

Reintegrating children in street situations into schools in Haiti

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Dynamo International is an international network of street social workers. We bring street social workers who work on the streets together in order to exchange practices and build common advocacy campaigns around the exclusion of street-connected populations, especially children.

The international network comprises 51 national platforms of street social workers from northern and southern countries, one of which is Haiti. Each platform brings together several local associations and/or street social workers individually. These platforms meet regularly to create strategies and develop activities that help social street workers to share their experiences. Training is also delivered through these meetings.

Returning children to school in Haiti

We have supported the Haitian network of street social workers for a number of years, as the situation of street-connected children in the country is a major concern. One of the many projects implemented focuses specifically on the reintegration of street-connected children into schools. However, the street social workers who facilitate this project have met several difficulties in its implementation.

In Haiti, street-connected children are exposed to abuse through: prostitution, enrolment in negative political activism, drug use, violence and related gang membership. The authorities deal with these abuses by treating the children as offenders rather than victims. In addition, street-connected adults who have grown up on the streets, dominate youngsters and coerce them into working for them. Consequently, street social workers have experienced verbal and physical aggression from these adults – creating a situation in which street-connected children are more and more difficult to reach. This vicious circle of violence can make street-connected children violent themselves.

The context of the project has helped us to understand some of the difficulties of reintegrating street-connected children into schools. For

example, the children sell on their uniforms and school materials, either to make some money for themselves or their families, or because they are forced to do so by older members of the street-based community. The children may also have behavioural problems as they are used to being part of, and surviving within, a violent environment on the streets. These behaviours can carry over to the classroom – particularly with regards to their relationships with adults. If a child has continually experienced violence and abuse from adults, developing trusting, respectful relationships with other adults could be difficult. Addressing these issues has led to collaborative projects to design new interventions for work with street-connected children.

The use of Capoeira to instil respect

The street social work has three components:

- Individual work: the street social workers follow an individual on the streets and address the specificities of her/his profile.
- Collective work: street social workers organise sessions for a group of people connected to the street: for example, awareness raising activities (on drugs etc) or recreational activities like sport or art.
- Communitarian work: street social workers have an active role in society. They raise awareness of the situation of street-connected people with the general public to advocate for their rights and engage citizens in the fight against their exclusion. Street social workers are development agents in this way.

These components are interdependent and bring the street-connected individual complete support.

For example, Braz, a street social worker from Brazil, stayed in Haiti for a while for an exchange of practice between members of the two national platforms. He started developing Capoeira activities with children to develop structure, discipline and respect toward each other. Through this kind of collective activity, the child's social integration is enabled and an easier reintegration into school can be



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facilitated. In respecting Braz, as the teacher, the children are able to extend this respect to the teachers of their classes when they arrive in school. As the Capoeira project had worked well in Brazil, Dynamo International enabled Braz's journey to Haiti to train street social workers there and pass on the practice.

Long-term approaches to reintegration into schools

A round table on child protection in Haiti decided to address the problems of reintegrating street-connected children into schools. The Belgium platform, Haiti.be (<http://www.plateformehaiti.be/>), which coordinates the cross-sectoral networking of a number of organisations active in the country, supported us. We decided to explore the problems facing the reintegration of street-connected children into schools and research of alternatives through an action research project.

The research project is in the early stages. To begin with, we are bringing different stakeholders together, such as street social workers and university researchers from Belgium and Haiti, to combine their knowledge, experience of practice, and methodology. The objectives are:

- to develop an overview of what interventions have already been carried out in Haiti in terms of school reintegration, in order to understand the opportunities and challenges, and the roots of problems;
- to document good practice;
- to trial innovative alternatives through micro-actions that could be implemented in different parts of the country.

This action research method is a continuous movement between micro implementation in the field and analysis. In every city involved in the project, a micro seminar will take place with

various stakeholders, to determine the micro actions that could be implemented at the local level. We imagine that a school and a centre for street-connected children will develop a special partnership. For example, school teachers could give additional lessons at the centre to better understand street-connected children and help the children get used to school teachers. The researchers will analyse information from this experiment to inform future projects.

Researchers, street social workers, schools, child protection officers, and local authorities are working in collaboration to define three micro actions that will be implemented in Port au Prince, Jacmel and Petit Goave over an eight-month period in 2017. It is a pilot project that will inform a transition toward more efficient systems targeting the reintegration of street-connected children into schools. Taking a multi-stakeholder perspective, includes different actors with different experiences, responsibilities and opportunities.

A final conference in December 2017 will present the conclusions of the research to the different stakeholders involved in the protection of children in Haiti. The objective is to develop knowledge and understanding, and establish recommendations based on the research and on practice to the Haitian and Belgian governments that direct their development cooperation policies toward more inclusive and efficient reintegration of street-connected children into schools.

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