
Book Review: *Education and Resilience in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa* edited by Mary Mendenhall, Gauthier Marchais, Yusuf Sayed, and Neil Boothby

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BOOK REVIEW

EDUCATION AND RESILIENCE IN CRISIS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

**EDITED BY MARY MENDENHALL, GAUTHIER MARCHAIS,
YUSUF SAYED, AND NEIL BOOTHBY**

BRISTOL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024. XXIII + 214 PAGES

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Education and Resilience in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa, edited by Mary Mendenhall, Gauthier Marchais, Yusuf Sayed, and Neil Boothby, is a timely resource for those dealing with the recurring crises—conflicts and natural disasters—in the region. Widespread conflict across Africa has resulted in the killing and displacement of teachers and students and the destruction of schools. Attacks on education, therefore, are attacks on the community, on children, and on knowledge itself—and hence on our future. The ability to cope with such challenges helps reshape the destinies of the children and of society at large.

Education and Resilience in Crisis includes an introduction, four main chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, the authors elaborate on the courage of the students and teachers in conflict-affected sub-Saharan Africa who stay in school despite facing unimaginable difficulties. In this part of the book, the authors examine education in crisis and education for crisis, described as pathways to improved resilience and wellbeing. The four chapters are independent studies conducted in intervention contexts served by the Building Resilience in Crisis through Education project, or BRiCE, which integrates humanitarian and development support in conflict-affected settings.

Chapter one presents findings on the academic persistence of students in accelerated education programs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania. Chapter two describes the wellbeing and resilience of teachers and students in South Sudan and Uganda. Chapter three offers evidence on the wellbeing and resilience of teachers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Niger. In chapter four, the discussion shifts to teacher professional support in Ethiopia and Somalia. In the conclusion, the authors highlight the four studies' focus on investigating how crisis affects learners, teacher wellbeing, and education systems' ability to carry out their responsibilities, as well as the role education can play in response to the consequences of crisis.

Across the four studies, the authors focus on contextual learning and longitudinal design rather than on a selected variable in cross-national settings. Although each chapter addresses a different issue, they converge around two common messages: (1) how teaching and learning can thrive in the midst of conflict, and (2) the role of education as a transformative tool. While acknowledging the value of education in problem-solving, healing, and coping during crises and in transforming individual and societal prospects, the authors note that the path to success is not without obstacles. Some factors, such as student absenteeism, limited resources, and the long-term effects of trauma, are beyond the realm of education. The studies provide evidence that these factors act as bottlenecks to effective education in conflict settings and the authors propose continuous professional development as a solution.

The studies presented in *Education and Resilience in Crisis* strengthen credibility and enhanced participation by combining two or more methods of data collection: document analysis, interviews, and/or questionnaires. As a teacher, I am especially surprised by the findings on the teachers' and students' determination to cope and to hope for a better life through education. The authors focus on building personal strengths through education as a mechanism for thriving. However, there are times when the students lose trust and discontinue their schooling. Education quality and relevance are important determinants of enrollment and student retention.

Although the book is highly informative, it would benefit from further evidence on selected issues and from adopting a balanced view of accelerated education programming as an option in crisis-affected contexts. First, as the focus is on personal and school-related factors, the evidence on external influences is limited. While conducting an early grade reading assessment in two refugee camps in Ethiopia several years ago, I observed that young people were staying out of school. Through informal discussions, I sought to understand why they were not enrolled. Their responses were brief and consistent: "We are going to move to the developed world with the help of the United Nations." I then asked why they did not consider education important, given that the societies they intended to migrate to are more literate, implying that they would need a higher level of education to find employment and in everyday life. Their response: "We only need to go and see what works for us once we are there."

This book would have been stronger had it provided evidence on the external factors that influence enrollment and retention. Destin and Oyserman (2010) argue, for example, that young people's perceived pathways to earning a high income other than education can weaken their motivation to attend school. Including such factors would have helped deepen understanding and support more pragmatic approaches to designing education in emergencies (EiE) interventions. This also

implies the need for alternative measurements. For example, involving dropouts themselves in exploring reasons for student dropout would have enriched the findings in this book. Similarly, using personal perspectives to measure constructs such as wellbeing and resilience would have provided valuable contextual insights. Finally, incorporating more rigorous and validated measurement tools could have strengthened the evidence base and implications.

Second, the book's contextual descriptions highlight meaningful differences between the contexts of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), thus providing important opportunities for future analytical studies. In chapter four, for example, which examines EiE in Somalia and Ethiopia, the authors highlight contrasting funding arrangements. Schools are supported primarily by local communities in IDP contexts and by international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) in refugee camps. In other words, perceptions that the provision of education for refugees is better than for IDPs—often associated with INGO support—can contribute to tensions between refugee and host communities. Experiences of “otherness” may be more pronounced in refugee settings than among IDPs. A more disaggregated analytical approach that distinguished between refugee and IDP contexts would have strengthened the book by identifying lessons of practical relevance for policy and programming.

Third, the environmental and pedagogical aspects of schooling emerge as key aspects of learning. While the authors address resilience, wellbeing, accelerated education programming, continuous professional development, and inclusion in EiE, connecting these issues with learning outcomes would have enriched the significance of the findings for policy and programming. Gender is also not specifically addressed; further research in this area is of paramount importance to the design of intervention schemes for EiE.

Fourth, sub-Saharan Africa not only faces recurring conflicts but also a significant learning crisis, due in part to poorly designed education systems. Presenting arguments about accelerated education in comparison with formal education systems would imply practical and logical fallacies. It is constructive to recommend accelerated education programs as second-chance educational programming rather than as the best alternative. It might be a good option for enrollment but not for quality. Besides, accelerated education programs are typically supported by INGOs and often incorporate additional elements such as active learning methods. This highlights the need to refrain from system comparison and focus on program objectives.

In conclusion, the book is timely and valuable not only because it demonstrates the interaction between education and crisis but because of its methodological rigor. The authors' use of longitudinal, comparative, and mixed methods approaches strengthens triangulation of findings and supports more balanced conclusions. Overall, this work shows strong potential to inform future studies and to enhance efforts to making education more responsive to diverse and evolving contexts.

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