

'Is the world coming to an end?'

– exploring children's concerns about what is happening in the world

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Environmental disasters are already key issues in the lives of many children and families around the world – and the trend is rising. The temptation to close our eyes and ears to disturbing news in the hope that the problems will then disappear is tempting, but not effective.

In this article, I want to introduce the Situational Approach to you as a possibility to explore children's fears and concerns and channel them into action and learning opportunities for children and teachers. The Situational Approach is a complex approach to work with children and their families, always focusing on the vision to empower children and adults in their autonomy, solidarity and competence. The Institute for the Situational Approach (ISTA) at the International Academy Berlin, Germany, where I come from, is a place for research and training. On a research trip to Aotearoa, I had the privilege to visit Childspace, meet some of the wonderful and inspiring people working there and glimpse into the pedagogy. I hope our approach connects with some of your ideas and 'inspires you back'. The article was first published in 'Betrifft Kinder' 07-08/2025, a German journal for teachers in ECE and then translated and slightly changed.

When we turn on the news or scroll through Instagram or TikTok content these days, it is not easy to maintain a positive view of the world. We are overwhelmed by depressing reports: natural disasters, climate catastrophes, wars, poverty, political upheavals. Democracy and human rights are being called into question, children are experiencing violence, and exclusion and discrimination are daily occurrences.

In the Situational Approach, we assume that children deal with such issues from a very early age, that they notice what is happening and try to make sense of it. We know that they have feelings about this and are often very alone in trying to explain the negative and frightening aspects of life in the world today to themselves. The more often teachers (and families) succeed in supporting children in dealing with these issues and questions, the better. (Arbeitsgruppe Vorschulerziehung, 1975; Macha, 2023)

In my seminar "Educational Sciences as an Answer to Current Questions" at Munich University of Applied Sciences, we looked at the impact of the current world situation on children's lives – and also reflected on our attitude and experience of crises. Sometimes it is so overwhelming and depressing that we simply switch off, turn away and do nothing at all. Sometimes the news is so abstract that we cannot even imagine how it affects us or our children.

This shows how privileged many of us are: families in Palestine cannot "switch off", but are starving, fearing for their lives, experiencing destruction and violence. In Germany, too, children and their families are subjected to racist attacks, insults and injuries; they cannot turn away. Also in Aotearoa, children experience crisis, poverty or fear. Children affected by natural disasters such as floods, tornadoes, landslides, droughts – no matter where in the world – lose their toys, homes, livelihoods, loved ones. They cannot say, 'This is too much for me right now, it's none of my business.'

I'm not trying to make you – or the children – feel guilty. That won't get us anywhere. Nor am I trying to kick-start activism or prescribe a particular course of action. It's all too complex, too chaotic, too complicated for that. However, I would like to consider two approaches with you – and then describe how we work with children on such complex, unsettling, big questions in the Situational Approach.

Sharing power

The concept of power sharing emerged in the debate about the role of privileged white people in research on discrimination and intersectionality. It makes it clear that discrimination not only disadvantages, marginalises and hurts some people, but also that some people benefit from it. Colonial and patriarchal traditions are at work here, making it difficult for us to recognise the lines of power and inequality and to see our own role in them. For many people, it is a difficult process to realise this. For example, in Germany, we place a lot of importance on individuals having successful educational or professional careers. When I realise that I had an easier time in my educational career than others because of my education-oriented parents, because my parents were able to support me, teach me the appropriate codes for interacting in educational institutions, or use their influence to ensure that I could learn in good educational environments, then perhaps my success is 'taken away' from me, and I resist this insight. On the contrary, if I had to work for my educational success myself, without support from home, I would have a very clear view of the mechanisms of exclusion that I had to overcome. (Nassir-Shahnian, 2020)

Once we recognise the discrimination lying in situations like these, we can figure out where we are involved in discriminating against people. Differences and, above all, certain characteristics are constructed as significant. Certain people are then "different" and excluded because of (physical) characteristics or their membership of certain groups. These differences are associated with a negative or positive value. People are evaluated on the basis of a characteristic, which distracts from their individual actions and qualities. The power difference clearly determines which characteristics are valued or devalued, who is allowed to sit at the table and who is not. Thus, some people benefit from certain characteristics through no fault of their own. And some people are disadvantaged or marginalised because of these characteristics, through no fault of their own either. (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2021; DiAngelo, 2019)

These evaluations do not happen on an individual level, but have become ingrained in our social norms and values and, equally, in our social structures and systems through a long process. Nevertheless, people who have many privileges can learn to reflect on them for themselves and to get involved systemically and structurally in order to address these injustices as a whole. Openly acknowledging one's own privileges contributes to acting in solidarity with others. I hope that this awareness will help us to deal differently with crises in our world and our options for action in them. (DiAngelo, 2019)

Being connected

Báyò Akómoláfé points out how strongly we as living beings in this world are intertwined with everything that happens here. He and many other indigenous thinkers or posthumanists describe how humans are not separate from nature and the world, but rather connected to each other and to the other beings in this world. We often do not perceive this connection or have forgotten how to feel it. When I meditate or walk in the forest or stand with my feet in the sea or a river, I sometimes feel this connection with nature. Do you, too?

Based on this connection, we can also experience our influence on crises in the world:

"Even to ask 'how can I help the world?' is to - like a domino flow of falling cards and cascading movements - shift the world itself and destabilise it, unleashing new potentials and excluding others. We are already ethically complicit, already dancing with others." (Akómoláfé, n.d.-b)

Slowing down

In this dance that we dance with everyone and everything in the world, questions arise: What triggers the suffering of others somewhere else in the world in us? How do we feel that nature is crying out for help in some places? Do we block our connection with the air, earth, water and living beings in this world, or do we open ourselves to it? How do we react to it? Do we turn against it, or do we feel solidarity?

By opening ourselves up to questions of this kind, we become aware of our connection to the world and enter into a dance that will hopefully resonate with and be perceived by many others around the world. This is where solidarity can arise, not directly in our actions, but in the way we perceive the world and what happens within it. We are involved in the process of shaping the world. We cannot ignore this.

Getting caught up in hectic activities sometimes leads us to get bogged down in fragmented solutions and to repeat approaches that have not been successful. That is why Akómoláfé's idea of breaking these patterns seems valuable to me: 'The times are urgent; let us slow down.' (Akómoláfé, n.d.-a)

Slowing down means taking the time to understand what is actually going on, to recognise how differently different people, animals, plants and regions of the world are intertwined with a particular issue. It means opening oneself up to other perspectives in order to recognise and endure the complexity and interconnectedness of the situation. This makes it possible to identify starting points for possible courses of action that were not visible before.

Exploring

When I read Akómoláfé, it struck a chord with me because this very act of getting involved, looking closely, seeing things differently, resonating and feeling connected is part of exploration for me, the first planning step in the Situational Approach. (More information on <https://situationsansatz.de/situational-approach-at-ista/>)

When teachers explore situations and topics that are relevant to children's real lives, a great deal happens. It is about engaging with the topic, taking time, and removing pressure. This allows us to approach a situation, problem, or topic differently. We find clues related to the topic or situation in other moments of shared experience. We notice things that we did not notice before. We engage in conversations, the unknown, the open, for which we previously had no ear, were not ready to see. Thus, exploration can be a deeply creative, new process of coming into contact with this aspect of the world.

When it comes to crises, climate change and similar topics, something happens during the analysis, during this close observation, the discussions and in our self-perception that breaks down the big, generative, overwhelming topic and makes it more tangible: 'Ah, that's part of it!' 'Oh, that could be a way to work with it.' 'I hadn't realised that was part of it.' In this way, we feel -in the further process together with the children and their families - that we have some power and strength within us to shape the world.

Different perspectives

In the Situational Approach, exploration involves considering the different perspectives on a topic or situation. 'Is the world coming to an end because climate change isn't being stopped?' When children raise this question, it is important to talk and mostly listen to them about it in more detail. We try to find out what they understand by it, where they got their information from, what feelings this question triggers in them and what solutions they might have themselves. We can also explore with the families whether and how this topic is discussed at home. For example, are there any climate activists or opponents among the parents? What do families notice about how children deal with environmental issues? What media do children consume that mention climate change, and how is this information presented? It is also interesting to find out how families themselves feel about this. Some family members may find it difficult to address such issues because they would prefer to keep children away from them. In this case, it can be important to talk to families about the fact that children also have to deal with unpleasant things in the world as they grow up, and that we should accompany them in this process together. So when families notice their children's fears or concerns, it is valuable for them to share this with the teachers so that we can also address it at the centre.

In any case, it is important that teachers think about and discuss how they themselves feel about the issue: What is our attitude towards climate change? What feelings does it trigger in us? What are we concerned about when we want or need to address this with children (and their families)? How do we usually deal with such topics with children? What might we want to do differently? This self-reflection is part of our own learning process with the topic. It also helps us to open up emotionally to the topic and the situation, to resonate with what is coming. It helps us to embrace the unknown, the chaotic, the process of joint exploration.

Finding the point of influence

Exploration also involves engaging with specialist knowledge and asking research questions. When it comes to the question of the end of the world due to climate change, it is important to find child-friendly literature on the subject. In Germany, there are several resources to find illustrative material that can be worked on together with children, and provide educators and families with good ways of discussing these topics with children. Perhaps there are adults in the families or communities who have environmental expertise and can work with teachers and/or children on this. A thorough analysis of specialist knowledge is central to working with children in order to expand their knowledge and encourage them to discuss their own ideas on the topic.

There may be other groups of actors who should be included in the exploration. Children may be interested in how politicians or scientists position themselves on the issue (if there is a university nearby, this would be a great opportunity for a visit).

As the scope of the questions and perspectives has already shown, exploration is a lengthy process. This slower pace allows children, teachers and families to engage with the topic and take a comprehensive look at it. It should be an exciting and enjoyable research process for everyone involved, although it can be quite strenuous and intensive.

At some point during the exploration, the children, parents and teachers will realise what they want to achieve in their further work on the topic and what skills they can develop as a result. In line with the Situational Approach, it is always about perceiving oneself as capable of acting in this world. Ruth Cohn, the founder of Theme-Centred Interaction, encourages us in a similar way to become aware of our scope for action: 'I am not omnipotent, I am not powerless, I am partially powerful.' (<https://www.ruth-cohn-institute.org/home.html>)

Resources

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Taking action

When it comes to addressing climate change and the state of the world, this may mean that children take action and urge politicians, society and their families to do more to protect the climate. It could also be that fear and feelings of threat become the focus of exploration. In this case, the goal is more about learning to deal with these difficult feelings.

The second planning step, setting goals, is therefore about determining the focus of further work based on the findings of the exploration.

This is followed by further activities to continue working on the topic in line with the main objective – always in a joint process with the children and their families, and taking the time that is needed.

The fourth planning step once again explicitly calls on us to reflect on the process, to evaluate what happened, how children and families were involved in the process, what difficult moments there were, and what educators, children and families are particularly proud of.

Throughout this entire process of working on a topic with the children, we are constantly confronted with power structures and our connection to the world. With my text, I hope I have been able to contribute to making us more open to these questions; that we, as educational teams and as citizens of our society, set out on the path to address these issues and make them tangible for children. This will certainly not happen overnight. But we can start and do a little bit. And then maybe a little more next time...



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