**Guide to Working with the Growth Document**

**Introduction**

The diversity and the experiences amongst students from refugee, migrant and newcomer backgrounds are varied. Some students have enjoyed a relatively stable education in their home countries, while others have had none or hardly any. Some students know a second language that they can share with teachers, while others don’t. Some have a rich knowledge of their native language and vocabulary, while others don’t. For some, the journey to the host country was especially traumatic, while for others, it was the deprivation and insecurity in their home countries that was unbearable. For some students, the arrival in their host was distressing, while others have experienced little or none.

Diverse students create the need for diverse trajectories of development. It doesn’t make sense to walk the exact same path with every and all students. When educators insist on the same path, then, they ensure that a migrant student’s unequal start is not only confirmed, but also reinforced. Still, it is very wise to map both the growth and development of every student.

In education, we often think in terms of competences. Goals are often formulated abstractly and without connecting them to specific contexts. In strength-based learning, growth and the use of a student’s knowledge and skills are linked to each context. In an educational context, we want to give young people the space to experiment with other contexts outside of the school and classroom. That’s why in strength-based learning, we emphasize ‘self-management’: a young person can employ, in a self-directed way, diverse skills in his or her own self-chosen contexts. Diverse behaviour – or being able to react and behave differently in various contexts – is a goal.

Because diverse behaviour is a goal, we assume that a school includes free working time into their curriculum.

In the Growth Document, student progress is mapped in a visible way. As such, the Growth Document is a handbook for the young person and his or her teacher (see chart). It works optimally when it is not seen as an instrument to ‘judge’ a student, but as the starting point of communication between the teacher, who is seen as the specialist of learning, and the student, who is seen as a specialist of his or her own learning and the world. Now we will go through the structure of the Growth Document.

**The Growth Document: Structure**

**Themes:**

The themes listed below on the chart are based on human development. When educators claim young people’s time for six to eight hours per day, we shouldn’t assume that we are only responsible for a student’s cognitive development. We try to distance ourselves from a fragmented understanding of parents being solely responsible for some areas of development, while the school is responsible for other areas. Parents and schools are responsible together for the total development of children and young people. They are partners, not adversaries. The themes listed on the chart are:

* Physical and mental health as well as living conditions
* Well-being
* Worldview, identity, perspective for the future
* Openness, Peacefulness, Focus
* Learning processes
* Social and Emotional Skills

**Periods**

The Growth Document is divided into six Periods. We have consciously not linked these Periods to a concrete timeframe. One student might race through the themes of the Growth Document in a year, while another in two years, but a third might need to regularly return to certain themes for support. Obviously, there will be some students who have gone through the themes of the Growth Document before they arrive in the host country.

**Physical and Mental Health as well as Living Conditions**

It’s almost impossible to learn and to develop as a person when there is no structure that promotes and protects the physical and mental health of every child. Inclusive education, with the necessary compensatory measures, is a basic condition to make learning possible for everyone. In strength-based learning, the school reaches out to the local community and the support that is available there, even when this might not be official. Mapping living conditions means that the school charts this for every child and engages in an open dialogue when mapping shortcomings. The school then plays an active role in the activation of networks.

In Period 1, this theme is addressed explicitly. The goal-oriented actions of this theme start for the young person in school and are then connected to fixed activities and free working time. In this sense, the themes of health and living conditions form a part of the curriculum. This is the area where the differences between strength-based learning and thinking in terms of competences are the most acute. We don’t only learn that ‘brushing our teeth’ is healthy (competence), but we also cast a line from classroom activities to free time (e.g. eating fewer sweets and drinking water) and active participation in the neighbourhood/world, until we are sure that the young person has achieved a level of self-control over this (partial) theme (strength-based learning). When we recognize the youth as specialist of his own health, then, he will map out on his own the areas where he experiences the most hurdles to jump over. Not every young person needs to complete this growth line as the ‘best tooth brusher of the neighbourhood’, but we also won’t need to give everyone a medal with the slogan: ‘I’m a champion tooth brusher!’ because they followed three hours of lessons about dental hygiene.

Living conditions are malleable to some extent. They can be adjusted so that they better support a young person. When that’s not possible, what can be added to the line of growth to improve them? Here, we need to think about employing potential outside sources of support. These can be parents, people from the cultural or local community, charities, other teachers, classmates or friends. What support can we extend for a student when, for example, it’s too chaotic to do homework at home? What can be achieved when we consult some of the abovementioned sources, for example, when a child suffers from food insecurity?

**Well-being**

For this theme, we touch all of the ‘Periods’, but not at all times and at the same intensity. At this point, we refer to the use of tools for behavioural and positive classroom management, where we can use the ‘well-being meter’. We also refer to the ‘week planner teacher and student’ where the energy per block of time is measured.

When it concerns getting to know others, we start with the classmates. Then, we attempt to discover how active the young person is in making acquaintances by extending the exercise to others during the free working time: “Who would I like to get to know better?” We deepen this exercise in the following Period by creating projects during free time where longer lasting cooperation is needed: “With whom do I want to work together and who would I like to get to know outside of school?” In the last step, the youth becomes active in outside organizations and networks so that sustainable friendships take root outside of school.

The line of individual guidance begins immediately. The free working time ensures that there’s time for individual students to sit together. In a classical lesson plan, where everyone in a class group gets taught together, this is difficult. Students, who have to ‘leave’ the class, are labelled as ‘problematic’ or ‘less intelligent’, only because they are taken out of class. The establishment of ‘free working time’ ensures that every student receives individual guidance moments with a teacher. It’s no longer really important whether this moment concerns the class material, or a personal problem, or discussions about well-being, or even an experiment with talents. The individual guidance around well-being should be rounded off around Period Three (3). This doesn’t mean that from this moment, i.e. Period 3, the student should be ‘happy’. It does mean, however, that every young person should, at a certain moment, be made responsible for his or her own well-being. That’s why by Period Four (4) or later, we read: ‘Restart at own initiative’.

**Worldview, Identity, Future Perspective**

With worldview, we literally mean how someone views the world. Worldview is determined by a philosophical or a religious framework, by culture, subculture, experiences, but also values and norms, all of or some of these together. TEACHmi’s *Teachers’ Guide on Intercultural Competences* or Competence-Based Learning, focuses especially on worldviews (see separate link under Resources: Teachers’ Guides).

When we talk about ‘identity’, then, we assume that we are speaking about multiple belonging in a constructivist perspective. More information about that perspective and ways to work within that perspective are described in the TEACHmi *Toolbox*. With multiple identities, we mean that someone behaves differently or even adheres to different norms (or societally determined rules) depending on a particular context.

Having a ‘perspective for or on the future’ helps a young person to determine his or her course in life. When they can see a horizon in the distance, then, they can motivate themselves to set out towards the future. The development of this perspective is one of the pre-conditions to stand within life with hope and to react with resilience when misfortunes happen. The central question here is whether the young person can develop a long-term perspective and whether this is a point in the future that provides them with a direction.

We start with long-term planning in Period 2, or even later. We assume that the young person must first feel at home in the school and experiences enough security and trust in order to start to work actively on their future. When given enough time to work out a future perspective, there’s also enough time to research the possibilities to achieve this and to reflect on these with different persons. A future perspective departs from the position of how one’s life could possibly look as an adult. From this standpoint, we work in blocks of time of 3 to 5 years. In the following Period (see Growth Document), the future perspective is made concrete by creating a planning that runs through the next year. At this point, we use the ‘Life Goal Planner’. This Planner contains three (3) rubrics: Life, Future and Worldview. Obviously, the goals of these three rubrics do not need to be filled in each for each month of the year. The ‘School Goal Planner’ is used to make the ‘Life Goal Planner’ concrete for school subjects. Language, Math and ‘Other Subjects’ are listed in the rubrics. Hence, a young person learns at school how to plan his or her life instead of just memorizing material for the next test. Working on this theme begins in the free working time, but not during the permanent activities at school. We want the young person to begin during free working time so that they learn how to work towards their own personal goals, implying a more individual approach.

Worldview and identity change along the way. When a young person wants to stand in solidarity with their school and classmates and they are allowed to focus on their strengths, by reflecting on this process, their worldview develops and they gain a multiple sense of identity and belonging. Hence, future perspective no longer has to be the explicit content of teaching.

**Openness, Peacefulness and Focus**

When a student is unable to open him or herself up for new experiences (openness), are unable to calm down (peacefulness) and concentrate (focus), learning is difficult. Especially when it is assumed that the learner needs to be responsible for his or her own learning processes. Openness, Peacefulness and Focus are the basic conditions of learning. Young people who are unable to master these things, should be given the opportunity to work on these aspects and to grow in their mastery. Often, a young person from a refugee or newcomer migrant background is unable to work through all the classroom material during the first months of their school career in the host country. By explicitly giving priority to activities where openness, peacefulness and focus are practiced, we give young people the chance to achieve mastery over themselves and become self-steering more quickly.

Young people can practice openness, peacefulness and focus, by participating in activities that address these themes:

* Making acquaintances and sharing their personal biography. Young people learn how to become more open by sharing their own personal life experiences. The range includes classic games for getting to know each other and the sharing of personal (even negative) experiences.
* Relaxation. Today, we categorize classic relaxation exercises under the theme of ‘mindfulness’, but we should also consider active forms of relaxation like walking, listening to music, yoga and sports. A more diverse offering will ensure that more young people get the opportunity to arrive at peacefulness on their own accord. A young person can best say for themselves what makes them peaceful.
* Concentration. Having the ability to concentrate is not a given, but it can be trained. Some youth can remain focussed during an entire football match, but are unable to sit still for 15 minutes during a math lesson. Should we then say that they are unable to concentrate? Working on concentration works best a young person is able to consciously extend the time that they are able to concentrate in order to achieve a goal and are then able to learn from it. The goal is not that everyone can concentrate for 50 minutes. The goal is that every youth knows how long he or she can concentrate and is able to search for solutions for him or herself without disturbing the learning processes of the others.

**Learning processes**

The theme of ‘learning processes’ is divided into different areas of interest or courses. Obviously, this can be adapted to the curriculum of a school. We begin by measuring languages and math levels in Period 1. We move the measurement of ‘Other Courses’ to Period 2 so that the young person can get accustomed to the school culture before he or she is tested on these subjects. It doesn’t mean that the student shouldn’t already begin taking these courses. The permanent activities of the other students, together with their free working time, serves as an opportunity to find out what the youth already knows, masters and can implement in his or her life context. It might seem strange to postpone the implementation of knowledge and skills to the free working time, or active participation to the neighbourhood and/or world to Periods 4 or 5, but in the vision of strength-based learning, you only master a set of skills (in an area of interest) when you are able to apply these skills independently (self-management or mastery). Moreover, the expansion of a network of contacts ensures that the student continues to receive impulses and remains motivated. Active participation means that young people look for work in their area of interest. When a school has a strong connection with the neighbourhood, then, this can happen organically.

**Social Emotional Skills**

Most frameworks, which are concerned with social emotional skills, make a link between (a lack of) social-emotional skills and behavioural difficulties and disorders without connecting these to a particular context. In strength-based learning, we first work on creating a positive classroom environment (see section in the Teacher ‘s manual on strength-based learning: Resolving conflicts). Only then is it meaningful to work at an individual level on social-emotional skills. When we fail to establish a positive classroom environment, we cannot rule out that behavioural difficulties are related to a particular context. This is why this theme is included at the bottom of the Growth Document. The message is: first focus on the themes which are found at the top. When young people are able to grow in these areas, then, maybe they do not need to work harder on their social-emotional skills.

Furthermore, often a young person appears to master a number of social-emotional skills outside of a school context, but within a school context, they do not. That’s why we emphasize interaction and interconnectedness with the neighbourhood and local community. What can they tell us about how a young person behaves? Which strengths do we see emerging? How can the young person utilize these during his or her growth process at school? Only when a young person is allowed to provide input into the school context is this possible. When the conditions above, mentioned under ‘Social Emotional Skills has been completed, then, we can apply the growth line for this theme and substantiate them. Otherwise, the message is merely: ‘Be good and do what we tell you to do’.

**What happens to a young non-native speaker, who temporarily remains in an educational system?**

Often, refugee youth and their parents do not actually choose the host country in which they arrive. That’s why the country, where students and their families (or unaccompanied minors) are being educated, becomes for some a ‘home country’, while for others, only a place of transit.

When a teacher and their students can communicate openly about a student’s and/or their family’s intentions, then, together they can create a personalized learning plan for the student’s temporary stay. The Growth Document helps them create a plan so that they can focus on how to fill in the available remaining time. What makes sense for the student will depend upon the young person, his or her own possibilities and the legal framework of the educational system.

**Conclusion**

The Growth Document actualizes the development of the young person as it is based on his or her strengths over diverse contexts. Possibilities to grow always begin in school, but schools should also take active steps to encourage and allow for growth outside of school. We communicate this idea to the young person by sharing their Growth Document with them. We put them behind the steering wheel of their own lives and connect their goals at school with their future perspectives. In this way, they are made responsible for improving their own lives and their own happiness.