

Essence of Learning: a 4-day training and ongoing mentorship for educators of Rohingya refugee children

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DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

Around 900,000 Rohingya refugees, approximately 60% of whom are children, currently live in settlements in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. UNICEF estimates that around 300,000 children have access to education in close to 5,000 learning facilities, leaving 16% of children ages 3-14 and 81% of adolescents (ages 15-24) without access to education (ReliefWeb 2019). These gaps necessitate the development of a scalable approach to quality education.

As the primary entity that provides education for Rohingya refugees, UNICEF has struggled to implement an approach that reaches all children and provides key elements of an education in emergencies approach, such as hygiene and nutrition-related services (UNICEF Evaluation Office 2018). As of the end of 2018, other challenges to education in Cox's Bazar included a lack of learning materials and teachers as well as a lack of emphasis on socio-emotional activities that address psychosocial trauma and encourage resilience.

In addition to an array of other organizations, Caritas aimed to help address these challenges, opening six Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) in Cox's Bazar shortly after the most recent influx of Rohingya refugees. The Caritas CFS provide educational activities that are grounded in socio-emotional learning and incorporate elements of hygiene, nutrition, and psychosocial support. The program aims to address the lack of resources by encouraging the use of recycled materials for learning, and the lack of teachers by using a training method, called Essence of Learning, designed to be accessible to educators who either lack formal education or have limited teaching experience.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Essence of Learning (EoL) is a pedagogical approach developed by Caritas Switzerland that aims to provide

psychosocial and educational support to children in crisis situations. EoL follows a routine offering targeted, sensorial activities which employ recycled materials that are accessible to children in their environment. The program enables educators to teach a typical curriculum through relaxation and play to support children as they recover from traumatic events and restore their ability to learn.

The basic concepts of the EoL program are taught to educators in four days, which ensures a quick start-up that focuses on addressing students' immediate needs in an emergency context. The teacher training – as implied in the name of the program – seeks to convey the essence of high-quality education through practical exercises that draw from the Steiner, Montessori and Reggio Emilia pedagogies. The training uses limited written materials to cater to an array of educator backgrounds, including those who lack formal education training. Educators are also supported through a mentorship component that begins immediately following training. Mentors observe and support educational activities two times a week, until the educator gains sufficient confidence in her ability to deliver the program (based on program monitoring indicators). At that point, mentors' visit frequency decreases, but peer-to-peer feedback continues throughout the program.

Caritas Switzerland and Caritas Luxembourg partnered with Caritas Bangladesh in late 2017 to begin implementation in response to the Rohingya refugee crisis. Although Caritas Bangladesh has been implementing EoL in and around Dhaka since 2013, EoL implementation in the Rohingya settlements began in April 2018. Six Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) were constructed with UNHCR funding to serve the children of 1100 families up to 12 years old. Caritas works with Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), who supports psychosocial case management.

In the Rohingya settlements, Caritas offers EoL in morning and afternoon shifts. Each child attends the program for two sessions (three hours each) per week, ideally for one year. Educators in the CFS are from the host community. Most educators in the first cohort had formal education training, but little classroom experience. Ongoing support for educators includes four reflection trainings throughout the cycle, bi-weekly mentoring, and peer-exchange. Educators are also supported in the classroom by refugee assistants, who do not attend the full training. Finally, Caritas hosts sensitization workshops for parents and caregivers during the program, and provides healthy snacks for children.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

AIR and Caritas collected qualitative data on the program throughout Bangladesh in July 2018. Findings from training observations, focus groups, and a post-training survey of educators and mentors indicated that educators found the EoL training useful and felt equipped to work with children using the pedagogical approach after the 4-day training, which focuses on practical instruction. Results indicated that despite the need for more guidance on activities, practice, and feedback, the short training – accompanied by ongoing mentoring from a well-trained peer mentor – can provide educators with a toolkit to deliver education in emergency settings. These results were especially strong in locations around Dhaka, where educators had received a high-quality initial training and had been implementing for four years.

The collected data shows that EoL trainers' and mentors' practical experience in the classroom is a key success factor. When training and mentoring was performed by individuals with a management background rather than a teaching background, more gaps in the understanding of the methodology were reported by training participants. The continuous and high-quality mentorship is essential to the program and is especially effective when mentors can provide a range of development-appropriate activities and practical classroom strategies. Educators reported that it was challenging to continuously develop contextually appropriate materials and lessons after only recently learning the approach. Educators also requested written documentation to accompany the training and reference throughout the program.

Data indicated another challenge to mentoring teacher practice: some mentors were distracting in the classroom during monitoring, using their authority to interrupt educators to correct them and in some cases, take over classroom practice. While educators unanimously stated that mentors play an important role in developing their educational skills and more generally in supporting their work in the classroom, it is key that they do not take the lead while the lesson is ongoing. The risk is that by doing so they might undermine educators' confidence as well as the children confidence in their leadership.

Community leaders and mothers said they noticed children creating toys from recycled materials or making drawings in the sand since they began attending EoL sessions, indicating that the methodology is enabling children to be creative outside the CFS environment. In addition, community leaders and parents positively valued the CFS community meetings – which bring together parents and the CFS committee – as a positive and sustainable approach to co-creation, acceptance, and engagement. For example, the meetings gave mothers an opportunity to voice requests, such as that their children have umbrellas and identification related to the CFS. The meetings similarly allowed parents to provide suggestions on topics of interest and ask questions about how to supplement children's learning at home.

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

Though a concise, high-level training that lays the foundation for educator-led curriculum is ideal for an emergency setting, emphasis on the ongoing investment in high-quality mentorship is essential for programme success. Though trained in EoL, mentors in Cox's Bazar had not taught EoL themselves, and had misunderstandings of classroom practice. In addition, the mentorship component in Cox's Bazar was seen as top-down as opposed to collaborative. The mentorship component is strongest in cases where mentors have previous classroom experience (as was the case in the learning centres in and around Dhaka) and an existing understanding of education methods. This finding is consistent with the literature on mentorship and classroom practice (e.g., Popova, Evans, & Arancibia 2016).

Educators were overwhelmed by having to continuously develop their own lessons; they requested more examples and practice as training tools, as well as increased peer and mentor engagement and guidance. Ideally, educational activities should require only minimal preparation by the educators, in order not to further increase their workload. Educators also suggested various options for ongoing collaboration, which could include an online community group or other online sharing mechanism, educator meetings, or ongoing group mentorship meetings. Collaborating with other educators in UNICEF or other CFS as part of a comprehensive approach to learning (UNICEF Bangladesh 2019) could also enhance practice and enable the sharing of ideas central to EoL.

Educators emphasized the need for a clear, structured approach to training that links EoL theory to the lessons and developmental stage. From this foundation, teachers could more effectively develop their own lessons and ensure teaching is appropriate based on the age of the children. Despite having seen the benefits of the training approach in non-emergency settings through teacher practice over time, an emergency setting necessitates more guidance that

enables educators to feel more equipped to implement the methods immediately post-training. Such written guidance could also facilitate the integration of an EoL training for educators in EiE generally, who may benefit from training on play-based education and using local materials to encourage children to translate learning outside the classroom.

Finally, though the teaching methods support psychosocial development, the psychosocial support component should be substantially strengthened by specifically linking learning development to psychosocial targets, and by providing clear, evidence-based steps for following up with children who need extra support, including children with disabilities. This finding is aligned with evidence gap on the effects of education programmes on psychosocial outcomes (INEE 2016). Inter-sectoral linkages and employing a specialized psychosocial support specialist in each location to run those elements of the programme would help maximize the effectiveness and legitimacy of this programme component. Formalizing the psychosocial support would also enable educators to focus on classroom activities and learning.

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