregivers are often more vulnerable and at risk of becoming victims of violence, exploitation, trafficking, discrimination or other abuses. In conflict situations, involuntary separation from both family and community protection, sometimes across



national borders, greatly increases the child's risk of exposure to violence, physical abuse, exploitation and even death. Surviving children face malnutrition, illness, physical and psychosocial trauma, and impaired cognitive and emotional development. Unaccompanied girls are at especially high risk of sexual abuse. Meanwhile, unaccompanied boys are a high risk of forced or 'voluntary' participation in violence and armed conflict (2006).

Consistently, in every arena, governmental, humanitarian, and medical, there is recognition of the importance of education and the work of teachers in situations where children have experienced violence, exploitation and abuse. "Education is more than about learning. Education is first a form of resistance. It is part of a struggle," Adam Shapiro said at an international forum at Hofstra University which focused on teachers helping teachers. Adam is a human rights activist who has made a film about Darfur and another in Baghdad at the beginning of America's second war with Iraq. He said, "The leaders I have known are nearly always teachers." Adam, who has most recently been living and working in Kabul, Afghanistan, is on a plane to Lebanon as I write. "Education is a struggle for identity," he said at the international forum. "'This is who I am.' 'This is who I want to be.' Education is also about survival. Whatever we can do we should do." More than two years after Adam spoke at the forum his film, "Darfur Diaries: Message from Home," which he made with Aisha Bain and Jen Marlowe was released and shown at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York. In Darfur, 2,000 villages have been destroyed and burned. In the film refugees talk about what has happened to them, but many say there are stories

that they just can't bring themselves to tell. Mostly, they focus on the plight of the children who watched as their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters were killed. In the dark I write. The following quotes are close to verbatim. "What they endure here is a lack of education," one man says. There are shots of a school that has been destroyed and then the camera focuses on the two schools, rooms without roofs, made with mud that the refugees have built. The man says there are 315 children attending the schools. "We need many things. We make our blackboards. We need books. Paper. The teachers don't drink tea. They don't eat lunch to educate the children. Education is essential. Without education there is no life. This school, we put it here. We built it. I teach for three years without pay. We will educate our children so their future will be bright."

### **In Life, Death is Easy to Achieve: The Dark Side of Imagination**

Being human brings great joy, especially for teachers who have the privilege of spending their professional lives working with children. Central to the work of teachers is creating spaces for the imaginative worlds of children (Eleanor Duckworth, 1995; Anne Haas Dyson, 2003; Maxine Greene, 1995, 2001; Vivian Gussen Paley, 1981, 1997). For some scholars and philosophers encouraging teachers to create such spaces is their life's work, but the violent beginning of the twenty first century has made us think deeply about our understandings of the role of imagination in human tragedies as well as triumphs. Goya's "Disasters of War" and Picasso's "Guernica" are profound depictions of war, the violence and brutality, but for Goya and Picasso the paintings are also triumphs of imagination. The relationships between death and destruction and compassion and caring, unspeakable acts and celebrated accomplishments, are

more complex than this simple dichotomy implies, but we rarely make the connections in the way, say, that Susan Sontag (2003) does between photographs of war and the photographers who took them.

“Children came yesterday at five o’clock,” Helga Weissova wrote in her diary in Terezín, (Volavkova, 1993). “No one is allowed near them. They are all barelegged and only a very few have shoes. They all have frightened eyes. Where they came from we never found out, nor where they were taken either. They have gone. All that is left is a few lines scribbled on the wall of the barracks that hardly anyone can figure out.” Between 1942 and 1944 there were 10,000 children in Terezín Concentration Camp. Only 500 survived.



“They don’t have to talk about it or write about it, but they can if they want to,” says Cassandra Smith, the social worker at the Kate Middleton Elementary School in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana (Taylor and Yamasaki, 2005). Cassandra is working with the children who were most affected by Katrina. On the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina she says, “I am concerned about the media. That was the worst thing last night showing the Superdome, seeing the water. When children watch it over and over that’s traumatic, re-traumatizing.”

“(H)umanity is an old problem whose fits of cruelty alternates with smiles,” Julian Green (1985) writes in his diary on May 3, 1943. “I never asked the questions I’ve been asking the last few days with quite the feeling of asking them now,” Maxine Green (2001) said at another international scholar’s forum at Hofstra, just after September 11, 2001. “There is a dark side to imagination that we must consider as we imagine the possibilities of children’s lives.” Yesterday, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York I saw the exhibit of Robert Polidori’s (2006) photographs which he took in New Orleans after the hurricane. The exhibit was difficult for me to take in. Huge colored photographs of the catastrophic destruction of hundreds of thousands of people’s homes, but no people. There, living rooms had become still lifes of no life at all. “Like an archeologist, Polidori focuses on both the big picture and the telling detail: the total absence of people, the cruel tumble of furniture; dry tide lines on cars and rotting wallboard. With quiet empathy he records mud-caked upholstery, silenced pianos, the aching droop of ceiling fan blades and wall after wall of disturbingly beautiful but pathogenic mold.”

“Amazing photographs,” a woman says. She is looking at a photograph in which the water is so high you can only see the roofs of a row of cars. “Did you see this car?” she says to the two women that are with her. “Look! There is one! two!” she peers closely, “three! four! five! six!” She laughs. “What would you do about insurance?” one of the women asks. “Take photos before and after,” the other says, and they all laugh. In an eerie way the photos are beautiful and the people who look at them point out the familiar objects that are hidden in the rubble in the huge photos of destroyed living rooms. A man smiles and there is more laughter and my own sense of reality is shaken. Just as I am leaving a

young woman who seems to be similarly “disturbed” says, “It’s here, but it has nothing to do with being socially conscious,” and I am grateful to her.

In the exhibit of the Picasso’s, Renoir’s, and van Gough’s bought and sold by the art dealer Ambroise Vollard there was a hush. The rooms in which the exhibit was housed were hushed. People whispered to their friends. The reds and blues in several of paintings reminded me of the reds and blues in one of the living rooms in the New Orleans photographs but there are people in the paintings. People.

At the forum Maxine Greene spoke about the work of Wallace Stevens. “He talks about the destructive imagination,” she said, “as well as the imagination that opens to the possibilities. He talks about how much work it is for teachers not to deny the dark side of imagination, not to bury understanding, not to bury it even under beauty.” She talked directly to the teachers who have come to hear her speak. “How do I create myself as someone who can somehow be of help? I think we’re all thinking about that.” Then with a brief smile she said, “I wish I wrote my *Releasing the Imagination* in pencil so I could have explored that more, but it’s again one of the incomplete journeys I still have to take.” Teachers are travelers of sorts. To teach is a life long struggle. When we work with our students there is always great pleasure and great pain. Like Maxine, most of us work hard to deny the dark side of imagination. This is the difficult part of being human. We explore and celebrate the great accomplishments of human beings but we do not want to consider that for human beings death is easy to achieve. We know that language learning is central to human existence and that we cannot separate the complex relationships between language and literacy and



children's personal and shared identities and their ways of being in the world. When children are traumatized, it is through language and often literacy that they struggle to overcome their difficulties.

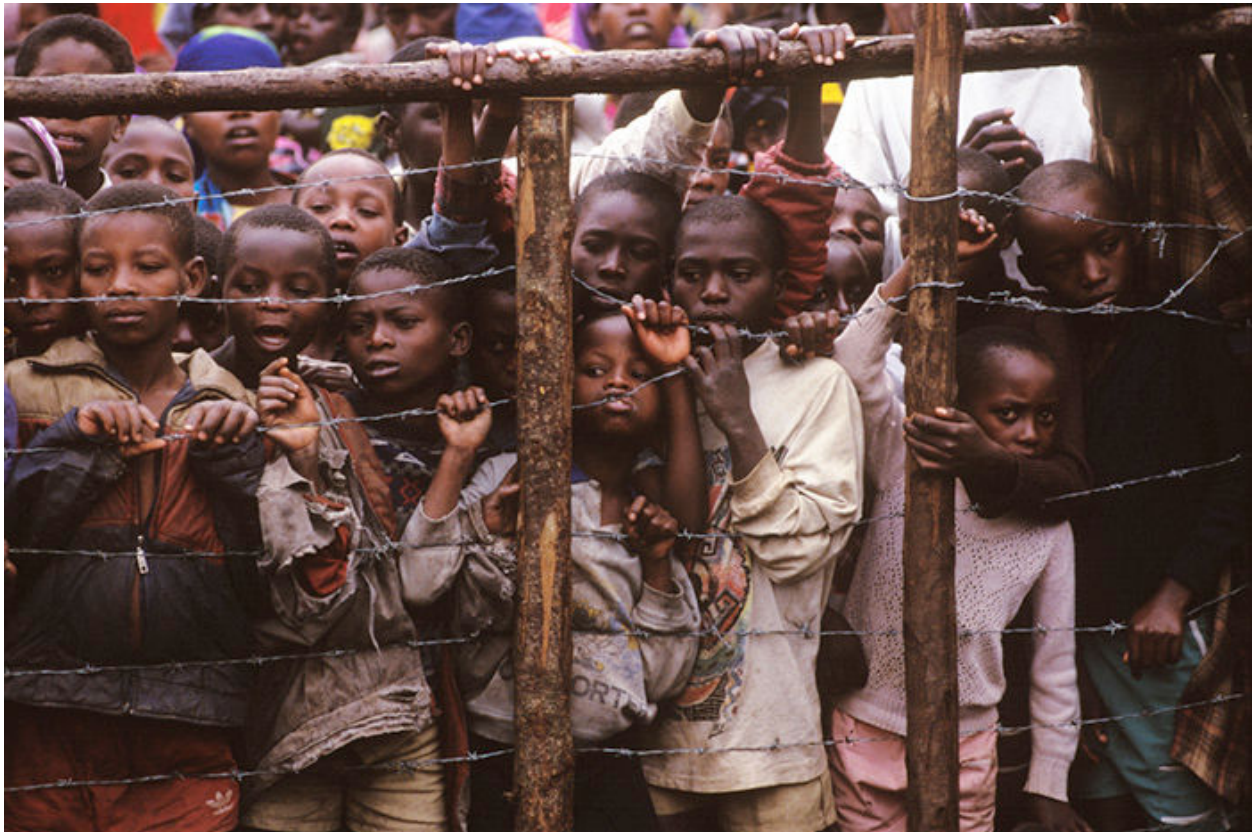
### **Education Has the Potential to Keep Children Alive and Increases the Possibilities for Children to Recover from Mass Trauma**

More than one hundred million people died in wars during the 20th century and the 21st century portends to be equally catastrophic. We live in a time of unimaginable and unspeakable humanitarian crisis, for 50 percent of those killed in wars are children.



Bayardo was in his house playing with his brother when a hand grenade was thrown in the window. Both boys were badly burned and had shrapnel wounds. Bayardo's father is comforting his son. At the Fernando Velez Piaz Hospital in Managua, Nicaragua, where he is being treated there are only limited medical supplies which are reserved for soldiers, and so his wounds have been disinfected with rubbing alcohol.

In the aftermath of mass violence and natural disasters the importance of education, teaching and learning are rarely a priority, and yet as UNICEF states, "In wartime, education gives children a sense of stability" (2005). Evidence of the importance of education is provided in a meta-analysis of 160 studies of 60,000 victims of mass trauma which suggests that re-establishment of social structures bolsters resilience and can minimize psychological problems" (Norris, Friedman, and Watson, 2002; Shalev, Tuval-Mashiach & Hadar, 2004).



Outside the Gisenyi Relocation Center hungry Tutsi boys who did not leave Rwanda during the genocide watch as Tutsi children who left the country are fed on their return by UN aid workers. In a period of four months 800,000 were killed.

Today, in more than 36 countries around the world, children are the innocent victims of armed conflict," UNESCO (2002) reports. "Children have been cheated of the chance to go to school, to play in the fields, and to be raised within a peaceful environment protected by elders. However, the international commitment and investment in education for children living in areas of armed conflict and natural disasters has not been a high priority." Marc Sommers (2002) states, "More than during peacetime, education during and soon after emergencies centers on teachers. If teachers are present and able to respond, educating children can continue" (p. 25). Sommers writes of education as a protective measure and argues that a "lack of investment in and creative, participatory work on education for children and youth in danger makes a return to peace and stability difficult if not fairly impossible" (p.28).

The need for the international community to support teachers working with children in areas of extreme poverty and public health emergencies is also of critical importance. In the last UNICEF update on child survival, which focuses specifically on the mortality rates from preventable or treatable diseases for children under five, thirty thousand children a day die even though we have the knowledge and resources to save their lives. "Child mortality is closely linked to poverty," the UNICEF (2006) report states. "Advances in infant and child survival have come more slowly in poor countries and to the poorest people in wealthier countries." The report addresses issues of public health services and then states, "Education, especially for girls and mothers, will save children's lives" (p.1).

Writing about protection from denial of children's access to quality education, Save the Children states in a policy brief, "All too often education has

been overlooked in emergency settings and has been seen as an area that can only be considered as part of long-term development strategies. Humanitarian donors traditionally do not focus their funding on education, or focus only on school reconstruction and supplies. Appropriate education interventions in emergencies need to focus on quality and content, rather than solely on access and infrastructure, through investments in teacher training, curriculum development, and the development of schools as safe areas” (2005, p. 10). Education has the potential to keep children alive and increases the possibilities for children to recover from mass trauma. Teachers have an important role to play whether we are at peace or war.



At the Kibumba Refugee Camp in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, Hutu boys play volley ball with a net they made from vines. Behind them 800,000 Hutus live in tents. It is just after the genocide in Rwanda and the camp is a violent place for the boys to be and there are many deaths. It is too dangerous for humanitarian aid workers to visit the camp.

Here, in the United States, Katrina was quickly followed by Rita and these two hurricanes have devastated Louisiana and Mississippi. In the Gulf Coast region 372,000 children were evacuated from the communities in which their families used to live. A social disaster has followed which is also of catastrophic proportions. We were not prepared for the physical, social and psychological impact of the hurricanes and we are still not prepared. For teachers this is of particular concern because teachers are often first responders. Few teachers have been trained to work with children when catastrophic events take place, and few teachers, if any, have any experience of working with children in situations of mass trauma.

### **Sharing Hearts and Minds: Using Literacy for the Common Good and Mutual Aid**

We are not powerless. We can participate. There is much that we can do. Every day, teachers in every country and every state cross borders – racial, ethnic, religious and political, metaphorical and physical (Taylor, in press). They make these crossings because they realize that there are no simple solutions to the problems we face. They recognize that there are only more complex understandings of children's everyday lives, especially the lives of children who are traumatized, and that when we narrow our perspective we limit the possibilities of children's lives. The health and well being of children often depends on the work of teachers. Their love and caring, their knowledge and skills, increase the likelihood that children will live and thrive. In many countries it is teachers who lead the call for arms, not for guns to kill, but for arms to hold children, to nurture them and keep them safe.



I want to return to the international forum which focused on teachers helping teachers which was convened at Hofstra University to raise awareness of the trauma experienced by children living in areas of extreme poverty, armed conflict and natural disasters. The forum focused on teachers helping teachers. It was the tenth anniversary of the Rwanda genocide when we met in preparation for the establishment of the International Center for Everybody's Child. Speakers who teach or provide aid in areas of armed conflict or emergency situations were invited to participate with researchers and teachers from around the world whose work focuses on language, literacy and learning in families, schools and communities. I've introduced you to Adam Shapiro. Anat Sofir and Bila Artzi were there from Israel, Immaculée Mukashema from Rwanda and Saji Preli from Sri Lanka. They worked together, philanthropists, neurologists, clinical psychologists, humanitarian aid workers, survivors of the genocide in Rwanda and the tsunami in Sri Lanka and educational researchers and teachers from the international community.

At the forum a radical shift took place in the ways in which those in the medical profession and those in education regard each other. The presentations and discussions that took place raised to critical consciousness the hegemonies of our respective professions. Old divisions were abandoned. In the company of teachers, one clinical psychologist commented that it was the best "trauma conference" that she had ever attended. In recent years, as I have attended medical symposiums and conferences the insularity of the medical profession invariably is evident in the presentations that are made and the conversations that take place. To be blunt, there is little, actually nothing that I have heard which indicates recognition of the contribution teachers can make when

catastrophic events take place or in on-going emergency situations. I recognize the extraordinary humanitarian efforts of those in the medicine, but I am also very much aware of the hierarchical thinking that separates the medical profession from teachers and researchers in education. There is much that we can learn from each other. While teachers know very little about trauma, doctors appear to know very little about pedagogical practices and still less about language, literacy or learning. There is an urgent need to move beyond old ways of thinking and to create new ways for the professions to support each other and to work more closely together.

At the international forum, as old divisions were abandoned, children and literacy were used as organizing principles. Particular emphasis was placed on conversations about the local/everyday experiences of children, and the multiple ways in which language and literacy, as naturally occurring social and psychological resources within the families, schools and communities, can be used to increase the resilience of children who have experienced mass traumas and live in areas of armed conflict. The intended outcome of the forum was the development of working partnerships and collaborative initiatives which can be undertaken by teachers and researchers from the international community to work with teachers and researchers who live and work in areas of armed conflict around the world. The collaborative efforts and the recommendations of the participants at the forum have shaped the work that I have done since that time in the development of the International Center for Everybody's Child.

One of the guiding principles that has framed my professional life for more than forty years is the idea that literacy is a human right. Two other guiding

principles have become important. Both were introduced to me by Louise Rosenblatt who was in her ninety-sixth year when she came to Hofstra to speak at an International Scholars Forum that took place ten days after September 11, 2001. Louise learned these principles from her father who emigrated from Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. He, in turn, learned them from the writings of Kropotkin. The two principles are that literacy can be used for mutual aid and literacy can be used for the common good. Thus the work of ICEC is guided by these three guiding principles: 1. literacy is a human right; 2. literacy can be used for the common good; and 3. literacy can be used for mutual aid.

Allan Luke's (2005) definition of literacy is particularly helpful for teachers who work with these three principles in mind. Luke writes:

Literacy is a malleable repertoire of practices, not an unchanging or universal set of skills. Learning to be literate is like learning to be an artisan in a guild, to play an instrument in an ensemble, like acquiring a craft within a community whose art and forms of life are dynamic, rather than a robotic acquisition and authorization of core skills. Once we understand this we can find the resources, grounds and normative purposes for teaching literacy not from textbooks and skill taxonomies, but by attending closely to what children and communities actually do with texts, old and new, print and multimodal, traditional and radical. This requires something more than common sense, and that we get out of the staffroom, get away from the teachers' guidebooks and draw

upon all skills as teachers and intellectuals, psychologists and sociologists, linguists and ethnographers. The systematic engagement with these everyday texts, discourses and practices is at the heart of teaching and learning. And it is in these artifacts and practices that you will find the generative domains, text and practices for lessons, units and classrooms events (p. xi).

Language is the center of human existence. Through the languages we use when we speak, the words we write and the images we draw, we shape our perceptions of one another. We can use literacy for the common good and for mutual aid. We can create networks of teachers to support children who live in areas of extreme poverty, armed conflict and natural disasters. We can support the work of psychiatrists and physicians working with traumatized children. We can ensure in schools children can play, sing songs, listen to stories and experience pleasures and joys of childhood with their friends. We can make sure that children in their own time and their own way have opportunities to represent their own lives in words and images as they share different stories of courage and love, tragedy and pain. We can do this not just here in this place, although that too is important, but in places where poverty exists, conflicts occur, and disasters happen.

The central premise is that when working for the common good of children, it is essential that we share knowledge, increase understanding and improve the educational opportunities of all children, irrespective of the children's race, ethnicity, gender, religion or national identity. ICEC, which is in its infancy,

provides teachers, psychologists and doctors with the opportunity to work with teachers and other professionals in areas of extreme poverty, armed conflict and natural disasters on problems, some simple and some more complex, in real and virtual time. The idea is to create, through direct involvement and technological assisted participation, new kinds of communities and social organizations that can work together for the collective good of children and their families who live in remote parts of the world, but also here in the United States, especially in Louisiana and Mississippi where children have received inadequate support following the devastation and loss of their homes, schools and communities due to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

My hope is that we can develop collaborative initiatives in the US and international partnerships to increase the social and psychological resources and educational opportunities of children to strengthen their resiliency and recovery from trauma. The work of ICEC will be local as well as global and will have a multidisciplinary focus on the life sustaining needs and educational opportunities of children who live in:

1. Areas of extreme poverty and public health emergencies;
2. Places of conflict or post conflict; and
3. Parts of the world in which there are natural and social disasters.

The intent of the Center is to:



1. Strengthen the resiliency of children;
2. Increase the possibilities for children to recover from trauma;
3. Provide children with opportunities to actively participate in a world wide educational community established through ICEC's international network of teachers helping teachers.

The intended outcome is based upon a radical rethinking of the roles of clinical psychologists, physicians and educators, so that more people work together. The idea is to provide opportunities for teachers from around the world to work with teachers in areas of armed conflict, public health emergencies and natural disasters, on emergency education projects and long term educational initiatives. This work with teachers needs the guidance and support of physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists as well as humanitarian aid workers who have experience in working with children in areas where mass trauma has occurred. The development of ICEC is based upon:

1. First hand experience in areas of extreme poverty, armed conflict and natural disasters;
2. Ten years of participation in urban peace work and conflict transformation/resolution resulting in *Toxic Literacies* which focuses on the lives of two women and two men who were drug and alcohol addicted, and homeless or incarcerated.

3. Anthropological, sociological and pedagogical research which focuses on children who have experienced catastrophic events or live in areas where there are ongoing adverse events taking place;
4. Medical and psychiatric research which focuses on biopsychosocial and developmental perspectives of adverse childhood experiences in which complex trauma is regarded as an organizing principle;
5. The recommendations of UNICEF which focus on the importance of the re-establishment of schools following catastrophic events, and the importance of long term educational opportunities for children who have experiences of emergency situations;
6. Pedagogical practices in safe environments which focus on using language and literacy activities, and arts and science projects that are sensitive and responsive to the local conditions of the children's everyday lives. The pedagogical practices are:
  - i. In keeping with the recommendations of educational researchers and scholars, psychiatrists and physicians, and international aid organizations the activities are strengths based and meaningful in the lives of the children who participate;
  - ii. Culturally and linguistically relevant activities and age appropriate for very young children, older children and

- adolescents who have experienced traumatic events or experience on-going toxic stress;
- iii. Supported by thirty five years of first-hand research in family, community and school settings in multiple contexts including studies of children living in areas of urban and rural poverty and research in areas of armed conflict and natural disasters;
  - iv. Responsive to the major educational recommendations of UNICEF following the 2004 tsunami in India and South East Asia;
  - v. Grounded in theoretical and empirical medical and psychiatric research on complex trauma and children;
  - vi. Responsive to a meta-analysis of studies of mass trauma which indicates that the reestablishment of the social structures (such as schools) in children's everyday lives is of critical importance to their recovery from complex trauma;
7. Seven years of continuous development of a world wide network of scholars, teachers, psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians, aid workers and philanthropists who are willing to participate in the work of ICEC;

8. Five years of development connections with international humanitarian organizations and non-governmental aid organizations in areas of armed conflict and natural disasters;
9. A fully developed proposal for cross-disciplinary, multidimensional approaches to the use of innovative technology that makes a global web of educational opportunities for children who have experienced complex trauma a virtual reality.

Through the center we can use literacy for the common good and mutual aid to:

1. Provide emergency short-term response *and* long-term sustainable support;
2. Connect with existing international organizations and local NGO's;
3. Provide immediate aid/support for children in the aftermath of a catastrophic event by activation of an international network of teachers and scholars; as well as physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists acting in an advisory capacity to the teachers and scholars;
4. Participate in the reconstruction and rehabilitation in emergency situations through the provision of long term support for local teachers facing locally identified problems, and difficulties identified

through the rapid assessment of organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF;

5. Provide long term support by sharing existing knowledge about teaching, learning and instructional knowledge across cultural contexts through:
  - a. development of mutually constructed dialogues and participatory approaches;
  - b. development of culturally and linguistically relevant educational activities and materials;
  - c. development of opportunities and incentives for teacher participation in local training and college courses;
  - d. development of long-distance learning, degrees and research opportunities;

Emphasis is placed on the resistance of cultural imposition and importance of local teachers' voices and narratives. Recognition is also given to the importance of connecting with conflicting groups and the acceptance of irreconcilable narratives of the same lived events. Importance is placed on the exploration of commonalities in teaching and learning across cultural contexts and sustaining local teachers and teaching organizations through the use of technology to connect them with teachers and scholars in the international



community. The purpose and intent of ICEC are ambitious but entirely possible and the urgency of the work and for the center is unquestionable.

### **We must Try to Influence What is Happening to Children**

“Am I asleep?” Archbishop Desmond Tutu asks in a clip on BBC World News on Saturday, October 7, 2006, as I finish writing. “Am I dreaming,” he asks, “when I see the children of all races going to the same school?” He looks up. “No! The sky is still there!” Remember what Louise said. “No matter what your gender, your race, your religion, every child is entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that does not harm others.” In her one hundred and first year, up until the time she died, Louise lobbied congress on behalf of children and their teachers. Those who sit back and wait, are, I believe, ignoring children whose lives are affected,” Louise said. “We must try to influence what is happening to children, and if we fail, as well we may, we shall at least have spread some ideas, have educated some, who will continue the resistance.” So many of my friends, the ones I know and the ones I read are a part of this struggle. Young or old, beginning or retiring and continuing to work, I smile when I think of them. This is an extraordinary time to be in the company of teachers. Go back and look at the photo and caption at the beginning of this article. For longer than we can remember teachers have been working for the dissolution of human divides, crossing borders and mending rifts.



The children who go to school in the Sharon Negev within the reach of Qassam rockets are spending their days participating in activities which focus on the rights and responsibilities of children, the right to live in a warm and loving house, the right to be exceptional, the responsibility to respect others. The children listen to stories, participate in discussions and play games. After lunch there is music in the school yard and the teachers and children dance.



In Hebron in the old city fifteen year old young women play ball between classes. To get to school they pass through military checkpoints and there are often curfews. In school the teachers focus on providing the young women with opportunities to participate in physical activities that they enjoy.



International observers walk with students to school and come back in the afternoon to walk them home. Often the observers stay in the school yard and participate in the sports activities. In a moment the game will be over and the girls will go back to their classroom to study math. They will be asked to come to the board to complete complex mathematical equations. Their participation is as intense as it is when they play ball. Then the lessons will switch and they will study poetry and the classroom will be quiet and peaceful before they are escorted home.





In Jerusalem, at Hand in Hand, a bilingual school, Christian, Jewish and Muslim children study together. Each class has a Jewish and Arab teacher. “The summers in Israel are always long and hot but this summer was especially difficult as both Arabs and Jews felt themselves isolated from each other and their communities during a war that we are all still trying to understand” (Khatib, 2006). The editor of the school newsletter states, “We are always concerned about how these events affect our children, parents, teachers and staff. We are happy to say that the children, parents, and staff of Hand in Hand are still working hard developing new bilingual multicultural curriculum and working to start new schools in parts of Israel. We maintain our values and our beliefs in living together as equals in the complex realities that face us all” (Khatib, 2006).



Every child was welcomed back when the Kate Middleton Elementary School reopened after Hurricane Katrina. “Welcome!” was the first word that children heard as they were given hugs or their hands were held. The teachers wanted their young students to know that school is a safe place for them to be. Whatever is happening in the world, teaching and learning still take place in school.





On her first day at Kate Middleton, Emerald, second from the left, celebrates her birthday with her friends. Emerald’s mother and father brought in a birthday cake and they stayed while everyone sang “Happy birthday” to Emerald. Even after a hurricane on the first day in a new school children still have birthdays. The teachers make sure that children can still enjoy being children, and there is lots of time for them to sing songs, listen to stories and play.

## **Responding to Catastrophic Events and in Emergency Situations**

I would like to leave you with Desmond Tutu and Louise Rosenblatt but I must ask you, right here, right now, if a catastrophic event took place what would you do? The framework presented below comes from the medical and psychological research literature on trauma and my own experience of living and working in places where catastrophic events take place and where there are on-going emergency situations. My son was on a subway one stop from the World

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Trade Center on September 11, 2001. It was late in the afternoon before we knew that he was okay. Many of the students in the Literacy Studies Department at Hofstra were teachers in schools in which children lost parents, and some watched from the windows of their classrooms as the Twin Towers fell. A week after Katrina and Rita I went to Baton Rouge and spent time with families in the shelters and worked with teachers and counselors as schools reopened after the hurricanes. I have continued to work in Louisiana throughout this year and I will return in February 2007. I have been visiting Israel and the West bank and Gaza since January 2003 and I hope to return next year. The framework below is based on all these experiences and it has been reviewed by psychiatrists, psychologists and counselors. An earlier version was the basis for my work with teachers and counselors immediately after Hurricane Katrina. Remember, teachers are not therapists but there is much we can do when catastrophic events take place.

#### First Responses When Catastrophic Events Take Place:

1. Talking with children and youth and their families, who have experienced a catastrophic event, IS an intervention. Just being comfortable with the fact that children are distressed, helps first responders.
2. Make sure children with special needs are located and that their immediate needs are met. This might include making sure the child receives medical attention.

3. When there are young children involved, activities that promote mental health at this time include things like:
  - a. Playing with children to help distract them;
  - b. If parents are present holding babies so parents can eat or rest;
  - c. If there is nothing to do, helping with care giving, just making yourself available, and “being there” with them;
4. Do not ask children to reveal emotional information, but if they do, listen.
5. Try to focus on their immediate needs by reducing hassles for survivors. That means if you assist doctors and Red Cross workers in problem-solving and logistics (e.g. making telephone calls, replacing personal items, etc.) you are providing a service.

#### First Responses In schools:

6. Assume that students are doing their absolute best to cope.
7. Encourage students to engage in self-care.
8. Help students feel as much in control as they can.
9. Make sure students with special needs receive assistance.
10. Don't assume first responders have taken care of basic needs.

11. Make sure students have food, clothing and shelter.
12. Keep parents informed. Send letters when possible.
13. Teachers should not provide psychological intervention, but simply listen and support students who are in distress.
14. It is important that students are not asked to tell their stories. Talking about what happened to them and their families can lead to students reliving the catastrophic event and to retraumatization.
15. If students talk about the events that have taken place, listen and “be there” for them.
16. If students focus on the catastrophic event when they write or draw, make sure that they keep their work.
17. Respect students’ wishes.
18. Do not make false assurances.
19. Do not speculate! Only provide information that you know is accurate about school routines and classroom activities.
20. Re-establish basic routines with students.

21. Engage students in creative activities. Music and art are important.
22. Read stories and then more stories.
23. Suspend all activities that might be stressful. Test prep and tests should be postponed.
24. Make sure there is time for students to play, have fun, participate in sports activities, be joyful. Participating in pleasurable activities is essential for recovery.
25. Reassure students that with the exception of self-destructive behaviors and emotions, their feelings and reactions are reasonable given the situation.
26. If you are concerned about a student, know what to do to triage that student and get them mental or physical health services at your site.
27. Let an administrator or someone in charge of the relief effort know what needs you identify, so services can be provided to help meet those needs.
28. Make sure that every teacher has a list of resources and knows what services are available.

29. Remember that teachers have also experienced the catastrophic event and need support too.

30. Make time for teacher support groups. Hold meetings at lunch time or after school. Teachers need time to discuss what's happening and share feelings. These groups should be non hierarchical, rotate leadership.

I encourage you to work together, talk about the preparations you have made in your own schools. Take a look at “ ‘But I’m Not a Therapist’ Furthering Discussion about Literacy Work with Survivors of Trauma” by Jenny Horseman (1998). Get doctors and nurses in your community involved. If you are an MD reading this article, contact your local school. Read Robert Macy and his colleagues’ (2003) “Healing in familiar settings: Support for children and youth in the classroom and community.” Make sure you talk with teachers as well as principals and school psychologists and counselors. Be proactive in building strong working relationships. Ask yourselves the “right here, right now” question. What would you do? This is a process and not an event. Putting a plan on paper and then putting it in the drawer of your desk is not enough. Discussions should take place on a regular basis and should relate directly to what is happening in the schools.

Then ask the questions behind the questions. How can we live in the world without doing something that might make a difference? How can we connect children of different races, ethnicities and religions, who live in different places? How can we represent different expressions of love and sorrow? Is it possible to create different interpretations of separate and shared identity? Can we advocate



for cooperation and communication in the world arena through the work we do in our classrooms and our schools? Can we impress by our actions and activities that there is nothing more important than the lives of children. No nation, no government, no religion, no soldier, no armed conflict, no freedom fighter, no aggressive act, no politician, no profiteer, no international corporation is worth the lives of our children. Not one child, anywhere, any time. In every place that I have worked “suffering” is the word used most often by mothers and fathers and teachers to describe what is happening to their children. “If one of our children suffers we suffer,” a teacher says, “and if we cause suffering we suffer too.”

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