

AN EXPERIENCE OF SMALL REFLECTIVE GROUPS

STORY OF JOSE LUIS ENCINAS FROM PERU



José Luis Encinas participated the Mutual Learning Programs. In daily life he is an Emergency and Disaster Consultant.

Read his story here:

It was around 3 in the afternoon and although no one had had lunch, we were all looking forward to these meetings after the encounters we called at that time "emotional recovery" of some 5,000 girls and boys, from several cities in Arequipa and Moquegua in southern Peru that had suffered a strong earthquake in 2000, the facilitators were a thousand schoolchildren from public and private schools who had never done anything together, and the 300 volunteer monitors: psychologists, firefighters, Red Cross coordinators and leaders of Catholic and Evangelical churches.

That day, the girls and boys, organized into small groups, had been given the task of making masks, painting them, decorating them, and then telling a story as if each mask were a character in a story or a mini-movie.

We met as usual at the end of the day. The masks were set up like a museum, the team sat on the floor in a circle as usual, and there began a long, unusual silence. Marita, the youngest, spoke: "We never thought we'd encounter this. There are very beautiful masks of animals or fictional characters, but the girls and boys have made many masks that look like they're straight out of a horror movie, suffering, crying, or afraid (...) There are many devils, witches, or truly scary characters." This broke the silence. Manuel, Amparo, and Betty spoke at once, as if speaking out of the blue.

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When they began to tell their stories, the masks contained within their narratives experiences that were almost always "uncharacteristic" of intense violence: assaults and homicides in the streets, terrorists attacking a neighborhood, mothers beaten by their drunken husbands, children kidnapped by a stranger who apparently sexually abused them.

The discussion in the reflection group quickly became polarized: these were isolated cases and were not the purpose of the meetings for emotional recovery from the earthquake, as opposed to the position that this was the reality the girls and boys were telling us and something had to be done.

I was the coordinator; I knew they were going to ask me what we were doing. Suddenly, I opened my inner video and saw the masks and stories as micro-scenes. My inner dialogue was in controlled stress mode, because I didn't have an answer at hand. I suddenly realized I felt alone, even afraid of my own doubts, and I found it hard to show my vulnerability. But I did it:

"I still feel like I'm still learning and understanding from you this reality of the girls and boys we work with, and this is one of those times when I don't have an answer and I have so many doubts and questions. I suggest we help each other: What do you think is happening? What do you think we should do?"

We didn't reach a super-agreement, something we might call a total consensus, but the internal dialogue made public helped me connect with the team's feelings and their own doubts.

**This experience is part of a long series of stories that emerged within the framework of the Emotional Recovery Program in 2000 in the cities of Arequipa and Moquegua. As a consultant in the field of emotional recovery, I was tasked with designing the methodology and adapting the backpack with the play items.*

*** In memory of Edgar Bellido, a beloved friend and psychologist on the coordinating team of the Emotional Recovery Program, who passed away while participating in psychological interventions for COVID in 2023.*