

# What should children learn?

## A discussion of learning content during crisis

by Susan Nicolai

*Emergencies present an opportunity to influence or change what children learn so that it becomes more relevant to their everyday lives.*

*From the set of photos used by teachers and students, as mentioned in 'The Framework in West Timor'*

In many crisis situations children have no access at all to organised learning experiences. In others, when schooling is already in place, there are questions as to whether learning is relevant or comprehensive. In either case, there are decisions to be made about what children learn and how they are taught. Crisis changes an environment in such a way that new topics become urgent and new ways of teaching old subjects are necessary in order to be more effective. Introducing learning content or revising that which already exists should help students survive better in changed circumstances, develop individually and socially, and build skills for life-long learning.

### What should learning include?

In an emergency there is often a sense that changes are needed in what children are taught. Before new materials are developed or specific alterations to curriculum are promoted, however, one should have a sense of what is important for children to know - not only as a result of the emergency but also for their lives as a whole. Only then is it possible to assess whether schools can provide the full range of learning content or if out-of-school alternatives are necessary.

#### i. Survival skills: 'learning to live'

Survival skills are a central part of education in emergency situations. Children must have access to the essential knowledge and skills that will enable them to cope with the emergency. In stable situations, children typically learn core aspects of survival from their parents. Crises leave parents without the knowledge or capacity to take on this role. In an emergency, subjects such as safety, health and environment take on increased urgency.

#### ii. Developmental skills: 'learning to be'

At its best, education should never be only about survival, nor should it be only about academic aims. Individual and social development skills are equally important. Structured learning opportunities can contribute to children's sense of themselves and their interaction within a community. Having at least one constant in a daily life full of change can help children continue growing, both individually and socially. This may be achieved by introducing certain subject content such as conflict resolution, human rights awareness or cultural activities. Alternatively, it may mean teaching other subjects in a manner that emphasises communication, encourages positive group interaction and allows children to deal with the emotional impact of the crisis.

#### iii. Academic skills: 'learning to learn'

Core academic skills, taught in a way that help children 'learn to learn', cannot be ignored during times of crisis. Emergencies often delay children academically, either because they face a lack of organised learning experiences for a period or because learning is continually interrupted. Literacy and numeracy, as well as subjects such as history, science, and the arts, are vital for an individual's independence and self-sufficiency. Opportunities to focus on and progress in traditional subjects can also be one mechanism for psychosocial support, providing a sense of normality and opportunities for accomplishment.

### What makes learning effective?

The methods used to convey new knowledge to children are critical. Essential aspects include:



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#### i. Becoming child-centred

Child-centred teaching and learning make the progress of each individual child central to the education experience. The focus is on what children learn, rather than on what teachers teach. Child-centred methods address the needs of the whole child - skills for survival, individual development and social interaction, and academic learning.

#### ii. Learning through activities

Learning is effective when a child can act on what is learned. Teaching must link the knowledge and skills of a certain subject with the competency to use them. Rote learning is not enough. While education should definitely include the theoretical, it must also engage the learner in the practical use of an activity or in discussion of a new awareness. The approach recognises that when children play they are

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often engaged in serious activity designed to learn something they want to know or understand.

#### iii. Both structure and creativity

Education should be provided in a structure that establishes expectations for both teachers and students. This is especially important in emergencies when the world seems out of control. In this environment, a child's sense of security is dependent on the certainty and familiarity of a routine. Structure does not necessarily equal rigidity, however, and affording children a space for expressiveness is equally important.

**Issues to consider**

**i. Changes to content**

During or after a crisis, the established curriculum document may need changes to make it relevant to children in new circumstances. Where the established curriculum has been narrow or rigid, this is an opportunity to expand awareness of other learning needs. Transforming curriculum is a slow process, requiring collaboration with and approval from government bureaucracies. Sometimes it is possible to work with schools to adapt their curriculum or include new subject matter. Often it is not, however, and urgent issues for children must be addressed through learning outside of school.

**ii. Home country versus host country curriculum**

Familiar classroom materials and teachers provide a sense of security and identity for children who have been displaced. For refugee children, the curriculum used should ideally be that of their country of origin. This encourages return home and facilitates reintegration once they have arrived. In situations of extended asylum, Ministries of Education may facilitate conversion from one curriculum to the other, particularly for those who plan to enter secondary or

tertiary schools. Although difficult, it may be possible to arrange for the home country to certify courses completed in the host country.

**iii. Language of instruction**

The language that is used for study is one of the most important aspects in education. It affects both the quality of learning and, in times of crisis, often creates a political statement. Studying in one’s mother tongue is particularly important for younger children, helping them to understand the material they are trying to learn and to retain use of the language. Where it is not possible to use mother tongue, some other means must be found to ensure that children understand (i.e. bilingual parents who can act as classroom assistants).

The mother tongue of an ethnic minority, a group often affected by conflict, is rarely that of mainstream society. Whether in their home country or as refugees in a host country, these children are likely to use a second language for the majority of their education. Similar to the selection of curriculum, as much as possible the selection of language should prepare children in several ways - both facilitating children’s integration in the society around them in cases of long-term displacement and leaving doors

open for families to return. Because language of study raises so many issues, the best policy for selection is one that prioritises the wishes of the beneficiary communities themselves.

**Framework for Learning for Children Affected by Emergencies**

Save the Children has developed a tool to guide decisions on learning content within its own work, both for use when supporting state education systems and when working with out-of-school education activities. Originally prepared during a 1998 regional education meeting in South and Central Asia, the tool continues to be refined through use in various countries programmes.

The Framework for Learning for Children Affected by Emergencies is meant to serve as a starting point, and is deliberately general so it can be adapted to suit many contexts. The package is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child with its call for universal basic education, and focuses on the participation of children. The tool advocates for the applicability of education to real life and promotes the use of a variety of teaching and learning approaches.

SURVIVAL SKILLS: LEARNING TO LIVE WHERE YOU LIVE	
THEME	PURPOSE
Safety Measures	To understand the dangers in the immediate environment and be capable of implementing survival strategies (this could include landmine awareness, small arms safety, camp living, health and sanitation).
Vocational Skills	To acquire practical vocational skills that enable the reconstruction of homes and livelihoods, with appropriate economic skills and an understanding of budgeting, marketing and small business.
Health Promotion	To understand basic health and survival issues, develop practical skills and implement strategies to reduce health risks. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Community Health</li> <li>To promote and improve individual, family and community health and well-being.</li> <li>✓ Reproductive Health</li> <li>To facilitate informed choice based on HIV/AIDS and other risks</li> <li>✓ Environmental Hygiene</li> <li>To be able to pro-actively address personal and environmental hygiene issues that include appropriate water, sanitation and waste disposal resources and practices.</li> </ul>
Analysis & Understanding of Context	For children to understand the effects of a disaster or conflict, what is going on around them and how this impacts on their lives, their families and their communities.
Understanding Unity in Diversity	To recognise the similarities and respect the diversity of people from different cultures, religious, ethnic and political groups.
Environmental Education	To enable children to recognise and understand the direct effects of the disaster or conflict on environment, as well as the impact of human activities.
Parenting & Caregiving	To enable and encourage caregivers (children, youth, adults in the family and community) to take an interactive role in the children’s care and emotional, intellectual, physical and social development.

<b>DEVELOPMENTAL SKILLS: LEARNING TO BE</b>	
<b>CURRICULUM AREA</b>	<b>PURPOSE</b>
Social Development	To be able to confidently participate, interact and take responsibility at individual, family and societal level in all aspects of everyday life.
Communication	To be able to effectively communicate in a variety of ways and situations in a manner which respects, understands and recognises others. This includes watching, listening, talking, participation and interaction.
Social Harmony, Peace and Tolerance	To understand, respect and be open to differences in opinion, religion, ethnicity and background with a commitment to overcoming discrimination and building a tolerant community inclusive of and responsive to all members.
Conflict Resolution	To develop capacities and use peaceful means to resolve day-to-day conflict.
Moral Education	To observe and respect the moral and ethical codes of one's own society and of the host community, drawing on positive aspects of the culture.
Civic Responsibility & Ability to Effect Change	To demonstrate the initiative and confidence to represent and promote the best interests of individuals, family and the community.
Awareness of Rights, Responsibilities & Obligations	To understand and respect that all individuals have basic human rights and to take practical measures to advance them in their daily life.
Psychological Development	To strengthen self-esteem, ability to cope and to be resilient within the changing circumstances of the day-to-day context in which they live towards becoming an independent, capable and responsible person.
Emotional well-being & develop. in conflict	To provide support and encouragement to children so they are better equipped to maintain an emotional balance within the changing circumstances created by the conflict.
Recreation and Creativity	To allow the time and space for leisure, with the opportunity to participate in and express oneself through a variety of recreational activities.
Coping with effects of instability	To cope with fear and stress and develop capacity to recognise the impact of disaster or conflict on themselves and their families and to develop practical coping mechanisms to deal with these.
Spiritual Development	To allow for individuals' spiritual development (thought, conscience, religion) within the socio-cultural context.
Physical Development	To develop a variety of physical skills to improve physical health and mental well-being.
Cultural identity and heritage	To develop skills to know and appreciate one's own culture in order to develop a sense of belonging, while enabling functional integration and appreciation of the host community.
Language (mother-tongue)	To learn one's own mother tongue in order to function within one's own culture and community in addition to other languages as appropriate.

<b>LEARNING SKILLS: LEARNING TO LEARN</b>	
<b>CURRICULUM AREA</b>	<b>PURPOSE</b>
Functional Literacy	To be able to effectively use reading, writing and oral skills for enjoyment, to acquire information and to interact with others.
Functional Numeracy	To be able to apply basic mathematical skills in order to undertake financial transactions, use basic measurements and to think analytically in daily life.
World Learning	To understand and appreciate one's relationship with one's physical and social environment and the wider world.
Science	To develop an investigative approach to learning about the world and the way things work.
History	To develop a sense of history and change.
Geography	To give children a sense of themselves, their family and community, in relation to their environment, and the wider world.
The Arts	To appreciate a community's artistic heritage and develop skills of communication and expression in select mediums.

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This article is drawn from a chapter of the forthcoming *Education in Emergencies Tool Kit*. To obtain a copy, please contact Shireen Miller, tel. +44 (0)20 7703 5400 or email: s.miller@scfuk.org.uk. A short summary of SC UK's policy and practice in education in emergencies can be found at: [www.savethechildren.org.uk/emergency/emmer\\_educ.pdf](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/emergency/emmer_educ.pdf)