

## What characterizes education in emergencies?

Crises are very diverse: war situations, flight, displacement, natural disasters, epidemics or bitter poverty. As different as the causes may be, the course of the crisis can differ. What all these situations have in common is that action must be adapted to the crisis and we often have to completely rethink. In this context, the word *crisis* is not only used for supposedly catastrophic circumstances, a crisis can already exist if a few important parameters are out of balance or have been dropped - as is now the case with the measures surrounding the corona pandemic.

Seen from the children's perspective, their everyday life suddenly no longer fits in with the curriculum when schools are closed, lessons are shortened or suddenly there are no longer any structures at all. Now it is important to accept the current situation in which the children find themselves as the "new normality". Emergency education therefore attempts to build bridges between the needs and requirements of children, parents, teachers and authorities by means of individual pedagogical and psycho-hygienic solutions.

This pedagogy focuses on the well-being of the child, whose special situation means that he or she has different needs. In general, it can be said that "spiritual nourishment" is more important for children in times of crisis than inputs in the form of learning material. Depending on the age of the children and the severity of the situation, the relationship between these two factors shifts and returns to a normal level when the crisis ends. In addition, a crisis is always a dynamic process and passes through different phases, so that the action must also be permanently re-adjusted.

Essence of Learning (EoL) actually works with the "essence" of learning (background information on this can be found in the handbook or in the overview), takes a holistic view of the situations and aligns action with the possibilities. In doing so, the approach is more of a supplemental one, which offers support to the children - but also to the teachers - taking into account the mental impairments. It is not only about the acute crisis situation, but also about the way back to normality. With the help of EoL, "learning gaps" that have arisen can be closed more easily.

## Learning in times of crises

The current situation makes it clear that learning in times of crisis brings along new challenges. The children have to adjust to the new "normality" by creating appropriate routines. The transition to the current reality of life demands their attention and strength, so that this affects their concentration on the school content.

The school community disappears and thus not only the direct social contacts, but also the recognition, criticism and regulation associated with it. But the child also demands recognition and attention in isolation. It wants to share what it has actively achieved with others and feel its self-efficacy. In doing so, the child's natural need to learn is preserved and should be satisfied at all costs. However, it must be noted that children learn differently in times of crisis. Since the short-term memory is otherwise occupied, it is important to use the long-term memory, which is always triggered when the child can be active with all senses. However, this requires a commitment on the part of the teachers to follow different paths.

## A change for educators and parents

The curriculum sets out the learning objectives to be achieved at the end of the school year and the textbooks formulate the path to be followed. However, this requires that the content is worked out with the pupils in a class setting. Now this is no longer possible in exactly this form. One of the most important changes is therefore that the children now have to do the main work and educators as well as the parents become "companions". In times of crisis, learning must become an experience that leads to experience. The framework of defined school hours is no longer in place.

This means that other methodological-didactic approaches must be applied. These must be designed in such a way that they simplify "handling" and can be tailored to the respective "teaching conditions" in the families. This means that several children of different ages may be present within a family, and that both children with learning

difficulties and highly gifted children must be taken into account. It must be ensured that the children can give feedback to the teachers, which has to be reacted to. In a crisis situation the child is the “doer” and the teacher the “receiver”.

## **Methodical-didactical considerations based on the “Essence of Learning”**

### **Weekly topic**

Using a weekly topic as a connecting red ribbon offers the following advantages:

- It gives the parents a thematic framework to stimulate the children in a visual and age-appropriate way.
- Different aspects related to corona can be easily addressed (e.g. hygiene, distance, etc.)
- The possibility of putting different school subjects under one roof and dealing with them in a complex way.
- Children can always contribute something to any topic.
- The topics can be edited for any age group.
- The collected works can be used for documentation and analysis when dealing with the crisis.
- The use of a weekly topic ensures that the actuality is dynamically integrated into the learning process.

### **The aid of learning flow and learning pathway**

The methodological didactics of EoL is very much based on the natural development of the child - both in terms of play and learning development. For this purpose two models have been developed, which are linked by the weekly topic:

#### **The learning pathway:**

The basis of the learning pathway is the natural play development of the child. It describes how a child develops a new task or object until he or she can finally overlook it and thus has really understood it. In times of crisis, children often have to focus on perception, orientation and visualisation. These are the first “learning path stages”, which normally shorten the older a child is - but in stressful situations they must be given more emphasis.

#### **The learning flow**

The development of the child and the associated social and cognitive skills are considered in this context. They are always assigned to the respective age/development level. Linguistic, mathematical and creative abilities are differentiated and put into context. With the help of the learning flow it is also possible, for example, to identify exactly where a child currently stands or to which level he or she has been thrown back due to the effects of a crisis.

(The above descriptions are only a quick overview. If you are interested, you can find more detailed information in the handbook).

### **Collection of ideas based on practical experience with EoL in other crisis situations:**

- Stronger focus on perception and orientation/visualisation (see learning path).
- Enabling experiences by promoting creativity and individuality. This means working less target-oriented.
- Setting tasks that make processes tangible and that lead to a result which can be shown to others.
- Encouraging the children to work/create with multifunctional (recycling) materials. In this way, it is also possible to create without paper. The children or parents photograph the results and make them available to the teachers so that they can be collected. Later on, the results can be looked back on, which helps to process what has been experienced.

- Prioritising the child's preferences and competences to create positive experiences/feelings. Work on the gaps can be done after the crisis.
- Reduction stimulates the imagination of the children. Improvisation is discovered as a competence.
- Opening the eyes for the environment in the household, which has many materials available that can be used for learning.
- Set tasks that the child is also able to solve. In this way, frustrations are reduced and self-competence is made tangible.
- Older children design tasks for younger ones. They experience that they and their knowledge are needed.
- Designing tasks whose degree of difficulty can be continuously increased.
- Giving motivating feedback and thus increasing motivation.
- Enabling a sense of achievement, reducing stress.

## For motivation

The questions teachers are asking themselves in the current crisis situation in Switzerland are not very different from those that are being raised all over the world in other adverse circumstances. Everything is being done to support the children and their parents in coping with the tasks. But doubts are raised, efforts are questioned: "Can the children learn? What is the next step? What can we expect after the crisis? Etc." Experience has shown that children should not be underestimated. With a little help, the children become experts; they realize what they can do and identify what they find difficult. We have often seen them grow beyond themselves and mobilize all their resources.

Essence of Learning is flexible as an emergency educational approach and is always adapted to the respective situation. This has already been proven in many places in the world in a wide variety of crisis situations and is also valid for the effects of the corona pandemic in Switzerland.

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In the course of her work for Caritas Switzerland, she developed "Essence of Learning" (EoL), thus creating an adaptable approach that addresses children's learning needs - despite all crises. EoL is used in programmes for different age groups both in and out of school. In 2017 the approach was selected and promoted by the UNHCR for the "Humanitarian Educational Accelerator" (HEA).

The current goal is to make the experience gained over the years in the field of emergency education available to interested teachers. Ideas always inspire new ideas. This is precisely the point: Swiss teachers should benefit from the experience that other teachers have gained in crisis situations.

Contact for further information:

### Learning in Times of Crises

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