

THE SEEDS OF HOPE PRESCHOOL: A SOURCE OF MOTIVATION



The history of the Port-au-Prince preschool

Since the mid-1980s, ATD Fourth World has been active in Haut Martissant, a deprived area in the south of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. In 1997, the ATD Fourth World team set up an informal preschool in the Haut Martissant's Grande Ravine neighborhood. It was part of a larger project that aimed to improve the health of residents and foster the development of young children. For almost ten years, children living nearby between the ages of 2 to 7 gathered there twice a week; they played games, sang songs, read books, listened to stories, and participated in arts and crafts projects.

From the outset, many children of all ages took part in the program. As a result, in December 2000, the group split into two: the preschool continued to welcome children from ages 3 to 7 and a separate "Welcome Babies" program group was created for children below the age of 3.

In the mid-2000s, political unrest in Haiti and violent confrontations between gangs in the vulnerable communities of Port-au-Prince meant that ATD Fourth World could no longer continue the preschool program in Grande Ravine. As a temporary measure, the team relocated to a school managed by an ATD Fourth World ally in the residential area Fontamara, and they conducted sessions on Saturdays. To reach this neighborhood, families sometimes had to take risks and walk long distances: some walked for up to an hour and a half from their homes to the preschool. Nonetheless, it was a source of great pride for parents to take their children to school in a different neighborhood.

Observing this, in 2009 the team permanently relocated the new Fourth World House to Fontamara, and operated the preschool from there. Guided by the parents' high aspirations for their children, the staff has steadily made the preschool more formal, catering to children aged 4 to 6, and increasing the number of days it operates each week from two, to as of 2018, four. Teachers received training in ATD Fourth World's values and expertise and integrated these principles into the program. The preschool was named "Seeds of Hope," reflecting an innovative approach to teaching that strives to ensure that children from the most vulnerable families receive an effective education.

A proper education for children from the poorest families

In Haiti, 88% of all schools are private for-profit institutions. As a result, "poverty is an important factor limiting access to education, given the high costs involved (school fees, uniforms, educational materials, books and so on)."¹ And although parents have to pay for it, primary education is largely ineffective: half of all children drop out without having mastered "the three Rs" (reading, writing, and arithmetic). A study by the World Bank found that the teaching methods used in Haiti are the main reason that children do not benefit from the time they spend in the classroom: "Most instructional time is spent on lecturing or eliciting responses in unison from the class, and responses were often related to repetition and memorization. Teachers rarely acknowledged or corrected the many incorrect answers or

¹ *Analyse de la situation des femmes et des enfants en Haïti (Analysis of the Situation of Women and Children in Haiti)*, Unicef 2016, p.28.

lack of answers. [These methods have limited effectiveness](#) in teaching children, especially young children, the foundational cognitive skills they need to succeed in school."²

The distance which has traditionally existed between schools and parents is another factor in the lack of accessibility and poor educational outcomes in Haiti's school system. Parents are often only able to communicate with management, instead of with their children's teachers. That communication is also often in French, despite the fact that many parents cannot understand it.

At Seeds of Hope, the teaching methods and relationships with parents are very different from those typically found in Haitian preschools. In "Another Source of Motivation" Philimène Chérifain, a preschool teacher at Seeds of Hope, tells the story of a boy with special needs called Jòjy who learns how to read. In it, she also describes how she grew both personally and professionally, and provides evidence of the success of Seeds of Hope's innovative approaches. She explains:

"This story has special significance for me because Jòjy and I started at the Seeds of Hope preschool at the same time. I had worked in other schools and have to say that I arrived with some preconceived notions. We always kept a certain distance between teachers and parents where I worked before, but when I started at [Seeds of Hope], I found that it was very different. I have called Jòjy's story "*Another Source of Motivation*" because it is what inspired me to work with families that are in the most difficult circumstances. I love small children and I am very happy that ATD Fourth World has given [me] the chance to work with the most vulnerable children, as well as with those the state has abandoned. I feel privileged to work with them. I have always wanted to help others and bring about change in my country. However, to do so you need a productive environment in which to operate, and to go it alone is not easy. What ATD Fourth World has done is to give us a space in which we can all work together. Parents and teachers respect and trust one another. Our bond means that we as teachers can gain insight into the reality of families' lives. Talking to parents and listening to what they have to say helps us to understand the issues they face, support their children effectively, and tailor our teaching methods to their needs."³

2 Adelman, M., Barón J., Evans J., *Why school enrollment is not enough: A look inside Haiti's classrooms*. World Bank, June 9, 2016. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/education/why-school-enrollment-not-enough-look-inside-haiti-s-classrooms>, 2016.

3 Philimène Chérifain in the short feature "*Tèt Ansanm*" *contre la misère*, Simeon Brand, ATD Quart Monde 2020

Another Source of Motivation

Enrollement

This is the story of a mother who came to register her son for preschool in September 2012. She arrived looking discouraged; "I want to register my child at the preschool," she said. "He had an accident that gave him a disability. He cannot control his right arm and has trouble speaking. My neighbors told me to put him in an institution, but he is my only son. I cannot reject him. He is already 4 years old. I do not have the means to enroll him in a special school but, as I know the preschool, I would like to register him here."

I looked at the child — Jòjy — and felt uncomfortable because I wasn't used to working with children facing these types of challenges. Yanick, a teacher and a member of the ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps, said to me: "What are we going to do? It's true we are not trained to work with children who have intellectual challenges. But we do not have the right to send her away without doing anything for her child. I don't know what will happen, but I'm enrolling him."

In September, at the start of the school year, Jòjy arrived like all the other children. We began by introducing him to the entire class: "He is a child just like you," we told the class. "He had an accident. Anyone can have an accident. We must accept him as he is." All the children agreed. They played with Jòjy, and they talked to him.

We did not know how he would learn because he did not speak. He could not express his feelings, but we, as teachers, understood his mother's concern. We accepted him like all the other children, without knowing what was in store for us. We looked after him and gave him lots of love.

Just like the others

The first year when we took attendance, we called his name even though we knew he would not answer; "Jòjy? Here I am!" we would say, and he reacted to his name through his facial expressions. We never cast Jòjy aside, as we wanted to make him feel he had the same importance as the other children. Later, through a great deal of effort, he began to make sounds.

Jòjy spent a year in the 4 to 5 year-old group. By the end of the year, he could say "hello Philimène" (though with a lot of difficulty) and "thank you" when we gave him something. But we did not evaluate him in the same way as we did the other children. We suggested to his mother that he repeat the same class, and she agreed.

Every Thursday, the children took turns reciting poetry in front of the class. At first, when Jòjy's turn came, he would get up, come to the front of the class, and smile without saying anything. And we said to him: "Bravo, Jòjy!," because for him, getting up in front of the class was already an achievement. He felt comfortable with us. The other children did not laugh at him.

In the second year, even though the words did not come out clearly, he began to sing and recite the poems. He was also beginning to distinguish between colors and gradually participate in activities. With his left hand he could hold a cup, however, we still unfortunately did not have much hope that he would be able to perform well in the upcoming prewriting exercises.

Jòjy begins to read

When Jòjy turned six, he advanced to the next class. He continued to grow and he knew many poems, despite still having great difficulty speaking. He knew four colors and could make

small calculations: when there were 2 mangoes plus 2 mangoes, he was ready to say "It's four!" He emitted sounds accompanied by gestures and, with time and habit, we understood what he meant. When we eventually introduced the class to the alphabet, he understood very well and he could even repeat the sound of letters. By the third trimester, Jòjy had begun to read in the Ti Malice book.⁴

At the last parents' meeting, Jòjy's mother came to congratulate us, telling us that, although her son could not write, she felt happy to see him read, count, and recognize the colors. She thanked us many times, and it touched me a lot.

Several years later

Several years later, Jòjy's mother told us what happened after Jòjy left the preschool. His mother had tried to enroll him in a primary school, but the principal did not initially want to register him because of his disability. Jòjy's mother insisted, explaining the accident that occurred when he was 2 months old. The principal was deeply affected by the story, and finally agreed to enroll Jòjy.

Soon after he began attending school, Jòjy came home one day and told his mother that the students were bullying him, calling him a cripple and an idiot. She immediately went to the school to meet with the principal, and explained what her

son had told her. Jòjy's mother asked the principal to talk to the students and convince them to accept Jòjy. The principal understood Jòjy's mother's reaction and agreed to act: Jòjy has not experienced any bullying since then.

His mother explained to us: "My son shows me a lot of love. Had I "rejected" him as my neighbors advised me to, I would have deeply regretted it — especially when I see how he is today. He helps me so much. I can count on him. He tells me that when he grows up, he will build a house with three rooms, two rooms for me and one for his wife! "

Reflections

Before I started at Seeds of Hope, I had many preconceptions. When I worked in other schools, there was always a distance between teachers and parents: if a parent had something to say, they had to go to the principal, and then the principal would hopefully speak to the teacher. At Seeds of Hope, parents have access to the school. They can be present and watch us teach the children. They are interested in what their child does — whether they're participating, listening, or responding to instructions — and they watch what the other children are doing. Sometimes they give us advice. At any time they can ask us questions. In the case of Jòjy, his mother always came to the school to ask questions. For her, it was a pleasure to see how her son had progressed.

⁴ Ti Malice“ Books for pre-school education in Haiti, a method for studying letters and sounds. In Haiti, a child must know how to read to enter the first grade.