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Special Issue on Mobilizing an Effective, Equitable, and Just Data and Evidence Ecosystem for Education in Crisis and Conflict Contexts

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122 East 42nd Street, 14th floor

New York, NY 10168

<https://inee.org/journal>

journal@inee.org

New York University

International Education Program

246 Greene Street, Suite 300

New York, NY 10003

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EDITORIAL NOTE

SAMANTHA COLÓN, NATHAN THOMPSON, AND DANA BURDE

Significant progress has been made in the expansion and evolution of an education in emergencies (EiE) data and evidence ecosystem since the EiE field first began to coalesce in the mid-1990s, and with the founding in 2000 of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). Researchers have increasingly recognized the value of mixed methods and participatory research approaches in crisis and conflict contexts and have focused resources on contextualized and localized measurement tools, data-collection mechanisms, and evaluation research. These advances have helped to strengthen the visibility and rigor of EiE research while improving the field's ability to respond to rapidly evolving crises. Nevertheless, many gaps remain in the generation, uptake, and use of EiE data and evidence. Indeed, this fragile but steady progress in research and programming has been set back by newly emerging, overlapping, and protracted crises, a surge in global displacement and the number of out-of-school children, and the shuttering of USAID, which has had a profound effect on the EiE field and beyond. Despite these shocks to international aid and the research system, evidence-based decisionmaking in EiE remains as important as ever.

UNHCR (2026) estimated the number of forcibly displaced people at the end of 2025 to be approximately 117.8 million, a 4 percent decrease from the previous year. However, the number of conflict settings and conflict intensity remain high, and children are particularly vulnerable. Approximately 1.6 billion children live in a conflict-affected country (Østby and Rustad 2025); of the 258 million school-age children affected by crises, 93 million are out of school entirely (ECW 2026). Protracted crises in Sudan, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo account for nearly half of the out-of-school children. This number increases with the addition of crises in Syria, Myanmar, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Palestine, and the Sahel region. Climate emergencies and food insecurity also disrupt education and put added pressure on humanitarian and development actors to address gaps in data and evidence on issues that intersect with schooling (UNESCO 2022). Although data and evidence are central to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners for education financing, accountability, and planning (UNESCO 2023, 18), major questions remain about the quality, equity, ethics, and usability of EiE evidence (Kim et al. 2024).

The EiE data and evidence ecosystem remains fragmented and is marked by unequal power dynamics. Questions about the contextual relevance of EiE research prevail, as Global North actors dominate research planning and fundraising, while Global South research colleagues, if they are included, often assume the role of field experts due to their familiarity with communities, languages, and in-country networks (Haelewaters,

Hofmann, and Romero-Olivares 2021). When Global North actors guide the early phases of education research and programming, those in the Global South may be sidelined. These dynamics underscore the critical ongoing debates in EiE on epistemic justice and authority. In addition, the demand for data in many crisis contexts has expanded faster than the sector's ability to ensure that evidence systems are equitable, participatory, and safe. Many actors, including the authors whose work appears in this issue, argue that the humanitarian ethos to “do no harm” must undergird the entire EiE data and evidence enterprise.

This *JEiE* Special Issue on Mobilizing an Effective, Equitable, and Just Data and Evidence Ecosystem for Education in Crisis and Conflict Contexts prompts EiE researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to consider what it may take to address the limitations of the current data and evidence systems and ensure that these systems are accountable—not only to donors and institutions but to learners, families, educators, and crisis-affected communities. The EiE field has increasingly advocated for participatory evidence, localization, codesign, and community voices, which has prompted a broad rethinking of what counts as evidence (Barnes et al. 2023; Haelewaters, Hofmann, and Romero-Olivares 2021). Ethical data stewardship principles further encourage EiE actors to center voices from the local communities affected by crisis and conflict, rather than imposing top-down structures that may lead to culturally insensitive interventions.¹ Inclusive and equitable research partnerships that go beyond tokenism may support the ethical generation of community-informed evidence, while strong research institutions can help safeguard the rights and wellbeing of research participants.

The five research articles, four field notes, one commentary, and five book reviews presented in this Special Issue contribute to capacity-sharing and strengthening EiE data and evidence systems. Collectively they emphasize the use of multiple methodologies and multilevel analysis in diverse contexts. They examine evidence that supports learner wellbeing, participation in education, and recovery in crisis contexts, while also interrogating the power structures and institutional dynamics that shape decisionmaking about education in humanitarian settings. These contributions advance collective understanding of effective social-emotional learning (SEL) programming and the benefits of EdTech for accelerated education programming. They offer models for confronting safety risks to participation in education; for school-based data collection, use, and accountability; for equity and capacity-sharing in EiE research goals and processes; and for programming EiE interventions that prioritize data security and integrity.

¹ Ethical stewardship refers to the responsible generation, interpretation, and use of evidence in ways that prioritize human-centered, equity-driven, and locally led responses while advancing localization, redressing power imbalances, and promoting antiracist practices in the EiE sector (Shreeraman 2025). Practitioner knowledge comprises the operational expertise, contextual understanding, and practice-based evidence generated through the design and implementation of education responses in crisis settings. Grounded in frameworks such as the INEE Minimum Standards, it supports coordinated, accountable, and contextually responsive decisionmaking while promoting safe, equitable, and continuous learning for crisis-affected populations (INEE 2024).

We open the issue with two research articles that foreground the learning outcomes and education participation for conflict- and crisis-affected learners. In “What Works to Improve Social-Emotional Skills in Conflict and Crisis Settings: Evidence from a Meta-Analysis of Education Interventions,” Silvia Diazgranados Ferráns, Bernard Thuo, and Ignacio López synthesize findings from 20 rigorous impact evaluations of seven types of education interventions conducted between 2000 and 2024 to identify which approaches are most effective, which domains of SEL they improve, under what conditions, and at what cost. They find that SEL interventions in EiE contexts show a pooled impact of 0.10 standard deviations (SD), which indicates a modest but statistically significant effect on improving children’s SEL outcomes. Interventions that targeted the emotional (0.13 SD), social (0.09 SD), and perspectives (0.07 SD) domains of SEL produced significant effects. In their analysis of intervention types, the authors found that studies of interventions that incorporated SEL-targeted practices into academic programming exhibited modest effects, with low heterogeneity and high statistical significance; mental health and psychosocial support interventions had a high impact (0.16 SD), but considerable variability across mental health and psychosocial support studies resulted in a pooled estimate that was not statistically significant. Diazgranados Ferráns, Thuo, and López conclude with a discussion of the cost-effectiveness of SEL interventions in conflict and crisis settings, noting the tremendous variability among these programs. Interventions that improve SEL outcomes cost US\$211 on average, and achieving a 0.20 SD improvement in SEL outcomes is estimated to cost between US\$157 and US\$636 per child. The authors note that the EiE interventions in their meta-analysis tended to produce smaller overall effect sizes than SEL interventions in high- and middle-income contexts, which they suggest may reflect implementation challenges, insufficient localization and contextual adaptation, and limitations in how SEL is measured in crisis-affected contexts. This study underscores the importance of designing interventions to support SEL outcomes in conflict and crisis settings that are developmentally appropriate, culturally grounded, codesigned with local stakeholders, and scalable from the outset.

In the next research article, “Perceptions of School and Community Safety and Links to Education Outcomes in Contexts of Forced Displacement: Evidence and Mitigation Strategies from Project 21 Countries in the Central Sahel,” Cirenía Chávez Villegas, Alanna Heyer, Seun Bunmi Adebayo, Pierre Vernier, Arsenii Slieba, and Ivan Lopes, address the perceived safety of schools and the surrounding communities among households facing forcible displacement, linking these perceptions to the households’ decisions about participating in schooling and the influence risk factors have on learning. The authors draw from Project 21, a community-based monitoring project among households in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger, where education participation among displaced families (40%) is lower than among all surveyed households (46%). The authors show that nonparticipation in education is driven by schools being perceived as unsafe, insufficient space in schools, conflict and climate shocks, as well as dropout and prolonged periods out of school. The authors’ interviews with key informants highlight the threats

students face when in transit to and from school, which, along with community- and school-based violence such as bullying, reduces participation in schooling. The authors then recommend a three-pronged approach to counteracting these barriers: (1) school preparedness and emergency planning that builds schools' capacity to respond to threats to safety; (2) the mainstreaming of child-protection principles and strategies to prevent and mitigate gender-based violence; and (3) adaptive education delivery and proximity-based school infrastructure that may, for example, reduce students' exposure to danger en route to and from school. This study strengthens EiE evidence systems by showing how community-based monitoring, such as that provided by Project 21, can address critical data gaps on safety in displacement contexts while modelling ethical, locally grounded approaches for generating actionable evidence.

Building on these discussions of learning and participation, the next research article explores how innovative technology-supported approaches may help address education disruption and exclusion for marginalized learners. In "Can EdTech Improve Accelerated Emergency Education Programs? Empirical Evidence from Pakistan after COVID-19," Thomas Brown, Allyson Krupar, and Farman Khan present results from Learning Tree, a mobile learning application piloted in Pakistan in 2021, where COVID-19 and natural disasters heightened inequities in education access for girls. Using a longitudinal, quasi-experimental design in which a Learning Tree component was introduced alongside accelerated education programming in 25 randomly assigned learning centers, Brown, Krupar, and Khan show evidence of large and statistically significant gains in literacy, numeracy, executive functioning, and SEL outcomes among the Learning Tree treatment group, as measured by the Holistic Assessment of Learning and Development Outcomes (HALDO). From the baseline HALDO assessment to the follow-up assessment four months later, the girls who received the additional EdTech intervention had double the learning and developmental gains of those who received only the standard accelerated learning center programming. In their discussion, Brown, Krupar, and Khan argue that EdTech interventions may help to close digital divides for girls in education settings marked by precarity, disruption, and inequality.

We continue our research article section with two pieces that pose questions about how institutional dynamics and governance shape the ways evidence is generated, interpreted, and translated into education policy and practice. In "Hypergovernance and Multilayered Data Accountability in Haiti: Implications for Leadership of NGO Schools," Marion Imboden and Cathryn Magno examine the accountability structures and mechanisms through which school directors generate, analyze, and utilize data in the provision of education. Imboden and Magno review the case of Solèy, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that operates schools across Haiti. They also provide a document review, field observations, and interviews with the NGO's school leaders and executive director, which indicate that school-based leaders are positioned as intermediaries in a kaleidoscopic system of multiple reporting lines, externally imposed compliance regulations, interrupted information flows, fractured accountability, and

high scrutiny. The authors explore how the nature and structure of NGO oversight over schools may influence gaps in school leaders' capacity, and they offer recommendations to help empower school directors to be critical actors in the EiE data ecosystem, such as receiving training on data collection and reporting systems and participating in evidence-based decisionmaking for their schools.

In our final research article, Celia Reddick considers the institutional dynamics at play in refugee education. In "How Decisions Are Made: Organizational Isomorphism and a Focus on English in Refugee Education," Reddick argues that EiE is an "institutionally defined field," one that has strong institutions that share a common enterprise, patterned mechanisms for regulating data and evidence flows, recognized structures of collaboration, and work taking place in uncertain, constrained, low-information, or shifting circumstances. All of these factors may make EiE vulnerable to isomorphism, or the tendency of institutions and organizations in a given sector to converge and become increasingly similar. Drawing from 34 interviews with individuals working in EiE, by participating in EiE convenings, and making other observations of the EiE field in Uganda, Reddick argues that, although EiE program and policy leaders often articulate a diverse set of goals and ambitions with respect to language programming for refugee learners, the reality is that their organizations often default to focusing resources on education access and English language programming, despite these leaders' awareness of the evidence supporting multilingual approaches. Reddick discusses the case of the Language Support Program in Uganda, which has worked to resist the isomorphic trend toward English language programming by "engaging refugees' other linguistic resources, ...drawing from emerging evaluation and research to help inform problem-solving, and identifying resources to fund the work of experts and stakeholders outside the field" of EiE (p. 156). Reddick's article warns of the unintended consequences of streamlining and efficiency, which may stymie innovation for refugee learners and put pressure on organizations to offer refugee education programming that does not align with evidence.

We begin our field notes section with two pieces that illustrate how tailored assessment systems and collaborative research design processes may support a more responsive provision of education, while also challenging unequal power dynamics in the production and use of evidence. In the first field note, "Exploring How EiEPC Data and Evidence Support Teaching and Learning in Practice: Implementing the Holistic Assessment for Learning in Syria," Allyson Krupar, Wafa Al-Amaireh, Bem Tivkaa, Khaled Al-Yousef, and Abeer Attari present the results of an adaptation of the Holistic Assessment for Learning (HAL) assessment for nonformal education settings in Northwest and Northeast Syria in 2023. Drawing from training reports, fieldwork data, teacher surveys, and debriefing tools, the authors argue that classroom-level, curriculum-aligned measures, like those in HAL, can generate actionable insights for teachers while remaining adaptable for aggregation into broader data systems, such as national education management information systems. Krupar and her coauthors position HAL as helping teachers use literacy, numeracy, and SEL data to identify learning gaps and

adjust lessons and remediation strategies, rather than merely as a tool for reporting data to ministry officials and donors. The field note represents a step forward in the goal of formulating data systems that are practical and meet the needs of educators and education planners alike, and offers a proof-of-concept for adapting tools to measure learning in nonformal settings.

Gray Rinehart, Myat Thandar Aung, Naw Bway Paw, May Yi Myint, and Saw Ler Moo outline their efforts to subvert predominant relational dynamics in EiE research in their field note, “Confronting Research Neocolonialism: Reflections on a Quantitative Study Codesign in Myanmar.” Rather than replicating a pattern in which Global North actors design, direct, and manage research, often from afar, while Global South partners play subordinate roles, Rinehart et al. set out to develop instruments that they tailored to the Myanmar context, with participation from the Karen community. Rinehart and his coauthors lay out three guiding principles and orientations in their field note, which they argue may transform historically unequal North-South research partnerships into complementary, nonhierarchical collaborations by “redistributing epistemic authority, practicing contextual and cultural humility, and recognizing the interdependence of different forms of expertise” (p. 176). The field note is instructive for strengthening systems and capacity-sharing in the data and evidence ecosystem, particularly for researchers and donors seeking to adopt more inclusive and ethical practices in North-South research partnerships.

The last two field notes discuss the ethics and coordination facets of the EiE data and evidence ecosystem, highlighting how practitioners navigate participant protection, trauma-informed data stewardship, accountability demands, and coordination challenges while working to sustain equitable education responses in fragile environments. In “Data Stewardship and Trauma-Informed Care in Online Professional Development for Afghan Adult Learners: Lessons from Practice,” Janice D’souza and Jeremy Bryan Coats review the implementation of safeguarding and protection practices in a program of online professional training for Afghan learners. They note that digital and remote learning modalities can expose participants to novel sources of risk, particularly in environments with heightened surveillance. These programs create a digital record of those who participate in training and education, thus making data security and data stewardship principles paramount for program planning in these contexts. D’souza and Coats discuss how the program emphasized informed consent and data minimization so that only the data most critically needed for the intervention to function effectively was collected, and how these principles influenced the recruitment, instruction, monitoring, and evaluation of the training program throughout its rollout. This field note unpacks the tension between participant protection and data collection and provides practical insights into program adaptations that reduce risk while meeting learning needs.

In our final field note, “The Multifaceted Responsibilities of Education Clusters: Successes and Struggles,” Friedrich W. Affolter and Michelle Brown document Education Clusters’ (ECs) role in the EiE data and evidence ecosystem. They particularly highlight how ECs aim to support inclusive response systems, coordinated planning and operationalization, collective and inclusive evidence generation and knowledge-sharing, and resource mobilization. Drawing from EC documents across multiple crisis contexts worldwide, along with insights from the coordination literature, Affolter and Brown discuss EC milestones in convening EiE actors, generating and using evidence, improving cost-effectiveness, and advocating with decisionmakers for the needs of education systems and learners. Affolter and Brown position ECs as powerful institutions in the EiE field that work to advance children’s right to protective, continuous, and safe education and note how ECs must be attuned to data and evidence requirements to ensure that goal is met.

We also present Francine Menashy’s commentary article, “A Framework for Ethics and Equity in Education in Emergencies Research,” which brings into dialogue many of the central themes and questions raised throughout this Special Issue. Menashy draws from the comments of her research participants and collaborators and of scholars of decolonization and education, and from key stakeholders’ observations of the EiE field to demonstrate its tendency toward “extractive research practices, Global North epistemic authority, and the marginalization of racialized and crisis-affected communities in agenda-setting and knowledge production, as well as the privileging of quantitative evidence and the ethical risks of datafication, privacy breaches, and restricted dissemination” (p. 202). Menashy then offers a four-question framework to help EiE actors center ethics and power dynamics in their conceptualization of the research enterprise. She argues that power brokers in the EiE data and evidence ecosystem must interrogate assumptions and historical legacies that have shaped who determines EiE research agendas, what and whose knowledge is valued, how evidence is collected and by whom, and who ultimately is positioned to disseminate and use research in EiE. In considering these questions, Menashy argues that a more ethical and just data and evidence ecosystem will open doors to more participation from local experts, broader conceptualizations of methodological rigor, and freer access to evidence on which to base EiE programming and policy decisions.

Finally, we close with a set of book reviews that bring together many of the crosscutting themes of this Special Issue, including justice, decolonization, peacebuilding, displacement, and the politics of humanitarianism, while also highlighting whose knowledge, experiences, and futures are centered in education in emergencies research, policy, and practice.

We begin with Abraha Asfaw’s review of *Education and Resilience in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Mary Mendenhall, Gauthier Marchais, Yusuf Sayed, and Neil Boothby. Drawing from research-practice partnerships across seven countries, the book’s authors examine how humanitarian crises shape education

systems. Asfaw notes the book's emphasis on resilience, teacher and learner wellbeing, and on pathways toward more just and responsive education in crisis contexts. In his analysis, Asfaw pays attention to the external factors that affect education continuity, the inclusion of a gender perspective, and a stronger focus on program objectives over cross-system comparisons. This review contributes to this Special Issue by reinforcing the importance of contextually grounded evidence and critical reflection to the advancing of EiE research, policy, and practice.

In the next book review, Elisheva Cohen reviews *Schooling for Refugee Children: A Social Justice Perspective Informed by Children from Syria* by Eleanore Hargreaves, Brian Lally, Bassel Akar, Jumana Al-Waeli, and Jasmine Costello. Presenting Syrian refugee children's words, drawings, and experiences in Lebanon and the United Kingdom, the book foregrounds the children's perspectives on belonging, participation, and justice within educational spaces. Cohen emphasizes the methodological contributions of the book's participatory research approaches, while also reflecting on the absence of stronger policy recommendations to address the structural inequities that make nonformal education programs necessary.

Gabrielle Oliveira's review of *Unsettled Families: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Kinship* by Sophia Balakian shifts attention to the politics of refugee classification, family recognition, and humanitarian governance. Through personal narratives and long-term ethnographic research with Somali and Congolese refugees who are navigating resettlement systems between Kenya and the United States, Oliveira discusses the way the book highlights how personal narratives can deepen understanding of the everyday realities faced by displaced families.

The last two book reviews turn toward broader questions of transformation, peacebuilding, and decolonization in education. Sofía Antonia Gómez-Doyle reviews *The Art of Global Peacebuilding and Excellence in Education: Pathways to Hopeful, Transformational Practice* by Angie Kotler and Jo Westbrook. Kotler and Westbrook reconceptualize the relationship between peacebuilding and educational excellence through case studies from diverse education contexts and argue that transformative, context-responsive practice is central to fostering more just and inclusive education systems. Gómez-Doyle details how the book's authors position language, education values, and reflective practice as catalysts for reshaping approaches to teaching and learning in conflict-affected settings. This book review enriches the Special Issue by inviting researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to reconsider how education can advance peacebuilding and transformational change in contexts affected by crisis and conflict.

We conclude this issue with Shreya Shreeraman and Luke Pye's review of Yvette Hutchinson, Artemio Arturo Cortez Ochoa, Julia Paulson, and Leon Tikly's edited volume, *Decolonizing Education for Sustainable Futures*. The volume brings together diverse voices to examine decolonization, sustainable futures, and the enduring influence

of colonial legacies on education and development. Shreeraman and Pye engage critically with the book's methodological approaches, recognizing its contribution to advancing decolonial, reparative, and planet-centered perspectives on education while also noting opportunities for broader methodological representation. Although the volume is not specific to crisis-affected contexts, Shreeraman and Pye's review demonstrates its relevance for EiE settings by illustrating how its insights can inform more equitable, context-responsive, and sustainable education practices.

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NOTE FROM FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) leads the UK's diplomatic, development and consular work around the world, working to reduce poverty, address global challenges, and promote sustainable and inclusive development.

FCDO funds the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) programme which aims to generate robust and actionable evidence to improve education policy and practice in conflict-affected and crisis settings.² ERICC focuses on understanding what works, for whom, in what contexts, and at what cost, with a strong focus on ensuring evidence is accessible and used by policymakers and practitioners.

Through its contribution to this *JEiE* Special Issue, FCDO aims to strengthen understanding across the Education in Emergencies sector of what constitutes a robust, inclusive, and accountable data and evidence ecosystem. This reflects a broader commitment not only to generating quality evidence through ERICC, but also to supporting the systems, partnerships, and capacities needed to ensure that evidence informs policy and practice.

We extend our sincere thanks to all contributors, *JEiE* staff members, and peer reviewers for their dedication and collaboration in bringing this *JEiE* Special Issue to fruition.



2 <https://inee.org/data-evidence/ericc>

NOTE FROM QATAR FOUNDATION INTERNATIONAL

Qatar Foundation International's (QFI) mission is to advance the value of teaching and learning Arabic as a global language for school-age learners. QFI supports the entire Arabic language education ecosystem by helping to make the teaching and learning of Arabic as accessible and professional as it is for other world languages. One way it does this is by supporting practice-oriented research that can be translated directly into a school or classroom. As such, QFI is excited to support this Special Issue because, when one thinks of education in emergency settings, they usually consider those learners who are hosted in low- and middle-income countries or in refugee camps. However, a significant number of refugee and displaced children reach or are resettled in high- and middle-income countries, like those QFI operates in. Very little is known about these students' educational experiences, especially when it comes to language learning. QFI's Research Department aims to build the data and evidence ecosystem for Arabic teaching and learning for all types of school-age learners, and that evidence is useful in any context where students are learning Arabic. By supporting this Special Issue, QFI continues to push for research findings to be accessible to educators so that school-age learners' priorities and needs are centered not only in how educators are teaching, but also in the research being generated. This Special Issue furthers QFI's own goal of increasing the "generation, uptake, and use of data and evidence."



WHAT WORKS TO IMPROVE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS SETTINGS: EVIDENCE FROM A META-ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS

SILVIA DIAZGRANADOS FERRÁNS, BERNARD THUO,
AND IGNACIO LÓPEZ

ABSTRACT

In this meta-analysis, we synthesize findings from 20 rigorous evaluations of seven types of education interventions in multiple conflict and protracted crisis settings. We assess their effects on children's social-emotional learning (SEL) outcomes in the social, emotional, cognitive, values, perspectives, and identity domains: mental health and psychosocial support, academic support with positive school climate practices, SEL-targeted practices, comprehensive SEL curricula, remote academic support through EdTech, multicomponent interventions, and peace education. We estimate a pooled impact of 0.10 standard deviations (SD) that reflect medium, positive, and statistically significant effects. Domain-specific analyses show medium, positive, and significant effects in the emotional (0.13 SD), social (0.09 SD), and perspectives (0.07) domains, but limited evidence and null effects in the cognitive, values, and identity domains. Academic interventions that integrate SEL components—through positive school climate, practices targeting SEL skills, or comprehensive SEL curricula—show significant small-to-medium effects (0.05 to 0.13 SD) across intervention types; mental health and psychosocial support interventions exhibit the largest effects (0.16 SD), but they are not statistically significant, given the high variability. An analysis that combines cost with impact data suggests that, while education interventions can improve SEL, their cost-effectiveness varies considerably, and many are not cost-effective. Compared to high- and middle-income contexts, smaller effect sizes in conflict and protracted crisis settings may reflect challenges in implementation, contextual fit, and measurement. This study underscores the importance of designing interventions to support SEL outcomes in humanitarian settings that are, from the outset, developmentally appropriate, contextually grounded, and scalable.

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INTRODUCTION

More than 234 million school-age children worldwide are affected by conflicts and protracted crises (Education Cannot Wait 2025), with devastating consequences for their education, wellbeing, and long-term development (Burde et al. 2017; UNESCO 2011). Many live in contexts shaped by war and violence, economic shocks and poverty, pandemics, climate change, environmental disasters, and forced displacement (Falk et al. 2024). Of these children, 85 million are not in school; an additional 149 million are in school but not learning: 83 percent are not meeting the minimum reading proficiency by the end of primary school (Education Cannot Wait 2025). These children face significant barriers to accessing safe and quality education environments while also experiencing great adversity, including poverty, instability, disruptions in their education, loss, and trauma. This can produce a toxic-stress response that negatively affects their learning, psychosocial wellbeing, and long-term development (Shonkoff and Garner 2012).

In conflict and protracted crisis settings, education can serve as a protective and stabilizing force (Nicolai and Triplehorn 2003; INEE 2010). However, education budgets in humanitarian settings are extremely limited, and investment in education is challenged by competing priorities such as food, shelter, and protection (UNESCO 2012). For this reason, policymakers and donors require rigorous, comparative evidence to inform decisions about fund allocations. Impact evaluations are particularly helpful because they can help identify the degree to which interventions are improving children's learning, wellbeing, and development, including their social and emotional learning (SEL). However, the available evidence remains fragmented and difficult to compare across intervention types, which limits its usefulness for informing decisions on the allocation of scarce resources (Kim et al. 2026).

In this study, we address this gap by systematically synthesizing and comparing the effectiveness of different types of education interventions in improving children's SEL outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis settings. It is the first meta-analysis in humanitarian settings that quantifies the impact of education interventions on children's SEL. In doing so, it moves beyond prior meta-analytic work focused on SEL programming in primarily stable, high-income settings (Cipriano et al. 2023; Durlak et al. 2011), and on the wellbeing outcomes of SEL programming in conflict and crisis settings (Burde et al. 2023), to examine a broader range of education interventions—including academic, psychosocial, and multicomponent approaches—and identify which are most effective, for which SEL domains, and under what conditions. We also link impact estimates with cost data to generate preliminary insights on cost-effectiveness.

SEL IN CONFLICT AND PROTRACTED CRISIS SETTINGS

According to CASEL, social and emotional learning refers to the process through which young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, build relationships and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL n.d). There is robust evidence that SEL can enhance children's holistic development and academic performance, reduce behavioral problems and drug abuse (Durlak et al. 2011; Durlak, Mahoney, and Boyle 2022; Jones, Greenberg, and Crawley 2015), promote social cohesion through tolerance and inclusion across social and cultural divides (INEE 2016; Davies 2010), and strengthen workforce and civic readiness through ethical reasoning and civic engagement (OECD 2015; Berkowitz 2007; Selman 2008; Haste 2023; Levinson 2013).

In conflict and protracted crisis settings, SEL can protect children from the negative effects of trauma, helping them to become resilient in the face of adversity, strengthening their relationships and networks of support, and providing a sense of safety and belonging (Jones and Kahn 2017; INEE 2016). These benefits are particularly important, given evidence from longitudinal studies showing that SEL skills developed during childhood are associated with better mental health, steady employment, and stable relationships (Jones, Greenberg, and Crawley 2015; Moffit et al. 2011).

Despite this promise, most evidence on the impact education interventions have on SEL skills come from high-income settings, or from low- and middle-income settings that are stable; few come from settings of conflict and protracted crisis. Moreover, existing meta-analyses have largely focused on estimating the impact SEL programming has on a range of outcomes, rather than on identifying which types of interventions are more effective at improving SEL skills. For example, meta-analyses of universal school-based SEL programs in high-income and stable contexts find consistent, positive effects on a range of outcomes, including children's SEL competence, behavioral functioning, mental health, and academic achievement. Cipriano et al. (2023) report average effect sizes ranging from 0.11 standard deviations (SD) to 0.29 SD across the emotional, behavioral, and academic domains, while Durlak, Mahoney, and Boyle (2022) emphasize the robust and replicable benefits of SEL programming when implemented with fidelity and cultural alignment. Evidence from humanitarian settings is more limited, but it suggests that SEL programming has the potential to reduce depression and posttraumatic stress (Burde et al. 2023). However, these studies focus on the effects of SEL programming on a range of learning and developmental outcomes, such as mental health. As a result, there is still a limited understanding of what works to improve children's SEL across different types of education interventions in conflict and protracted crisis settings.

While interest in SEL skills is growing in these settings and an increasing number of education programs aim to support the development of children’s SEL outcomes and explore their impact on these skills (Burde et al. 2023; Deitz, Lahmann, and Thompson 2021; Kim, Deitz, and Aber 2024), the evidence remains fragmented and siloed by disciplines (Kim et al. 2026). Moreover, there currently are no meta-analytic insights into the effectiveness of education interventions on children’s SEL outcomes across different programs in conflict and protracted crisis settings. Overall, the field lacks synthesized and rigorous evidence on what works, how, for whom, at what cost, and under what conditions to improve the SEL skills of children in these settings.

LACK OF COHERENCE IN SEL MEASUREMENT AND A TAXONOMY OF SEL DOMAIN AND SKILLS

A challenge when synthesizing evidence on SEL is the lack of coherence in how SEL constructs are defined and measured across studies—particularly in conflict- and crisis-affected contexts (Temko et al. 2023; Harvard EASEL Lab and INEE 2022). Similar skills may be labeled differently across interventions (e.g., “self-control” vs. “behavioral regulation”) and, conversely, identical terms (self-regulation) may reference substantively different constructs (e.g., ability to manage emotions and cope with stress vs. attention control or task persistence). This variation undermines efforts to compare outcomes, track progress, and derive generalizable conclusions from impact evaluations and creates difficulties measuring SEL outcomes (Diazgranados et al. 2024).

To address this issue in the present study, we adopted the inventory of SEL domains and skills outlined in the PSS-SEL toolbox (Temko et al. 2023). The toolbox was developed by the Harvard EASEL Lab and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) to support stakeholders who provide psychosocial support and SEL in conflict and crisis settings, and to increase coherence in the field. The cognitive domain includes skills and competencies required to manage and direct behavior to achieve a goal, including those related to executive function, self-regulation, decisionmaking, and problem-solving. The emotional domain includes skills children use to identify, express, and manage their emotions, and to understand and feel empathy for others. The social domain includes skills that enable children to understand others’ behaviors and navigate social situations, such as prosocial skills and conflict-resolution skills. The values domain includes values, habits, and character strengths that help children become productive members of a particular community, and includes their ethical, civic, and performance values, among others. The perspectives domain includes attitudes, mindsets, and outlooks that influence how children interpret and respond to events and interactions, such as hope, optimism, and gratitude. The identity domain includes the attitudes and perceptions children have about themselves and their abilities, such as their knowledge and beliefs about who they are and their ability to learn and grow.

THE PRESENT STUDY

For this study, we conducted a review of 24 impact evaluations of education interventions for school-age children, and a meta-analysis of a subset of 20 of those studies, using a structured framework of SEL domains. Our goal was to identify the strength of the evidence for different types of interventions and the overall effects education interventions have on SEL outcomes, and to examine which domains and interventions show the most promise in conflict and crisis settings. We also examined the extent to which there was evidence of cost-effectiveness, using a subset of six studies that reported cost estimates.

METHOD

We used meta-analysis to statistically combine the results of multiple impact evaluations and estimate average impacts on SEL outcomes. Unlike traditional evidence reviews, which summarize findings qualitatively, meta-analysis applies statistical techniques to weight studies by sample size, effect size, and standard errors (Lipsey and Wilson 2001). This approach allows the estimation of overall effect sizes and detection of patterns that may not be evident from individual studies. Meta-analysis increases statistical power and reduces the influence of outliers by aggregating data across a broad range of interventions and contexts, producing a more precise and nuanced understanding of what works to improve SEL in crisis and conflict settings.

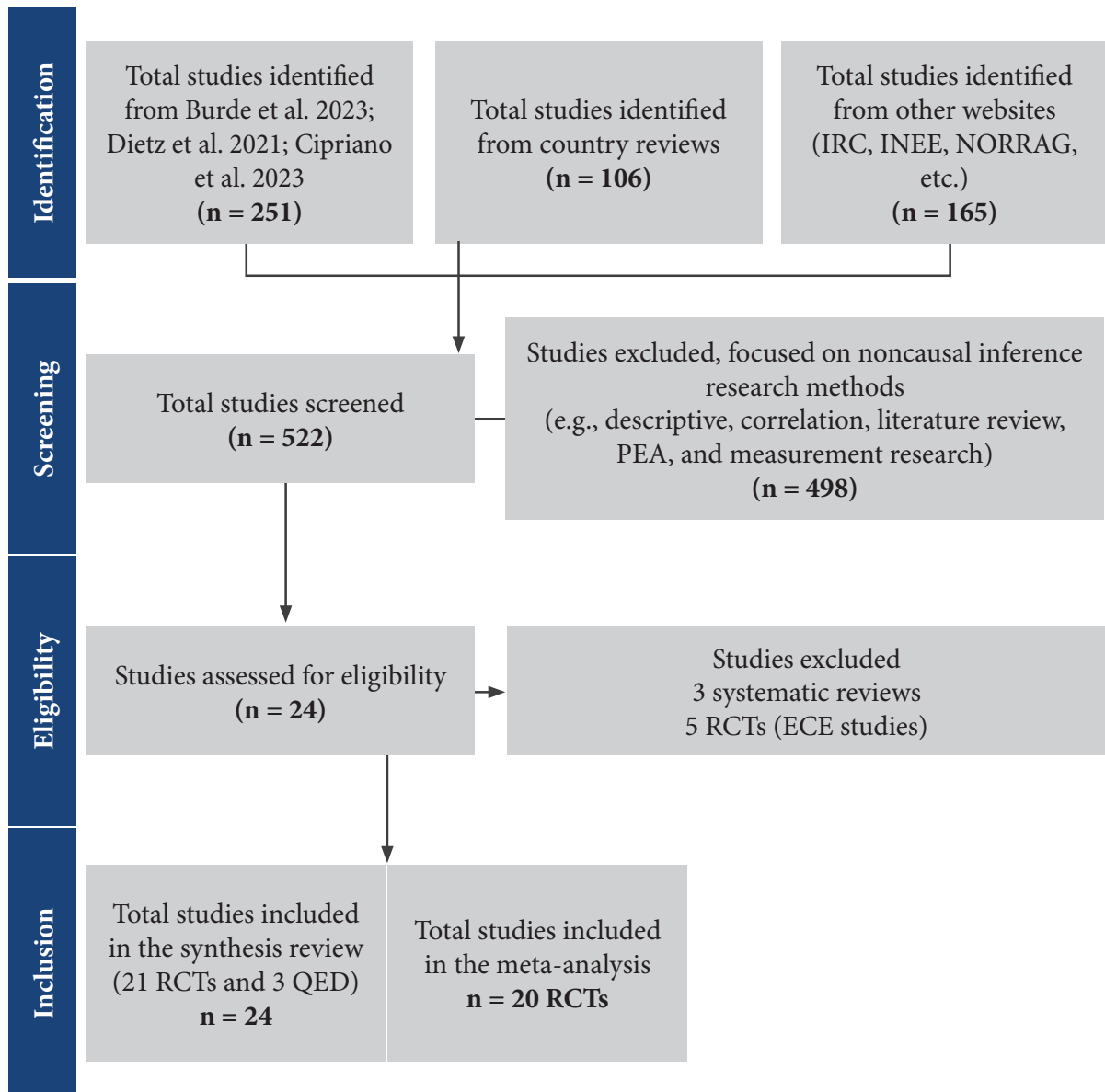
DATA

We identified 24 impact evaluations that assess the causal effect of education interventions on the SEL outcomes of school-age children (6-18) in conflict-affected settings. The search strategy focused on studies conducted between 2000 and December 2024 in conflict and crisis settings. We defined these settings as those experiencing violence, forced displacement, epidemics and pandemics, economic shocks and poverty, climate-related and environmental disasters, as well as governance crises, including fragile, failed, or authoritarian states (Falk et al. 2024). We used three strategies. First, we used snowballing from systematic reviews in conflict-affected settings (Burde et al. 2015, 2023) or with a focus on SEL (Deitz et al. 2021; Cipriano et al. 2023). Second, we conducted academic searches and drew from systematic country-level evidence reviews (Rauschenberger and Sabella 2023; Mishra et al. 2023; Saha et al. 2023; Akar et al. 2024; Brun et al. 2024; Wagner et al. 2024; Rinehart et al. 2024). Third, we identified studies through expert input and searches of organization websites, such as INEE and the International Rescue Committee's Airbel Impact Lab.

We included impact evaluations of education interventions targeting school-age children (6-18) that aimed to influence SEL outcomes across the emotional, social, cognitive, identity, values, and perspectives domains. Impact evaluations assess the changes in outcomes that can be attributed to a particular project, program, or policy; as such, they use causal inference methods to determine what would have happened to participants if the intervention had not occurred (Murnane and Willet 2011). Eligible studies employed causal inference methods, such as experimental (e.g., randomized controlled trials) or quasi-experimental designs (e.g., difference-in-differences, propensity score matching, regression discontinuity, instrumental variables, or pre-post designs with a comparison group). Studies were required to be conducted in settings of conflict and protracted crisis, including those affected by violence, forced displacement, epidemics or pandemics, economic shocks and poverty, climate-related or environmental disasters, or governance crises (e.g., fragile or authoritarian settings) (Falk et al. 2024). All education interventions that reported effect sizes on SEL outcomes and met the inclusion criteria were retained, regardless of whether improving SEL outcomes was an explicit or primary objective of the intervention.

We excluded studies that did not meet these criteria or that lacked sufficient methodological detail (e.g., research questions, sample, instruments, and analytic approach). Interventions targeting early childhood were also excluded, given that SEL outcomes for the 0-5 age group are typically measured differently than those for school-age children (i.e., through parent or caregiver reports instead of self-reports or standardized SEL scales), which made comparability difficult; however, they are addressed in a separate review (Diazgranados, Murphy, and Thuo 2026). We used systematic reviews and prior meta-analysis to identify studies.

Figure 1: Identification, Screening, and Inclusion of Studies



PROCEDURE

Following the study selection, we manually extracted information on study characteristics, intervention features, and outcome data into a standardized Excel template. For each study, we recorded bibliographic information, intervention characteristics, causal inference method, sample size, and all reported estimates of impact. For the meta-analysis, we extracted effect sizes, corresponding standard errors, and sample sizes for all relevant outcomes. When studies reported multiple estimates, we extracted and retained all eligible effect sizes. We coded outcome data across domains, including enrollment, attainment, academic outcomes, SEL outcomes, mental health outcomes, caregiver and teacher-level outcomes, etc. While the broader database includes many domains, the present analysis focuses exclusively on SEL outcomes.

To harmonize outcome measures, we coded SEL outcomes according to how they were defined and operationalized in the primary studies and then mapped them onto broader SEL domains. This approach enabled us to harmonize diverse outcome measures while preserving conceptual distinctions across SEL constructs. For meta-analytic purposes, we used an inventory of SEL skills and domains from the PSS-SEL toolbox (Harvard EASEL Lab and INEE 2022) to recode discrete SEL skills into six SEL domains: cognitive, social, emotional, values, perspectives, and identity. We classified the interventions through an inductive coding process. The initial coding captured how interventions were described in the primary studies. Interventions were then iteratively grouped into broader categories based on their explicit or implicit underlying mechanism for promoting SEL. For meta-analytic purposes, we clustered the interventions into conceptually coherent groups that reflected shared strategies, even when they were labeled differently in the original studies. For example, a remedial program using SEL-targeted practices was coded as academic support with SEL-targeted practices. This two-step process—coding based on study descriptions, followed by clustering based on underlying mechanisms—enabled us to develop a typology grounded in the empirical literature while ensuring comparability across studies.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

We conducted a meta-analysis of 20 studies using a random effects inverse-variance model (the DerSimonian-Laird method) to account for expected heterogeneity across interventions, populations, and outcome measures. We calculated effect sizes as standardized mean differences (Hedges' g), which enabled us to make comparisons across diverse instruments, applying small-sample bias correction where appropriate. We weighted the studies using inverse-variance weighting, such that estimates with greater precision (i.e., smaller standard errors, typically from larger samples) contributed more to the pooled effect sizes. We assessed statistical heterogeneity using the I^2 statistic.

To assess the size of the impact, we departed from Cohen's d for social sciences (Cohen 1988) and used education-specific benchmarks proposed by Kraft (2020), where effect sizes below 0.05 SD are interpreted as small, values between 0.05 SD and 0.20 SD as medium, and values above 0.20 SD as large.

We did not estimate intervention costs directly, but instead extracted cost data as reported by each primary study. When studies reported costs in local currencies or in different years, we converted all figures to US dollars for 2024, using official exchange rates and inflation adjustments based on World Bank and International Monetary Fund consumer price indices. This allowed for greater comparability, although it should be noted that cost-reporting methods may have varied and were not verified by the authors.

To assess cost-effectiveness—defined as the cost per unit of learning gain—we extracted cost per child for each study, where available. All cost estimates were converted to a common currency—US dollars—and adjusted for inflation to 2024 values. We then linked these cost data to impact estimates, calculating the cost required to achieve a 0.20 SD improvement in SEL, a benchmark corresponding to a large effect size in education (Kraft 2020).

To facilitate comparisons across interventions, we categorized cost-effectiveness using terciles of the distribution of estimated costs. Interventions in the lowest tercile were classified as “more cost-effective,” those in the middle tercile as “average cost-effectiveness,” and those in the highest tercile as “less cost-effective.” These categories were intended to support relative comparisons across interventions rather than to establish normative funding thresholds.

RESULTS

WHICH EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS IN CONFLICT SETTINGS HAVE RIGOROUS EVIDENCE OF IMPACT ON CHILDREN’S SEL?

We found seven types of education interventions for which research evidence assessed their impact on children’s SEL outcomes, including mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), academic support with SEL-informed school climate practices, academic support with skill-targeted SEL practices, comprehensive SEL curriculum, remote academic support through EdTech, peace education, and multicomponent interventions that combine SEL with caregiver and financial support. Table 1 provides details for each study on the particular intervention, research methods, effect sizes documenting impact on SEL outcomes, as well as the cost per child, when available. Below we describe the categories of interventions, grouped according to the strength of the evidence.

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

MHPSS interventions aim to improve children’s psychological wellbeing and social-emotional functioning by helping them cope with stress, trauma, and adversity. They are typically delivered in schools or nonformal learning spaces by trained facilitators, teachers, or paraprofessionals, and involve structured group sessions that include activities such as guided discussions, sociodrama, storytelling, creative arts, and cognitive-behavioral techniques. Sessions are usually delivered multiple times per week over a defined period and focus on building emotional awareness, emotional regulation, coping strategies, and interpersonal skills.

In conflict and crisis settings, MHPSS programs are among the most common approaches used to support SEL outcomes. The evidence shows that they have an overall positive impact on mental health and SEL outcomes (Ager et al. 2011; Barron, Abdallah, and Heltne 2016; Burde et al. 2017). We found evidence of nine MHPSS interventions implemented in Indonesia (Tol et al. 2008), Nepal (Jordans et al. 2010), Sri Lanka (Tol et al. 2012), Burundi (Tol et al. 2014), Democratic Republic of the Congo (O’Callaghan et al. 2014), and Sierra Leone (Betancourt et al. 2014), and three in Gaza (Forsberg and Schultz 2022; Peltonen et al. 2012; Punamaki et al. 2014). Across studies, MHPSS interventions showed the most consistent evidence of having an impact on SEL, with effects concentrated in the emotional, perspectives, and identity SEL domains. Several studies reported improvements in emotion regulation, hope, self-efficacy, and self-regulation, although the findings were heterogeneous and often varied by subgroup (e.g., age, gender, exposure to trauma). The evidence for social skills, such as prosocial behavior and peer relationships, was mixed, with many studies reporting null effects or delayed improvements. Impacts on the cognitive and values domains were largely absent. Overall, MHPSS appeared to be the most effective at strengthening emotional competencies, with less consistent effects on social skills.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS WITH POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE PRACTICES

Academic support interventions that include positive school climate practices integrate SEL implicitly through the learning environment and instructional approach, rather than through dedicated SEL content. They emphasize the creation of safe, inclusive, and supportive classroom environments through strategies such as positive teacher-student relationships, collaborative learning, participatory pedagogy, and classroom management practices that promote respect and belonging. These approaches are commonly embedded within remedial education programs, accelerated learning programs, or other forms of flexible education delivery in conflict and crisis settings. While their primary focus remains academic recovery, they seek to influence students’ SEL development indirectly by fostering a positive classroom climate that supports emotional wellbeing, social interaction, and engagement in learning. In conflict and protracted crisis settings, we found five studies that evaluated programs that integrated SEL-informed routines to improve the school and classroom climate (Aber et al. 2016; Torrente et al. 2019; Tubbs Dolan et al. 2022; Brown et al. 2022; Kim et al. 2023). Prior studies on the impact of Healing Classrooms (HC) in public schools in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Aber et al. 2016; Torrente et al. 2019) and a remedial program in Niger (Brown et al. 2023) did not assess effects on SEL. Other programs that incorporated HC also included SEL-targeted activities; these are reported in the next section. In our review, we found only one randomized controlled trial (RCT) of a remedial program for Syrian refugees in Lebanon that integrated HC, which improved school perceptions but had limited impact on academic and SEL outcomes (Tubbs-Dolan et al. 2022).

ACADEMIC SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS WITH SKILL-TARGETED SEL ACTIVITIES

Academic support interventions with skill-targeted SEL activities combine instructional support in core academic subjects with explicit, structured activities to develop specific SEL skills. They include regular school classes for in-school children, remedial lessons for low-performing children, and accelerated learning programs for out-of-school children. In each case, short, skill-targeted SEL exercises focused on specific SEL skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication are integrated into academic instruction and delivered multiple times per day across subject areas.

The skill-targeted SEL activities are typically flexible and require minimal training. Teachers can choose from many options based on existing needs without the need for a specific sequence (Jones et al. 2018). Mindfulness is one example. It consists of brief practices such as breathing techniques and mindful movement to help children manage stress and regulate their emotional responses when facing stress or conflict. Brain Games similarly consist of short and simple games that use movement and playfulness to practice executive function skills, such as attention, working memory, and inhibitory control (Barnes, Bailey, and Jones 2021).

In our review, four studies examined the integration of SEL-targeted activities into academic programs. Two incorporated these activities into remedial programs in Lebanon (Tubbs et al. 2022) and Nigeria (Diazgranados, Lee, and Miheretu 2019), and two integrated SEL into accelerated programs for out-of-school children in Nigeria (Diazgranados et al. 2022) and Ethiopia (Hagos and Hagos 2024). Overall, these interventions yielded mixed and generally limited effects. While one accelerated learning program in Ethiopia reported improvements in prosocial behavior and social difficulties (Hagos and Hagos 2024), the other one reported reduced use of disengagement as a conflict-resolution strategy but found no additional impact on SEL skills (Diazgranados et al. 2022). Both remedial programs with skill-targeted SEL activities showed that they had no impact on SEL skills (Diazgranados, Lee, and Miheretu 2019; Tubbs-Dolan et al. 2022).

Additionally, one RCT in Lebanon disentangled the unique effect of adding 16 weeks of mindfulness practices into a remedial program for Syrian refugees (Tubbs-Dolan 2021). The study showed that adding mindfulness had marginal effects on SEL skills such as behavioral regulation, emotional regulation, and hostile attribution bias but resulted in medium, positive, and significant improvements in academic skills and perceptions of a supportive school environment. Adding 11 more weeks with Brain Games activities targeting executive function skills did not have any further impact (Tubbs-Dolan et al. 2022).

COMPREHENSIVE SEL CURRICULUM

SEL programming can be provided through a comprehensive SEL curriculum that includes structured lesson plans and dedicated time for instruction. In our review, we found evidence of two studies using an SEL curriculum. In Lebanon, an RCT evaluated the impact of adding a comprehensive SEL curriculum to a remedial program with Syrian refugees, but it did not find conclusive evidence of any impact on SEL skills. The cost of adding the SEL curriculum to a tutoring program was \$531 per child (2018 US\$) (Kim et al. 2023). In Liberia, an RCT evaluated the impact of a gender-transformative SEL and life-skills curriculum to girls affected by conflict and crisis. The program did not improve girls' self-esteem or attitudes about gender (Ozler et al. 2020).

REMOTE ACADEMIC SUPPORT THROUGH EDTECH

Remote academic support provided by EdTech interventions primarily aim to strengthen foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy, while also supporting selected SEL outcomes such as motivation, perseverance, and engagement. They are typically delivered through low-tech or remote modalities, including SMS messages, phone calls, interactive voice response, or simple digital platforms. They often combine instructional content with behavioral nudges, goal-setting prompts, and engagement strategies for caregivers. While SEL is not always the primary objective, these interventions may influence children's perspectives and attitudes toward learning, particularly in contexts where schooling has been disrupted. This meta-analysis included seven RCTs on EdTech interventions, including five RCTs that examined the impact of SMS, or SMS paired with phone tutoring calls in Kenya, India, Nepal, Uganda, and the Philippines (Angrist et al. 2023); an RCT of interactive voice-response systems in Bangladesh (Islam et al. 2022); and an RCT of software with academic games in Sudan (Brown et al. 2023).

Across the studies, remote academic support delivered through EdTech showed inconsistent effects across SEL domains. SMS with academic content showed no impact on perspectives (e.g., perseverance, ambition) or social skills (e.g., communication), but modest improvements emerged when SMS was paired with tutoring via phone calls (Angrist et al. 2023). One interactive voice response study suggested isolated gains in leadership but none in communication or planning (Islam et al. 2022). Software with academic games did not affect hope (Brown et al. 2023). There was no information on the effects of EdTech interventions on the emotional, cognitive, or values domains. Overall, EdTech interventions appear to have a limited impact on the identity and perspectives domains.

MULTICOMPONENT INTERVENTIONS

Multicomponent interventions aim to improve children's and adolescents' SEL outcomes by combining SEL or life-skills programming with additional components that address broader structural and contextual constraints, such as poverty, gender norms, and limited caregiver support. Rather than focusing solely on skill development, these interventions integrate multiple pathways—including mentoring, household engagement, and economic support—to influence wellbeing, agency, and social behavior. SEL is typically delivered through structured life-skills sessions or group-based activities, often in safe spaces, but it functions as one component within a broader package of supports.

In this review, we found one multicomponent intervention, Girl Empower, a program in Liberia that provided adolescent girls with weekly life-skills sessions through mentoring in safe spaces. The program also featured caregiver discussion groups and financial support. A variant included offering conditional cash transfers to caregivers to incentivize participation. The intervention aimed to improve girls' social-emotional skills, agency, and wellbeing by addressing both individual competencies and structural barriers to empowerment. Girl Empower showed improvements in life skills related to the cognitive (e.g., decisionmaking and problem-solving), identity (e.g., self-efficacy), and values (e.g., gender attitudes) domains but didn't improve wellbeing outcomes or examine the impacts on the emotional or social domains (Ozler et al. 2024).

PEACE EDUCATION

These interventions aim to promote social cohesion, nonviolent conflict resolution, and positive intergroup relations in contexts affected by conflict and division. They are typically delivered through structured sessions that engage learners in dialogue, reflection, and discussions about identity, inclusion and exclusion, historical narratives, justice, and coexistence. Activities often include perspective-taking exercises, group discussions, and collaborative problem-solving. By encouraging critical reflection on social relationships and conflict dynamics, they aim to strengthen SEL competencies such as empathy, respect, conflict resolution, and ethical reasoning, particularly across lines of difference such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, political affiliation, or other identities that may contribute to social division and conflict.

In our review, Rosen and Salomon (2011) explored Pathways into Reconciliation, an intervention that engaged Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian tenth grade students in biweekly, 90-minute school-based sessions to discuss equality, liberty, majority-minority group relations, and groups' historical narratives. The intervention focused on improving students' understanding of the other group's beliefs and perspectives. A quasi-experimental study used a pre-test and two waves of post-test data to identify and assess changes in core beliefs about security, justness, victimization, and delegitimization, and

in peripheral beliefs about the conflict. Results showed that the intervention influenced peripheral beliefs about the adversary but did not change core beliefs.

Table 1 summarizes the evidence for different education interventions for school age-children in conflict settings, including the number of studies and citations, geographies, and range of impacts.

Table 1: Summary of Evidence on Education Interventions for School-Age Children in Conflict- and Crisis-Affected Settings: Study Coverage, Geographic Distribution, and Impacts

Intervention Category	Citation	Intervention Name	Program Description	Method	Impact on SEL Skills	Geography
MHPSS	Tol et al. 2008	MHPSS group sessions	15-session intervention over 5 weeks combining trauma processing, cooperative play, and creative-expressive activities, delivered by trained paraprofessionals	Clustered RCT; n = 495 children ages 8-10 in 14 schools	Improved hope (d = 0.38); also improved PTSD but no other mental health effects	Indonesia
	Jordans et al. 2010	School-based psychosocial intervention	School-based, group PSS intervention (15 sessions, 5 weeks) combining Cognitive Behavioral Techniques (CBT), creative expression, and group activities (e.g., sociodrama, drawing, cooperative play) to address trauma, promote resilience, hope, and prosocial behavior	Clustered RCT; n = 325 children ages 11-14 in 8 schools	No impacts on main outcomes, but gendered effects, with improvements for girls in prosocial skills and increased hope for older children (no effect sizes provided)	Nepal
	Tol et al. 2013	School-based preventive mental health intervention	School-based group intervention (15 sessions, 5 weeks) combining CBT (psychoeducation, coping, guided trauma exposure) and creative expressive activities (games, drama, music) to reduce distress and strengthen coping and social functioning among war-affected children	Clustered RCT; n = 399 children ages 9-14 in 24 schools	No impact on prosocial skills, but improvements for young children only. No effects on primary mental health outcomes (PTSD, depression, anxiety)	Sri Lanka
	Tol et al. 2014	School-based intervention (CBI) – school-based psychosocial program	School-based group intervention (15 sessions, 5 weeks) combining CBT (psychoeducation, coping, guided trauma exposure) and creative expressive activities (games, drama, music) to reduce distress and strengthen coping and social functioning among war-affected children	Clustered RCT; n = 329 children ages 8-17 in 14 schools	No main effects on mental health outcomes (PTSD, depression, anxiety, hope, functioning), but improvements in hope for younger children and children with lower trauma exposure	Burundi
	Peltonen et al. 2012	School Mediation Intervention	8 month peer mediation and conflict resolution and dialogue skills training, focused on caring for peers and preventing disruptive and aggressive behavior	QED; n = 225 children ages 10-14 in 2 schools	No impacts on mental health, quality of friendships, prosocial behavior, and aggressiveness, but treatment prevented deterioration of friendships (no effect sizes reported)	Gaza

Intervention Category	Citation	Intervention Name	Program Description	Method	Impact on SEL Skills	Geography
MHPSS	O'Callaghan et al. 2014	Family focused, community based PSS	Group-based psychosocial intervention (8 sessions) delivered to children and caregivers, combining life skills training (communication, conflict resolution), relaxation techniques, and community-based activities (e.g., mobile cinema) to strengthen coping, family relationships, and community cohesion	RCT; n = 159 children ages 7-18	Moderate reduction in PTSD symptoms ($d = 0.40$); no significant effects on prosocial behavior or conduct problems at post-test; improvements in prosocial behavior and conduct problems observed at follow-up without a control group	Democratic Republic of the Congo
	Betancourt et al. 2014	Youth Readiness Intervention	Group-based cognitive-behavioral psychosocial intervention (10 sessions) for war-affected youth, combining skills in emotion regulation, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and cognitive restructuring, delivered by trained lay facilitators	RCT; n = 436 children and youth ages 15-24	Significant improvements at post-intervention in emotion regulation ($d = 0.31$), prosocial behavior ($d = 0.39$), social support ($d = 0.29$), and functional impairment ($d = -0.32$); no effects on psychological distress or PTSD; effects were not sustained at 6-month follow-up	Sierra Leone
	Forsberg and Schultz 2022	Better Learning Program – Level 2 (BLP-2)	School-based, teacher-led psychosocial intervention targeting academic underachievement, combining academic support with activities to improve emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and coping with stress	Clustered RCT; n = 300 students ages 9-16 in 30 schools	Significant improvements in self-regulation ($d = 0.99$), self-efficacy ($d = 0.78$), executive function ($d = 0.79$), and hope ($d = 0.53$), reductions in stress-related symptoms at post-intervention; some effects (e.g., self-regulation, self-efficacy) sustained at 5-month follow-up, while others diminished	Gaza
	Punamäki et al. 2014	Teaching Recovery Techniques	School-based, group PSS intervention based on CBT principles (TRT), delivered over 4 weeks (2 sessions per week), using narrative, relaxation, and coping exercises to help children regulate emotions and process trauma	Clustered RCT; n = 482 children ages 10-13 in 4 schools	No significant effects on emotion regulation, but improvements on mental health outcomes (reduced PTSD, depression, distress; increased wellbeing)	Gaza

WHAT WORKS TO IMPROVE SEL SKILLS IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS SETTINGS

Intervention Category	Citation	Intervention Name	Program Description	Method	Impact on SEL Skills	Geography
Academic Support through EdTech	Angrist et al. 2023	ConnectEd: SMS only and SMS + phone calls	Weekly SMS calls with math content plus reminders to support numeracy and motivation. A second treatment arm added 20-minute tutoring calls tailored to level	5 RCTs; India, Kenya n = 1,985 children, Philippines n = 2,316 children, Uganda n = 1,308 children	SMS intervention did not have impacts on perseverance or ambition; SMS + phone calls improved perseverance and ambition	India, Kenya, Nepal, Uganda, Philippines
	Islam et al. 2022	IVR Bangladesh	During COVID-19 school closures, caregivers dial toll-free number to access up to 75 pre-recorded audio lessons for 15 weeks, with content on literacy, numeracy, and a noncognitive module on SEL	Clustered RCT with three treatment arms; 1,763 children ages 5-10 in 90 villages	Improved leadership; no effect on communication/planning	Bangladesh
	Brown et al. 2023	Software with Academic Games	Digital, game-based learning program providing personalized, curriculum-aligned literacy and numeracy instruction for out-of-school children	Quasi-experimental, mixed-methods evaluation; n = 221 children ages 7-9	No effect on hope; improvements on psychological wellbeing	Sudan
Academic Support with School Climate Routines	Tubbs-Dolan et al. 2021	Remedial with Healing Classrooms	Healing Classroom Tutoring (HCT) is a nonformal remedial program. Delivered 3 times per week, 2.67 hours per day, 16 weeks, providing structured literacy and numeracy instruction infused with SEL-informed school climate practices	Clustered RCT; n = 4,994 children in grades 2-4 in 87 public schools	No impacts on SEL outcomes, but impacts on perceptions of the school	Lebanon
Academic Support with SEL-Targeted Practices	Tubbs-Dolan et al. 2021	Remedial with Healing Classrooms and targeted SEL	HCT+ Mindfulness builds on HCT by adding three 10-minute sessions targeting emotional regulation over 16 weeks		No impacts on SEL outcomes, but impacts on perceptions of the school	Lebanon
		Mindfulness and Brain Games	Unique effect of adding 16 weeks of brief mindfulness practices such as breathing and mindful movement to manage stress and regulate emotions, and 11 weeks of Brain Games to support executive	Clustered RCT with 3 arms; n = 4,598 children ages 5 to 15 in public schools	Mindfulness had marginal SEL effects, adding Brain Games had no additional impact	Lebanon
	Diazgranados et al. 2022	ALP with Healing Classrooms	Accelerated learning program for out-of-school children 3 hours per day, 5 days per week for 7 months; including math, literacy, and SEL	Clustered RCT; n = 2,244 out-of-school children, ages 9-14 in 80 nonformal centers	Reduced disengagement; no other effects on SEL (prosocial skills, aggression, emotional regulation)	Nigeria
	Hagos and Hagos 2024	ALP with SEL	ALP with SEL and trauma healing	RCT	Reduced social difficulties; improved prosocial behavior	Ethiopia
	Diazgranados et al. 2019	Remedial with Healing Classrooms and SEL	After-school group remedial sessions (3 times per week, 2.5 hours per day, 21 weeks; 157 hours) that integrate learning in healing classrooms and focus on literacy, numeracy, and SEL	Clustered RCT, n = 1,175 children ages 9-14 in 80 public schools	No impacts on SEL outcomes (emotional regulation, conflict resolution)	Nigeria
SEL Comprehensive Curriculum	Kim et al. 2023	SEL Curriculum	Adding a universal, comprehensive SEL curriculum to a remedial program that already integrated Learning in a Healing Classroom approach	Clustered RCT with 3 arms; n = 4,289 children ages 5-15 in 57 public schools	No impacts on SEL outcomes, including emotional regulation, prosocial skills, conflict resolution, and hostile attribution bias	Lebanon

Intervention Category	Citation	Intervention Name	Program Description	Method	Impact on SEL Skills	Geography
Multicomponent SEL Intervention	Ozler et al. 2020	Girl Empower (GE) Girl Empower + Cash (GE+)	Multicomponent, gender-transformative program combining SEL/ life skills curriculum, mentoring, caregiver engagement. Second treatment arm also added financial support with cash transfers	Clustered RCT with 3 arms: GE, GE+; n = 1,216 girls ages 13-14 across 84 villages	No significant effects on psychosocial wellbeing; positive impacts on life skills (GE: 0.22 SD; GE+: 0.29 SD) and gender attitudes (GE: 0.20 SD; GE+: 0.23 SD)	Liberia
Peace Education	Rosen and Salomon 2012	Peace Education	Dialogue sessions on identity and conflict	QED	Changed peripheral beliefs about other group, but not central beliefs	Israel, Palestine

META-ANALYSIS RESULTS: EVIDENCE ON THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS ON SEL

Above we provided a narrative synthesis of existing evidence on the impact education interventions have on SEL outcomes in crisis- and conflict-affected settings. We highlighted the strength of the evidence for different types of interventions. This overview, however, did not account for the relative magnitude or consistency of effects across interventions. In this section, we present the findings from a meta-analysis that pooled data across studies to generate overall effect estimates and explore variations in impact. This quantitative approach provides a rigorous assessment of what works to improve SEL across diverse humanitarian contexts to reveal insights that may not be evident from individual studies alone.

The analysis covered five intervention types: MHPSS, academic support with positive school climate practices, academic support with targeted SEL, standalone SEL programming, and academic support through EdTech. We excluded peace education interventions because the only study in this category did not provide standard errors.

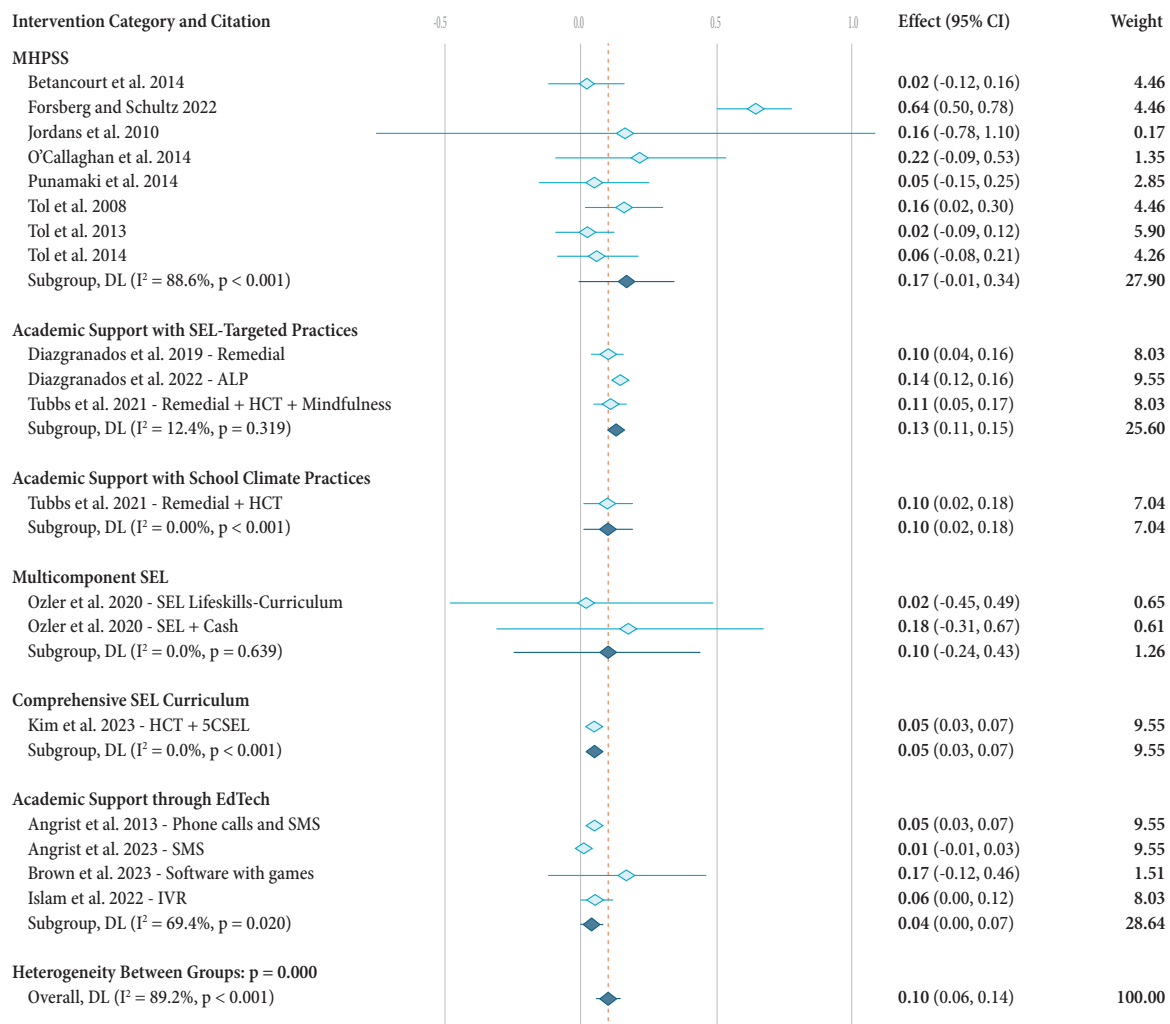
The meta-analysis yielded a pooled effect size of 0.10 [95% CI: 0.06, 0.14], which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that, overall, the interventions included in the analysis produced a moderate positive effect on SEL outcomes. However, the heterogeneity across studies was high ($I^2 = 89.2\%$, $p < 0.001$), which indicates substantial variability in effect sizes. The test for differences between intervention categories was statistically significant ($Q = 15.63$, $p = 0.01$), which suggests that variation in effect sizes across intervention types and SEL domains explains a meaningful portion of the observed variability.

A key finding of the meta-analysis is that many interventions showing null effects in individual studies appeared to have small and statistically significant effects when results were aggregated in the meta-analysis. This suggests that these interventions may generate diffuse, low-intensity changes that are difficult to detect in single studies but become more visible when statistical power increases.

META-ANALYSIS BY INTERVENTION TYPE

We conducted a meta-analysis, grouping studies by six types of interventions. Figure 2 displays a forest plot with the results.

Figure 2: Forest Plot of Impacts of Education Interventions on SEL Outcomes in Conflict Settings



Note: Between subgroup heterogeneity tests are from random-effects model

MHPSS interventions yielded a larger estimated effect ($ES = 0.166$), although this result does not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.065$). The extremely high heterogeneity observed in this group ($I^2 = 88.6\%$) indicates substantial inconsistency across studies, which suggests that the effectiveness of MHPSS interventions is highly context dependent, with some studies showing meaningful improvements while others report negligible or highly uncertain effects. The wide confidence intervals call for cautious interpretation.

Interventions providing academic support that integrate positive school climate components showed a pooled effect size of 0.10 [$CI = 0.02, 0.17$], which is statistically significant ($p = 0.01$). However, this estimate is based on a single study, which limits the generalizability of the findings; further evidence is needed to confirm consistency across contexts.

Academic support interventions combined with SEL-targeted components yielded a pooled effect size of 0.13 [$95\% CI = 0.10, 0.15$], which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The low level of heterogeneity ($I^2 = 12.4\%$) indicates that the effect is stable across studies.

Academic support delivered through educational technology yielded a pooled effect size of 0.05 [$95\% CI = 0.03, 0.07$], which is statistically significant ($p < 0.007$). As with the school climate subgroup, this is driven by a single study and should be interpreted with caution.

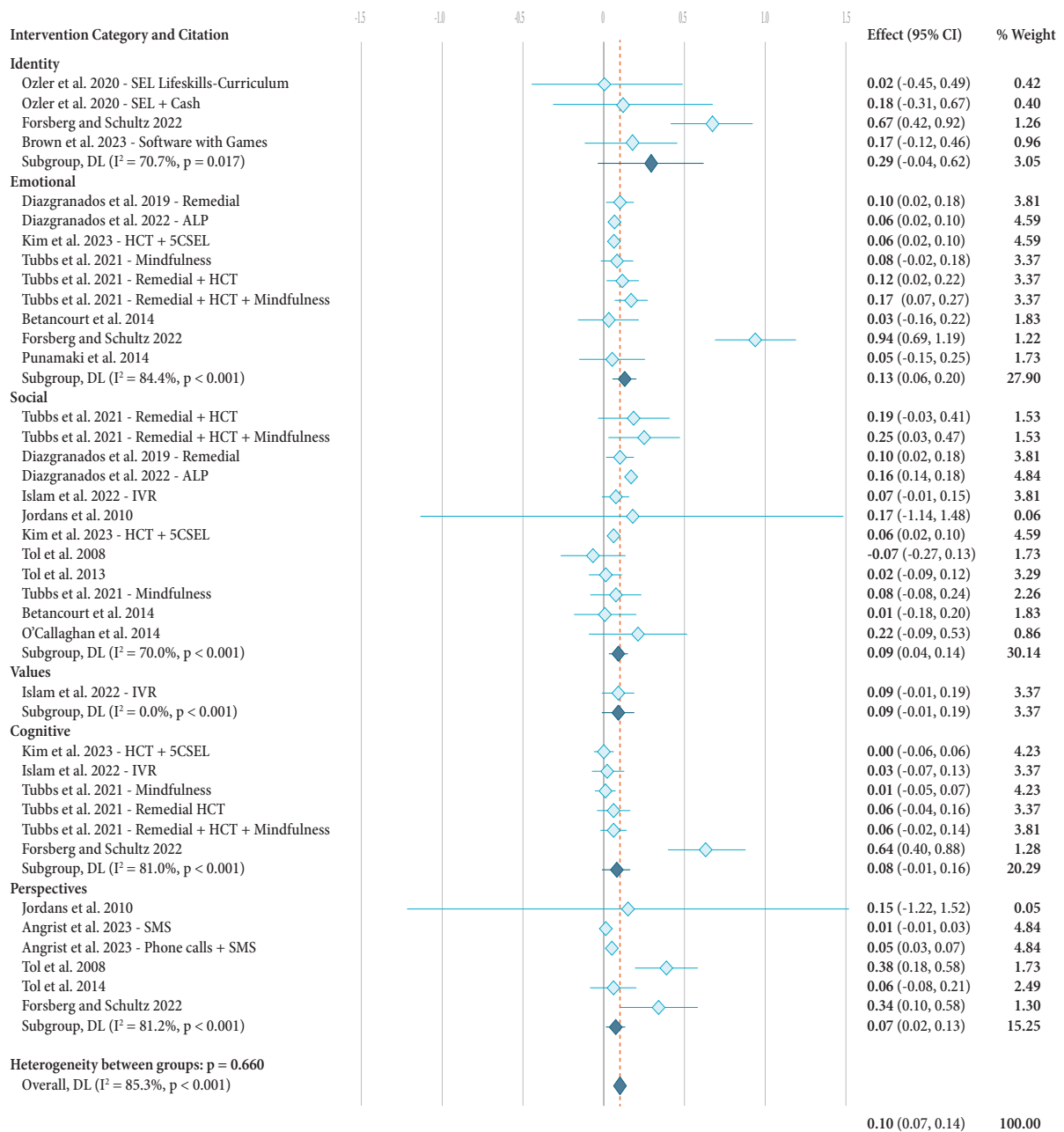
Multicomponent SEL interventions presented a small ($ES = 0.095$, [$95\% CI = -0.243, 0.433$]) and nonsignificant effect ($p = 0.580$), with no observed heterogeneity ($I^2 = 0.0\%$). The wide confidence interval indicates low precision and insufficient evidence to draw firm conclusions.

In sum, the meta-analysis indicates that several intervention categories yielded positive, moderate, and statistically significant effects on SEL outcomes. Academic support interventions that integrate SEL-targeted activities and school climate components, as well as standalone SEL programming such as a comprehensive SEL curriculum, showed significant effects in the range of 0.05 SD to 0.13 SD, while MHPSS interventions presented the largest estimated effect size but did not reach statistical significance and show high heterogeneity. Remote academic supports delivered through EdTech had a small effect on SEL outcomes within the perspectives domain (e.g., ambition and perseverance). Multicomponent SEL interventions showed small, nonsignificant effects with wide confidence intervals, reflecting limited precision in the available evidence.

META-ANALYSIS BY SEL DOMAIN

We also conducted a meta-analysis to identify patterns of impacts by SEL domain. Whereas the previous section showed the impacts that different types of education interventions had on SEL outcomes, this section highlights which SEL domains were most influenced by the education interventions in our sample. Figure 3 displays a forest plot with the impact of studies on SEL competencies, clustered on SEL domains, according to Harvard EASEL Lab's SEL taxonomy (Bailey et al. 2021).

Figure 3: Forest Plot of Impacts of Education Interventions on SEL Domains



Note: Between subgroup heterogeneity tests are from random-effects model

The emotional domain showed a pooled effect size of 0.13 [95% CI = 0.061, 0.203], which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and represents one of the largest effects across domains. However, heterogeneity was very high ($I^2 = 84.4\%$, $p < 0.001$), which indicates considerable dispersion in effect sizes, including both moderate and large effects.

The social domain showed a pooled effect size of 0.09 [95% CI = 0.04, 0.14], which was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Heterogeneity was moderate to high ($I^2 = 70\%$, $p < 0.001$), with most estimates clustering around small positive values.

The perspectives domain showed a pooled effect size of 0.07 [95% CI = 0.01, 0.13], which was statistically significant ($p = 0.011$). However, heterogeneity was high ($I^2 = 81.2\%$, $p < 0.001$), with effect sizes ranging from near zero to moderate values, and some wide confidence intervals.

The cognitive domain showed a pooled effect size of 0.07 [95% CI = -0.005, 0.15], which was not statistically significant ($p = 0.06$). Heterogeneity was high ($I^2 = 81\%$, $p < 0.001$), which indicates substantial variation across studies, including both negligible and larger positive effects.

The values domain included one study that yielded an effect size of 0.09 [95% CI = -0.008, 0.18], which was not statistically significant ($p = 0.07$). Heterogeneity could not be estimated.

Finally, the identity domain showed a pooled effect size of 0.29 [95% CI = -0.03, 0.62], which was not statistically significant ($p = 0.08$). The confidence interval was wide and included zero, which indicates high uncertainty. Heterogeneity was moderate to high ($I^2 = 70.7\%$, $p < 0.017$).

Overall, statistically significant effects were observed in the social, emotional, and perspective domains, while cognitive, values, and identity did not show statistically significant pooled effects. The largest point estimates were in the emotional and identity domains, although the latter was not statistically robust. High heterogeneity was present in most domains, indicating a substantial variability in intervention effects.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS EVIDENCE FOR IMPROVING SEL

Drawing on evidence from the 11 interventions that reported cost data, we estimated that the average cost of education interventions with evidence of impact on SEL outcomes in conflict-affected settings was \$211 per child (2024 US\$) and ranged from \$12 to \$663 dollars.

Cost-effectiveness varied substantially across intervention types, reflecting differences in both implementation costs and effect sizes. When expressed as the cost required to achieve a 0.20 SD improvement in SEL, a remote phone-based tutoring intervention demonstrated a very low cost per child (\$13), combined with a modest but statistically significant effect size (0.05 SD). This resulted in a cost of \$52 per 0.20 SD improvement—the lowest among all interventions analyzed—but was limited to competencies in the perspectives SEL domain (i.e., perseverance and ambition).

Interventions that combined academic support with explicit SEL components demonstrated moderate cost-effectiveness. An accelerated learning program and a remedial program with a comprehensive SEL curriculum in Nigeria achieved one of the largest observed effect sizes (0.14 SD) at moderate cost, which resulted in a cost of \$157 per 0.20 SD improvement for the accelerated learning programs, and \$198 for the remedial program. Another remedial program that integrated SEL components in Lebanon showed lower cost-effectiveness, \$636 per 0.20 SD improvement.

Standalone SEL programming showed mixed cost-effectiveness. While comprehensive SEL curricula produced statistically significant effects, they were less cost-effective than integrated academic-SEL approaches, which reflected smaller effect sizes relative to cost. Interventions with negligible or nonsignificant effects, such as SMS-only or mindfulness-only programs, could not be meaningfully assessed.

Table 2: Cost-Effectiveness of Education Interventions for Improving SEL Outcomes among School-Age Children in Conflict-Affected Settings

Intervention Category	Intervention and Reference	Context	Cost per Child (USD)	Effect Size (SD)	Significance	Cost per 0.20 SD (USD)	Cost-Effectiveness
Remote Academic Support through EdTech	SMS + phone calls (Angrist et al. 2024)	India, Kenya, Nepal, Uganda, Philippines	\$13.00	0.05	$p < 0.0001$	\$52.00	Higher cost-effectiveness
	SMS (Angrist et al. 2024)	India, Kenya, Nepal, Uganda, Philippines	\$0.24	0.01	null	n/a	Not cost-effective
	IVR (Islam et al. 2022)	Bangladesh	\$47.85	0.06	$p = 0.05$	\$159.50	Medium cost-effectiveness
Academic Support with School Climate Practices	Remedial Lessons in Healing Classrooms (Tubbs et al. 2021)	Lebanon	\$318.00	0.10	$p < 0.05$	\$636.00	Lower cost-effectiveness

Intervention Category	Intervention and Reference	Context	Cost per Child (USD)	Effect Size (SD)	Significance	Cost per 0.20 SD (USD)	Cost-Effectiveness
Academic Support with SEL-Targeted Practices	Accelerated Learning Program with Comprehensive SEL Curriculum (Diazgranados et al. 2022)	Nigeria	\$110.13	0.14	$p < 0.0001$	\$157.33	Medium cost-effectiveness
	Remedial Lessons with Mindfulness and Brain Games (Tubbs et al. 2021)	Lebanon	\$350.00	0.11	$p < 0.0001$	\$636.36	Lower cost-effectiveness
	Remedial Lessons with Comprehensive SEL Curriculum and Mindfulness (Diazgranados et al. 2019)	Nigeria	\$98.97	0.10	$p < 0.0001$	\$197.94	Medium cost-effectiveness
SEL Programming	Mindfulness only (Tubbs et al. 2021)	Lebanon	\$32.00	0.03	null	n/a	Not cost-effective
	Comprehensive SEL curriculum only (Kim et al. 2023)	Lebanon	\$83.75	0.05	$p < 0.0001$	\$335.00	Lower cost-effectiveness

DISCUSSION

This study provides the first meta-analytic evidence on the impact of education interventions on SEL outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis settings. Overall, the meta-analysis shows that education interventions in conflict-affected settings have an overall positive, moderate, and statistically significant impact, with a pooled effect size of 0.10 SD. This finding indicates that, despite highly constrained and disrupted environments, interventions can generate measurable improvement in children's SEL. However, these average effects mask substantial variation across both intervention types and SEL domains. Evidence on cost-effectiveness remains extremely limited, with few studies reporting costing data; among those that do, many do not demonstrate high cost-effectiveness.

At the intervention level, the findings highlight important variation across intervention types. Academic support interventions that integrate SEL-targeted practices showed statistically significant and consistent effects with relatively low heterogeneity, which suggests a more reliable and replicable pathway to impact. Interventions combining academic support with school climate components and those explicitly focused on

SEL through a comprehensive curriculum showed moderate effects, but they represent promising areas of programming, with evidence still emerging. Remote academic support delivered through EdTech also showed statistically significant but small effects, which likely reflects the fact that these interventions do not typically directly target SEL outcomes and instead influence them through indirect pathways. In contrast, MHPSS interventions presented the largest estimated effect size but did not reach statistical significance and exhibit substantial heterogeneity. This points to wide variations in implementation. Multicomponent interventions showed small and nonsignificant effects, with wide confidence intervals reflecting limited precision, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about effectiveness.

Across SEL domains, the analysis reveals important differences. Statistically significant effects were observed in the emotional, social, and perspectives domains, with the largest and most consistent effects in the emotional domain. In contrast, effects in the cognitive, values, and identity domains were not statistically significant, and the evidence base for these domains remains limited. These findings suggest that some domains—particularly those related to emotional functioning and interpersonal skills—are more frequently targeted or more responsive to intervention in crisis contexts, while others remain underexplored. However, given the limited number of studies in several domains, these patterns should be interpreted cautiously.

These effects are consistent with benchmarks observed in international education research. In their review of more than 150 education interventions in low- and middle-income countries, Evans and Yuan (2022) found that median effect sizes tend to range between 0.05 SD and 0.10 SD, with few interventions demonstrating effects above 0.20 SD. According to education-specific benchmarks (Kraft 2020), an effect size of 0.10 SD constitutes a moderate effect size and may represent meaningful improvement in conflict and crisis settings, where learning environments are disrupted and children face multiple constraints on their development. As Kraft (2020) noted, the interpretation of effect sizes in education depends critically on context, intervention intensity, and scalability. Given the limited and heterogeneous evidence base, meta-analytic estimates should be interpreted as reflecting broad patterns rather than precise or universally generalizable effects.

Compared to estimates from the broader SEL literature, these effects are smaller. Cipriano et al. (2023) reported average effect sizes ranging from 0.11 SD to 0.29 SD across SEL and related domains, which suggests that interventions in conflict-affected settings may face additional implementation and contextual constraints. When compared to evidence on academic outcomes in conflict-affected settings, this estimate is also lower. A recent meta-analysis of interventions targeting foundational literacy and numeracy in conflict-affected contexts reported average effect sizes of 0.27 SD in literacy and 0.21 SD in numeracy, which indicates larger impacts on academic outcomes than those observed for SEL (Diazgranados and Thuo in press).

An interesting emerging pattern is the discrepancy between individual studies and pooled meta-analytic estimates. While many individual evaluations report null effects on SEL outcomes, the meta-analysis detects moderate and statistically significant impacts, suggesting that effects may be too small to detect in underpowered individual studies but become visible when evidence is aggregated. This pattern contrasts with findings from a meta-analysis of foundational learning in conflict-affected settings, where individual studies more consistently detect statistically significant impacts on academic outcomes (Diazgranados and Thuo in press). This suggests that SEL outcomes may be more difficult to shift, detect, or measure in the short term than academic outcomes.

Among studies reporting costing data, the average cost of education interventions that promote SEL outcomes is \$211 per child (2024 US\$), with substantial variation across programs, ranging from \$13 to \$350. When linking cost to impact, we find that education interventions have mixed cost-effectiveness, ranging from null impacts to improvements per 0.20 SD in SEL outcomes between \$52 to \$636 per child. A remote phone-based intervention delivered through EdTech appears to exhibit the highest cost-effectiveness, \$52 per improvement in SEL. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution, as the intervention was primarily designed to improve academic outcomes rather than SEL, and cost-effectiveness is driven by very low delivery costs combined with small but significant effects on a narrow set of outcomes within the perspectives domain only (i.e., perseverance and ambition). Academic interventions that integrate SEL components—whether through school climate practices, targeted SEL strategies, or comprehensive SEL curricula—show mixed cost-effectiveness. Estimates range from no cost-effectiveness in cases of null impacts to between \$157 and \$636 per 0.20 SD improvement.

In contrast, evidence on the cost-effectiveness of education interventions targeting academic outcomes in conflict and crisis settings shows stronger and more consistent results, with costs per 0.20 SD improvement in literacy and numeracy ranging from \$3 to \$385. These findings are driven by a combination of lower delivery costs and larger impacts. Foundational learning interventions often achieve meaningful gains in academic outcomes at a relatively low cost, which reflects scalable delivery models and well-defined instructional approaches. The contrast suggests that, while interventions targeting academic outcomes have increasingly converged around cost-effective and scalable models, comparable optimization has not yet been achieved for SEL programming in conflict and crisis settings (Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel 2023). This underscores that cost-effectiveness is a function not only of delivery cost but of how interventions are designed to balance intensity, feasibility, and scale (Diazgranados, Guimond, and Annan 2026).

Overall, the meta-analytic and cost-effectiveness findings point to a broader challenge: despite the increasing prominence of SEL programming in humanitarian settings, SEL programs are not yet reliably improving children’s SEL outcomes in cost-effective ways. Effects remain modest and uneven across intervention types and domains, and the limited cost data available suggests that many interventions do not achieve high cost-effectiveness. To explain these patterns, we identify three interrelated drivers of variation in SEL impacts and cost-effectiveness: (1) the nature and intensity of the mechanisms activated by interventions; (2) implementation conditions, including alignment with local contexts; and (3) adequate measurement of SEL outcomes. These drivers not only shape effectiveness, they also influence cost-effectiveness and scalability, as decisions about mechanisms, delivery models, and measurement systems influence both the magnitude of the impact and the resources required to achieve it. These factors likely interact, compounding their effects and contributing to the variability observed across studies. We discuss each of these below.

The first driver relates to the mechanisms that interventions use to influence SEL. Interventions with stronger and more consistent effects—particularly those integrating SEL into academic support—tend to combine structured opportunities for skill development with regular instructional engagement, which allows for repeated exposure and practice. This integration may also reduce opportunity costs and increase feasibility in resource-constrained settings, thus contributing to more consistent implementation. In contrast, interventions that rely on indirect or lower intensity pathways may influence SEL through narrower or less well-sustained mechanisms. MHPSS interventions, while designed to directly address psychosocial processes, show highly variable effects across contexts, which suggests that their effectiveness may depend on factors such as implementation quality, targeting, and alignment with local needs. This variability underscores the importance of understanding not only what interventions are delivered but how, for whom, and under what conditions. Prior systematic evidence has shown that SEL interventions are most effective when they are active, focused, and explicitly target specific competencies, rather than relying on diffuse or indirect approaches (Deitz et al. 2021).

The second driver relates to context and implementation conditions. Beyond differences in mechanisms, variation in effects is also closely linked to implementation conditions. SEL interventions are sensitive to context, culture, and implementation conditions, requiring design or adaptation that aligns with local norms, experiences, and learner needs. Emerging critiques of education programming in crisis settings (Shah and Dalrymple 2025) highlight a tendency to transfer or “import” SEL frameworks and curricula developed in high-income or stable contexts, rather than to engage in a process of codesign that prioritizes local knowledge. Such approaches may overlook how SEL competencies are defined, expressed, and valued across different cultural and conflict-affected settings. As a result, interventions may not fully align with learners’ lived experiences or with locally relevant forms of social and emotional development, limiting

implementation uptake, quality, and impact. As prior research shows, interventions are less likely to produce intended outcomes when they do not resonate with local values and context (Durlak and DuPre 2008; Burns and Lawrie 2015; Puri et al. 2017). This is particularly relevant for SEL, where effectiveness depends on alignment with locally defined competencies and social norms (Deitz et al. 2021). Moreover, ensuring that programs are tailored to children's developmental needs is especially critical in humanitarian settings, where learners often have heightened vulnerabilities and diverse cognitive and emotional needs (Jones et al. 2017).

This highlights the need to sequence research and program development in ways that support iterative design, testing, and adaptation, which will ultimately enable the development of education interventions that are effective, scalable, and sustainable in crisis contexts (Diazgranados, Guimond, and Annan 2026). Addressing these challenges requires more systematic use of tools that support alignment between intervention design and local knowledge, values, and priorities. For example, the PSS-SEL toolbox provides localizing tools with structured guidance to help practitioners identify local needs and assets, prioritize relevant skills, and validate SEL frameworks and measurement tools in collaboration with local stakeholders (Harvard EASEL Lab and INEE 2022). These insights reinforce the importance of moving toward more participatory and contextually grounded approaches to SEL design, where local actors—including educators, communities, and learners—play a central role in shaping intervention content and delivery. Strengthening this alignment may help reduce variability in implementation and improve the consistency of observed effects across contexts.

The third driver relates to how SEL outcomes are measured. Limitations in SEL measurement may contribute to inconsistent evidence. Existing tools aiming to measure SEL outcomes vary widely in the constructs they capture, the domains they prioritize, and the terminology they use, which reflects a lack of conceptual standardization across the field (Jones et al. 2016). Many instruments have been developed outside of crisis-affected contexts and thus require substantial adaptation to ensure cultural relevance and validity (Diazgranados and Lee 2019). Fragmentation and limited contextual alignment can reduce the sensitivity of measurement tools and their ability to detect change and complicate comparisons across studies. Moreover, measurement tools are not always well aligned with the specific mechanisms targeted by interventions, and they often rely on self-reported outcomes that may be less responsive to short-term changes. These limitations may systematically attenuate observed effect sizes and contribute to null findings in individual studies. Addressing this requires strengthening the alignment between intervention design and measurement. Greater use of structured resources—such as the INEE Measurement Library (INEE n.d.) and the PSS-SEL toolbox (Harvard EASEL Lab and INEE 2022)—along with existing efforts to map SEL tools against SEL domains and subdomains (Jones et al. 2020; Diazgranados et al. n.d.) can help researchers and practitioners select instruments that more closely capture the skills targeted by the

interventions. Improving this alignment is critical for measuring accurately and for advancing cumulative and comparable evidence in the field.

These drivers help explain why some interventions are more cost-effective than others. Interventions that balance the intensity of mechanisms with feasible and scalable delivery models while maintaining alignment with local contexts and measurable outcomes are more likely to generate impact efficiently. In contrast, interventions that are intensive but difficult to scale, weakly aligned with context, or poorly matched to measurement systems may generate impact at a high cost or with limited efficiency. Interventions must also be designed to deliver impact in cost-effective and sustainable ways, at scale.

LIMITATIONS

This meta-analysis has several limitations. First, the evidence base for many intervention types is limited, with only a small number of eligible studies per category. This restricted the precision of pooled estimates and reduces confidence in cross-intervention comparisons. Second, insufficient disaggregation by key variables, such as geographic region, type of conflict or crisis, and implementation modality, limited our ability to explore sources of heterogeneity. Third, few studies reported cost or expenditure data, which prevented a systematic assessment of cost-effectiveness across interventions. Fourth, the synthesis relied on published and accessible evaluation reports, which may have introduced publication bias if studies with null or negative results were less likely to be disseminated. Finally, this analysis aggregated diverse interventions implemented in highly heterogeneous humanitarian and crisis-affected settings. While necessary for synthesis, aggregation may have masked important contextual differences that shaped effectiveness and transferability.

CONCLUSION

This study provides the first comparative, meta-analytic evidence on the effectiveness of education interventions in improving SEL outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis settings. The findings show that, while interventions can generate meaningful improvements, the effects are modest, uneven across domains, and highly variable across intervention types.

To explain this variation, we identified three interrelated drivers shaping SEL impacts: the nature and intensity of intervention mechanisms, the degree of alignment with local contexts and implementation conditions, and limitations in terms of how SEL outcomes are measured. These drivers highlight the fact that improving SEL outcomes in conflict and crisis settings requires not only identifying effective approaches but also strengthening coherence between intervention design, implementation, and measurement.

Advancing the field of education in conflict and protracted crisis will require greater investment in contextually grounded and developmentally appropriate program design, stronger alignment between intended outcomes and measurement tools, and more systematic attention to cost-effectiveness and scalability. Addressing these challenges is critical to generating reliable evidence on what works, for whom, and under what conditions to support the social and emotional development of children affected by conflict and crisis.

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PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY SAFETY AND LINKS TO EDUCATION OUTCOMES IN CONTEXTS OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT: EVIDENCE AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES FROM PROJECT 21 COUNTRIES IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

CIRENIA CHÁVEZ VILLEGAS, ALANNA HEYER,
SEUN BUNMI ADEBAYO, PIERRE VERNIER,
ARSENII SLIEBA, AND IVAN LOPES

ABSTRACT

Ensuring the provision of equitable, safe, and sustained learning in crisis-affected settings requires trustworthy and usable data on the risks in and around schools. However, evidence of this quality on safety at school and in the community in contexts of forced displacement is limited. Using Project 21 (P21), an interagency, cross-border, community-based monitoring initiative in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger, in this article we examine perceptions of school and community safety, their association with education outcomes, and strategies that can mitigate risks to school safety. Our descriptive analysis shows that school participation in these P21 countries is only 46 percent, and lower among forcibly displaced households (40%). Perceived lack of safety in schools and the community is high; 41 percent of surveyed households judged schools unsafe and 33 percent felt unsafe in their communities. Our logistic regression analysis finds a significant relationship between school participation and perceptions of both school and community safety, as well as a decrease in the odds of school participation among forcibly displaced households. Our qualitative findings indicate that effective mitigation in these P21 countries, which are located in the Central Sahel, requires a layered package that includes sustained preparedness and emergency planning; systematic protection and gender-based violence (GBV) mainstreaming, which we define as the systematic integration of protection principles and GBV risk mitigation into educational programming, along with water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions,

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psychosocial support, and referral pathways; adaptive delivery and proximity-based infrastructure, such as establishing learning centers closer to communities to reduce exposure to transit-related hazards, including armed ambushes and improvised explosive devices; and deep community engagement to address social norms in highly insecure environments. This study strengthens the education in emergencies evidence base by showing how community-based monitoring can address critical gaps in the data on safety in displacement contexts while modelling ethical, locally grounded approaches to generating actionable evidence.

INTRODUCTION

Robust and comparable evidence on safety in and around schools is a foundational element of an effective, equitable, and just data and evidence ecosystem for education in emergencies (EiE). Overlapping conflict, forced displacement, and climate shocks have severely disrupted education systems, in particular in West and Central Africa. More than 8.2 million people there are internally displaced and nearly 2.7 million across the region are refugees, with Burkina Faso alone hosting more than 2 million forcibly displaced people and more than 170,000 refugees since 2016. Hundreds of schools have been attacked, damaged, or repurposed as shelters, and school closures have surged in the Central Sahel subregion (UNHCR 2024). These dynamics heighten the salience of objective risks to school safety (e.g., threats and attacks by armed actors, improvised explosive devices [IEDs], occupation) and the perceived risks that shape families' decisions about whether to send their children to school.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a robust global literature documented the high prevalence of school-related violence, especially bullying, and its adverse consequences for student learning and wellbeing.¹ However, very few studies have examined the prevalence of school and community violence and their consequences for education specifically in contexts of forced displacement (e.g., Alsharabati and Lahoud 2016; Karaman 2023). The limited quantitative evidence available points to high victimization rates among refugee learners, but this evidence is geographically narrow and methodologically constrained. At the same time, a smaller but compelling body of research shows that community violence often reduces school attendance and achievement even more than in-school violence. This underscores the need to measure community-level risks along with school-based harms, a need that has been largely overlooked in studies on the experiences of forcibly displaced learners.

¹ In 2019, for example, UNESCO estimated that 32 percent of students worldwide had been bullied at least once in the prior month.

These evidence gaps are the products of a wider challenge in the data and evidence ecosystem. Most large-scale international education assessments and surveys do not identify forcibly displaced students, which prevents a credible estimation of the number of learners affected by displacement and the disparities among them (OECD 2020). Existing proxies (e.g., immigrant status) are imperfect substitutes for the identification of refugees. Furthermore, instruments typically emphasize school-based violence (e.g., bullying) but give only limited attention to the community risks and threats to mobility that can dominate decisionmaking in conflict-affected settings. While they ensure comparability across countries and over time, indicator design and recall windows are rarely calibrated, meaning they are often too narrow to capture low-frequency, high-severity events, such as attacks on education. To address this, evidence systems require “right-sized” recall windows and indicators specifically designed to document these severe incidents while maintaining cross-country comparability. Finally, ethical and safeguarding considerations (e.g., referral mechanisms that center on protecting data on survivors, collecting the minimum data necessary, and masking personally identifiable information) are often underspecified for fragile and conflict-affected contexts, which impedes the safe sharing and use of data.

In this study, we respond to these gaps and to the need to mobilize an effective, equitable, and just data and evidence ecosystem for education in crisis and conflict contexts by leveraging Project 21 (P21), an interagency, cross-border, community-based monitoring initiative in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger, which we refer to as the P21 countries.² P21 offers a rare multicountry platform, which includes disaggregation by forced displacement status, from which we can generate comparable indicators.

We focus on two policy-critical questions:

- What are households’ (parents’ and caregivers’) perceptions of school and community safety and their link to education outcomes in P21 countries?
- What effective strategies have been used in P21 countries to mitigate safety incidents in and around schools?

By analyzing P21 survey items along with qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs), we contribute in three ways. First, we generate comparable multicountry descriptive estimates of how safety is perceived in schools and communities in forced displacement settings, which complements and extends the largely single-country literature. Second, we synthesize field-informed perceptions that can inform and enhance mitigation strategies already in use, or that practitioners recommend to address the dominant

² To learn more about P21, go to <https://project21.info/>. To access the licensed P21 dataset, go to the UNHCR Microdata Library and create an account at <https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/auth/register>. Search for “P21” to return data from all P21 countries. For each dataset, go to the “Get Microdata” tab and request access. For questions, contact the UNHCR Curation Team at dencomdl@unhcr.org.

identified threats to safety, such as armed-group activity, dangers to mobility (including IEDs), and vulnerable infrastructure. We also offer guidance on context-appropriate considerations for how these mitigation strategies may be implemented across different high-risk settings. Third, we draw out implications for a more equitable and just EiE evidence ecosystem in the Central Sahel that disaggregates data by experiences of forced displacement, including practical steps to balance standardization and localization, extend reporting timeframes to ensure that rare but severe events like school attacks are not missed, and strengthen ethical governance of data and community feedback mechanisms so that evidence is both safe and usable for educators and decisionmakers.

To begin, we outline why evidence on school and community safety is central to effective EiE decisionmaking, then we summarize the displacement and insecurity dynamics shaping education access in the Central Sahel, which includes the P21 countries. We review the literature on school- and community-related violence and introduce the theoretical framework linking risk exposure, safety perceptions, and schooling behavior. We next highlight key gaps in the evidence on forced displacement contexts and describe the P21 data, measures, and methods. We discuss findings on safety risks and suggest mitigation strategies drawn from our key informants' insights. We identify the study's implications for practice and offer suggestions for how to create a stronger, more effective, equitable, and just EiE evidence ecosystem. We conclude with the limitations of our study and ideas for future research.

FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND RISKS TO EDUCATION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

The Central Sahel and adjoining West and Central African subregions face layered crises that have profoundly disrupted schooling and heightened risks for learners and educators. The region has experienced high levels of forced displacement and widespread damage to education infrastructure in recent years, conditions that affect the feasibility of maintaining schooling and the safety of school environments. Across the region, more than 8.2 million people are internally displaced and nearly 2.7 million are refugees, which underscores the scale and persistence of the mobility and protection pressures confronting education systems. For definitions of forced displacement status and other key terms, see Annex 1. Within this broader context, the Central Sahel, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have seen escalating violence and insecurity that directly target or spill over into education spaces, while Cameroon's Far North Region and Chad contend with overlapping conflict and climate shocks that similarly disrupt learning (see Table 1 for detailed country snapshots and regional patterns).

Table 1: Country Contexts

Country	Description
Burkina Faso	Since 2016, more than 2 million people have been displaced; more than 170,000 have fled as refugees to Burkina Faso. Attacks on education have surged (270 incidents reported in 2022-2023), destroying schools, disrupting learning, and prompting prolonged school closures.
Mali and Niger (Central Sahel)	Escalating violence has led to widespread school closures and persistent threats to students and teachers, which reflects entrenched nonstate armed group activity and chronic insecurity in the affected communities. As authorities respond to shifting security conditions, education systems face ongoing disruptions.
Cameroon (Far North)	Recurrent insecurity has damaged schools and led communities to repurpose facilities for emergency use. This has left many learners at risk of missing critical learning opportunities, and complicated efforts to stabilize staffing and timetables and provide safe access routes to school.
Chad (Salamat and Sila)	Home to more than 182,000 refugees, these regions of Chad have experienced extensive school closures and damage due to floods and conflict. This has put the infrastructure under extended strain and limited the capacity to deliver continuous education.

Targeted attacks on education have intensified existing vulnerabilities across the subregion. In Burkina Faso alone, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA 2025) documented more than 270 attacks on schools in 2022-2023, which has contributed to widespread destruction and displaced learners from the classroom. School closures have increased sharply in the Central Sahel as threats and attacks have proliferated, which magnifies the risks for children and teachers and reduces the availability of safe, predictable learning environments. Even where schools are not directly attacked, the proximity of conflict, the presence of armed actors, the use of explosives, and the occupation of facilities heighten the perceived and real risks, which results in precautionary school closures and reduces participation in school. Recurrent flooding and other climate-related shocks compound conflict-related risks by damaging facilities, creating the need to repurpose schools as emergency shelters and interrupting service delivery. These dynamics create prolonged periods during which learners lack access to safe, functional school spaces, while government ministries and partners face continual recovery efforts and restoration of services in highly constrained environments. The dual pressures of conflict and climate shocks erode infrastructure and strain national and local education systems' capacity to maintain equitable access to education (UNHCR 2024).

We posit that, based on the cross-border character of displacement, the fluidity of local security conditions, and the interplay of conflict and climate shocks, there is a critical need for an evidence approach that is timely, comparable, and grounded in community realities. P21, which was launched in mid-2020 and operates in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger, provides such a platform. By standardizing a core set of indicators across countries while preserving localization to capture context-specific risks, P21 helps to provide a clearer picture of the safety landscape that affects education in the Central Sahel and supports coordination among the education and protection actors who are responding to rapidly evolving conditions.

SCHOOL SAFETY AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES: EVIDENCE FROM GLOBAL, COMMUNITY, AND DISPLACEMENT CONTEXTS

Research on school safety consistently shows that experiences of violence, whether occurring within schools or in the surrounding communities, shape children's learning, wellbeing, and engagement in the classroom (Eriksen, Nielsen, and Simonsen 2014; Konishi et al. 2010). Three strands of evidence situate this understanding and point to effective strategies for strengthening the safety of learning environments across diverse and crisis-affected contexts.

First, global and regional studies demonstrate the high prevalence and detrimental effects of school-related violence, especially bullying among peers within the school system. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 32 percent of students worldwide had been bullied at least once in the preceding month (UNESCO 2019), and multicountry analyses report similar levels of victimization among adolescents (UNICEF 2018). The consensus across settings is clear: exposure to school-based violence disrupts learning and undermines psychosocial wellbeing for both the short and long term. Documented consequences for students include lower academic achievement, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, school absenteeism, and increased engagement in risky behaviors (Eriksen, Nielsen, and Simonsen 2014; Holt, Finkelhor, and Kantor 2007; Barzilay et al. 2017; Smalley, Warren, and Barefoot 2017).

Evidence from low- and middle-income countries confirms similar patterns (Chávez et al. 2021; Delprato, Akyeampong, and Dunne 2017; Trucco and Inostroza 2017). Unsafe school climates and weakened student-teacher relationships can further exacerbate these risks, which lowers attendance and student engagement in the classroom (Konishi et al. 2010). Effective strategies found in the literature emphasize whole-school approaches: strengthening positive teacher-student interactions, implementing clear reporting pathways, training teachers on classroom management and inclusive practices, and building peer support systems (Holt, Finkelhor, and Kantor 2007; Barzilay et al. 2017).

A parallel body of work highlights how community violence significantly shapes schooling outcomes and can interact with or overwhelm school-level safety efforts. Reviews and empirical studies show that exposure to neighborhood or community violence, often measured through local crime or homicide rates, reduces standardized test performance, increases inattention and impulsivity, and elevates absenteeism and suspension (Burdick-Will 2013; Caudillo and Torche 2014; Chávez and Aguilar 2021; Monteiro and Rocha 2016). Some studies find that community risks explain more variance in attendance and behavior than school-based risks (Bowen and Bowen 1999), as well as a lower prevalence of bullying, and its academic salience, in schools in high-homicide contexts. This implies that schools can serve as protective spaces for students within violent environments (Trucco and Inostroza 2017).

In the broader contexts of forced displacement, evidence on school safety is far more limited, fragmented, and methodologically constrained. Available studies suggest that negative stereotypes and discrimination heighten refugee learners' risk of experiencing bullying (Sapouna, de Amicis, and Vezzali 2023; Yilmaz and Cikili-Yutun 2020; Alsharabati and Lahoud 2016), yet large-scale international assessments rarely single out refugees, relying instead on weak proxies such as immigrant status. These proxies reveal small average gaps in exposure to bullying (three percentage points in PISA 2018) and mixed predictive value (OECD 2020; Vitoroulis and Vaillancourt 2018), which underscores their limitations in helping to understand the safety of forcibly displaced students. Very few studies examine refugee students' perceptions of safety or explore how community-level threats affect their safety at school and influence their decisions to participate in school (e.g., Alsharabati and Lahoud 2016; Karaman 2023). The literature nevertheless points out promising strategies: culturally responsive school climate interventions, antidiscrimination messaging, targeted psychosocial support, and context-specific risk mitigation that accounts for community-level threats.

Across these strands, three recurring measurement and governance gaps constrain effective and equitable decisionmaking within the EiE evidence ecosystem. First, most surveys and assessments lack reliable identifiers for forcibly displaced learners, which limits the visibility of disparities and prevents targeted responses. Second, data systems over-emphasize school-based violence, especially bullying, while undermeasuring community violence and mobility risks, despite strong evidence that these factors shape school participation and learning. Third, existing data-collection and governance practices are often poorly aligned with the realities of crisis-affected settings. Surveys with short recall periods tend to undercount both low-frequency and high-severity events, such as attacks on schools or armed ambushes. Moreover, broadly framed knowledge-based questions may not be context relevant. At the same time, safeguarding protocols include referral mechanisms that center on protecting the data on survivors, which means they collect only the minimum data necessary. What they do collect is masked, and personally identifiable information is inconsistently applied, which limits the safe sharing and practical use of data.

Our use of P21 data responds directly to these gaps by generating multicountry descriptive evidence with that includes attention to displacement on both school and community safety; incorporating learners' perceptions of safety; and linking observed risk patterns to field-informed mitigation strategies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systems theory provides an overarching conceptual lens for examining school safety, community violence, and education outcomes in contexts of forced displacement. Based on von Bertalanffy's (1968) work on living systems as interconnected and interdependent wholes, systems theory asserts that the behavior of any single component such as a school, household, or community can only be understood in relation to the wider system within which it operates. This perspective is especially relevant in humanitarian and conflict-affected settings, where education systems are embedded in complex social, political, and security environments that continually influence how children access, experience, and benefit from schooling.

A systems approach views schools not as isolated institutions but as subsystems interacting dynamically with broader ecological layers. These include community security conditions, household livelihoods, displacement status, and the presence or absence of state authorities. As Meadows (2008) highlights, such systems are characterized by feedback loops that reinforce or balance the processes that shape system behavior over time. For the purposes of this article, this means recognizing that children's schooling trajectories are influenced not only by school-level factors but by external stressors, such as conflict, mobility constraints, perceived safety, and socioeconomic pressures.

Systems theory also emphasizes nonlinearity and interdependence, meaning that small changes in one subsystem (e.g., a community's security situation, the presence of armed groups, the loss of infrastructure) can have disproportionate effects on another (e.g., school access, participation, parental decisionmaking). This framework supports an understanding of school safety as an emergent property that arises from the interaction of multiple subsystems, rather than from isolated incidents on school grounds. Luhmann's (1995) concept of structural coupling is helpful here: schools and communities remain distinct systems yet are tightly linked, such that instability, violence, or insecurity in one subsystem inevitably affects the other.

Applying systems theory in this research study enables two analytical contributions. It first provides a conceptual basis for examining the prevalence of school and community safety incidents, not as separate phenomena but as interrelated dynamics embedded within broader social and security conditions. Second, it informs the examination of mitigation strategies by situating them within a multilayered system, which demonstrates that effective interventions must operate across education, protection, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and community leadership, rather than through single-point solutions.

Systems theory provides this research study with a structured conceptual approach for analyzing how school safety, community conditions, and forced displacement interact to shape education access and experiences. It guides the interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data presented and supports an integrated understanding of the complex ecosystems in which forcibly displaced and host-community children pursue their education.

DATA AND METHODS

We employed a convergent mixed methods design to address two critical policy questions in displacement affected education systems:

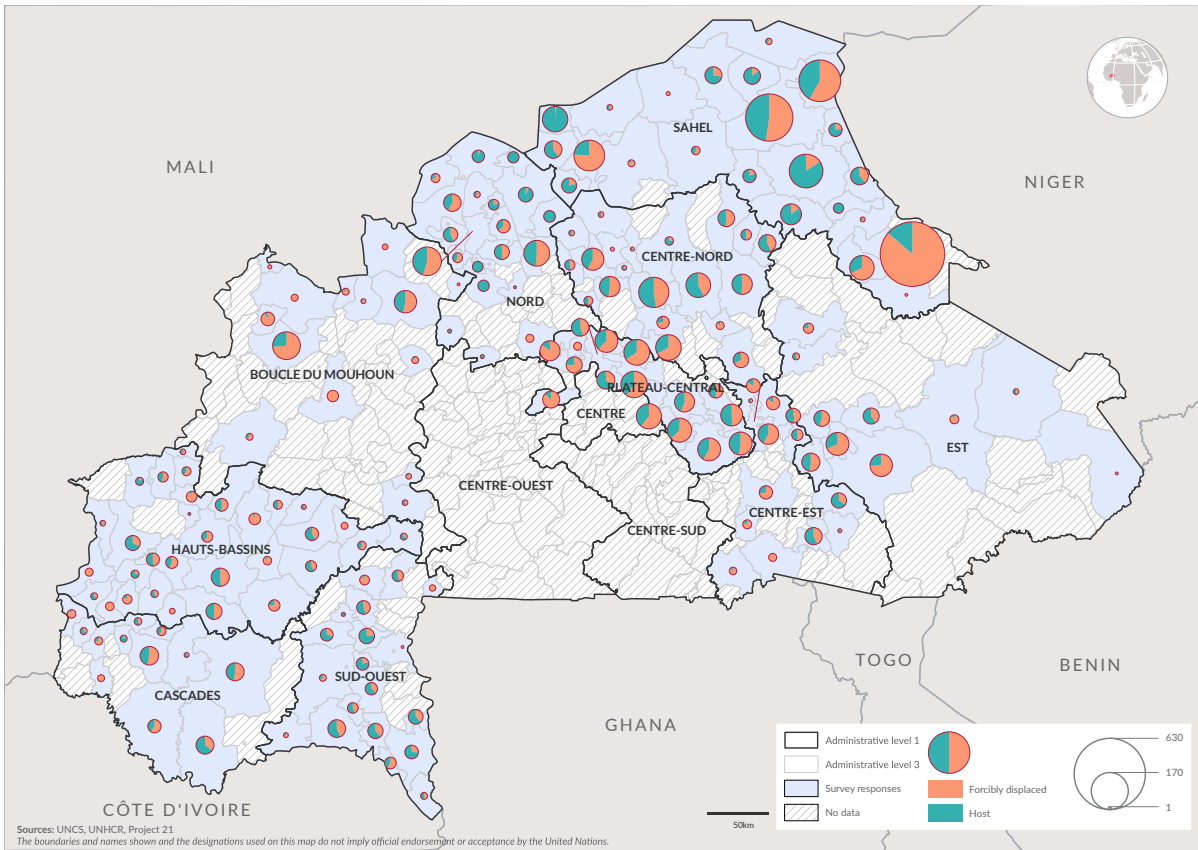
- What are households' (parents' and caregivers') perceptions of school and community safety and their link to education outcomes in P21 countries?
- What are effective strategies that have been used in P21 countries to mitigate safety incidents in and around schools?

Our quantitative analysis leveraged P21's 2020-2023 community-based monitoring survey in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger. The analysis synthesized observations of school and community safety, as well as mitigation strategies from two KIIs conducted in early 2024. The interviewees were based in Burkina Faso, where they held senior roles at international organizations involved in coordinating and implementing education and protection responses. Their expertise included child-protection programming, intercluster coordination, and the delivery of education services in emergency settings. We collected data through semistructured interviews conducted via internet-mediated communication platforms.

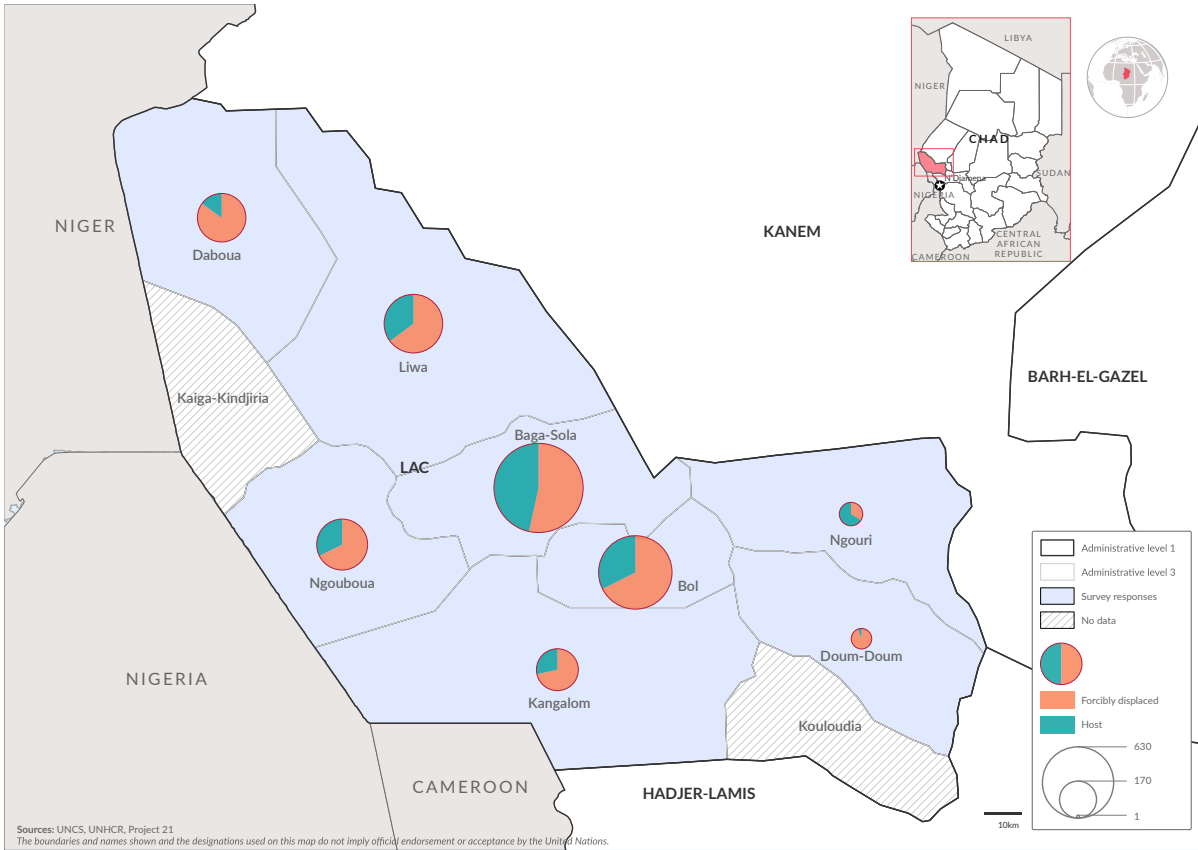
In interpreting the data, we aligned observed risk patterns with reported practices to recommend a coherent, context-appropriate mitigation package. This design is aligned with our systems theory framework, which treats school safety as the emergent property of interacting subsystems.

Our analysis draws from P21 country datasets and questionnaires covering the years 2020-2023 (accessed in 2024). We identified items relevant to education, safety, mobility, and protection and assessed cross-country comparability. Where identical wording existed, we defined fully comparable indicators; where wording differed slightly, we conducted crosswalks (a data-mapping process used to harmonize different survey items into a single comparable indicator) and documented residual noncomparability. The number and distribution of the 14,337 households surveyed at the geographic administrative 3 level across Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger are reflected in Maps 1-4. Note that P21 monitoring began in Cameroon toward the end of 2023, therefore a map of those household responses cannot be generated.

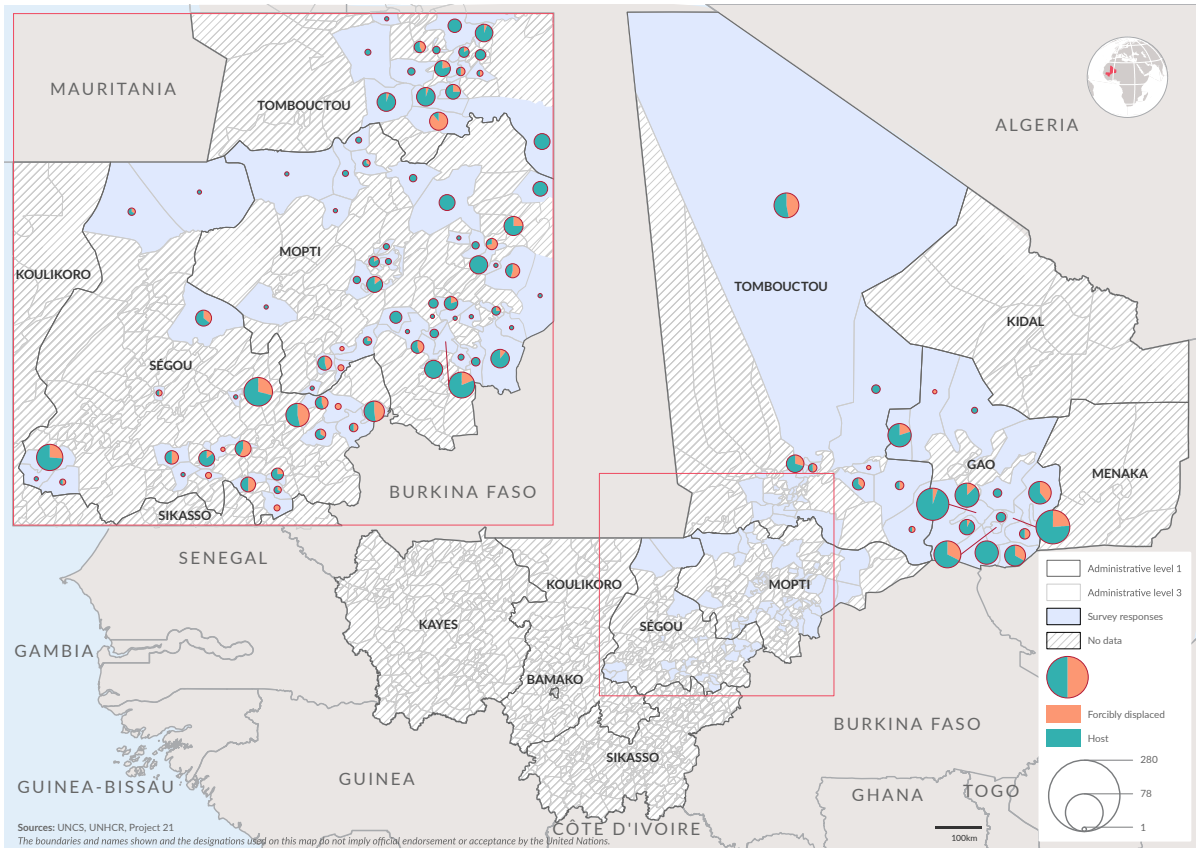
Map 1: Households Surveyed, Burkina Faso



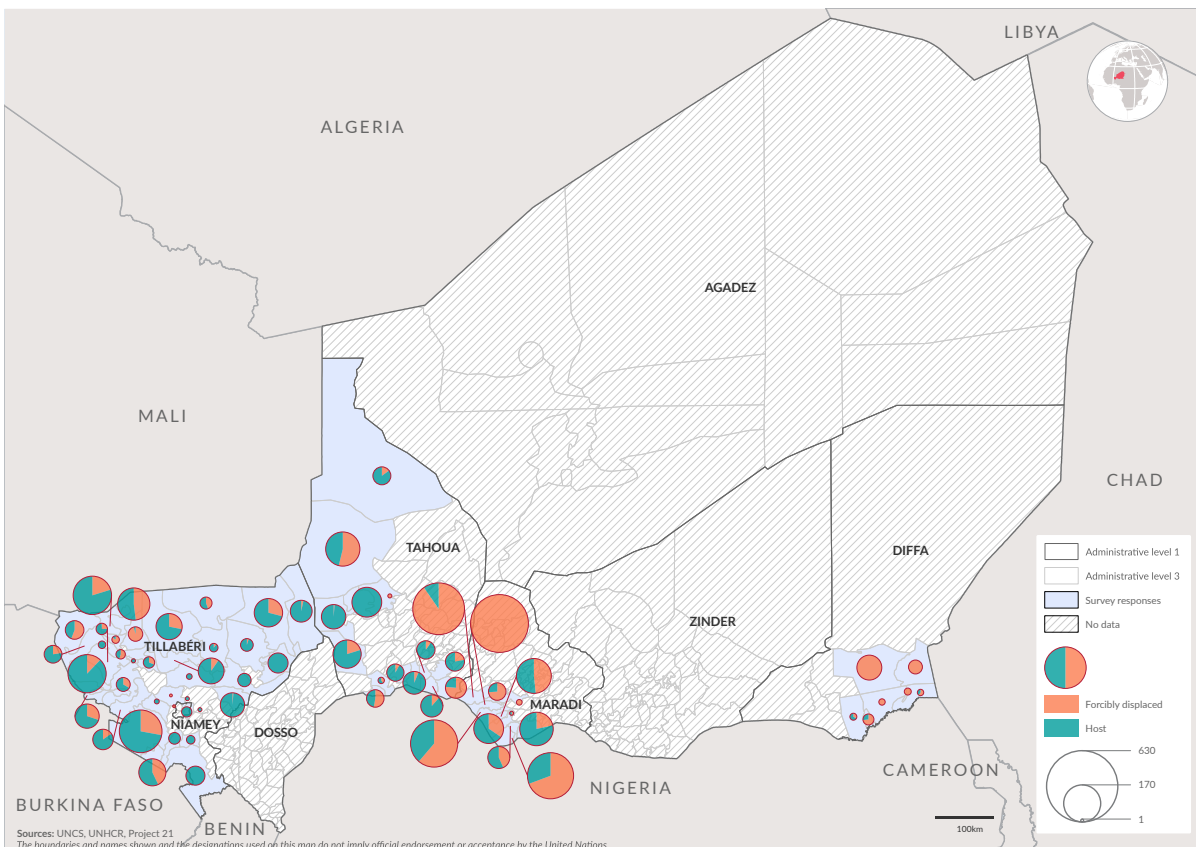
Map 2: Households Surveyed, Chad



Map 3: Households Surveyed, Mali



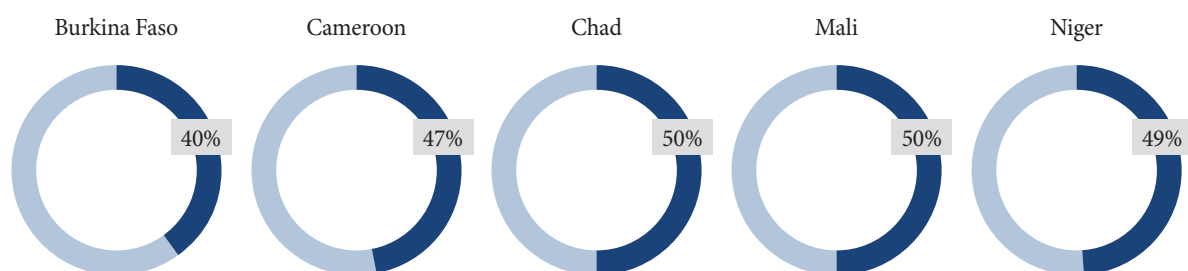
Map 4: Households Surveyed, Niger



FINDINGS: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY SAFETY, AND LINKS TO EDUCATION OUTCOMES IN P21 COUNTRIES

Across all P21 countries, school participation is already deeply constrained: only 46 percent of households reported that children “go to school regularly,” with even lower rates in higher-risk settings such as Burkina Faso (40%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Share of Households Where Children Are Regularly Attending School, by Country

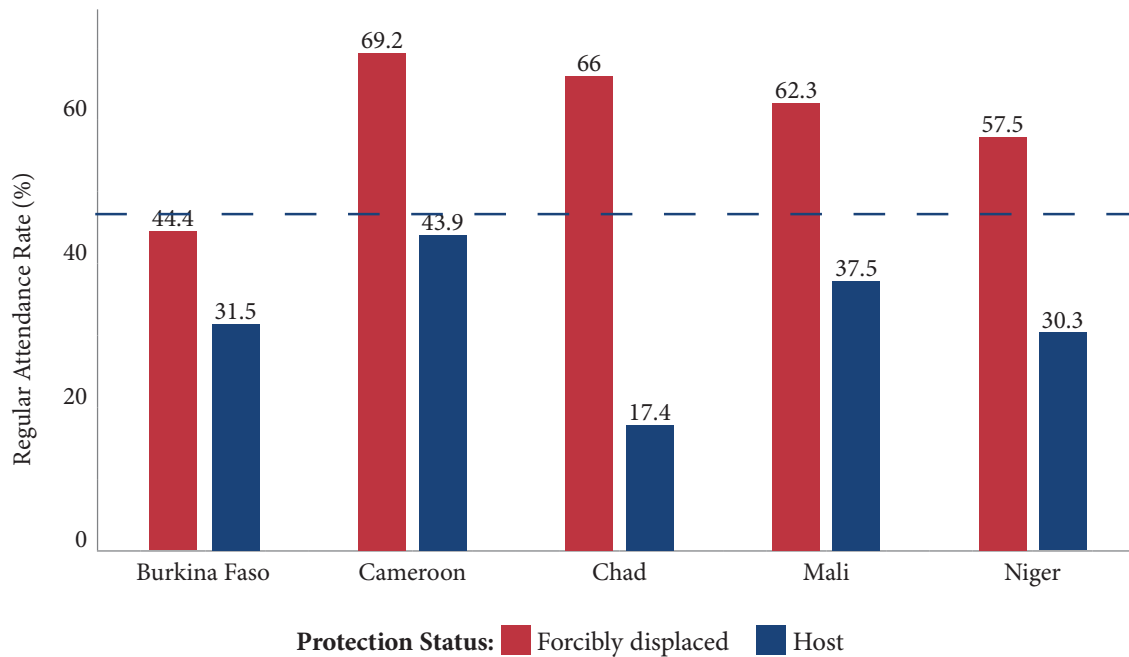


Source: P21 data

Note: N households reporting that children regularly attend school = 2,043 (Burkina Faso), 91 (Cameroon), 1,464 (Chad), 552 (Mali), 2,099 (Niger)

Consistent with existing global education metrics, participation declined from primary (59.9%) to secondary schooling levels (32.1%) and, on average, school participation was lower among children in forcibly displaced households (39.7%) than in host community households (52.5%) (Figure 2 and Figure 3). This contextualizes all subsequent indicators, as school participation is a minority condition, and patterns of safety incidents must be interpreted within a landscape of already restricted access.

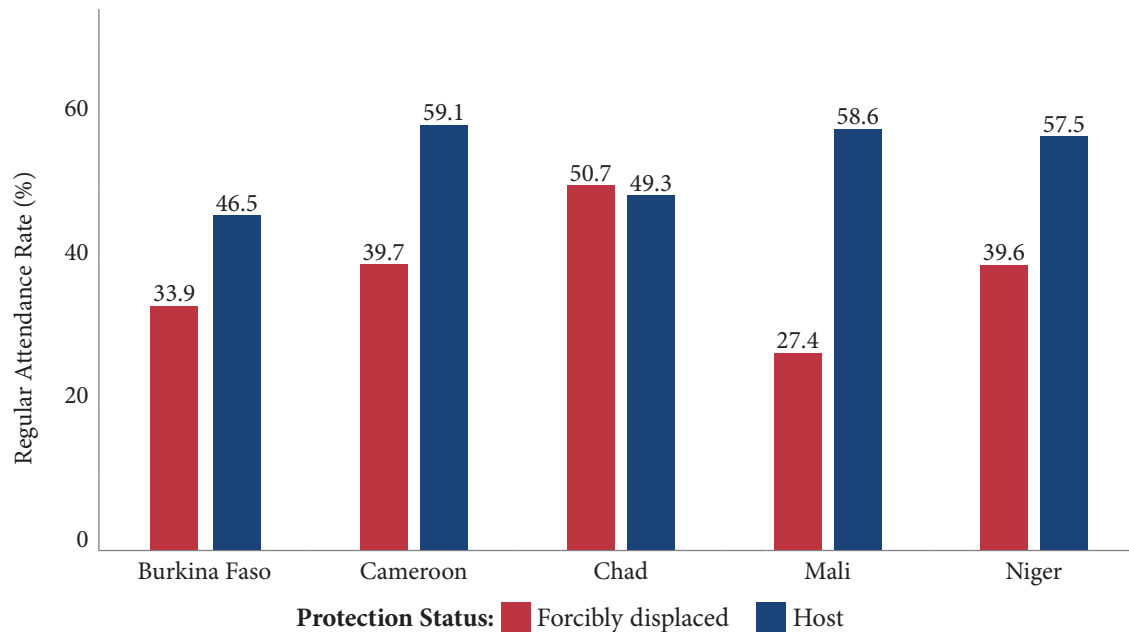
Figure 2: Percentage of Children Regularly Attending Primary and Secondary School



Source: P21 data

Note: Regular attendance rate is calculated by dividing the number of children regularly attending each level of school by the total population of the relevant school-level age group. In the P21 data, the primary school-level age group is 6-12 and the secondary school-level age group is 13-18. The blue dashed line represents the average rate of all children regularly attending school (46%). N households reporting that children regularly attend school = 6,249.

Figure 3: Share of Households Where Children Are Regularly Attending School, by Forced Displacement Status

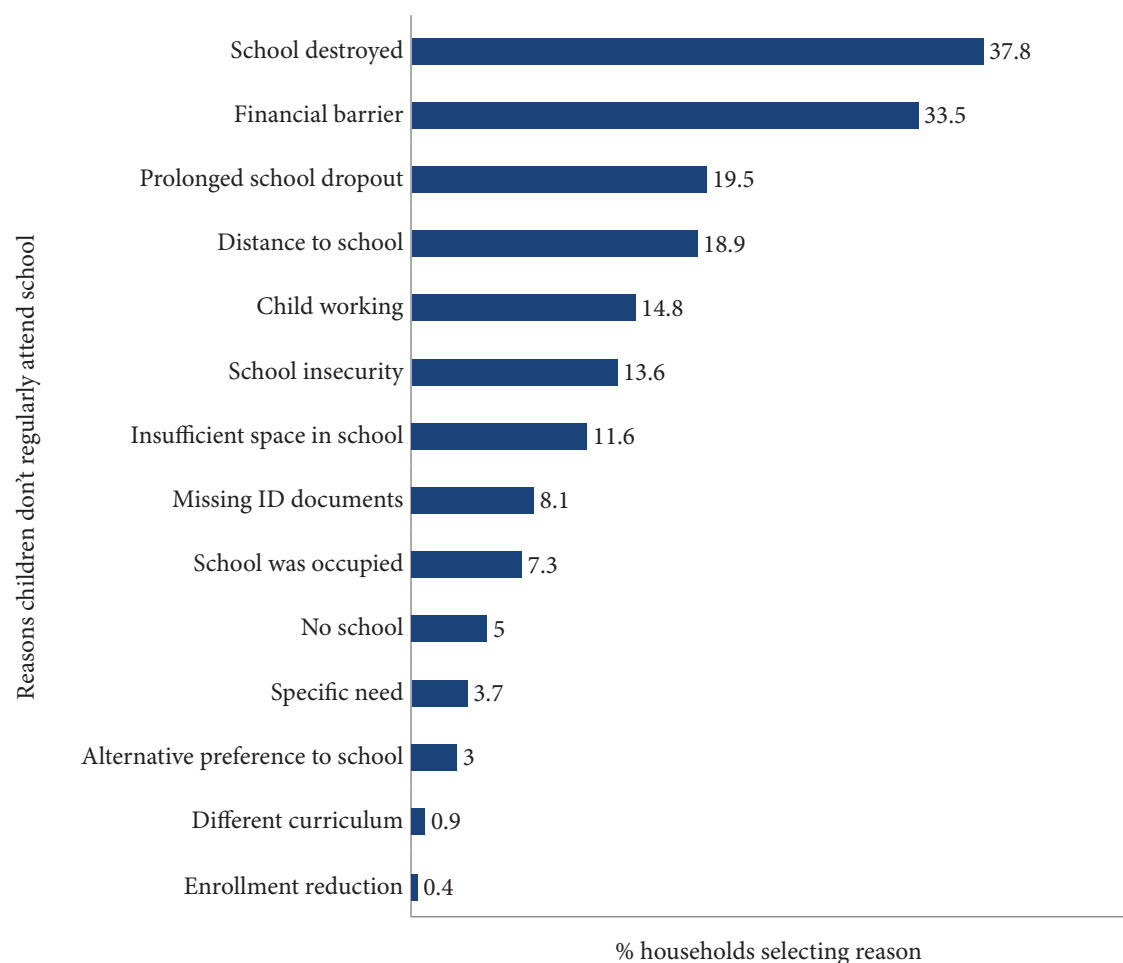


Source: P21 data

Note: N households reporting that children regularly attend school = 3,446 (host community), 2,798 (forcibly displaced)

Nonparticipation is attributed to overlapping risks and constraints on access. Nearly 40 percent of households with children who do not go to school regularly cited the destruction of their school, with large country variations (51% in Burkina Faso, 5% in Cameroon). Other prominent reasons included lack of financial resources (34%), prolonged disruption due to conflict or displacement (20%), and distance to school (19%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Share of Households Where Children Were Not Regularly Attending School and the Main Reasons Children Do Not Regularly Attend School in P21 Countries

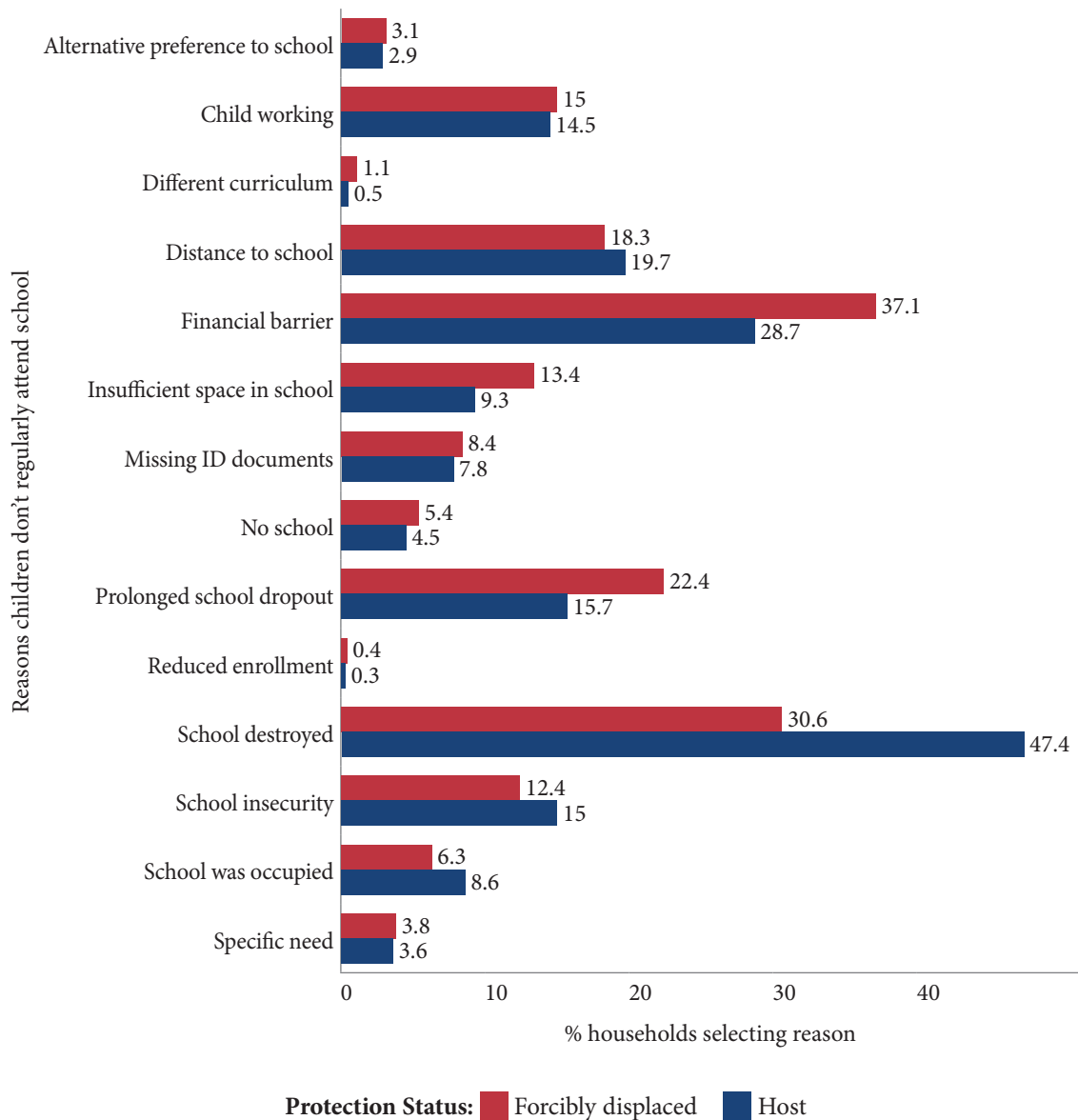


Source: P21 data

Note: N households reporting that children do not regularly attend school = 7,036

Upon disaggregation by forced displacement status, a higher proportion of host community households (47%) than of forcibly displaced households (31%) referred to school destruction, while forcibly displaced households referred more often to financial barriers and prolonged disruption of schooling due to conflict or displacement (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Main Reasons Children Do Not Regularly Attend School in P21 Countries, by Protection Status



Source: P21 data

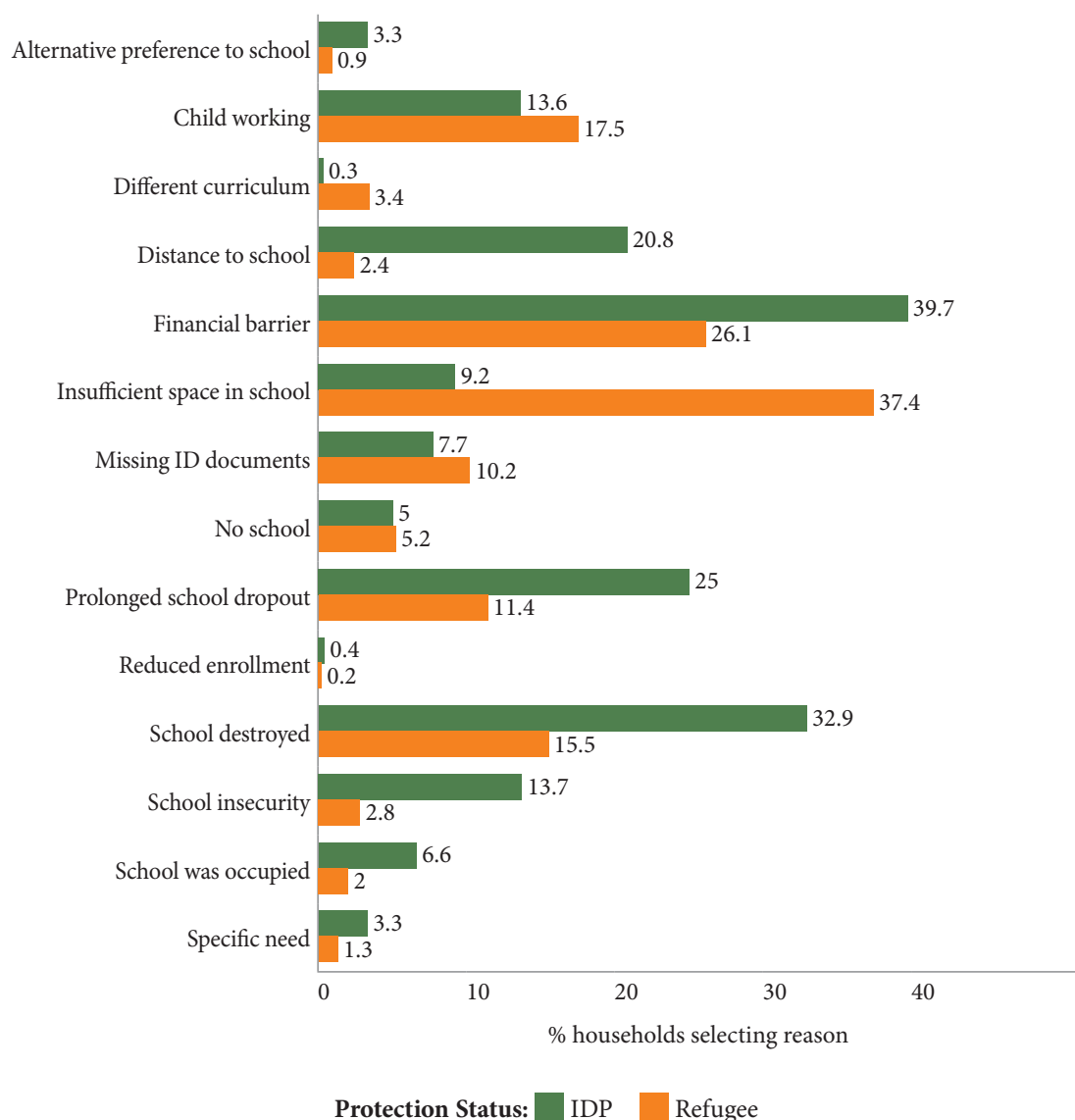
Note: N households reporting that children do not regularly attend school = 3,015 (host community), 4,019 (forcibly displaced)

Households experience differences in humanitarian support, geographic concentration, and policy applicability, based on their type of forced displacement. Therefore, we further disaggregate all indicators by type of forced displacement and compare responses from refugee and internally displaced respondents.

Upon further disaggregation and comparison between types of forcibly displaced households, there is minimal difference in regular school participation: 57.3 percent of refugee households and 57.8 percent of internally displaced person (IDP) households reported children do not regularly attend school. However, the reasons why vary a great

deal. A higher proportion of IDP households (40%) than of refugee households (26%) cited financial difficulties. In fact, this is the most common reason for nonparticipation among IDP households, which also more frequently cited distance to school as a barrier to participation (21%) than refugee households (2%). On the other hand, while insufficient space in school was not often mentioned by households overall (12%), this was the number one reason given for nonparticipation among refugee households (37%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Main Reasons Children Do Not Regularly Attend School in P21 Countries, Refugees and IDPs



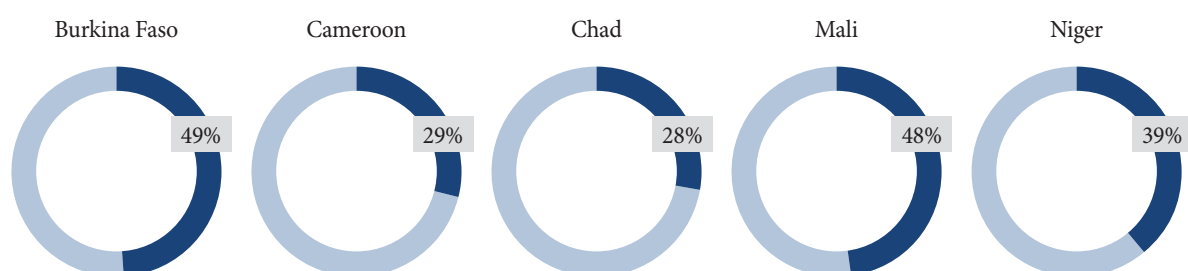
Source: P21 data

Note: N households reporting that children do not regularly attend school = 540 (refugee), 3,124 (IDP)

These responses demonstrate that the most frequently cited reasons children do not go to school regularly have little to do with in-school violence, such as bullying. Community-based and family context, as well as local education infrastructure, played a more significant role; forcibly displaced households frequently cited structural barriers and lack of resources. However, these varied by type of forced displacement; IDP households more often cited resource barriers, and refugee households pointed to a lack of inclusion in school.

Although households most frequently cited reasons for nonparticipation that had little to do with the immediate school environment, P21 data indicate that families generally did not perceive the schools to be safe. More than 40 percent of households felt that schools were unsafe, with clear differences by country. While nearly half of parents in Burkina Faso believed the school environment was not safe (49%), less than one-third of parents in Chad felt the same (28%) (Figure 7).

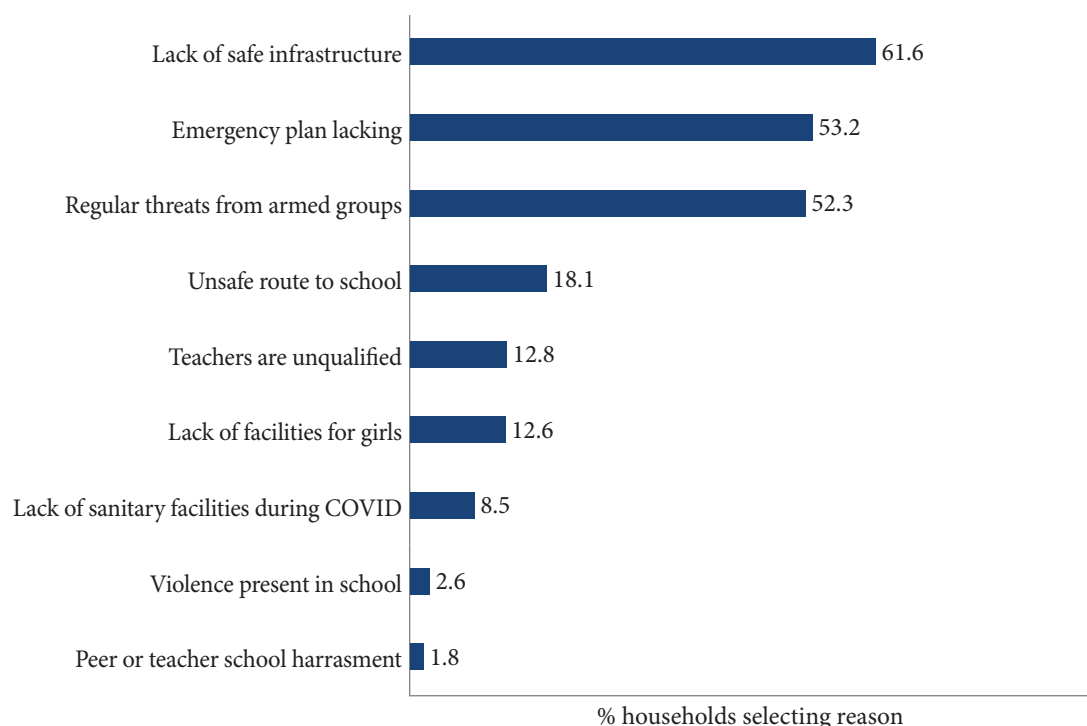
Figure 7: Share of Households That Believe Schools Are Unsafe, by Country



Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive schools to be unsafe = 2,536 (Burkina Faso), 55 (Cameroon), 816 (Chad), 522 (Mali), 1,639 (Niger)

When asked why they believe schools are unsafe, the top reasons were largely community-based threats and the school's inability to create a safe space in response. Households most often cited a lack of safe infrastructure (62%), lack of an emergency plan (53%), and regular threats from armed groups (52%) (Figure 8).

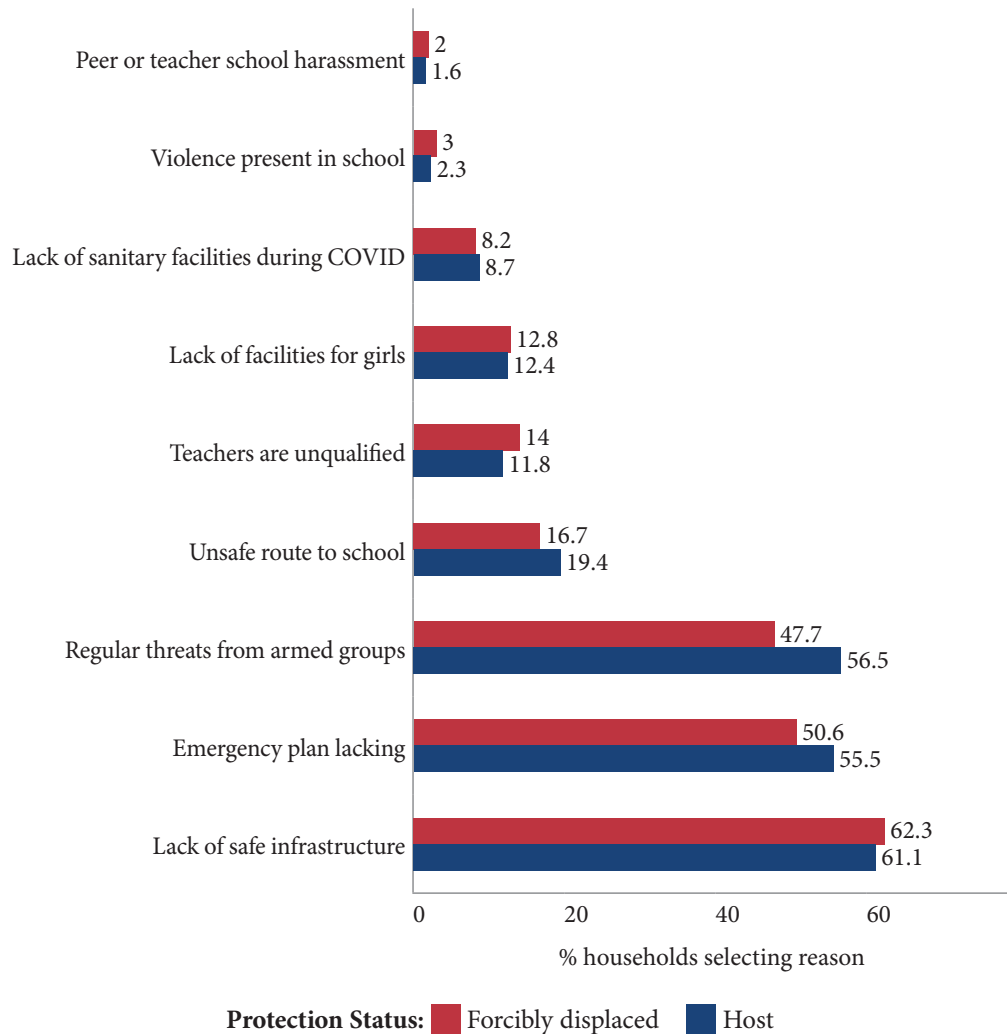
Figure 8: Share of Households That Believe Schools Are Unsafe and Their Reasons

Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive schools to be unsafe = 5,568

It is worth noting that a slightly higher percentage of host community households considered schools to be unsafe (45%) than forcibly displaced households (37%), but the reasons remained largely consistent, even after further disaggregation by type of forced displacement and comparisons between IDP and refugee households. However, a much higher proportion of IDP households felt that schools were unsafe (40%) than refugee households (19%) (Figure 9 and Figure 10).

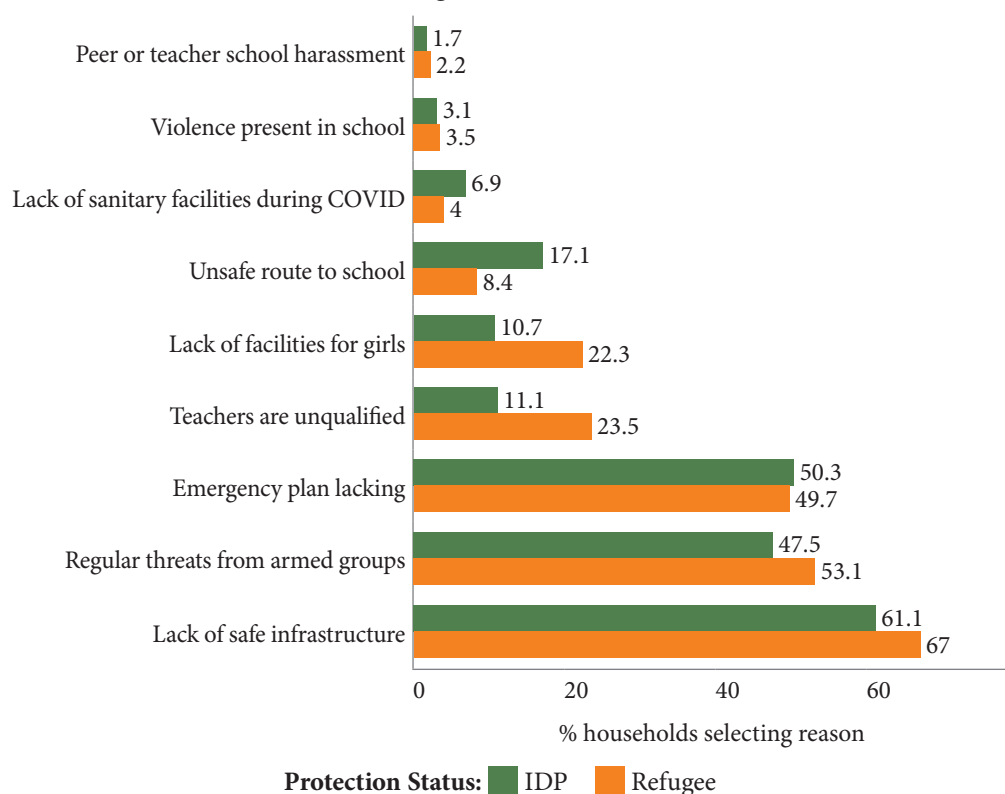
Figure 9: Share of Households That Believe Schools Are Unsafe and Their Reasons, by Protection Status



Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive schools to be unsafe = 2,930 (host community), 2,632 (forcibly displaced)

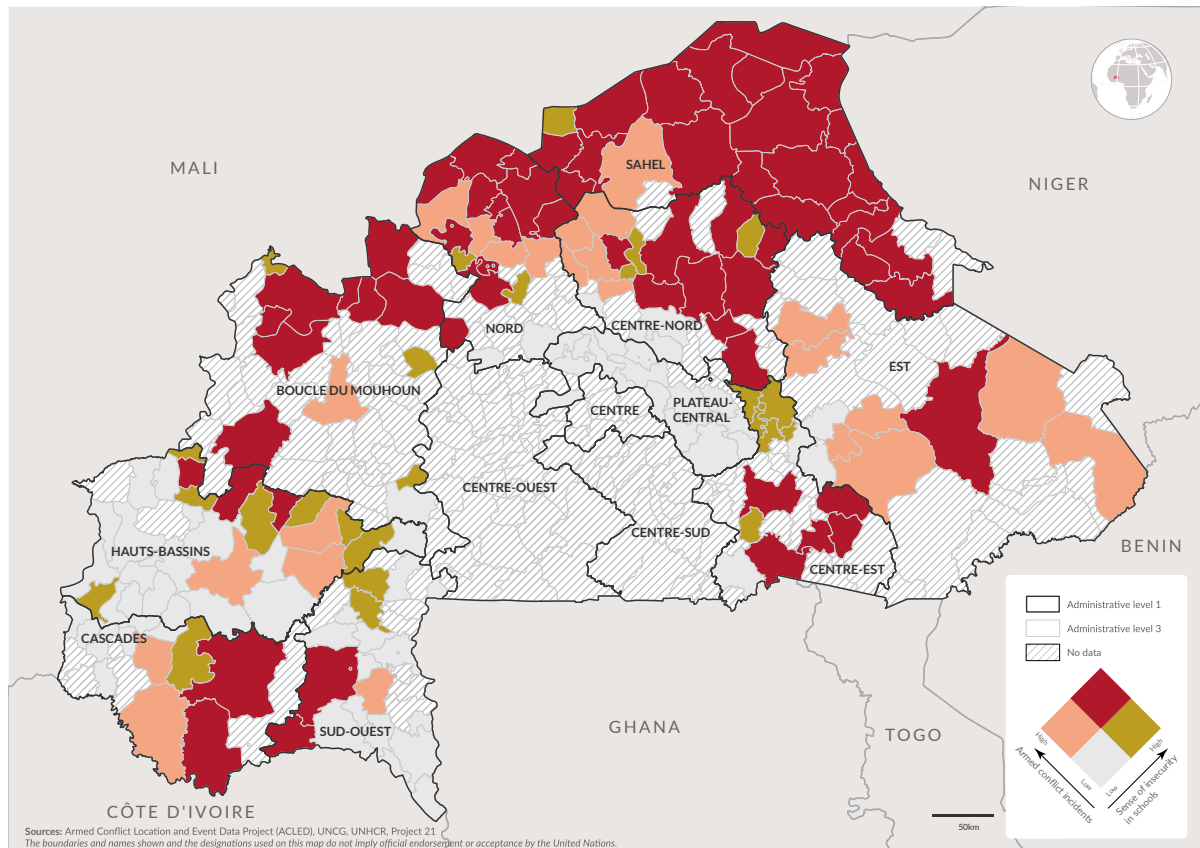
Figure 10: Share of Households That Believe Schools Are Unsafe and Their Reasons, Refugees and IDPs



Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive schools to be unsafe = 183 (refugee), 2,160 (IDP)

This may explain why there is also geographic alignment between where a majority of households perceived schools to be unsafe and where there is a high prevalence of armed conflict incidents cataloged in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) dataset. In bivariate Map 5, we compare these two variables (ACLED data on the prevalence of armed conflict incidents between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2023, and P21 data on the proportion of households perceiving that schools are unsafe). The light pink areas indicate a high prevalence of armed conflict incidents but a low proportion of households reporting that they perceived schools to be unsafe. The dark yellow areas indicate the reverse. Finally, the dark red areas indicate a high prevalence of armed conflict incidents and a high proportion of households perceiving schools to be unsafe. Dark red areas dominate the map, indicating a possible association between broader insecurity in the community and perceptions that schools are not safe. This map uses the quantile classification method. The “low” class contains 50 percent of the classes with the lowest values and “high” contains the half with the highest values. Note that Burkina Faso is the only country with sufficient countrywide spread for the meaningful geospatial analysis and comparison represented in the dataset covering 2020-2023.

Map 5: Perceived School Unsafety and Armed Conflict Incidents, Burkina Faso

In the KIIs, respondents concurred that the primary threats to school safety are conflict-related, not peer or interpersonal. The senior child-protection specialist noted that incidents are “not specific to refugees, but [to] school children in general,” and that they occurred “on the way to school or when schools are attacked and occupied,” including incidents involving explosives. An education cluster coordinator in Burkina Faso said they reported “incident[s]...almost every day,” including attacks using dynamite and shootings that targeted children traveling to school. They described cases in which “12 children [were] shot...going to school,” which illustrates the profound mobility-related risks shaping parental decisions (KII, education cluster coordinator). Exposure to ambushes, IEDs, and the presence of armed actors undermine enrollment, participation, concentration, and learning: “It is not possible to perform in school” under such conditions (KII, senior child-protection specialist).

To investigate whether there is a relationship between sense of school safety and school participation, we ran a logistic regression with perceptions of school safety (recoded as a binary variable where 1 = perceived safe, 0 = not perceived safe) on the dependent variable of school participation (recoded as a binary variable where 1 = all children in the household regularly go to school, 0 = all children in the household are not regularly going to school). When controlling for the number of children in the household within the available age-range groups in the P21 dataset (6-12, 13-18), number of meals (proxy

for household income), and forced displacement status (recoded as a binary variable where 1 = forcibly displaced, 0 = host), the analysis found an increase of 601 percent in the odds that all children in the household going to school regularly is associated with a household perceiving that their children's school is safe (results statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level). In addition, the odds of a child regularly going to school decline when the household is forcibly displaced (significant at the $p < 0.01$ level) (Model 1). Other relevant covariates, including school grade, gender, distance to school, recent school closures, or household exposure to conflict-related incidents, are not available in the P21 dataset.

Model 1: Effects Perceptions of School Safety Have on Regular School Participation
(Logistic Regression)

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
school_safe_environment_yes	1.948***	(0.040)
number_six_twelve	0.038***	(0.008)
number_thirteen_eighteen	-0.026**	(0.010)
number_meals_child_all	0.075*	(0.041)
protection_status	-0.715***	(0.040)
Constant	-0.978***	(0.050)
Observations: 13,419		
Log Likelihood: -7,783.589		
Akaike Inf. Crit.: 15,579.180		

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

To explore system-level interactions, with a focus on the dynamics associated with forced displacement, we ran a second logistic regression with the interaction of perceptions of school safety and forced displacement status on the dependent variable of school participation. When controlling for the number of children in the household and the number of meals, the analysis found that perceiving a school as safe is associated with a smaller increase in attendance for forcibly displaced children than for host community children. Specifically, the effect of a perception that a school is safe on school participation is 15 percent smaller for forcibly displaced children than for host community children (results statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level) (Model 2).

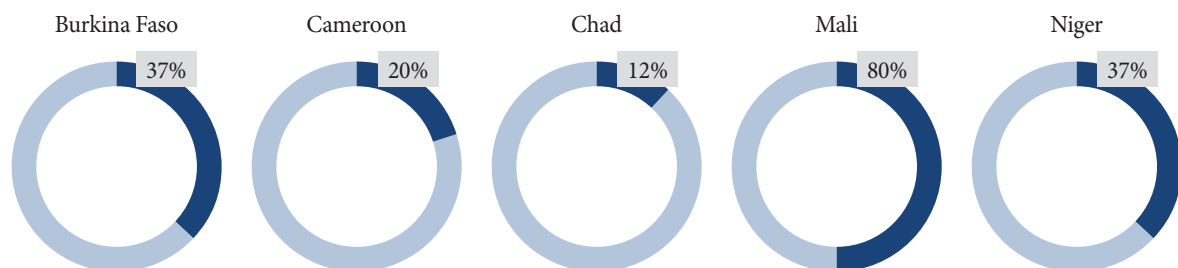
Model 2: Effects Perceptions of School Safety Have on Regular School Participation, by Forced Displacement Status (Logistic Regression)

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
school_safe_environment_yes	2.026***	(0.056)
protection_status	-0.623***	(0.061)
number_six_twelve	0.038***	(0.008)
number_thirteen_eighteen	-0.026***	(0.010)
number_meals_child_all	0.077*	(0.041)
school_safe_environment_yes:protection_status	-0.160**	(0.080)
Constant	-1.017***	(0.054)
Observations: 13,419		
Log Likelihood: -7,781.599		
Akaike Inf. Crit.: 15,577.200		

Note: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01

Although a slightly smaller proportion of households in P21 countries reported that they did not feel safe in their communities (33%) than the proportion that felt schools were unsafe, some common trends emerged. Disaggregation by country of perceptions that a community is unsafe aligns closely with a disaggregation of perceptions that school is unsafe, with the highest proportion of households perceiving their communities to be unsafe in Mali (50%), Burkina Faso (37%), and Niger (37%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Share of Households That Do Not Feel Safe in Their Communities, by Country

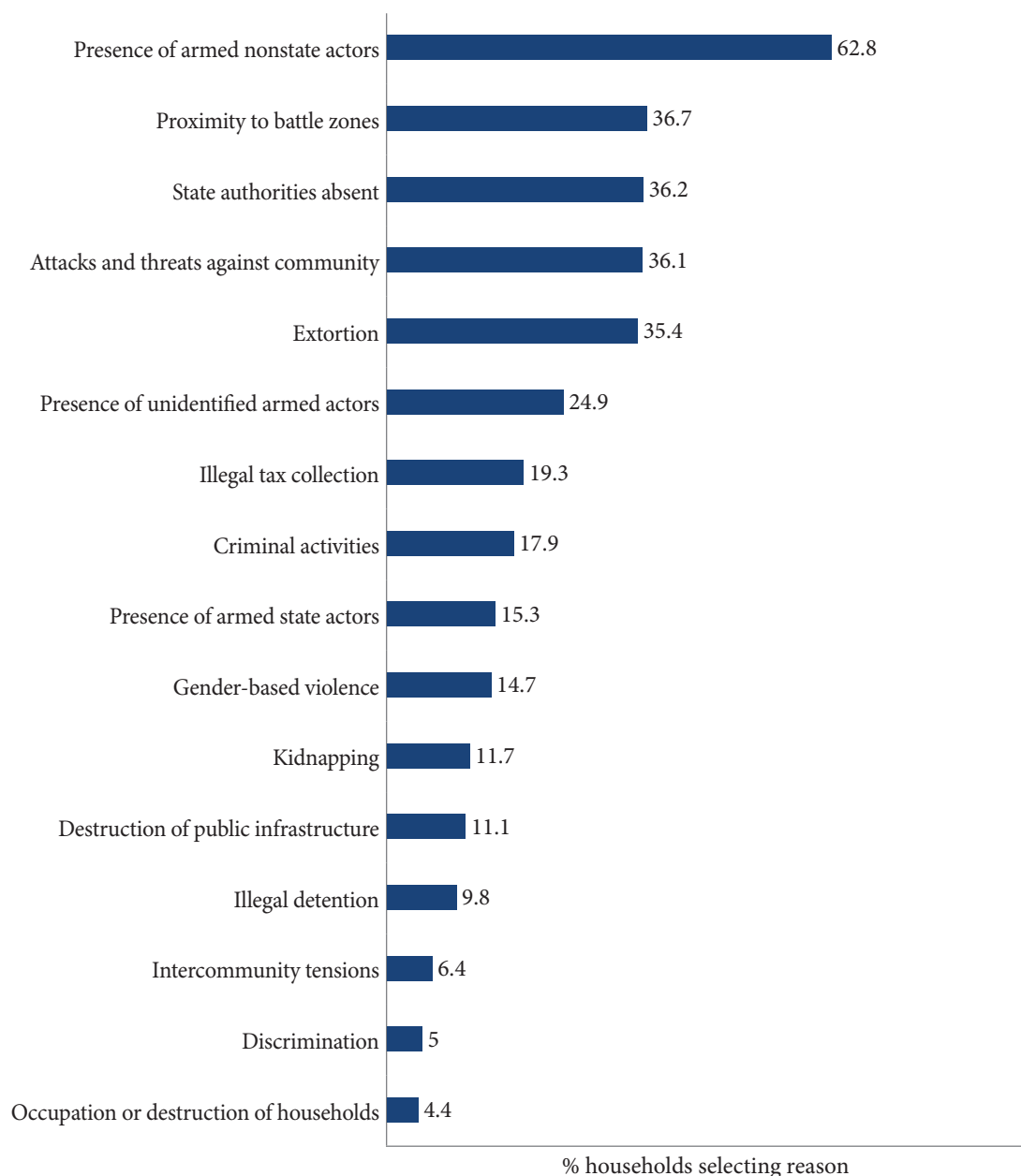


Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive community to be unsafe = 1,980 (Burkina Faso), 42 (Cameroon), 376 (Chad), 597 (Mali), 1,696 (Niger)

When asked why they perceive their community to be unsafe, the largest share of respondents indicated a prevalence of nonstate armed actors (63%), followed by proximity to battle zones (37%), absence of state authorities (36%), and attacks against the population (36%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Share of Households That Believe Communities Are Unsafe and Their Reasons

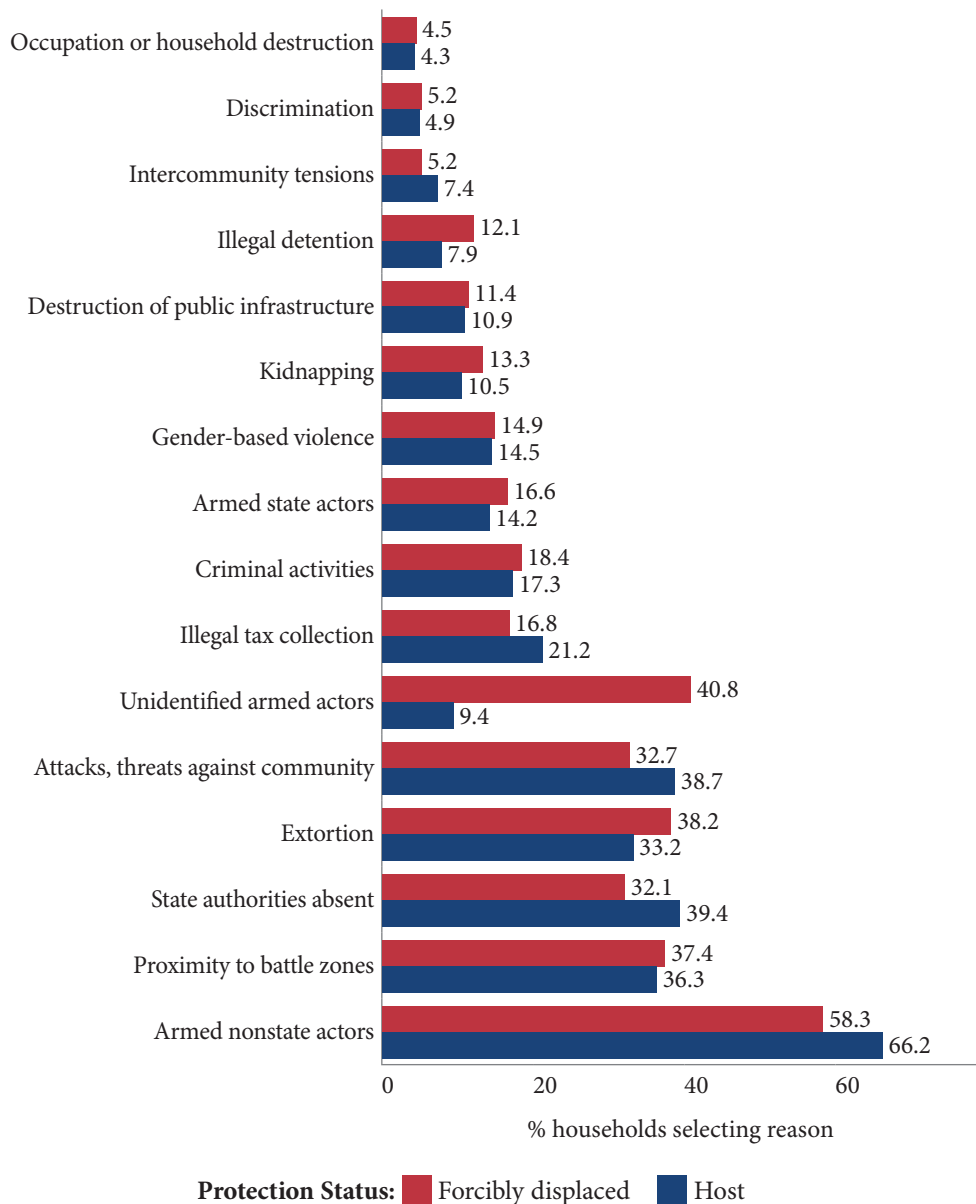


Source: P21 data

Note: N households that believe communities are unsafe = 4,691

A higher percentage of host community households (38%) than forcibly displaced households (28%) believed communities were unsafe. When households were asked why they perceived the community to be unsafe, forcibly displaced and host community households tended to select the same reasons, with one very notable exception: the presence of unidentified armed actors. Almost half of forcibly displaced households attributed their perception that the community is unsafe to this (41%), while fewer than 10 percent of host community households selected this reason (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Share of Households That Believe Communities Are Unsafe and Their Reasons, by Protection Status

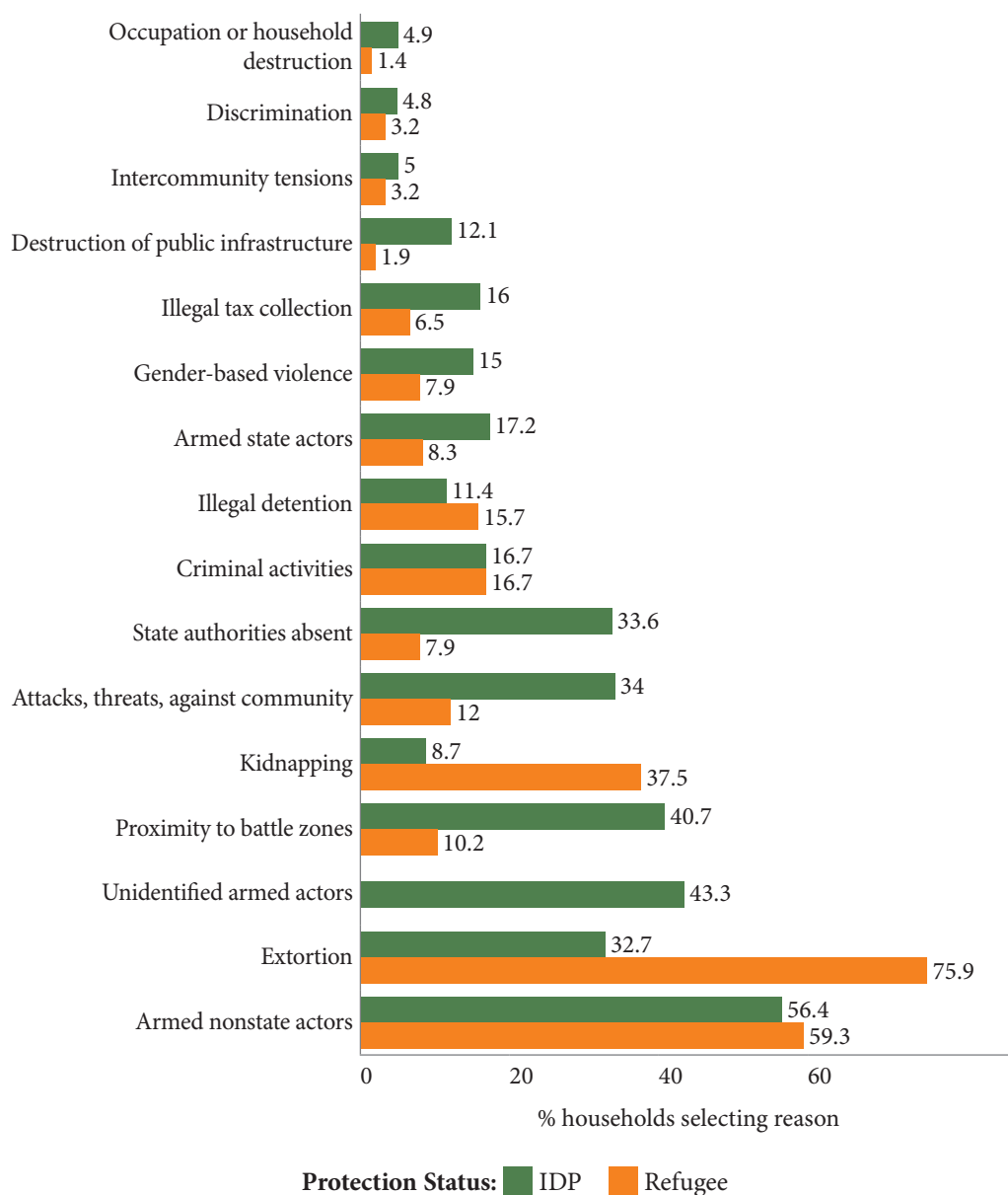


Source: P21 data

Note: N households that believe communities are unsafe = 2,643 (host community), 2,042 (forcibly displaced)

When we further disaggregate households by type of forced displacement and compare responses from refugee and IDP households, we can see a trend similar to that of perceptions of school unsafety. A slightly higher proportion of IDP households (29%) than refugee households (22%) perceived their communities to be unsafe. The general reasons referenced most often for this perception by both groups align with the trends cited by forcibly displaced households overall. However, extortion is the top reason mentioned by IDP households (76%), but only 33 percent of refugee households gave that reason (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Share of Households That Believe Communities Are Unsafe and Their Reasons, Refugees and IDPs



Source: P21 data

Note: N households that believe communities are unsafe: 216 (refugee), 1,610 (IDP)

As with a sense of school safety and school participation, a logistic regression affirms that there is a clear link between sense of community safety and school participation. In Model 3 we ran a logistic regression with perceptions of community safety (recoded as a binary variable, where 1 = perceived safe, 0 = not perceived safe) on the dependent variable of school participation (recoded as a binary variable, where 1 = all children in the household are regularly going to school, 0 = all children in the household are not regularly going to school). When controlling for the number of children in the household within the available age-range groups (6-12, 13-18), number of meals (proxy for household income), and forced displacement status (recoded as a binary variable, where 1 = forcibly displaced, 0 = host), the analysis found that a 203 percent increase in the odds of all children in the household going to school regularly is associated with a household perceiving the community to be safe (results statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level). This result indicates that a sense of safety in the community is linked to a higher probability that children in the household are going to school regularly (Model 3).

Model 3: Effects Perceptions of Community Safety Have on Regular School Participation (Logistic Regression)

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
sense_safety_yes	1.107***	(0.040)
number_six_twelve	0.033***	(0.008)
number_thirteen_eighteen	-0.041***	(0.009)
number_meals_child_all	0.142***	(0.038)
protection_status	-0.665***	(0.037)
Constant	-0.691***	(0.050)
Observations: 13,419		
Log Likelihood: -8,723.739		
Akaike Inf. Crit.: 17,459.480		

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

To explore additional systems-level interactions, we ran a logistic regression with the interaction of perceptions of community safety and forced displacement status on school participation. However, when controlling for the number of children in the household and number of meals, the results were not statistically significant.

The qualitative findings may identify three complementary strategies used across P21 contexts to mitigate school safety risks that directly respond to patterns observed in the quantitative data. Preparedness and emergency planning, including the integration of safe school protocols into teacher training, address the household concerns reflected in the quantitative findings, where a lack of safe infrastructure and the absence of

emergency plans were among the most frequently cited reasons for perceiving schools to be unsafe. Protection mainstreaming (i.e., the systematic integration of protection principles and GBV risk mitigation into educational programming) implemented through a collaboration between education, protection, and WASH actors, responds to vulnerabilities experienced by displaced and marginalized learners, which the quantitative data show are associated with lower rates of school participation and higher perceptions of insecurity, particularly among forcibly displaced households. Adaptive education delivery models (e.g., locating learning centers closer to communities, introducing staggered shifts, conducting protection activities within school compounds, and deploying temporary learning spaces) directly target the barriers identified in the quantitative data, including distance to school, mobility-related insecurity, and disruption caused by conflict and displacement.

The quantitative and qualitative findings together indicate that schools and communities in P21 countries are generally not perceived to be safe. These sentiments are overwhelmingly attributed to armed-group activity, mobility hazards, and infrastructure vulnerability, rather than to intraschool violence. Nevertheless, household perceptions of both school and community safety have a significant association with whether children go to school regularly. It is important to note that forcibly displaced households may account for, experience, or prioritize perceptions of school safety differently from their host community peers when making schooling decisions.

DISCUSSION

Across the five P21 countries, we observe a consistent pattern of constrained participation, conflict-related disruption, and chronic protection risks to be associated with household schooling decisions. Only 46 percent of households reported that all children regularly go to school (40% among forcibly displaced households), which situates all subsequent safety indicators within a context of already limited access that is amplified for forcibly displaced families. Nonparticipation in school is attributed to overlapping risks and barriers: nearly 40 percent of households whose children do not go to school regularly cited the destruction of their school, along with lack of financial resources (34%), prolonged disruption of classes due to conflict or displacement (20%), and distance to school (19%). Forcibly displaced households, with notable variation by type of displacement, disproportionately cited a lack of financial resources, insufficient space in school, and prolonged school dropout as the primary barriers they face. These challenges compound an environment with high rates of insecurity, forced displacement, conflict, and climate shocks.

Within this context, it is perhaps not surprising that households generally do not feel that schools (41%) or communities are safe (33%). The most common reasons for this include a lack of safe infrastructure or school preparedness, threats from various armed actors, proximity to battle zones, absence of state authorities, and attacks against the population. The trends appear similar, regardless of forced displacement status. However, among forcibly displaced households, a higher proportion of IDP households felt their schools and communities were unsafe (40% and 29%, respectively) than of refugee households (19% and 22%, respectively).

These findings are reinforced by the KIIs, in which participants emphasized that the dominant school safety risks are conflict related and that they are particularly acute along the routes to school. The KIIs participants referred to armed ambushes, IEDs, attacks using explosives, and shootings targeting children in transit; for example, “12 children [were] shot...going to school.” These factors may undermine student enrollment, participation, concentration, and performance; as an interviewee reflected, “It is not possible to perform in school” under such conditions. Informants also reported near-daily incidents in some areas and the precautionary school closures that rippled across the surrounding communities following the attacks, which corroborates the quantitative picture of a persistent environment of danger where the constant fear of violence drives behavior, even if specific violent incidents are only captured sporadically in the data.

School-related violence (especially bullying) is prevalent worldwide (e.g., UNESCO estimates that 32% of students worldwide were bullied at least once in the previous month) and is consistently associated with worse learning and wellbeing outcomes. However, research in contexts comparable to P21 countries suggests that in-school peer violence is not the dominant signal of risk in crisis-affected, forced displacement settings (UNESCO 2019; UNICEF 2018; Barzilay et al. 2017; Smalley, Warren, and Barefoot 2017; Chávez et al. 2021; Delprato, Akyeampong, and Dunne 2017; Trucco and Inostroza 2017). Furthermore, complementary evidence shows that community violence reduces academic performance, attention, and attendance, often more significantly than in-school violence (Burdick-Will 2013; Caudillo and Torche 2014; Chávez and Aguilar 2021; Monteiro and Rocha 2016; Ramirez et al. 2012).

Notably, Bowen and Bowen (1999) found neighborhood danger to be more predictive of attendance and behavior than school danger. Trucco and Inostroza (2017) reported that, in high-homicide contexts, the prevalence and academic salience of bullying are relatively lower, which suggests that schools may function as protective spaces in violent communities. Our logistic regression analysis (see Models 1 and 3) and review of other studies helps explain the P21 pattern: ambient community threats, the presence of armed actors, extortion, IEDs, and proximity to attacks appear to be closely associated with perceptions and behaviors that suppress regular participation in school. In forced displacement contexts, the quantitative literature is sparse and often relies on imperfect proxies. Existing studies suggest that there is a high degree of victimization among

refugee learners and frequent discrimination, while large assessments (e.g., PISA 2018) show small average gaps in bullying between immigrants and nonimmigrants, and mixed predictive power for immigrant background (Sapouna, de Amicis, and Vezzali 2023; Yilmaz and Cikili-Uytun 2020; Alsharabati and Lahoud 2016; OECD 2020; Vitoroulis and Vaillancourt 2018). This reinforces the need for context-grounded monitoring that is attentive to displacement (including within group variation), such as P21, to surface the risks most salient to forcibly displaced and host communities in conflict zones.

Using the systems theory lens, macrolevel conflict dynamics (armed groups, weak state presence) and climate shocks create a high-hazard environment; mid-level mobility risks (ambushes, IEDs, extortion) and service disruptions elevate exposure; and microlevel school vulnerabilities (infrastructure, safeguarding capacity) shape the protective value of schooling. Within this system, low-frequency, high-severity incidents can trigger precautionary school closures that persist and reshape household routines. Communities may reopen schools despite improved security, which produces nonlinear, place-specific patterns in participation and perceived safety. From our quantitative data analysis, perceived safety in the community, and especially in schools, is positively and significantly associated with the probability that all children go to school regularly. However, our exploration of the interaction between perceived school safety and forced displacement status (Model 2) finds that the effect of perceived school safety associated with school participation is smaller for forcibly displaced children than for host community children. Perhaps prior experience of forced displacement and the risks associated with it make perceived school safety less of a priority, which emphasizes the importance of contextualized mitigation strategies that account for the household needs as a result of forced displacement.

The three clusters of strategies identified by the KIIs align with the dominant risk pathways documented by P21. First, safe school preparedness (integrated into teacher training) and refreshed emergency planning build a school-level capacity to absorb shocks from low-frequency, high-severity threats, which can improve perceived safety when practiced, despite the psychological toll they take. Second, child protection and GBV mainstreaming, implemented with WASH partners, psychosocial support delivered by teachers, identification of distress, and referral to specialized protection and health pathways, addresses in-school harms and gendered barriers. In Burkina Faso, GBV training has been made a mandatory educational activity, which serves to institutionalize protection within the education response. Further, community engagement with traditional and religious leaders supports norm changes where legal prohibitions (e.g., corporal punishment) coexist with entrenched practices: “You have to act on both” the legal and social fronts (KII, senior child-protection specialist). Third, adaptive delivery and infrastructure, locating places of learning closer to children, staggering shifts (including during vacations), hosting protection activities on school grounds, and deploying temporary or semifinished classrooms near operational schools reduce exposure to ambushes and IEDs along the route to school. Although temporary

structures are fragile (e.g., tents last about one year), they help sustain access to schools under conditions of blockade or high threat. These measures target distinct leverage points (school protection capacity, social norms and services, mobility exposure) and collectively weaken the coupling between community insecurity and disrupted schooling.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrates that, in the Central Sahel P21 context, the school safety risks cited most often are rooted not in intraschool peer violence but in the broader conflict environment. This specifically includes armed-group activity, mobility hazards such as IEDs, and the fragility of the surrounding infrastructure. Families' perceptions of safety, formed within this landscape of chronic threats, are closely linked with household decisions to send children to school. These findings align with our regression analysis and the broader evidence base linking community violence, perceived risk, forced displacement, and education access. Taken together, the results underscore the need for a layered mitigation approach that integrates preparedness and safeguarding, systematic protection and GBV mainstreaming, and proximity-based, flexible delivery models. Such efforts must be supported by an evidence ecosystem that is simultaneously standardized and context responsive, ethically governed, and designed for practical use by both educators and the affected communities.

A central strength of this research lies in its multicountry design that is attentive to displacement, which combines school participation data, community perceptions, and protection and GBV contexts with field-informed mitigation strategies. This integration provides a rare descriptive foundation across fragile border zones, where systematic education data are often sparse. The ability to link quantitative patterns with qualitative insights further enhances the interpretability and operational relevance of our findings for EiE actors.

However, due to several limitations, generalizations should be made carefully, primarily in relation to similar conflict-affected environments that are affected by displacement. Missing denominators for certain indicators restricted the precision of our descriptive estimates, and the inability to apply sampling weights due to absent design variables limited cross-country comparability. The limited availability of education outcomes indicators (only regular school participation) and the limited KII sample constrains the depth of qualitative triangulation. The research team made several attempts to recruit additional key informants, including UNHCR staff, but were unable to do so. This was largely due to limited staffing availability in the field, a consequence of shrinking global humanitarian funding, as well as capacity constraints among field staff members to participate as key informants. We also were unable to include interviews

with other relevant stakeholder groups, such as parents or caregivers, school principals, teachers, or other community actors, due to the challenging security and operational environment and the need to prioritize the protection and safety of all stakeholders. Field-level capacity constraints and reduced staffing also limited our ability to recruit other stakeholder groups. Finally, in the data available at the start of the analysis for this research (collected from 2020-2023), Burkina Faso was the only country with sufficient countrywide spread for a meaningful geospatial analysis; therefore, cross-country comparison was not possible.

Future research should examine more deeply how actual and perceived school-related violence interacts with education outcomes for refugees and crisis-affected learners, with particular attention to longitudinal patterns of regular school attendance (not solely participation), learning, and wellbeing. Although qualitative findings strengthen the interpretation of quantitative results, several gaps remain that require further research. Qualitative evidence suggests that chronic exposure to insecurity affects student wellbeing, concentration, and academic performance, yet the P21 quantitative data do not capture broader learning or psychosocial outcomes. While preparedness training, protection mainstreaming, and adaptive delivery models were identified as effective mitigation strategies, there is limited quantitative evidence that assesses their long-term impact and scalability. Qualitative findings also highlight tensions between formal legal protections and entrenched social norms, which current quantitative indicators do not measure, as well as operational constraints that limit data collection among refugee populations. Additionally, variation in risk experiences and perception by type of forced displacement indicates the need for longitudinal and comparative research, along with qualitative studies with larger and more diverse samples. This will lead to better understanding of how mitigation measures are implemented in practice, how variation in support from humanitarian actors and policy implementation may affect the needs and safety perceptions of IDPs as compared to refugees, and how communities negotiate risk in everyday schooling decisions.

Finally, data collection using the P21 questionnaire continues to take place, and future research may take advantage of the expanded dataset as well as more robust within-country coverage. This also would improve cross-country comparisons by multicountry displacement situation, including use of ACLED data to further explore associations between education outcomes and actual incidents and perceptions of violence. Such research would strengthen the transferability and practical relevance of evidence for the educators, protection actors, and decisionmakers working in volatile settings.

Advancing this agenda requires an EiE evidence ecosystem that balances standardization with contextual specificity through a core set of comparable indicators, complemented by locally tailored modules; that establishes clear, ethical governance standards on data stewardship, consent, safeguarding, access, and dissemination; and that strengthens local capacity for analysis, visualization, and responsible use. This approach was directly

informed by our analysis of Project 21 data across the Central Sahel, which reveals that school participation is significantly associated with perceptions of safety that are driven more by systemic threats like armed-group activity and mobility hazards than by typical intraschool violence. Sustained investment in these systems in alignment with operational decision cycles, including by NGOs and government ministries working in displacement-affected education systems, as well as prioritization by researchers and donors, will improve the relevance and uptake of evidence for educators, protection actors, and decisionmakers. This will result in more equitable, effective, and contextually grounded approaches to school safety in crisis-affected regions.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Definitions

Term	Definition
School-related violence	This term encompasses a range of harms, including physical, psychological, and sexual violence (UNESCO 2017). It includes bullying, weapon- and drug-related incidents, corporal punishment, sexual and verbal abuse, and gender-based violence.
School safety	We define school safety as a secure and inclusive learning environment that protects students from physical, emotional, and psychological harm. It includes measures to prevent and address aggression, bullying, and violence while promoting a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Astor, Guerra, and Van Acker 2010)
Community violence	This term is defined as a series of deliberate acts intended to cause physical harm against a person in the community (Cooley-Strickland et al. 2009) where children live and/or go to school. Armed violence and drug-related violence that occur in communities where children live and/or go to school can also be included.
Education outcomes	Due to available data, we focus on school participation, understood as pupils or students who have attended a given grade or level of education at least one day during the academic reference year (UNESCO-UIS 2024).
Refugee	This term includes individuals who, “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country” (UNHCR 2025a).
Internally displaced person (IDP)	This term includes “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” (UNHCR 2025b, 1).

CAN EDTECH IMPROVE ACCELERATED EMERGENCY EDUCATION PROGRAMS? EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM PAKISTAN AFTER COVID-19

THOMAS BROWN, ALLYSON KRUPAR, AND FARMAN KHAN

ABSTRACT

Education technology is often heralded as a tool for improving education access and quality, but evidence of its effectiveness in enhancing learning outcomes in emergency settings in low- and middle-income countries is limited. In this article, we present results from Learning Tree, a mobile-based learning application piloted in Pakistan in 2021, where inequities in girls' access to education were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters. The Learning Tree was introduced as a supplemental tool for crisis-affected girls ages 11-14 who were participating in accelerated learning programs in rural areas of the Shikarpur district. Through a longitudinal quasi-experimental evaluation and multivariate regression analysis, we found that the Learning Tree tool was associated with approximately double the learning gains of accelerated learning activities alone. We observed significant improvements across literacy, numeracy, and executive functioning outcomes far beyond the gains produced by the accelerated learning activities alone. Learning Tree also boosted gains in social and emotional skills; this was a novel result, given the inherent challenge of improving these skills with only limited direct interpersonal interaction and hands-on engagement. These results provide promising evidence that well-designed, mobile-based education technology interventions can help to close the gaps in education that emerge for vulnerable girls during emergencies in lower-middle-income settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Emergencies have detrimental effects on children's education, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Disruption in the provision of education services, as well as the trauma and stress associated with emergencies, can increase dropout rates and lead to learning loss. This deepens existing inequalities in education, such as those related to socioeconomic status. These effects are especially pronounced for girls, who face greater barriers than boys to continuing their education during crises, due to an increase in household responsibilities, constrained mobility, and reduced access to learning resources and technology. This increases their risk of permanently dropping out. Pakistan, a country where girls' access to education was already a major challenge, experienced unprecedented disruption of education in 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a series of major natural disasters. Schools in Pakistan closed in March 2020 and remained closed on and off until September 2021. This greatly exacerbated the challenges faced by disadvantaged girls in gaining access to quality education.

Education technology, or EdTech, became an important tool to keep children engaged with education during this period, which helped to guard against dropout and learning loss in countries across the world. In Pakistan, however, options were limited for access to remote learning in crisis-affected and low-income households. Furthermore, critical appraisal of the utility of EdTech tools and their ability to stimulate learning and development in emergency contexts in global majority countries been limited. In this article, we address this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of Learning Tree, a mobile-based EdTech intervention used in the Sindh province of Pakistan, a region that faces particularly tough challenges for girls in gaining access to education.

Save the Children developed and piloted Learning Tree to supplement the accelerated learning programs being provided to out-of-school girls ages 11 to 14 in the wake of COVID-19 and natural disasters in 2021. The EdTech tool facilitates structured remote learning for children by providing rich, self-directed content focused on social and emotional learning (SEL), literacy, and numeracy. Save the Children staff worked with caregivers and teachers to introduce the application at 25 learning centers and support students with using it, and implemented a quasi-experimental study design to determine whether Learning Tree was effective in improving learning outcomes over a period of four months.

BACKGROUND

EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE FOR GIRLS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Education technology comes in many shapes and sizes. It involves using technology such as radios, computers, tablets, and smartphones to support education by interfacing with children, teachers, education leaders and administrators, and caregivers (Czerniewicz 2008). Rodriguez-Segura (2022) categorizes EdTech interventions into four main types: access to technology, which provides teachers and students with devices and connectivity that enable them to participate in digital learning; technology-enabled behavioral interventions, which use digital tools to enhance student engagement and motivation; improvements to instruction, which focus on enhancing teaching quality through a digital curriculum and teacher training; and self-led learning, which empowers students to have personalized learning experiences through adaptive software and online courses. Although technology has been used in classrooms since the 1920s, the introduction of the personal computer in the 1980s marked a significant change in the delivery of education. Since then, EdTech has continued to transform teaching and learning (Papert 1980; Cuban 1986) and has proliferated rapidly across both high-income and emerging economies. It has been a promising tool in the latter, where it has helped to bridge gaps in education by enhancing accessibility and providing cost-effective, open-source digital tools to education systems facing resource challenges (Unwin et al. 2017; Guri-Rosenblit 2018).

The increasing role technology plays in education can be positioned within the broad conceptual framework of the digital divide. This role includes designing inclusive education interventions that are effective for all children. The term “digital divide” refers to the gaps in access to and use of technology between individuals and groups of people. These gaps influence the extent to which digital tools can provide economic advancement and improve social inclusion (van Dijk and Hacker 2003; Warschauer 2003; OECD 2021). In the education context, while technology holds considerable promise to reduce inequalities in education access and learning, this may not be achieved if some children are unable to access and utilize increasingly digitized learning tools. Selwyn (2016) argues that, while technology has the power to transform education for the better, interventions must be managed thoughtfully if they are to be effective for children who are vulnerable, including paying attention to socioeconomic, cultural, and political contexts. This approach underscores the need for considered and inclusive strategies to ensure that vulnerable children reap the benefits of EdTech interventions (Miras et al. 2023).

The digital divide overlaps with other inequalities that limit educational opportunities for vulnerable children, particularly women and girls in developing countries. In resource-constrained countries, the adoption of technology can be limited by such challenges as poor digital infrastructure and connectivity, lack of digital literacy, and socioeconomic

inequality. There is compelling evidence that the introduction of digital tools for education in developing countries can improve learning outcomes, engagement, and retention rates (Rodriguez-Segura 2022; Ball, Paris, and Govinda 2014; Lurvink and Pitchford 2023). However, commentators emphasize that, to succeed in reducing education inequalities, EdTech interventions should engage teachers and the community, be locally tailored, and be designed to overcome challenges related to capacity and accessibility (Lynch, Singal, and Francis 2024; Coflan and Kaye 2020; Munoz-Najar et al. 2021; Rodriguez-Segura 2022).

Women and girls face greater barriers to accessing digital technologies than men and boys. Global data show that they are 12 percent less likely to use the internet and 10 percent less likely to own a mobile phone (Borgonovi et al. 2018). This gender-related digital divide is driven by socioeconomic inequalities, lower digital literacy, and sociocultural norms, all of which make it more difficult for women to access EdTech. For example, women may have less control of household finances, fewer financial means to purchase digital technologies and internet services, and are less likely to access digital technologies to learn advanced digital skills (Borgonovi et al. 2018). Girls also face sociocultural beliefs and norms that can limit their access to technology, both in the classroom and at home. These factors often center on assumptions about girls' competence and enjoyment of technology, and the benefits and risks they accrue from using it (Crompton, Burke, Jordan, and Wilson 2021). For example, one study of an EdTech intervention conducting during COVID-19-related school closures in Pakistan found that nearly one-third of parents did not permit their daughters to access EdTech for cultural, religious, and financial reasons (Adil, Nazir, and Akhtar 2021). More generally, studies from Kenya and Ghana find that girls' limited use of EdTech was driven by a lack of trust in their using devices; lack of access to the internet and mobile data; security concerns; and limited time, due to expectations that girls would carry out household chores and care duties (Amenya et al. 2021; Aurino, Tsinigo, and Wolf 2022; Tembey et al. 2021; Ananga et al. 2021).

EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

Emergencies such as natural disasters, conflicts, and pandemics have detrimental effects on children's education. When such emergencies occur, schools often are closed, education activities are disrupted, and children experience trauma and stress. Children also can be internally displaced or become refugees, which presents additional challenges to their ability to access education (Brown 2013, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Al Habsi and Rude 2021). As a result, millions of children are forced out of school, face disruptions in learning and protection, and are unable to learn effectively because of compromised education quality or psychosocial challenges (Burde et al. 2017; Nicolai, Hine, and Wales 2015). Girls' education outcomes tend to be affected disproportionately more than boys', due to girls' heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, cultural norms that prioritize boys' education, attitudes around the division of caregiving and household labor, and gender disparities that exacerbate barriers to access to learning opportunities (INEE 2021). In the context of LMICs, emergencies exacerbate existing inequalities in education access

and quality, which increases the number of children who are out of school or failing to learn. A range of tried-and-tested approaches to providing education to children facing such experiences has emerged, which led to the development of the field of education in emergencies (Burde et al. 2017; Burde, Lahmann, and Thompson 2019; Torani et al. 2019). There has been increasing interest in recent years about the potential uses of EdTech in the provision of education during emergencies.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of EdTech to provide learning opportunities during emergencies when traditional classrooms were not available was relatively novel and experimental. Radio and mobile learning were leveraged on a limited scale to maintain education continuity in certain areas prone to natural disasters or conflicts, but the adoption of comprehensive digital education strategies was not widespread. Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of EdTech in emergency settings in LMICs is limited, but it has been summarized in a number of key studies (Carlson 2013). For example, Dahya's (2016) cross-country landscape review found that tools like radios, mobile phones, mobile projectors, e-readers and tablets, laptops, and desktop computers have been used successfully to support, enable, and enhance the provision of education for children affected by emergencies, which has benefited student learning and teacher training and strengthened education systems. Stannard and Tauson's (2018) review of research on EdTech for children found that, if implemented effectively with the assistance of teachers and parents, EdTech programs can fill gaps when education is disrupted and increase the speed at which learners return to full-time schooling. They also found that EdTech works most effectively when it supplements, rather than substitutes for, classroom teaching. Ashlee and colleagues (2020) found that both blended EdTech modalities, which involve teachers and peers, and self-directed approaches, wherein children engage in learning by themselves, can promote positive learning outcomes and psychosocial wellbeing for children during emergencies.

The role EdTech played in emergency education during the COVID-19 pandemic expanded significantly. It became the primary mode of instruction worldwide, utilizing platforms such as Zoom and online learning management systems to deliver synchronous and asynchronous learning to students in lockdown (Hodges et al. 2020; Manca, Persico, and Raffaghelli 2021). While a great deal of empirical evidence emerged on the use of EdTech during the pandemic, only a small number of studies focused on LMICs (Crompton et al. 2021). Nicolai, Jefferies, and Lockhart (2023) reviewed ten studies that looked at the use of interactive voice-response audio lessons, audiovisual lessons, text messages and social media, digital platforms, and data systems in Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, and Sierra Leone. They found that EdTech interventions had mixed results in improving learning outcomes, that teacher-student engagement through EdTech was critical in encouraging structured learning, and that the role of parents and caregivers was crucial, including giving children permission to use devices and the internet, scheduling and guiding learning sessions, and supporting learning comprehension.

Commentary on the benefits and challenges of deploying EdTech in emergency settings in developing countries, particularly during the pandemic, can be situated within the digital divide framework. On the one hand, technology enabled ongoing access to education for millions of children in lockdown, and there is evidence that some children experienced no measurable learning loss during the pandemic, due to highly effective distance learning programs (Donnelly and Patrinos 2022). However, transitioning quickly to fully digital learning at scale brought enormous challenges. Many vulnerable children were left behind, as they could not properly access or take full advantage of EdTech offerings. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to EdTech was correlated with socioeconomic status. Those from poorer families missed out, due to their personal resource challenges and those of the education institutions they were affiliated with, lack of access to technology and internet connectivity at home, and inadequate digital literacy (Stelitano et al. 2020; Vegas, Shah, and Fowler 2021). These challenges were even starker in developing countries, where the divide is greater, due to structural challenges around digital infrastructure, digital literacy, and socioeconomic inequality (Mathrani, Sarvesh, and Umer 2022). Women and girls also experienced more severe challenges during the pandemic, which further exacerbated the gendered digital divide (Amaro et al. 2020; Damani et al. 2022).

Vulnerable children who are experiencing emergencies face overlapping and intersecting inequalities that may influence whether technology-facilitated education tools will support their learning effectively. Targeted interventions should be tailored to local contexts, be easy to use, provide digital infrastructure and devices when they are not otherwise available, support capacity development, engage teachers and parents as well as children, and provide training and ongoing assistance to ensure that these tools can be used effectively. More evidence is needed to inform these processes as to whether, and by what means, EdTech can help children who are facing inequalities to learn effectively during emergencies and close education gaps. However, as highlighted above, there is a paucity of quality data on the efficacy of EdTech interventions in emergency settings for girls in LMICs.

THE PROMISE OF EDTECH FOR ACCELERATED LEARNING IN EMERGENCIES

Accelerated learning refers to educational approaches designed to speed up education or otherwise help students who have fallen behind, by months or even years, to reach the grade level typical of their age (Damani 2020). In emergencies and postcrisis situations, accelerated learning programs can help children regain lost educational ground caused by disrupted schooling. These approaches are used to reduce learning inequalities and enable children to catch up to their grade-level skills so they are in alignment with their peers, which prevents long-term setbacks in their education trajectories. Accelerated learning approaches, which provide flexible, inclusive, and targeted opportunities to overcome systemic inequalities, can be particularly effective for marginalized groups, including girls, out-of-school children, and those from underserved communities. Many of these programs also focus on promoting SEL; however, few studies have tracked outcomes

in this area, instead often prioritizing the measurement of subjects such as reading, mathematics, and science (Damani 2020).

EdTech shows promise as a tool for the delivery of accelerated learning programs for children in emergencies and postcrisis situations. Such tools can enhance learners' support systems by facilitating interactivity, learner-centered pedagogy, social and emotional development, and access to learning content, which these children otherwise would not have (Damani 2020). There is little data on EdTech's efficacy in increasing learning outcomes during emergencies in LMICs (Moscoviz and Evans 2022; Betthäuser, Bach-Mortensen, and Engzell 2023), and almost none at all that specifically evaluates the use of EdTech in accelerated learning programs in such contexts. Only two such studies have been identified.

One study is an accelerated mathematics program for secondary students in Indonesia that utilized an e-learning application called Edmodo, which was found to help students connect mathematical concepts more effectively than conventional methods, but it did not promote self-regulated learning (Yaniawati et al. 2017). The EdTech component was found to be effective due to its interactivity and engagement, and the facilitation of personalized learning. However, this evidence was limited to a small sample size ($n = 61$), and the study design only allowed for the evaluation of the combined intervention as a whole. Thus it did not offer a disaggregated analysis of the additional impact of the EdTech component within the accelerated program. A second study, this one from Turkey, involved fifth-grade science students. It had a more robust experimental design, which enabled comparisons between an accelerated learning approach delivered with accompanying learning software and one delivered in a regular classroom (Akbiyık and Şimsek 2009). The study found no additional impact on student achievement for those utilizing the EdTech component; however, the study's small sample size of 73 students limited the reliability of its findings.

In this article, we address this gap in the literature. We provide evidence from a robustly designed and adequately powered study that examines the use of EdTech in a nonformal accelerated learning program for girls in rural Pakistan, who were affected by a series of emergencies in 2020 and 2021. Using an experimental design involving random assignment of the EdTech tool to a large cohort of students in different accelerated learning centers, we analyzed whether the tool had any additional benefit in terms of learning outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, executive functioning, and social and emotional skills.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING TREE TO SUPPLEMENT AN ACCELERATED LEARNING RESPONSE TO THE EMERGENCIES IN 2020-2021 IN PAKISTAN

Although Pakistan has seen a substantial increase in access to education in recent years, serious challenges remain. Pakistan has the second-highest number of out-of-school children in the world, an estimated 25.1 million, or 35 percent, of children ages 5-16 (UNICEF 2026). Conflict and natural disasters across the country have exacerbated this challenge, driving displacement and limiting the government's ability to provide education effectively. There are disparities in education access based on gender and socioeconomic status: 55 percent of children from the poorest quintile are out of school, and 54 percent of out-of-school children are girls (EPDC 2012; Faran and Zaidi 2021). There also are stark regional disparities; three-quarters of out-of-school children in Pakistan reside in rural areas (Faran and Zaidi 2021). There is a pronounced gendered digital divide in terms of access to technology in Pakistan, where 22 percent of women have internet access, compared to 47 percent of men; only 50 percent of women own a mobile phone, compared to 81 percent of men (Akram 2023). Rural areas have even lower adoption of digital technology; only 7 percent of women have access to the internet, compared to 20 percent of men.

The Sindh province of Pakistan has the second-highest rate of out-of-school children in Pakistan, where 7.6 million children are out of school (UNICEF 2026). To respond to these challenges, Save the Children has been running an accelerated learning program for girls in the Shikarpur District of Sindh since 2018. Fifty nonformal Accelerated Learning Centers (ALCs) operate in rural areas to provide education to out-of-school girls from low-income households. The ALCs are girls-only learning centers with female teaching staff. The aim of the centers is to help girls to overcome inequalities in education and reach their age-appropriate learning level.

The existing challenges of access to education for girls in Pakistan were complicated further in 2020 and 2021, when unprecedented disruption was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a series of major floods, earthquakes, landslides, and avalanches. Schools in Pakistan closed in March 2020 and remained closed on and off until September 2021. School closures drove up dropout rates and caused significant learning loss in Pakistan. These effects were more pronounced for girls and low-income households (Khan and Ahmed 2021). Low-income households also had far fewer options for accessing remote learning (Nagesh et al. 2022).

In response to these challenges, Save the Children sought to supplement its nonformal accelerated learning programming for crisis-affected girls in rural areas of the Shikarpur District. The hope was that this tool, Learning Tree, would accelerate education remediation and enable children to overcome education inequalities more quickly. Learning Tree is a mobile-based application designed to facilitate structured learning by engaging children,

caregivers, and teachers (Brown and Krupar 2024). The tool was designed to stimulate learning by providing opportunities for girls to engage independently in educational activities using the application, with the support of teachers or caregivers at home. The aim was that the EdTech platform would lead to additional gains in learning remediation in literacy, numeracy, executive functioning, and social emotional skills, and thereby enable children to catch up to their age-appropriate levels more rapidly. Learning Tree uses the Return to Learning curriculum content developed by Save the Children, which focuses on SEL, literacy, and numeracy skills. To ensure that children can access the tool where mobile internet connections are scarce or prohibitively expensive, the platform can be used offline.

The Learning Tree mobile-based application was piloted in 25 of the 50 ALCs as an afterschool supplement to in-person nonformal education. It was provided to out-of-school girls ages 11-14 in the ALCs in rural areas of Shikarpur District. Given the challenges of the digital divide with the target population, Save the Children staff members worked with caregivers to register their children to use the application and provided ongoing support. Teachers in the intervention group of ALCs were given training, and they in turn provided on-site technical support to teachers and caregivers to resolve the issues and challenges they faced.

During the Learning Tree rollout, the implementers observed that ALC teachers and caregivers provided after-hours support to the children and caregivers using the application. Teachers provided support in person, by working with children at the ALCs to explain the app and providing ongoing troubleshooting, or by visiting students' family homes to provide support. Teachers also provided support to students remotely through phone calls, SMS, WhatsApp, or social media.

The following sections present results on the effectiveness of Learning Tree a supplementary tool used in nonformal education for girls in a low-resource emergency setting. We specifically analyze whether the tool, when compared with conventional emergency accelerated education measures, resulted in additional gains in literacy, numeracy, executive functioning, and SEL.

METHODS

The key research question in this study was whether the Learning Tree EdTech tool led to greater learning gains for girls ages 11-14 who were enrolled in an accelerated learning program in the Shikarpur District of Sindh, in Pakistan, than the gains measured for those who participated in the accelerated learning program alone. To answer this question, we employed a longitudinal, quasi-experimental design that involved 483 children enrolled across 50 ALCs.

For ethical and methodological reasons, the unit of treatment assignment was at the ALC level rather than the individual level. Assigning treatment at that level ensured that all children in the same school had equitable access to Learning Tree, which prevented perceived unfairness and reduced the potential for social tensions. Cluster-level assignment also helped minimize contamination and spillover effects by limiting the likelihood that students exposed to the tool would share devices, information, or learning strategies with peers in a different condition.

A cluster-randomized design was not feasible, due to the risk of geographic proximity between treatment and comparison centers. We instead undertook a purposive selection of ALCs to ensure sufficient spatial separation between groups, thereby reducing the risk of contamination. While this approach strengthened the feasibility of implementation and internal validity regarding spillover, it may introduce baseline differences between treatment and comparison groups that require adjustment in the analysis.

Twenty-five of the ALCs were assigned to receive the Learning Tree to complement their regular learning activities, while the other half provided a comparison by continuing with their regular ALC activities. To assess changes over time, data on student learning and household characteristic were collected for a sample of 501 children enrolled in the 50 ALCs before Learning Tree was rolled out in September-October 2021, and again in February 2022, four months into the implementation. The student learning measure we used was the Holistic Assessment of Learning and Development Outcomes (HALDO), which assessed the literacy, numeracy, executive functioning, and social emotional domains (Krupar and D'Sa 2024).

This study was approved by the ethics review committee at Save the Children. The enumerators obtained informed consent from caregivers and assent from the children before any data was collected.

MEASURES

The learning outcomes of girls ages 1-14 in an emergency setting in Pakistan were the primary interest in this study. These were measured with HALDO, a multidimensional instrument designed to assess children's diverse learning needs during emergencies, which has been psychometrically validated in LMICs (Krupar and D'Sa 2024). The instrument assesses literacy, numeracy, SEL, and executive functioning for children ages 4-16 by asking them a series of questions sourced from such measures as the International Development and Early Learning Assessment, the International Social and Emotional Learning Assessment, and the Literacy Boost and Numeracy Boost assessment. Table 1 presents the domains measured in HALDO, and the individual items covered in each domain.

The HALDO tool measures literacy using questions on letter identification, expressive vocabulary, the accuracy of an oral reading of a grade-2 passage, and reading comprehension. Numeracy is measured through one-to-one correspondence by counting objects, one- and two-digit number identification, one- and two-digit addition and subtraction, and word problems. SEL is measured through items on self-concept and empathy. Self-concept refers to children's understanding of themselves, including knowledge about their current identity—name, age, gender, caregiver name, community name, and the name of the country they live in; their ability to envision two different futures for themselves; and their ability to identify supportive influences and obstacles each future would hold for them.

These questions progress in difficulty and include skip logic, which means that, if a child cannot appropriately respond to questions about a possible future, obstacles, or supports, all remaining questions are skipped. Empathy refers to children's ability to identify the feelings and experiences of others, how those feelings relate to a situation, and how they respond to another child's feelings. Empathy questions are scored using a binary of locally defined appropriate or inappropriate responses, which then are aggregated as a percentage of five possible appropriate responses. Executive functioning includes items that measure short-term and working memory by utilizing digit recall and backwards digit recall. An average percentage correct score can be presented for a student for each domain, along with an aggregate HALDO measure constructed as an average of the domain items. Psychometric testing in emergency settings in Uganda, Kenya, and Lebanon affirms that the literacy, numeracy, SEL, and executive functioning domains measure their hypothesized constructs, that enumerators administered the tool reliably, and that the items consistently measured similar constructs (Krupar and D'Sa 2024).

Table 1: Domains, Skills, and Item Descriptions of the Holistic Assessment of Learning and Development Outcomes (HALDO) Tool

Domain	Skill	Items
Literacy	Letter identification	Identify 5 letters common letters
		Identify 5 letters infrequent letters
	Expressive language	Name 10 animals (only asked if child cannot identify any common letters)
	Accuracy	Number of words read correctly
	Reading with comprehension	Respond to 5 comprehension questions
Numeracy	Number identification	Identify 4 single-digit numbers presented visually
		Identify 4 double-digit numbers presented visually
	One-to-one correspondence	Understand concept of different numbers related to objects (3 items) (only asked if child cannot identify any single-digit numbers)
	Simple operations	Complete 4 simple numerical operations with single-digit numbers
	Hard operations	Complete 4 harder numerical operations with two-digit numbers
Social Emotional Learning	Self-concept	Complete 2 numerical problems from a verbal word problem
		Knowledge of name, age, sex, community name, country name
	Empathy	Ability to identify positive hope(s) for future, what could support and stop this future
		Ability to identify how someone else might be feeling
		Ability to show empathy
		Ability to take the perspective of a third child in an ambiguous situation
		Tendency to not attribute hostility to ambiguous provocation
Executive Functioning	Short-term memory	Ability to remember 4 number sequences
	Working memory	Ability to remember and reverse 4 number sequences

Data was also collected on the children's key background characteristics, including age, socioeconomic status, the home learning environment, disability status, and whether they were multilingual. Socioeconomic status was measured as an index of the presence or absence of ten household wealth assets in the children's homes, including electricity, bicycle, radio, mobile phone, tin roof, cement floor, television, motorcycle, goats/cows/chickens, and a computer. The home learning environment was measured as an average of two binary variables—whether there were books in the house and whether the child had seen someone reading in their home. The prevalence of disabilities was identified by children's self-reported difficulties with functional vision, hearing, and physical movement, using the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning (Sloman and Margaretha 2018). Multilingualism was defined as speaking a language other than Sindhi at home, and was identified in consultation with the parent or caregiver. Collecting background data on children enables baseline checks to assess the balance between groups and facilitates the specification of more robust multivariate regression models, factors that are likely related to the learning outcomes.

We expected higher socioeconomic status and households with more books or reading at home to be positively correlated with learning outcomes, as these factors often give children greater access to educational resources, support, and opportunities. Older children usually exhibit higher learning outcomes, as they often are more mature, have more opportunities for cognitive development, and more advanced brain development. Disability is often associated with lower learning outcomes, due to barriers to access, insufficient accommodations, and the additional challenges of navigating low-resource education environments without adequate support. Multilingualism as defined here positions students as a linguistic minority within the education setting. This is often associated with lower learning outcomes due to language barriers, reduced comprehension of instruction, and potential social or cultural marginalization.

STUDY SAMPLE

The sample frame for this study was the 1,360 girls, ages 11-14, who were enrolled across 50 ALCs run by Save the Children in the Shikarpur District of Sindh, Pakistan. We used a quasi-experimental sampling approach, including a purposive selection of treatment and comparison ALCs based on geography to minimize contamination and spillover effects, and a random sampling of students within the clusters. Half of the 50 ALCs were purposively assigned to a treatment arm, which received the Learning Tree EdTech tool; the other half were assigned to continue their regular activities to serve as a comparison. The sample size was calculated using the Optimal Design software package, based on several key parameters to ensure a representative sample that balanced statistical rigor and the feasibility of data collection within the study constraints. We assumed a Minimum Detectable Effect of 0.2 standard deviations ($\Delta = 0.2$), corresponding to a small effect size for learning outcomes. The significance level (α) was set at 0.05 for a two-tailed test, and the desired power ($1-\beta$) was 0.80, ensuring an 80 percent probability

of detecting the effect size, if it exists. To account for the clustered design, we assumed an intraclass correlation coefficient (ρ) of 0.10, accounting for some expected similarity of learning outcomes within schools. An average of ten students was randomly sampled within each cluster (ALC); the total number of clusters was 50, with 25 clusters per treatment arm. Within these parameters, the suggested total sample size calculated was 373 participants. Given the risk of attrition over time, we increased the target sample size to 502 participants, with 251 in each treatment arm.

We collected data from 50 ALCs located in Shikarpur beginning in September 2021. After these ALCs had been randomly allocated to treatment and control, a random sample of ten students was selected to participate in the study. They were stratified by age to ensure a balance of children ages 11 to 14. In terms of attrition, one student was lost to follow-up at endline and another 18 were dropped from the analysis due to incomplete or missing data. This represented a 3.8 percent attrition rate between baseline and endline, leaving a total sample of 483 (246 intervention and 237 control), which was still much larger than the required sample size calculated for the study.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

To test the hypothesis that implementing Learning Tree in ALCs would result in greater learning gains for students than those in regular ALCs without the EdTech component, the study specified a multivariate regression model; the dependent variable was learning outcome gains over the four-month period. Given the clustered treatment assignment in our study, robust standard errors were clustered at the school level. This approach accounts for potential intracluster correlation among students within the same school, which ensures valid statistical inference even when student outcomes may be correlated, due to shared school characteristics such as teacher quality or available resources.

Given that ALCs were assigned purposively rather than randomly, it was important to adjust statistically for baseline imbalances and for covariates known to be strong predictors of learning outcomes. The study sought to address observed imbalance in multilingualism and disability prevalence by including these variables as covariates in the regression model specification. Interaction tests between treatment and these imbalanced variables revealed no significant heterogeneity in the treatment effect, which supported the decision to exclude interaction terms and focus on the main effects. We also included learning outcomes at baseline as a covariate to control for initial differences between students and account for correlations between baseline scores and the observed gains in learning outcomes. Socioeconomic status (as measured by the household asset index) and household learning environment (reflecting the availability of books at home and the presence of literate family members) were also included as covariates, as they are well-established determinants of learning outcomes in education research (Filmer and Pritchett 2001; Evans et al. 2010; Brown and Park 2002).

Overall, this model specification reduces the risk of confounding and provides more credible estimates of the association between exposure to the EdTech intervention and observed improvements in learning outcomes. The multivariate regression analysis for this model was run in STATA 16.1, with robust standard errors clustered by ALC, for literacy, numeracy, SEL, and executive functioning outcomes, as measured by the HALDO learning measure. The final model is specified as follows:

$$\Delta Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Treatment} + \beta_2 Y_{\text{baseline}} + \beta_3 \text{Age} + \beta_4 \text{SES} + \beta_5 \text{HLE} + \beta_6 \text{Multilingual} + \beta_7 \text{Disability} + \epsilon$$

Where:

- ΔY : Gain in learning outcomes (e.g., post-test score minus pre-test score)
- Treatment: Indicator for the EdTech intervention used in ALCs
- Y_{baseline} : Learning outcome result at baseline (before intervention)
- Age: Age of the student (in years)
- SES: Socioeconomic status, measured using a household asset index (e.g., count of items owned out of a possible 10)
- HLE: Home learning environment, reflecting the availability of books at home and whether family members read at home
- Multilingual: Indicator for multilingual status (speaks a language other than Sindhi)
- Disability: Indicator for disability status (difficulty with vision, hearing, or movement)
- ϵ : Error term
- β_0 : Intercept (constant term)
- β_1 - β_7 : Estimated coefficients for each explanatory variable

To quantify the magnitude of these gains, the study used predicted values from the regression model to estimate an EdTech multiplier. This quantified how much greater the learning gains were for those receiving Learning Tree than for those who participated in conventional ALC activities. The control group's learning gains were estimated as the predicted outcomes for students in the non-EdTech sample (treatment = 0). The regression coefficient (β_1), as discussed above, represents the learning gains attributable to the EdTech intervention that were greater than those achieved through participation in conventional ALC activities. The total treatment effect, then, is the learning gains generated by the combination of ALC and EdTech activities. This enabled us to calculate the EdTech multiplier as the ratio of the total treatment effect (EdTech + ALC) to the control group gains (ALC only). By relying on regression-based estimates, this approach ensured consistency and robust adjustment for baseline differences, covariates, and clustering effects.

RESULTS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS AND BASELINE TEST

When examining the study sample, we found a group of girls with an average age of about 12 who had approximately four out of the ten household assets listed in the household asset index. They had relatively positive home learning environments, with more than 90 percent reporting that they have books in the home and around 65 percent reporting having a family member who reads at home. Although a majority spoke Sindhi as their first language, around 15 percent spoke an additional language at home, which positioned them as a linguistic minority within the education setting. Only a small proportion of the students in the study were identified as disabled, meaning they had difficulty seeing, hearing, or moving. In terms of learning outcomes, girls enrolled in the study were answering around 60 percent of all learning outcome questions correctly before the intervention began.

We now present a baseline balance test of household characteristics and learning outcomes to assess differences between the intervention group, who were enrolled at an ALC that utilized Learning Tree, and the control group, who were enrolled at an ALC without the intervention. Table 2 shows the baseline values for both groups and tests their difference with an independent t-test. Girls in each group were of a similar average age and socioeconomic status, as measured by the household asset index. Home learning environment, a measure that combines two subitems (books in the home, a family member reads at home), was also comparable between the control and treatment groups. The difference appeared to be driven by a higher incidence of family members reading at home in the intervention group, but a t-test revealed that this difference was not significant. Disability prevalence, as measured by difficulty seeing, hearing, or moving, was slightly higher in the intervention group. However, a correlation check revealed no significant relationship between disability status and learning outcomes, which suggests that the imbalance in disability status is unlikely to create systematic bias in the observed differences in learning gains between the intervention and control groups. The control group was found to have a higher proportion of multilingual students than the intervention group, and a correlation check revealed a significant relationship between this and learning outcomes. These minority language students were found to have lower learning outcomes, which was likely driven by the mismatch between the language of instruction and students' native languages, and their having limited access to educational resources and peer interactions.

Students in the control group were found to have lower performance for the overall HALDO measure, as well for literacy, numeracy, and executive functioning. SEL measures at baseline were comparable between the two groups; however, these differences were relatively small, significant only at the 0.05 level. Further correlation analysis indicated

that this difference may have been driven by the disproportionately greater number of multilingual students in the control group (20.7%) than in the intervention group (10.5%). A sensitivity analysis was conducted that excluded multilingual students from the sample, which eliminated the baseline differences in learning outcomes between the two groups. To address this potential confounding factor in the analysis, both multilingual status and baseline learning outcomes are included as covariates in the regression model specified below, ensuring that treatment effect estimates were adjusted for differences in linguistic background. This approach will help to isolate the impact of the intervention itself, independent of the influence of multilingualism.

Table 2: Baseline Values for Key Demographic Variables

	Intervention	Control	Difference
Background Variables			
Age (years)	11.9	11.6	+ 0.2
Household asset index (# items)	3.90	3.84	+ 0.06
Home learning environment (average proportion reporting books in home and literate household members)	79.7%	77.2%	+ 2.5%
Any books in the home	91.0%	91.5%	- 0.5 %
Anyone reading at home	68.3%	62.9%	+ 5.4%
Disability (%)	3%	2%	+1%**
Multilingual (%)	10.5%	20.7%	-10.1%**
Learning Outcomes			
Literacy	61.7%	54.5%	+7.2%*
Numeracy	63.3%	57.3%	+6.0%*
Executive functioning	64.1%	58.7%	+2.6%*
SEL	65.9%	63.7%	+2.2%
HALDO (overall)	64.7%	60.7%	+4.0%*
N	246	237	483

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

IMPACT ON CHILD LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Learning outcome results, as measured by HALDO, are summarized in Table 3 for both time periods and treatment arms to demonstrate learning gains over the study period. Before the intervention was rolled out, the 11- to 14-year-old girls who enrolled in ALCs that did not receive the EdTech intervention were able to correctly answer 54 percent of the literacy questions, 64 percent of the SEL questions, 57 percent of the numeracy questions, and 59 percent of the executive functioning questions. When the HALDO tool was administered four months later, learning outcomes had improved significantly, with students able to correctly answer 63 percent of the literacy questions, 87 percent of the SEL questions, 66 percent of the numeracy questions, and 72 percent of the executive functioning questions. The sizeable improvements in student outcomes occurred over a relatively short time, which indicates that the ALCs were effectively accelerating the learning of girls who had experienced multiple emergencies.

Descriptive results indicate that the students enrolled in the ALCs offering the Learning Tree intervention experienced significant learning gains that were larger than those experienced by girls in the control group over the same time period. At baseline, students enrolled in ALCs assigned to receive the EdTech intervention correctly answered 63 percent of the literacy questions, 67 percent of the SEL questions, 64 percent of the numeracy questions, and 65 percent of the executive functioning questions. As indicated above, the intervention baseline values were significantly higher in the treatment group than in the control group for all learning domains, except SEL. The study found considerably larger learning gains for the EdTech group over the same four-month period; their overall HALDO scores increase by 29 percentage points, compared to the 17.1 percentage point gain seen in the control group. Literacy scores increased by 31 percentage points, compared to 10; numeracy by 25 percentage points, compared to 10; executive functioning by 28 percentage points, compared to 14; and SEL by 30 percentage points, compared to 23. After four months, students in the EdTech group were able to answer 94 percent of the HALDO questions correctly, compared to 78 percent in the control group (Table 3). These descriptive findings provide evidence that the EdTech intervention generated additional gains in learning for girls enrolled in an accelerated learning program in Shikarpur. However, to come up with a more precise estimate of the differential impact of Learning Tree, incorporate clustering effects, and address the baseline imbalances identified above, we specify a multivariate regression model that allows us to formally test our hypothesis.

Table 3: Gains in Learning Outcomes Over a Four-Month Study Period, Stratified by Treatment Arm

Learning Domain	Treatment Arm	Baseline	Endline	Learning Gain
Literacy	Intervention	61.7%	93.1%	+31.4%
	Control	54.5%	64.7%	+10.2%
Numeracy	Intervention	63.3%	88.4%	+25.1%
	Control	57.3%	67.4%	+10.1%
Executive functioning	Intervention	64.1%	92.3%	+28.2%
	Control	58.7%	72.8%	+14.1%
SEL	Intervention	65.9%	95.8%	+29.8%
	Control	63.7%	87.1%	+23.4%
HALDO (overall)	Intervention	64.7%	93.8%	+29.1%
	Control	60.7%	78.4%	+17.7%

MODELED RESULTS

The multivariate regression results are summarized in Table 4. They show that the EdTech intervention is associated with significantly improved learning outcomes across the four learning domains, with students in the treatment group experiencing higher average learning gains than those who participated in regular ALC activities. Specifically, holding other factors constant, literacy gains for the children in the intervention group were 27.6 percentage points higher, numeracy gains were 21.2 points higher, executive functioning gains were 19.0 points higher, and SEL gains were 8.8 points higher than those of children in the control group. Overall, learning and development improved by 15.1 percentage points more when the EdTech intervention was used alongside the accelerated learning activities. Baseline learning outcomes had a strong and significant negative association with learning gains over the four-month study period, which was consistent with the regression-to-the-mean relationship in the educational literature, where students with higher initial scores tended to show less improvement over time. Other variables, including socioeconomic status, age, home learning environment, multilingual status, and disability status, did not exhibit significant relationships with learning gains in this model.

Table 4: Regression Model Applied to All Learning and Development Domains

	Literacy Skill Gains	Numeracy Skill Gains	EXF Skill Gains	SEL Skill Gains	HALDO Overall Gain
Intervention (Learning Tree)	0.276*** (0.053)	0.212*** (0.029)	0.190*** (0.038)	0.088*** (0.025)	0.151*** (0.024)
Child's age	0.015 (0.013)	0.015* (0.007)	-0.005 (0.011)	0.009 (0.007)	0.006 (0.005)
SES (household asset index)	0.020 (0.089)	0.064 (0.045)	0.112 (0.061)	0.064 (0.048)	0.069 (0.042)
Home learning environment	0.047 (0.062)	0.052 (0.056)	0.000 (0.035)	0.018 (0.050)	0.016 (0.042)
Multilingual status	-0.065 (0.079)	0.011 (0.033)	-0.039 (0.034)	0.003 (0.039)	-0.014 (0.036)
Disability/Difficulty	0.044 (0.035)	-0.013 (0.024)	0.032 (0.030)	0.018 (0.022)	0.024 (0.014)
Baseline learning outcome value	-0.983*** (0.057)	-0.966*** (0.042)	-1.009*** (0.037)	-0.990*** (0.038)	-0.967*** (0.042)
Constant	0.432* (0.183)	0.405*** (0.111)	0.755*** (0.126)	0.712*** (0.094)	0.655*** (0.075)
N	483	483	483	483	483

Note: ~ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The results of the Edtech multiplier estimation indicate that the addition of the EdTech component is associated with a doubling of overall learning and development gains experienced by girls who engaged in routine accelerated learning activities, as measured by the aggregate HALDO score. As Table 5 shows, literacy gains improved by a factor of five when the Learning Tree was used in ALCs, and numeracy gains by a factor of four. Adding EdTech was associated with an improvement in executive functioning by around two and a half times, and SEL was improved by approximately one and a half times.

Table 5: Estimating EdTech Learning Multiplier Using Predicted Values from the Regression Model

Learning Domain	ALC Only Learning Gains (predicted)	Additional Impact of EdTech (B1)	Total Treatment Effect (EdTech + ALC)	EdTech Multiplier
Literacy	6.9 %	27.6 %	34.5%	5.0x
Numeracy	6.9%	21.2 %	28.2%	4.1x
Executive functioning	11.6%	19.0 %	30.6%	2.6x
SEL	22.2%	8.8%	31.0%	1.4x
HALDO overall	15.8%	15.1%	30.9%	2.0x

DISCUSSION

In this article, we present new empirical evidence on the effectiveness of a mobile-based EdTech tool in supplementing accelerated learning programs. Conducted with a population of girls in an emergency setting in an LMIC, this study fills important knowledge gaps in the literature. This adequately powered, quasi-experimental study contributes to an underresearched area, as it was specifically designed to estimate the added benefit of integrating EdTech tools into existing emergency education programming.

This study offers several methodological and substantive strengths. First, it uses a longitudinal design with repeated measures, which allows the estimation of learning gains rather than relying solely on cross-sectional outcomes. Second, random sampling of students within clusters enhances internal validity and supports unbiased estimation of effects at the learner level. Third, learning outcomes were measured across multiple domains, including literacy, numeracy, executive functioning, and SEL skills, which provides a more holistic assessment of learning and development than is typical in emergency education research. Finally, the evaluation was conducted with a hard-to-reach population of adolescent girls who were affected by crises in rural Pakistan. It has generated rare empirical evidence from a context where rigorous studies on learning impact are limited.

The main limitation of the study was the purposive allocation of schools to treatment and comparison conditions, which introduced a risk of unobserved confounding. This approach was selected for ethical and practical reasons, including the need to minimize contamination and spillover effects within shared and geographically concentrated learning environments. To manage this limitation, we used statistical adjustment for baseline differences and key covariates to reduce the potential for bias. The resulting

treatment and comparison groups were well balanced along most observed background characteristics, although baseline balance tests revealed differences in multilingualism, disability prevalence, and learning outcomes. Correlation checks and sensitivity analyses revealed that the differences in learning outcomes appear to be driven by differences in multilingualism, which was then included as a covariate, along with disability prevalence and baseline learning outcomes in the multivariate regression model. This analytical strategy mitigates the potential confounding influence of these imbalances; however, omitted variable bias cannot be ruled out, and unmeasured factors may still have influenced the results. Future research using randomized assignment, larger samples, and additional covariates such as school-level characteristics or parental education would help validate these findings and enhance generalizability.

Another potential limitation of the study was the potential influence of regression-to-the-mean phenomenon, as the intervention group had higher baseline learning outcomes than the comparison group (Barnett, van der Pols, and Dobson 2005). However, any bias introduced likely would have attenuated the estimated treatment effect rather than inflating it, as children with higher baseline scores typically show less improvement due to ceiling effects; this limits their measurable growth more than that of lower-performing peers. Therefore, the observed positive and significant treatment effect can be considered robust and unlikely to have resulted from preexisting differences in performance between groups.

Taken together, the study's design features and strategies to address limitations lend confidence to the finding that introducing the Learning Tree tool is associated with significantly increased learning gains among crisis-affected girls ages 11 to 14, who were enrolled in an accelerated learning program in rural Pakistan in the wake of COVID-19 and a series of natural disasters. These results provide evidence that mobile-based EdTech tools can effectively supplement accelerated learning for girls during emergencies in low-resource settings, which can help to generate significantly higher learning gains across domains than those seen by conventional accelerated learning measures. These results highlight the potential of EdTech interventions that are locally tailored and rolled out effectively with stakeholders to promote learning and, as such, to close education gaps for vulnerable children experiencing emergencies in LMICs.

The significant and positive results observed for SEL are of particular interest, given the inherent challenges of improving social and emotional skills via a mobile application with limited direct interpersonal interaction and hands-on engagement. While more modest than the gains for other learning domains, ceiling effects were likely at play, as the ALC was already highly effective in improving SEL relative to the other learning domains. These novel results highlight the potential of EdTech tools to complement existing emergency programs, even in areas traditionally dependent on in-person interactions.

The findings in this article surface several implications for emergency education programming in low-resource settings. First, mobile-based EdTech tools can be deployed as an efficient supplemental modality to extend instruction time and reinforce foundational skills when teacher capacity, contact hours, or learning materials are limited. Second, pairing EdTech with existing accelerated learning programs may offer an effective approach to narrowing learning gaps for crisis-affected adolescent girls, a group often at risk of permanent dropout. Third, the relatively low infrastructural requirements of the tool tested here indicate the potential feasibility for scale in similar rural contexts, where connectivity is intermittent but mobile phone access is growing. Effective implementation, however, will require collaboration with local stakeholders, contextual adaptation of the content, and continued investment in inclusive designs to ensure accessibility for learners with diverse needs. These considerations can support humanitarian and development actors in determining where and how mobile-based EdTech can complement existing EiE interventions to sustain learning continuity during crises.

RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

The study was submitted to Save the Children's Ethics Review Committee and granted ethics approval (SCUS-ERC-FY2021-100) in October 2021, prior to data collection.

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HYPERGOVERNANCE AND MULTILAYERED DATA ACCOUNTABILITY IN HAITI: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP OF NGO SCHOOLS

MARION IMBODEN AND CATHRYN MAGNO

ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the Haitian education data and evidence ecosystem. We focus on schools supported by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating within a system of hypergovernance that is marked by multilayered oversight and systems of data reporting and accountability. We investigate these schools primarily through the eyes of their directors, gleaning from their experience the ways in which data is procured, analyzed, utilized, and reflected on in the provision of schooling to conflict-saturated communities. Through semistructured interviews supported by brief field observations and document review, we identify findings largely consistent with the previous literature: the lack of coherent data collection, analysis, and use; lack of alignment of NGO goals and school-based reality; fragmented responsibilities for collection and oversight of data and evidence; conflicting lines of procedural accountability; and interrupted information flows. Our findings also point to a discrepancy between externally imposed data regulations and the contextual conditions of crisis-affected schools. School directors are under pressure to provide specific types and amounts of data and evidence to be in compliance while being excluded from decisionmaking processes. They are also positioned as intermediaries between the school, the NGO, and international agencies, and are responsible for rendering schools “legible” within a humanitarian-development concurrence. We end by offering recommendations for an EiE data ecosystem that is informed by school directors in order to focus on the crisis-affected communities’ needs and priorities. Key recommendations include training school directors in the effective use of data and involving them in making decisions at the school level.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance and relevance of data in global governance and education in emergencies (EiE) is widely promoted, as it provides information on needs and gaps while also supplying the necessary metrics to improve coordination, support strategic planning, and facilitate resource mobilization (USAID 2026). However, the effective use of data in emergency contexts remains challenging. How constraints on data use manifest in particular locations is little understood, as is what possible measures could be taken to begin to address such constraints. As noted by previous scholars, data use is often context dependent, both in its availability and its operationalization, and delving into contextual barriers to and opportunities for data is paramount to improving education (Buckner et al. 2022). In this paper, therefore, we present the Haitian education ecosystem, with a focus on schools supported by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which have government ties and multilayered oversight. We investigate these schools primarily through the eyes of their directors, gleaned from their experiences the ways data is procured, analyzed, utilized, and reflected on in the provision of schooling to conflict-saturated communities. Acute humanitarian crises are embedded within Haiti's chronic instability and require approaches that combine development and emergency operations in the short-term and strategic contingency planning in the long-term. However, the current data and evidence ecosystem is convoluted, inadequate, and underprioritized. Within this context we ask: How do school leaders in NGO schools in Haiti interface with the collection, analysis, and uptake of education data and evidence?

We ground our exploration in a critical view of normative accountability structures and mechanisms by depicting the complex ecosystem in which Haitian school leaders function. Concepts such as legitimacy and legibility emerged as we untangled the ways in which data and evidence are deployed in a hypergovernance context. By interviewing school directors, NGO staff members, and an education ministry official, with supplemental observations and document review, we captured how school leaders make their schools visible and maintain credibility within overlapping accountability frameworks. We found that, while school directors play an important role in collecting and disseminating information, they struggle to reconcile the demands of multiple stakeholders, some of which conflict with local realities. This highlights the tensions inherent in hypergovernance. School directors mediate between external accountability requirements and the complex realities of their schools, shaping both the legibility of the schools and the perceived legitimacy of the data they provide. Before presenting our detailed methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion, we begin with a brief review of global governance in EiE and a description of the Haitian context.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

Recent publications by international organizations such as UNESCO (UNESCO-IIEP 2021; UNESCO-IIEP 2022; UNESCO 2025) and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE 2020), along with several academics (e.g., Nicolai et al. 2020), have taken up the question of how to articulate the data challenges in education and emergencies. School personnel and education authorities need information on which to base decisions in their efforts to ensure safe, equitable, and quality education. This right is guaranteed in global agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Safe Schools Declaration, to which Haiti is a signatory. However, many factors negatively influence the identification, collection, and use of data in fragile states and, further, during humanitarian crises (UNESCO 2023a). These include data mismatches, disagreement on data prioritization and availability, use of a nation's education management information system (EMIS), the costs and complexity of gathering data, especially under acute crisis conditions, the ambiguous, competitive, and/or contradictory responsibilities around data collection and data housing, and varying capacities related to the analysis of data and dissemination and the application of results or findings (UNESCO 2023b; INEE 2020; Fontdevila 2023).

These myriad actors and institutions within a polycrisis education environment, all of which have varying—and potentially misaligned—interests and resources, can render even the best conceptual frameworks for data production and uptake relatively ineffectual and unrealistic at the local level. The very concepts and categories on which many global “solutions” rest may in themselves be problematic when applied to specific localities (Rodríguez-Gómez 2019). Menashy and Zakharia (2022) emphasize that partnerships in EiE situations often prioritize data and results that are specified by donors, thereby limiting local decisionmaking and leadership. Global governance is central to understanding the Haitian case. International actors, such as donors, international NGOs, and financial institutions, play a decisive role in shaping domestic policy, distributing resources, and influencing development/humanitarian priorities, and they often replace or limit state authority (Pierre-Louis 2011; Fatton 2025). In a country with unpredictable and inconsistent means of data collection, local data sources become more relevant and consequential (Montjouridès and Liu 2019). However, the capacity to capture granular-level data is often minimal, which contributes to the multiple burdens on individuals such as school leaders, who are already responsible for operating schools under harrowing conditions.

Russell et al. (2025) offer a conceptual orientation to the ways global governance shapes education accountability in Haiti. In order to comprehend the various overlapping legal and policy categories of organizations and services for refugees through the migration process, they refer to organizations as actors of legibility within what they

call a multipolar migratory ecosystem. We similarly consider the current governance in Haiti as a multipolar education data ecosystem in which overlapping reporting (and policy) categories of donors, networks, NGOs, and governments direct data collection, analysis, and use. We question the ways decisions about what counts as relevant data—and who participates in making these decisions—influence institutional legitimacy and the “legibility” of schools.

INEE MINIMUM STANDARDS AND TOOLKITS

International organizations operationalize global frameworks such as the INEE Minimum Standards (INEE 2024), using tools like the Joint Education Needs Assessment (JENA). The JENA was developed by the Global Education Cluster, which supports the implementation of INEE Minimum Standard 4 (assessment), as a way to identify “reliable, comparable, and agreed-upon data points” across agencies and ministries in order to understand education needs and gaps, and to support coordinated, evidence-based planning in crisis contexts (GEC 2010, 4). It typically consists of a standardized set of tools and forms to collect data on core education domains. Findings are shared among cluster members and the relevant authorities (GEC 2010, 2025b). In Haiti, the latest JENA and its secondary data review were conducted collaboratively with Plan International, UNICEF, and Save the Children. The NGO under study in this article explicitly positions its work within EiE, receives funding from JENA participants, and is, therefore, implicated in meeting INEE Minimum Standards (GEC 2025a). Another tool is the 4Ws/5Ws (who is doing what, where, when, and for whom) used for sectorwide coordination, which is sometimes incomplete, inaccurate, or untimely (USAID 2026). Although we did not explicitly ask about these tools in our interviews, the respondents mentioned them in connection with their data-related activities, which illustrates their prevalence in practice under an array of hypergovernmental frameworks and expectations.

INEE Minimum Standard 6 calls for regular monitoring when adapting education programs to the evolving needs of affected populations, with the intention of rebalancing power and increasing the effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of responses in crisis settings (Barakat and Milton 2020). However, when conducted by external or international actors, this carries the risk of drawing misleading conclusions and promoting uniform solutions that may not be appropriate to local circumstances (ElAsad 2025). Standardized guidelines and metrics can clash with context-specific needs, especially when local stakeholders are unfamiliar with the required procedures (Henderson and Smith 2022; Akkari and Radhouane 2023). INEE Minimum Standard 7 recommends that all stakeholders, such as teachers, learners, community members, and education authorities, be involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of assessments to ensure their relevance. This can be difficult, if not dangerous, in conflict settings.

Although a country's EMIS usually stores data on education development, EMIS systems are often incomplete or underresourced, which prompts international NGOs to fill gaps. This results in disparate data collection and dissemination that is shaped by differing organizational mandates, methodologies, and donor priorities, with global strategic uses sometimes diverging from local operational needs (Buckner et al. 2022).

The obstacles to obtaining timely and accurate data are immense in fragile states, even more so in crisis situations. We approach the Haitian state as a historically and socially embedded actor shaped by colonial legacies, resource constraints, and interactions with global and local actors. The population's sense of "statelessness" reflects not only government weakness but the confusion caused by "hypergovernance"—that is, the overlap of international and local actors (Kivland 2012, 261). Kivland (2012) suggests that Haitian statehood is performatively constructed. From this perspective, the observed fragmentation and interrupted information flows within the data and evidence ecosystem can be interpreted not as a state "failure" but as a reflection of the complex conditions that shape governance in Haiti.

HAITIAN CONTEXT: POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND FOREIGN AID

Since gaining independence in 1804, Haiti has faced political and economic crises as well as natural and humanitarian disasters. Its history has been shaped by French colonial exploitation, revolutionary resistance, debt extraction, European and US-driven imperialism, as well as ongoing struggles to assert and maintain its national autonomy (Pierre-Louis 2011; Daut 2023; Dubuisson 2022; Alcenat 2021). The 1825 indemnity imposed by France in exchange for diplomatic recognition forced the new state into decades of debt repayment, depleted public revenues, exploitative agricultural systems, and structurally constrained economic growth, which resulted in persistent underdevelopment (Dubuisson 2011; Alcenat 2021). These privations were deepened by a long US imperial continuum, which started in 1915 when intervention entrenched a wealthy urban ruling class that curtailed fiscal and political autonomy. This reshaped domestic political authority limited the state's ability to fund and manage public education (Pierre 2024; Alcenat 2021; Angulo 2010). The Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986) centralized authoritarian rule, while neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s deepened economic vulnerability and privatized public services, including education (Charles 2023). As a result, Haiti became increasingly dependent on NGOs to provide services traditionally delivered by the state (Wisner and Concannon 2023).

The turbulent presidencies of Aristide from the early 1990s to 2004, including two coups and his 2004 ouster, intensified Haiti's political instability and led to the UN Stabilization Mission (Pierre 2024). External interventions have produced a governance landscape characterized by the simultaneous presence of (weak) government structures and extreme forms of informal or hybrid mechanisms of rule, where authority is contested and performed across multiple actors (Kivland 2012; Jaffe 2013), including armed groups. Foreign aid often substitutes for, rather than strengthens, state capacity and accountability (Fatton 2014, 2025).

Haiti has been widely referred to as the “Republic of (I)NGOs,” especially since the 2010 earthquake, which reflects the vast presence and influence of intermediaries in almost every aspect of Haitian society (Schöneberg 2016). This international presence has led some scholars to argue that Haiti functions as a kind of “parallel state” (Charles 2023, 1), in which nonstate actors assume functions normally performed by sovereign governments. Others characterize Haiti as “a graveyard of failed NGO projects” (Schuller 2025) or “the main laboratory for U.S. imperial machinations” (Pierre 2023, 245). NGOs are often seen as tools of foreign interests rather than partners in national development (Wright 2012).

The most recent period of unrest was sparked by the assassination of Jovenel Moïse in 2021. In 2023, the UN Security Council authorized the controversial Multinational Security Support Mission to Haiti, which reignited debates about sovereignty and neocolonialism (Pierre-Louis 2025). In 2026, Alix Didier Fils-Aimé was installed as prime minister through a procedural mandate, without elections. Haiti remains in a severe, chronic humanitarian crisis, which highlights the enduring consequences of historic exploitation and foreign intervention. The country remains dependent on foreign aid, which impedes Haiti’s long-term self-sufficiency (Pierre 2024; Schuller 2025) and legitimizes neoliberalism and globalization processes. Moreover, NGO accountability in Haiti is limited, due to the high number of unregulated organizations and the lack of consistent reporting mechanisms (Ramachandran and Walz 2015). The current situation threatens data-informed decisionmaking.

Haiti’s political and humanitarian emergencies have significantly impaired access to education and exposed children to increased risks, such as displacement, recruitment by armed groups, and severe psychological and physical distress (UNICEF 2024a). International NGOs focus on education continuity and psychosocial support, albeit in partial and irregular ways (UNICEF 2024b). While NGOs in Haiti have undermined state authority and reinforced privatization (Schuller 2009), they currently fill critical gaps in the underfunded education system. Rather than disbanding them wholesale, NGO practices and transnational aid policies should be improved, at least in the short term (Shah et al. 2024).

HAITI’S EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The effects of structural adjustment and neoliberal policies, systemic oppression, and the ongoing effects of impoverishment and violence (Wisner and Concannon 2023; Damas 2024) have resulted in a fragmented education system that is heavily dependent on private actors. This includes schools funded and directed by local or international NGOs that provide education services and participate in the governance of education (Charles 2023). In 2012, 154 NGOs were officially registered as active in the Haitian education space.¹ Haiti’s schools are organized into different communes and arrondissements, each

¹ It is important to note that no comprehensive list exists of the NGOs active in Haiti. Estimates are that there are hundreds of officially registered NGOs and several thousand operating in practice.

with varying numbers of public, private, religious, community, vocational, nonformal, international, and alternative schools (MENFP 2025), with little to no guarantee of consistency, equity, or quality. By 2023, it was estimated that 90 percent of the schools were “largely run by non-governmental employees [with] non-governmental funding” (Borger et al. 2023, 8), leading Damas (2024, 436) to describe the privatization as “one of the biggest challenges within the sector in Haiti.”

Colonial and US influence have shaped Haiti’s Euro-American education system, which limits access to local knowledge and creates an enduring epistemic crisis (Gourgues 2022). Trouillot (1995) further notes that external control over historical narratives and policy dampen Haitian perspectives and constrain local agency. The linguistic dominance of French and problematic racial dynamics, along with other sociocultural and socioeconomic divides such as urban/rural disparities, have exacerbated inequality in the education sector (Damas 2024). The need for education approaches that reconnect learning with local realities is one of the challenges that falls to school directors, who must maintain safety and stability while strengthening interpersonal relationships and community (Alon and Schechter 2025).

HAITI’S EDUCATION DATA AND EVIDENCE ECOSYSTEM

Haiti’s 1987 Constitution assigns to the state responsibility for regulating and overseeing all schools, through the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (MENFP). However, Haiti’s education data system remains fragmented, with limited coordination among schools, NGOs, and state actors (Freeman and Schuller 2020). Since 2010, the MENFP has collected and stored data on public schools through its EMIS. However, the MENFP struggles with data quality and reliability, outdated information systems and infrastructure, and incomplete national monitoring mechanisms (World Bank 2021). Moreover, the EMIS offers only a partial view of the education landscape; much of the private sector is excluded, although it constitutes the majority of schools in Haiti. NGO schools in Haiti operate in a regulatory gray area in which they are formally expected to comply with certain government regulations and national standards, including delivering certain data, but they often are considered to have uneven education standards as a result of inconsistent funding and lack of proper oversight by the MENFP (Borger et al. 2023; Zanotti 2010). While the MENFP requires private schools to be registered and to report data, by 2017, approximately 70 percent of private schools in Haiti were not accredited by the MENFP, and most do not contribute to national data collection (UNESCO 2017). NGOs, which use their own parallel reporting systems, seem to undermine the development of a functional EMIS, while they are simultaneously both dependent on and accountable to donor-driven initiatives. For example, an NGO may offer leadership training, but because of donors’ influence over school resources and education priorities, it is likely to be designed by international actors, not be aligned with state frameworks, and be disconnected from local realities. Uneven compliance and fragmented “policy implementation” are thus seen across the sector.

Freeman and Schuller (2020) claim that Haiti's aid industry has become a market for "project goods," one in which project delivery is valued over long-term improvements and data is treated as a commodity to secure funding and show accountability. Data practices in overlapping humanitarian and protracted crises often reflect the structural divide between humanitarian and development approaches, which acts to reinforce fragmented accountability and planning systems (UNESCO 2025).

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN HAITI

School principals play a key role in school improvement, education quality, and student learning outcomes (Cruz-González 2019). Effective school leadership can be a catalyst for positive change (UNESCO 2024), particularly in fragile contexts where public institutions are weakened by political instability and transitional governance (Smith and Riley 2012; Magno 2013). Mainstream leadership theory assumes a certain degree of institutional stability, adequate resources, stable governance, and capacity, but these conditions are largely absent in fragile contexts like Haiti, where the very nature of school leadership is muddled (Jean-Marie and Sider 2014). Among the challenges school leaders face in times of crisis are security concerns, communication interruptions, teacher and staff shortages, and student trauma. Typical leadership training does not cover preparation for, response to, recovery from, or reflection on crisis situations (Smith and Riley 2012). Crisis leadership theory recognizes that effective leaders must adapt to uncertainty and disruption and be flexible and resilient (Chiwisa 2024); it also assumes a certain degree of preparation, autonomy, and institutional support to enable option-seeking and decisive action.

In Haiti, the role of school directors, as it is presented in the Guide Pratique d'Administration Scolaire (GPAS), appears to be focused predominantly on administrative, managerial functions (MENFP 2019).² Ongoing revisions linked to the Plan Décennal d'Éducation et de Formation 2020-2030 indicate that the role of school directors may be evolving conceptually, to include a pedagogical emphasis. In ideal circumstances, leaders' decisions are made based on high-quality data (Campo et al. 2025); if the information collected does not accurately capture what it is intended to measure, it is of little use. At the same time, even well-organized data loses its value if it does not meet the actual needs or challenges of decisionmakers in practice (Campo et al. 2025), or if leaders are not able to analyze or apply it to improve schools.

2 While the term "school leader" promotes a visionary, change-oriented connotation aligning with newer theory, in most contexts around the world, earlier notions of school administration prevail, functioning under the premise that schools should be "directed" and "managed" in a top-down, hierarchical manner (Bush, 2003; Magno, 2013). In discussing the case, we use "school director," as that is the term used in Haiti.

To explore how these dynamics play out in Haiti, we conducted an exploratory qualitative case study in which we investigated how NGO school leaders interface with education data and evidence. This enabled us to deeply examine the multiple and overlapping data demands in Haiti’s hypergovernance context.

METHODOLOGY: EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

This exploratory qualitative case study focuses on the treatment of data and evidence in the schools of one Haitian NGO, for which we use the pseudonym Solèy (Kreyòl for “sun”).

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

Solèy was founded in 1995 as a local NGO. We selected it for its extensive involvement in educational and humanitarian programs in Haiti, particularly those addressing school continuity, teacher support, and student wellbeing. It is a significant actor in the regions under study and serves as a valuable exemplar of NGO operations in a fragile-state context. Solèy operates a network of 56 schools in underserved neighborhoods across several regions in Haiti. It has a US-based supporting arm and a stated goal: to strengthen the capacity of urban and rural schools by reinforcing the skills of local educators through robust training programs that target teachers and school administrators. According to the NGO, school directors should create safe learning environments. Solèy operates schools independently, but it is an implementing partner of a number of policy initiatives of the MENPF, UNICEF, and other organizations that address emergency responses and provide psychosocial support, child-centered instruction, and other education reforms. In 2025, the NGO received most of its funding from Save the Children and UNICEF. Figure 1 shows Haiti’s ten departments, with school-building icons representing the Solèy schools included in this study. The schools in Ouest and Artibonite have been directly affected by ongoing political and environmental crises, the one in Nord less so.

Figure 1: Map of Haiti with Departments and Solèy Schools



Source: Adapted from World Atlas (2025)

INSTRUMENTS, OBSERVATIONS, AND DOCUMENT REVIEW

Semistructured interviews capture in-depth insights and reveal nuance, contradictions, and subtle meanings (Mason 2002). Recruiting a sample of interviewees who could elucidate such meaning was challenging because of the lack of publicly available contact information and security concerns in Haiti. One author has family members who grew up and live in Haiti; they facilitated contact with Solèy's executive director, which allowed us to interview affiliated individuals. Both authors have spent brief periods of time in Haiti in professional capacities, and one's involvement in the Haitian Studies Association further shaped their academic positioning and network.

We contacted school directors and other Solèy staff members and invited them to participate in interviews. Upon confirmation, we sent them written consent forms and requested their signatures to ensure the protection of human subjects, including voluntariness, anonymity, and confidentiality. We conducted three interviews

between February and November 2025, one via Zoom and two on site in Haiti, each lasting approximately 1.5-2 hours; two participants were interviewed twice to capture additional perspectives. Of that total, three were school leaders, one was Solèy's executive director, and one was a ministry staff member (see Table 1). We would not claim that the school leaders interviewed are representative of the population of Haitian school directors, although their experiences may reflect those of other school leaders in NGO schools. We only interviewed one ministry of education official, due to limited access to high-level staff members during the data-collection period. This individual had participated in the revision of the GPAS, a significant process in the evolution of school leadership policy in Haiti. This interview provided broader insight into policy processes and reporting requirements for NGO schools, which is only indirectly reflected in the findings.

Table 1: Summary of Interview Participants

Interviewee Type	Interviews	Modality
School leaders (D1, D2, D3)	3	via Zoom (1), in person (2)
Solèy executive director (ED)	1	via Zoom
Ministry staff member (MS)	1	via Zoom

One author conducted all the interviews using guides developed by both authors and tailored to the participants' roles. We began with background questions to establish a rapport, followed by discussion of school leader preparation, practices, and experiences in the polycrisis context. Two follow-up interviews focused specifically on data collection and use. The questions were culturally sensitive and used locally relevant terms to avoid misunderstandings (Brayda and Boyce 2014), in this case from French, Kreyòl, and English (Brayda and Boyce 2014). We conducted the interviews in French, recorded them, then transcribed them. While French was our shared language, this may have limited expressions better conveyed in Kreyòl. The interviewer clarified unfamiliar terms and paraphrased responses to ensure accurate understanding. The recordings were reviewed several times to ensure accurate word-for-word reproduction and to correct errors. The final transcripts were then translated into English by the authors. The quotes used in this article are our translations from French to English.

Observations enable researchers to witness phenomena firsthand, thus facilitating their perspectives (Merriam 2009). Due to security concerns, only one school visit of approximately half a day was possible to observe leadership in practice. A second observation consisted of a fundraising event in the United States that was organized by Solèy, which lasted about four hours. This event included five conversations, during which one author noted attendees' insights into Solèy's operational processes

and fundraising strategies as contextual information. We consulted one government document (the GPAS) and Solèy's publicly available annual reports and social media. One interviewee also provided an internal document related to Solèy's education pillars, which contained NGO-specific contextual information.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was processed using descriptive coding (categorization and thematic content analysis) (Halkias et al. 2023). The data from the transcribed interviews and field notes were organized in a Word table. The initial descriptive codes and subcodes were determined inductively, covering several topics related to the data and evidence ecosystem in Haiti and Solèy. Our coding was primarily emic, as we did not initially ask about education data or evidence; this emerged as a topic from the school leaders themselves. When developing this article, we applied an etic perspective as we linked participants' comments with the literature on this topic. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories, such as data collection, responsibility for data, accountability, and communication.

Although a qualitative case study is appropriate for examining underresearched phenomena in Haiti's complex context (Merriam 2009), the study has certain limitations. "Studying up" requires access (Menashy 2025), and ongoing conflict restricted access to certain regions, reliable internet (requiring a greater time commitment), and internal documents, such as data forms. Researcher positionality also matters. As non-Haitian, White, Northern female researchers, we acknowledge our view to be external and took responsibility to conduct research with cultural sensitivity and reflexivity (Brayda and Boyce 2014); as such, we may omit crucial information and inputs to which our position blinded us. Lastly, to mitigate potential researcher bias, we conducted member checks. Member checks were done via follow-up interviews with two participants individually, during which we reviewed their own previous answers, corrected any misunderstandings, and gathered additional details.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following results and discussion of our data analysis reveal a lack of coherent data, a lack of goal alignment, fragmented responsibilities, conflicting procedural accountability, and interrupted information flows during crises.³

³ Please note that interviewees are cited as D1, D2 and D3 (school directors), ED (Solèy Executive Director), and MS (ministry staff member).

LACK OF COHERENT DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, AND REFLECTION

Data seems to permeate nearly every aspect of Solèy's work, as data was mentioned in all our interviews. It is collected daily, monthly, quarterly, annually, and across "dozens of [short-term] parallel projects," which supports Freeman and Schuller's (2020) view of Haiti as a market for short-term "project goods." Despite this demand for a variety of information, there is no unified system for coordinating or consolidating the diverse data, which reflects the structural divide that sustains a fragmented, multilayered system of accountability and planning (UNESCO 2025). Solèy's executive director (ED) described an organizational landscape in which each donor, including UNESCO, Save the Children, Expertise France, Education Cluster, and the MENFP, requires different measurements, outputs, and reporting formats, which results in a multitude of unrelated microsystems. The ED acknowledged that such disjointed donor demands preclude integrated analysis and prevent the development of long-term planning, which aligns with Rodríguez-Gómez's (2019) contention that, when numerous actors operate with uncoordinated agendas in crisis-affected education environments, the resulting proliferation of parallel systems undermines the applicability of global data models. The ED summarized it in this way: "Each project has its own logical framework and indicators...Our partners...pay us to do very specific things. Maybe one day, if we have money, we'll set up a real system with our own dashboard, something harmonized."

At the school level, assessment and monitoring occur year-round, primarily using attendance sheets to track enrollment and teacher supervision tools to monitor attendance and lesson preparation. One director explained that student performance is monitored through monthly summative assessments "to check students' level of progress," which is supported by a regularly updated database (D2). The MENFP also requires data on the school's GPS location, staff information, and student results, which is needed to make end-of-year decisions (ED, D2). Data provided to the MENFP, however, is often considered incomplete and unreliable, which makes strategic planning and management difficult (MS; World Bank 2021).

Solèy uses standardized numeric evaluation grids to collect teacher performance data as part of its internal data microsystem, but it does not involve a feedback loop. This reveals the weak capacity of the dissemination and application of results to improve instruction quality (UNESCO 2023a; INEE 2020). School directors also complete evaluation forms about their own productivity, communication, and compliance with the hierarchy (D2), which reveals that data is used for accountability rather than school improvement, even though implementing school improvement plans is explicitly stated to be a director's responsibility (Educational Pillars 2025). In fact, Solèy's stated objectives, such as ensuring access, continuity, protection, and quality education in situations of crisis and disruption, align with many of the INEE Minimum Standards; however, they rarely seem to be implemented in practice (D1, D2).

School directors are also required to produce two reports per year for Solèy's executive oversight (ED). These reports provide an overview of the school and the reporting period, document activities undertaken, outline challenges and strategies to address them, and present prospects and recommendations for the next period; this is accompanied by supporting materials (D2). The structure of these reports resembles donor-style interim reporting, which reflects a tacit adherence to the accountability hierarchies prevalent in foreign aid systems, as well as neocolonial requirements from beyond the school itself (Shah et al. 2024).

At the international level, UNICEF sends tools to Solèy to gather information on the needs of schools. However, these instruments are time-consuming and complex and are not used systematically. Solèy's ED noted that "it's not really systematic that there is a collection of needs. Perhaps when there are disasters...they conduct a little survey, but there is no real systematic process for gathering information at the [international] level." They also do not provide direct feedback to support local decisionmaking; they instead are generally unidirectional, from NGOs to international organizations (ED). This reflects findings by Menashy and Zakharia (2022), who show that results-based financing pressures local actors to produce data for external accountability. These instruments tend to reinforce donor-facing legitimacy while limiting local leadership and horizontal accountability.

UNICEF also encourages NGOs to develop their own data-collection mechanisms, but Solèy does not have a comprehensive tool for doing this. Tools such as the JENA can be used to overcome data-collection limitations, but this is also problematic, as it may be applied inconsistently or may not be sufficiently adapted to the context (Buckner et al. 2022), as noted by the secondary data review of the latest JENA in Haiti (GEC 2025).

The directors reported that they would like to utilize data more effectively, but findings suggest a lack of opportunity for participatory reflection about the implications of data (D1, D2, ED). School directors are not trained in data analysis, so much data circulates as information rather than as meaningful, strategic evidence for action. Consistent with neoliberal emphases on accountability, much evidence is reported performatively and hierarchically (Alcenat 2021). School directors are not typically expected to interpret results or set subsequent priorities. This resonates with Smith and Riley's (2012) observation that leadership training provides little preparation for coping with, managing, or reflecting on crisis situations.

LACK OF GOAL ALIGNMENT WITH SCHOOL-BASED REALITY

Goals set by Solèy or its international funders often differ from those the school directors would set if they were allowed to do so. The dynamics of aid, ranging from schools' dependence on foreign benevolence to the need for multiple organizational layers to implement projects, often translates into donors' failure to truly understand schools' needs. One director mentioned specifically that, "if the person helping you doesn't know what the reality is like, it's just temporary help." They go on to say that goals and projects are driven by external funding priorities, and it is "always a question of money" (D1). Another director says that goals set externally are sometimes unattainable or unrealistic because of conditions. He reflects on how he must justify himself when goals are not met, saying that "sometimes it's stressful...we can't achieve our goals because they're too high or irrelevant" (D2). External goal-setting can be understood as an adaptation of colonial logics or imperialist intervention via humanitarian aid (Gourgues 2022).

It remains unclear how psychosocial support, for example, is organized: who provides it, how it is carried out, and what is ultimately assessed and evaluated. External goals for psychosocial health are not grounded in children's immediate experiences. Directors repeatedly refer to psychosocial support measures, but there is a lack of clear structures, personnel capacities, or monitoring tools. Several directors explained: "If the child is not doing well, we can call in a psychologist" (D2); "There are women among the staff who try to be understanding" (D1); and "The children can leave a letter. I take a day to read all the letters" (D1). These examples illustrate a lack of coherence; support and monitoring are unevenly implemented, which echoes Fontdevila's (2023) concerns with data mismatches. The directors also described a persistent stigma associated with psychosocial health (D1, D2). This hinders the transparent discussion of goal-setting and action, and creates conditions in which externally conducted assessments risk generating misleading conclusions and promoting uniform solutions that do not fit local realities (ElAsad 2025).

One director described his frustration with externally designed projects that require parental involvement, even when many "parents can't read" or are unavailable (D1). He said, "It sometimes doesn't work, because the families don't have the capacity or just have other things to do, so they do not help" (D1). He must report that project as a failure when it was unrealistically designed from the outset, which illustrates concerns raised in the literature about standardized approaches (ElAsad 2025; Akkari and Radhouane 2023). The emphasis on measurable performance indicators creates considerable emotional pressure at the school level and causes directors to feel discomforted and maladroit.

FRAGMENTED RESPONSIBILITIES

The Haitian interviewees described a fragmented EiE data ecosystem in which responsibilities are diffused and unclear—a typical obstacle in fragile contexts (UNESCO 2023a). Responsibilities for data collection, transmission, and analysis are distributed among actors such as school assistants, secretaries, evaluation managers, educational supervisors, project-specific monitoring, evaluation, and learning officers, school directors, the school board, resource people, people in charge of school fees, and NGO administrators (D1, D2, ED). One of the directors explicitly noted that “information is first collected by the assistant, who takes attendance, records data, and follows up with the secretary. The secretary also collects information concerning requests to be made to the central office and to the school itself” (D2). School directors are responsible for collecting some data themselves and overseeing additional data collection by others, and the data collection differs from school to school. They deal with overlapping systems of accountability, with one saying, “It’s like being a project manager” (D1) and another saying “I am still a teacher after all” (D3).

Data circulates through school boards and parent committees (D2), but agendas and minutes are not recorded, stored, or shared with upper management (ED). While this broadens the circle of actors, it blurs responsibilities (D2). This highlights the lack of transparency and systematic documentation of context-sensitive interventions, activities, and needs. The interviews revealed a lack of consensus between the education ministry and Solèy as to what school directors’ data-related tasks are, especially in light of the new Plan Décennal d’Éducation et de Formation (M1, ED).

Finally, school leaders who have overlapping mandates and parallel data initiatives feel pressured and overburdened by forms and reporting avenues (D1, D3). As the Solèy ED explained, “If they don’t work the way [Solèy] requires, if they do not reach what we planned, we will be stricter with them.... If they do not improve, they will have to leave.”

CONFLICTING PROCEDURAL ACCOUNTABILITY WITH DIRECTORS AS DATA INTERMEDIARIES

The case of Solèy and its schools reflects a culture of procedural accountability in which the school directors occupy an intermediary position within overlapping systems of reporting and accountability. They are forced to prioritize following procedures rather than focusing on the substance of education (Dawson and Maricut-Akbik 2021). They navigate the everyday realities of school life, maintaining relationships with students, teachers, parents, and the wider community while engaging directly with other members of the staff and with the upper management of the NGO, to whom they must send procedural reports (D1, D2, ED). One director described the hierarchy: “We know what [Solèy] requires, we know [Solèy’s] philosophy. We’re the ones with the lesser role, but who know the reality of the community” (D1).

Our findings highlight the layered authority under which school directors operate, within government regulations and NGO guidelines. As one director said, “The teachers we recruit are part of the Ministry of Education system, but when [Solèy] runs a school, it first defines its policies, the goals it wants to achieve, and trains the team accordingly... The teachers and I must follow [Solèy’s] wishes to the letter” (D2). Even if a school director notes contradicting local needs, they must remain accountable to the ministry for supplying teachers and to the NGO’s directives for education delivery.

One director described a time-consuming administrative environment in which several levels of communication and reporting had to be managed:

Given that the school is managed in conjunction with [Solèy] and we also have guidelines from [Solèy], a good part of the time is reserved for communication with [Solèy’s] main office...There is certainly the equipment that we have to procure in order to work. And it takes a little time to communicate with those responsible for logistics, accounting, and other people who manage the institution’s funds. But...there is also communication with...the ministry, because there is data to be provided...So it is compulsory to stay in constant contact with [both]. It takes time because I’m also in management...there are forms to fill in, attendance forms, educational forms, attendance for teachers and attendance for pupils. So that’s part of the job, apart from the work given to me by [Solèy]. (D3)

This reflects the strategic or operational use of data, depending on the audience (Buckner et al. 2022). The directors thus act as data translators, converting local conditions into formats for Solèy or international donors, while having no influence on the indicators themselves. This makes schools appear legible to external actors even if they are locally illegible. It suggests that directors are implicated in a larger network in which decisions about what data should be collected, when, and by whom are made “above” them, by NGO management. One director said, “[Solèy] is connected with other international partners...who undoubtedly share [Solèy’s] vision. But personally, as director, it is not my responsibility. There is a higher level in [Solèy’s] hierarchy. They are the ones who organize themselves with other NGOs and organizations that share information and experiences” (D2). When NGO projects span multiple schools, directors are sidelined from planning but must interpret and apply decisions and data demands at the school level, thus reinforcing their “intermediary” identity, granting responsibility without giving decisionmaking authority.

INTERRUPTED INFORMATION FLOW DURING CRISES

Data management is disrupted during periods of crisis. The flow of information is often interrupted during periods of insecurity, fuel shortages, or network outages. Solèy's ED said, "The first obstacle is communication. When we can't communicate, we don't know what's going on." Because data is gathered and transmitted by numerous actors and to different authorities, which further complicates information flows, with information moving in only one direction, the ED admits that "sometimes we forget, but we're supposed to feed information collected back into the communities, into the schools, but it's difficult in this situation now, people are very busy." The lack of information available during crises highlights the constraints on school directors' flexibility (Chiwisa 2024) and underscores a broader issue: fragmented information systems produce fragmented data, which in turn impedes informed decisionmaking (Campo et al. 2025).

CONCLUSION

The case of Solèy reveals the complex data entanglement confronting school directors in Haiti. We conclude that the data and evidence ecosystem in Haiti exemplifies the type of hypergovernance and overlapping lines of authority in states with extensive external intervention (Kivland 2012; Russell et al. 2025). With this article, we make a unique contribution to the depiction of school directors' experiences in this context, where private NGO schools are prevalent and serve as sites where state (il)legitimacy and school (in)visibility can emerge, perhaps more so than in public schools. We see that Solèy schools operate not only as education institutions but also as reporting sites within a broader transnational governance network.

Buckner et al. (2022) had previously noted a discrepancy globewide between the use of data for strategic purposes and for operational uses locally. As we note in the Haitian case, this structural constraint reduces localized needs assessments and data collection that could serve as a basis for evidence-based decisionmaking. It also contradicts the importance of the context-specific, participatory monitoring processes emphasized by INEE (2024). Instead of enabling context-sensitive decisionmaking, the current configuration of the EiE data ecosystem in Haiti puts school directors under duress to meet external expectations that might not match local demands (Fontdevila 2023). Furthermore, school directors' management preparation does not include specific training on how to collect and analyze student- or school-level data. Solèy does not have a comprehensive monitoring system, yet school directors are responsible for continually communicating achievement results to the NGO and to the government. Evaluation processes exist but they are not standardized, and it is not clear to the school directors how results influence goal-setting or their future work.

The directors reported that they received little or no training specifically in crisis management and psychosocial support, which raises concerns about how priorities are set and why performance indicators take precedence over strengthening the human and interpersonal dimensions of school leadership in emergency situations, which is contrary to INEE guidance and leadership theory (Smith and Riley 2012; INEE 2020). Governance mechanisms tend to reinforce vertical accountability (upward reporting to donors) rather than horizontal or local accountability (responsive leadership, community engagement, meaningful learning outcomes).

Based on our findings, we understand that school directors have the potential to provide valuable qualitative insights within the EiE data ecosystem, but that their responsibilities for data and evidence are not explicitly treated in the INEE Minimum Standards. Integrating their context-sensitive perspectives could help transition the ecosystem from procedural accountability to the learning-oriented use of insights, with coherent systems and realistic goals.

Caught in the matrix of the foreign aid and NGO industry in Haiti and facing constraints in collecting and using accurate and relevant data, school leaders' positioning raises critical questions about a new vision for aid and development in education (Schuller 2025; Fatton 2025). In the context of Haitian hypergovernance, data generated by national assessments and donor-funded initiatives often circulate at the international level but do not feed back as actionable items for schools. The manifold monitoring and reporting frameworks form an ecosystem of partial and unintegrated databases. Even if current theory and, indeed, emerging Haitian education policy encourage school leaders to be instructional leaders, school directors in Haiti are hampered in doing so, as they are considered civil service administrators within current aid and development structures. Tensions between leadership ideals embedded in international guidance frameworks (e.g., UNESCO's IIEP) and the day-to-day realities of crisis leadership under multilayered oversight have an impact on directors' identity and autonomy.

School directors and organizations act as "intermediaries" and therefore as mediators of "legibility," producing data that make their schools (partially) visible but within externally defined accountability frameworks. We observed that the ministry's EMIS is ineffective and tools such as JENA, while capable of collecting rich contextual data, were used unidirectionally and inconsistently, with school leaders simply filling out predefined forms. This suggests that, in practice, these national and international tools do not capture the complex, rich reality on the ground, thereby limiting the data's legitimacy and depth and, in turn, reducing the schools' legibility. Ultimately, the data collected and delivered, intended for a variety of stakeholders, appears inconsistent, partial, and disconnected, making it difficult for the organizations requesting it and the leaders themselves to learn from it.

We conclude that in Haiti, where state capacities have historically been limited and repeated attempts to improve national data systems have largely failed, strengthening data management at the local level appears more feasible. In this context, NGO schools, which constitute the majority of the Haitian education system, could become transformative actors. But this is only possible if they are not mandated to participate in traditional data and accountability structures and instead are supported in developing robust, locally relevant, and actionable data-management practices. This conclusion requires a conception of the role of school leaders not as actors responsible for complying with multilayered, external administrative regulations but as professional education leaders who have knowledge about and influence over the design of school improvement processes, as envisioned in the new GPAS and in Solèy's Educational Pillars (2025).

Finally, the observed case provides initial clues as to what an EiE data ecosystem informed by school directors would require, and how it could be (re)organized to focus on crisis-affected communities' priorities, needs, and agendas. Our recommendations include the following: (1) targeting school directors as key actors who have access to timely and context-sensitive information and to the professionals who best understand their school needs and dynamics; (2) ensuring that school directors are trained in data collection, analysis, reporting, and planning in order to fill a preparation gap in this sector; (3) including school directors in decisionmaking for their schools, from setting goals and objectives to implementing recommendations; (4) establishing a harmonized data-monitoring system for NGO schools in order to eliminate overlap and reduce bureaucracy; and (5) creating spaces for dialogue among all actors involved across the governance landscape to help translate data into meaningful action and support the development of a more inclusive and accountable EiE evidence ecosystem.

In Haiti's hypergovernance context, our study suggests a shift in attention to harmonizing the data and evidence ecosystem, consolidating lines of accountability, and directly involving school leaders in crafting the data ecosystem that implicates them.

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HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE: ORGANIZATIONAL ISOMORPHISM AND A FOCUS ON ENGLISH IN REFUGEE EDUCATION

CELIA REDDICK

ABSTRACT

In this article, I draw from interviews conducted with stakeholders in education in emergencies (EiE) to examine the underexplored topic of language in refugee education. I argue that organizations and government staff members who work on EiE are functioning in an institutionally defined field that has been shaped by a shared mission, formal structures of collaboration, and significant information flows in the midst of uncertainty. Given these factors, the EiE field is vulnerable to organizational isomorphism, a process through which organizations become increasingly similar to one another. These organizations and government bodies are tasked with answering big questions related to language in education but have little data or expertise to support their work. Given these significant constraints, I find that program leaders and policymakers who initially articulated ambitious goals for language in refugee education tend to shift away from these data-informed, multilingual approaches, instead defaulting to monolingual English support programs aimed at education access. Drawing from 34 in-depth interviews with individuals working in EiE, as well as participant observations across meetings and other convenings, I reveal the isomorphic tendencies in the language-related work of EiE. I also offer recommendations for how to use data more effectively when making decisions in EiE. These include hiring programmatic and policy leaders who have the appropriate training to tackle some of the most challenging questions in education, and ensuring that structures for collaboration continue to offer targeted opportunities to examine, understand, and act on data and research.

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INTRODUCTION

Lauren and I sat at a rooftop café in the Kabalagala neighborhood of Kampala, Uganda, as we discussed the shifting nature of her work. She was a leading figure in the effort to ensure that refugee children and young people were able to access school in Uganda. This role gave Lauren a bird's-eye view of the Education in Emergencies (EiE) Working Group, a collection of multilateral and nonprofit organizations and a representative from the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports, who were working together to respond to the education needs of refugees in the country (see Table 1). In 2018, when Lauren and I met, 1.15 million refugees lived in Uganda; that number has continued to climb, and as of 2026, there are nearly 2 million refugees living there (British Council 2021; UNHCR 2025). Lauren had begun to notice that few education programs for refugees explicitly addressed issues of language at school, and that language was rarely mentioned in conversations about or proposals for education programming. Nonetheless, she saw that a mismatch between the language used at school and language(s) that refugee children were familiar with seemed to contribute to gaps in education access and quality, which the working group was tasked with solving.

Table 1: Collaborative Structures of the Education in Emergencies Field in Uganda in 2018

Education in Emergencies Working Group	Includes all NGOs involved in the refugee education response, including UNICEF, UNCHR, Save the Children, Finn Church Aid, War Child Holland, among others
Uganda Education Consortium	Led by Save the Children; manages grants from Education Cannot Wait and European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Operations (ECHO), and coordinates 16 NGO programs that received funding to operationalize the Education Response Plan
Education Development Partners	Bring together donor groups, including the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO, previously Department for International Development), the World Bank, USAID, ECHO, Japan International Cooperation Agency, among others
Local Development Partners Group	Brings together local Ugandan organizations engaged in education
Basic Education Working Group	Engages issues of primary education and early childhood development; members include UNICEF, Right to Play, Save the Children, Plan International, World Vision, Windle Trust, Kyambogo University, Makerere University Education Department, among others
Psychosocial Support Working Group	Engages issues of psychosocial support, including child protection; members include UNHCR, Youth Sport Uganda, Plan International, International Rescue Committee, World Vision, among others

I conducted 34 interviews with the people creating refugee education policy and programs in Uganda, including stakeholders working for the government and for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), who expressed fraught ideas about language learning and education programs for refugees. They highlighted the importance of providing children with opportunities to develop literacy in familiar languages and referenced well-understood findings about the relationship between early literacy and children's development of additional languages. They also discussed the importance of learning English for refugee children in Uganda. Members of this EiE professional community described their ambitious aspirations for the kinds of programming they might lead on language and education, if they had sufficient resources and data. Each of these participants also recounted the challenges that limited their ability to act on these aspirations. There appeared to be few strategies to engage in data collection and to learn about the challenges at hand. In the face of these constraints and despite many individuals' hopes to design programs differently, those designing, funding, and leading the work of refugee education in Uganda ultimately defaulted to a program focused on English language skills.

At the heart of this trend is organizational isomorphism, or the process by which organizations in the same field become increasingly similar to one another. In this case, isomorphism emerged in the face of insufficient funding and a lack of sufficient expertise on issues of language. This combination pushed organizations to default to approaches to language and education that are not supported by research or further examined through locally relevant data. In this article, I demonstrate how organizations in the field of EiE orient toward English-only programming, despite individual stakeholders' aspirations to implement multilingual approaches. These aspirations are hindered by a lack of funding, data, and expertise in tackling language in refugee education. My aim with this analysis is to reveal the broader dynamics at play in the field, in the hope that identifying them can support reform. I focus not on individual organizations but across the field of EiE, where I examine local, international, large, and small organizations, as well as government bodies, in an effort to understand how structures of coherence and cooperation may undermine the use of research to respond to education in moments of crisis and conflict.

In the next section, I discuss the conceptual framework that guides this study, bringing together literature from the fields of EiE, language in education, and organizational isomorphism. I also discuss the choice of Uganda, a multilingual country and a leader in educational inclusion for refugees, as the site for this research. I then present the study research design, drawing on 34 interviews I conducted with employees of government and NGOs who engage in refugee education, as well as insights from collaborative meetings of this group. In the findings, I demonstrate first that EiE is an institutionally defined field, due to collaborative structures and hierarchies, a shared mission, and a sense of uncertainty in the face of shifting information. Second, I show that stakeholders in the EiE field experience significant tension between their aspirations for multilingual educational approaches and the constraints of low resources and limited available expertise. Given these constraints, EiE actors demonstrate an isomorphic trend toward

English language support for refugees. These trends highlight ways that collaborative structures in EiE can push organizations away from innovation and data-informed approaches and toward conformity. I conclude with recommendations for strategies to engage with locally relevant data, and to incentivize research-based responses to the challenges of education in settings of forced migration.

REFUGEE EDUCATION, LANGUAGE, AND ORGANIZATIONAL ISOMORPHISM

EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

Education in emergencies refers to a field comprising organizations that work to facilitate education in settings of crisis and conflict, including among refugees (Dryden-Peterson 2022). Given the central role these organizations play in the design and provision of mass schooling for millions of refugee children around the world, scholars have dubbed them a “pseudo-state” (Waters and LeBlanc 2005) that is tasked with facilitating education for young people who have been displaced from their countries of origin due to conflict and crisis (Dryden-Peterson 2022). The focus is increasingly on including refugee learners in national education structures, through which they can earn formal certification, engage with teachers who have experienced national teacher training initiatives, and learn alongside their nonrefugee peers (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). In Uganda, the site of this study, refugees are permitted to attend any of the nation’s public or private schools; however, most refugees in Uganda attend rural schools in refugee settlements, where their peers are other refugees or marginalized Ugandan young people (Hicks and Maina 2018; Hovil 2016).

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION IN MULTILINGUAL SETTINGS

A key challenge of inclusion in refugee education relates to language in education, or the language(s) used in the school context to promote students’ learning and wellbeing. Refugee-only schools in refugee communities often use languages that are most familiar to the children and families living there. This helps to support language and literacy development but often undermines other goals for integration. In settings where governments include refugees in national schools, young people experiencing forced migration are often required to navigate unfamiliar languages with little support (Durrani, Khan, and Novelli 2025), which often causes them to flounder academically (Piper et al. 2020). In one study of refugee learners in Uganda, for example, where English is the primary language of instruction (LOI), only 34 percent of learners in grades 3 and 5 demonstrated basic word recognition skills in English, and only 35 percent demonstrated basic English language listening comprehension skills (Hicks and Maina 2018).

Broader issues beyond the classroom also affect language learning for refugee young people. In three of the top refugee-hosting settings, for example, Syrian children struggled most with the LOI when they faced segregated housing and schools, when they had limited opportunities to integrate into the wider society, and when families experienced significant financial stress, all of which undermined the refugee children's educational aspirations (Hammoud et al. 2025).

Nearly 37 percent of children in low- and middle-income settings worldwide experience a mismatch between the dominant school language and the language(s) spoken at home (World Bank 2021). This mismatch undermines literacy development and academic learning. Moreover, robust evidence reveals the value of multilingual educational approaches that draw from children's familiar language(s), which helps them develop skills in new languages, such as English (Clegg and Simpson 2016; Cummins 1981; Kim and Piper 2019). Multilingual education approaches such as pedagogical translanguaging, which enable children to use their full linguistic repertoires at school, can support academic success (García and Wei 2014). These approaches build on what children know, support bi- and multilingual skills, and avoid the severing of ties between family and home that children in monolingual, assimilative education spaces so often experience (Mtanza-Matariro and Makalela 2025; wa Thiong'o 1986). Despite a robust literature that examines the negative consequences of submerging children in unfamiliar languages at school (e.g., Benson 2012)—and the value of translanguaging pedagogy and bilingual education that treats multilingualism as an asset (Makalela 2015)—education systems across the globe often default to teaching in a dominant language, such as English, with devastating consequences for children's learning and wellbeing (Brock-Utne 2012).

UGANDA: A MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT HOSTING A LARGE REFUGEE POPULATION

English is connected to colonialism in many settings worldwide, including in Uganda, and has spread through imperialism and trade since before the 16th century (O'Regan 2021). Today, the ability to use English is referred to and “marketed” (Phillipson 2016, 321) as an apolitical basic skill. Given ideologies that link English to economic and symbolic power, many majority world countries that were formerly part of the British Empire have opted to maintain English as a primary LOI (Salomone 2021). Uganda, a multilingual country that boasts 41 languages and has worked to enact a multilingual language policy, is among these. English is required as the LOI in upper primary and secondary schools and in all grades in multilingual schools, but schools in rural, relatively linguistically homogenous communities use local “area languages” as the LOI during the first four years of schooling. In linguistically diverse refugee settlements, where most refugee children live and attend school, teachers are invited to use diverse linguistic resources but usually default to English (Hicks and Maina 2018).

Approximately 1.7 million people from South Sudan, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others, have sought refuge in Uganda (see Table 2). Half of these are of school-going age (UNHCR 2025). Uganda is known for its inclusion of refugees in the national school system (Ministry of Education and Sports 2023), although this relative welcome was made possible by significant outside funding, much of which is now under threat from the Trump administration (Kristof 2025). Many attending school in refugee communities have had a mixed experience with English prior to migration, and they introduce their own linguistic diversity into Ugandan schools, including languages such as Maban, Swahili, Koalib, Kakwa, Kirundi, and Kinyarwanda (Reddick forthcoming).

Table 2: Refugee Demographics in Uganda

Country of Origin	Estimated % of Total Refugee Population (1.7 million)	Languages	Conflict Dynamics, Further Details
South Sudan	~54%	English, Arabic, Maban, Koalib, Kakwa, Masalit, Dinka, Nuer, and others	Longstanding conflict; highest concentration in northern settlements
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)	~32%	French, Lingala, Kiswahili, Arabic, and others	Escalating violence in eastern DRC, driving ongoing new arrivals
Sudan	~5-8%	Arabic, Bari, Dinka, Nuer, and others	Significant influx since the civil war began in 2023
Others	~6-9%	Kinyarwanda, Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic, Kirundi, and others	Includes Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Burundi

ORGANIZATIONAL ISOMORPHISM

One of the many challenges of tackling language in refugee education has to do with the larger context organizations face as they undertake this work. Complex sociopolitical, ideological, and financial constraints shape the efforts of organizations working in refugee education. Neo-institutional theory provides insights into the processes by which organizations within any field—including EiE—become more and more similar to each other, often despite attempts to differentiate themselves from one another (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These isomorphic tendencies are particularly relevant for organizations in institutionally defined fields—that is, fields that are structured, created, and reinforced through four processes: (1) regular interaction among organizations in the field; (2) the development of hierarchies and coalitions; (3) an increased amount of information confronting organizations; and (4) a mutual awareness among organizations that they are engaged in a “common enterprise” (DiMaggio 1982, cited in DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 148).

Mimetic processes are one of the mechanisms through which organizations in these defined fields become similar. These processes take place in contexts of uncertainty, such as when the technologies that organizations employ in their work are not well understood, when “goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 151). Rather than competing with one another in these instances, organizations resolve their uncertainty by looking to others as models for how to approach pressing challenges.

Responding to issues of forced migration requires navigating uncertainty and shifting information while working toward a common enterprise—the very circumstances that lend themselves to isomorphism. In some cases, this can be beneficial to the work: in a study of gender-specific protection standards in Germany’s refugee response, for example, the NGOs engaged in this work made up an organizational field. When needs shifted, these organizations were able to make field-level changes to protect refugee women by using the existing infrastructure (Zimmermann et al. 2020). In contrast, due to the homogenizing effects of consultancies and a desire for legitimacy vis-à-vis international development organizations, NGOs in Finland have become increasingly alike (Kontinen and Onali 2017). There is as yet no research about isomorphic tendencies in organizations engaged with language in education.

Despite the strong pull toward similarity among organizations in a shared field, there are strategies to resist this. Oliver (1991) describes how organizations can deflect the demands and expectations that often drive isomorphism through what she calls manipulation, or the “attempt to co-opt, influence, or control institutional pressures and evaluations” (157). In her conceptualization, the structures that push organizations toward sameness can also be harnessed to drive reform. Decoupling form from function can also serve as a strategy to resist homogenization, as organizations attain legitimacy through their public image but maintain divergent, locally relevant practices internally (Gonzalez Benson, Routte, and Yoshihama 2024).

Within this broader context, and in the midst of ambiguity and uncertainty given fluctuating needs among refugees in Uganda (Dryden-Peterson 2022), organizations tend to focus on English in education programming for refugees. As I will demonstrate, this monolingual focus emerges as a strategy to support refugees’ access to education and inclusion, despite the government’s and stakeholders’ appreciation of the importance of a multilingual approach to education. The isomorphism toward monolingual English-language programs takes place through the institutional structures of the EiE field. Moreover, limited funding and significant gaps in expertise limit stakeholders’ ability to use relevant data and research when making decisions. In this, the first study of field-level responses to language in refugee education, I find that, as a result, these actors shift away from systemwide reforms and multilingual approaches in refugee education and toward a focus on English.

METHODOLOGY

My analysis of the field of education in emergencies in Uganda responds to recent calls to “study up”—to focus the analytic lens not on communities experiencing marginalization, as is so often the case, but on “study[ing] the powerful” (Menashy 2025, 2). I take up this methodological perspective as part of a larger comparative case study (e.g., Bartlett and Vavrus 2017), which I undertook related to language in refugee education. I ask the following question: How do government officials, NGO policymakers, and program leaders—those who create and enact education policies for refugees—make decisions about language in refugee education? While there is a growing body of research on issues of language in refugee education, in particular about the impact of language policies on learners and teachers (e.g., Reddick 2024; Piper et al. 2020), we know little about how language policies and practices are designed or prioritized. In this article, I examine this vital piece of the puzzle, which is key to improving how policies and practices in refugee education are designed. As I discuss, while these stakeholders are, in theory, the ones who create policy and practice, many describe having little real power to enact the policies and programs they prioritize, forcing questions about how the EiE field might be restructured.

My analysis is informed by 26 initial in-person, semistructured interviews I conducted with 29 stakeholders across 18 local, international, and multilateral organizations, and with employees of government departments involved in education policy and programming in Kampala. They are supplemented by eight follow-up interviews I conducted via Zoom and Skype. All interviews took place between 2018 and 2021, a time when refugee education in Uganda shifted due to increased refugee flows and pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Omolo 2025). All names of individuals and organizations used in the manuscript are pseudonyms; I provide an overview of the types of organizations involved in the EiE collaborative structures below (see Table 1).

I was first introduced to members of the EiE Working Group through a research mentor, and from there early contacts connected me to others, which initially enabled me to recruit interview participants through snowball sampling (Weiss 1995). Following the early interviews, I began “sampling for range” (Small 2009, 13), as I wanted to be sure to speak with individuals in a variety of organizations and in the government, as well as those involved in different aspects of the national education approach. I was able to draw from existing contacts to facilitate access to these additional participants. All the organizations represented in the interviews work on refugee education; they vary in size from large multinational organizations to small, locally led efforts. The interview participants come from a variety of places, including Uganda, countries in western Europe, and the United States. The government employees whom I interviewed—all of whom are Ugandan—were directly engaged in national education policy and practice, and in the inclusion of refugees in the national education system.

The interviews focused on organizational priorities and limitations related to refugee education, beliefs about schooling for refugees, and the role of language at school, at home, and in refugees' future-building. They were complemented by 17 hours of participant observation of group meetings and workshops that included many of these same participants, including a meeting of the EiE Working Group in Uganda and a formal workshop about language support in the education of refugees. Throughout my data collection, I shared my emerging findings with stakeholders in order to learn from their responses, and I was invited to present my research in progress.

I am a white, English-speaking UK/US national, and I began my career as an English language educator. I have since worked with international NGOs focused on education in Uganda, with a focus on language. As a result, I often had the feeling during interviews that I could have been on the other side of the table, the recorder pointed toward me. This position often opened space for wide-ranging conversations about work in education in international settings. It also may have encouraged participants to express views they might assume I'd agree with, or to otherwise find places of overlap. In these conversations, in an effort to alleviate any sense of there being a "right" answer, I was clear about my professional connection to the work and about its challenges.

These aspects of my identity also may have introduced power imbalances in my conversations with Ugandan stakeholders, who may have understood my work and my social position as being aligned with international development actors. I emphasized my prior experience working within national systems in Uganda to signal my knowledge and appreciation of the work of Ugandan education stakeholders. In general, I believe my professional proximity to the work, as well as my experience in a variety of roles in Uganda and elsewhere, enabled me to have diverse, candid conversations about the tensions between aspirations and actual efforts in education programming.

In the next section, I share findings that highlight the gap between stakeholders' aspirations for systemwide reform and the narrower focus on English that organizations—and the field of EiE in Uganda—ultimately pursue. I demonstrate that EiE is an institutionally defined field that is susceptible to isomorphic tendencies and that these tendencies—rather than data, research, or technical expertise—drive programmatic priorities. I find that, because organizations within the field are so intertwined with one another through collaborative structures, there is little divergence from this focus on English. This is the case regardless of whether stakeholders work for the Ugandan government or an organization, regardless of their size, focus, or geographic area, and regardless of whether the organization is led by Ugandan or international staff. I conclude with a discussion of efforts to resist these isomorphic trends toward a monolingual focus on English and offer my recommendations for policy and program design that can use data to meet refugee learners' needs more effectively.

FINDINGS

For Lauren and other stakeholders tasked with creating strategy, policy, and programs to facilitate refugee education in Uganda, there was considerable space between the work they aspired to do in language in education and the ultimate focus of their efforts. Across organizations and government roles, most stakeholders appreciated the importance of families' multilingualism and wanted to create opportunities for them to deepen their multilingual skills and strategies. However, in actually designing and implementing education programs and policies, these stakeholders came up against considerable barriers in terms of the material resources and expertise needed to complete the work.

The collegial structures designed to support EiE efforts in Uganda were intended to ensure efficiency and collaboration. As I describe below, however, EiE actors in Uganda were in fact members of a defined field vulnerable to organizational isomorphism. In the face of significant barriers and given the collaborative structures and uncertainty reinforcing the EiE field, organizations and government employees across the refugee response together shifted away from innovative approaches to language learning and teaching, and focused instead on the role of English at school.

In the section below, I first demonstrate that organizations engaged in EiE make up a defined field that is prone to organizational isomorphism. I then reveal the gap between what organizational leaders hoped for and what they felt was possible in refugee education when they were faced with limited funding and a lack of expertise related to language and education. Finally, I demonstrate how these constraints pushed organizational stakeholders and organizations away from research-backed innovation and opportunities to actively engage research and data, and toward a well-trod but often unsuccessful focus on English as the language of school access.

EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES AS AN INSTITUTIONALLY DEFINED FIELD

Through interviews and observations of professional gatherings, I came to understand those engaged in EiE not simply as colleagues but as members of what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) call an institutionally defined field. This is characterized by boundaries that are created and reinforced through accepted institutions, practices, and documents. Defining the EiE field, I argue, takes place in two key ways in Uganda: through a national strategy for refugee education, which provides an official roadmap for the work, and through standing committees and working groups in which members participate. Organizations engaged in these efforts work across contexts and with the government to facilitate education in settings of crisis and conflict in Uganda, including among refugee learners.

Uganda's national strategy for refugee education is articulated in the Second Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities in Uganda, a costed strategic document that outlines aspects of refugee education nationwide. This plan enables nonprofit and multinational organizations to target key pieces of work that have been prioritized by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports but are not yet fully funded (Ministry of Education and Sports 2023). As interview participants noted, the creation of this document occurred through formal collaborative structures, including a steering committee for both the first and the second Education Response Plans, which was made up of nonprofit organizations, funders, and members of government, each of which had detailed roles and obligations. The first and the second Education Response Plans have guided all national refugee education programming in Uganda for nearly ten years (Ministry of Education and Sports 2018); this has required stakeholders to coordinate with each other to make things work.

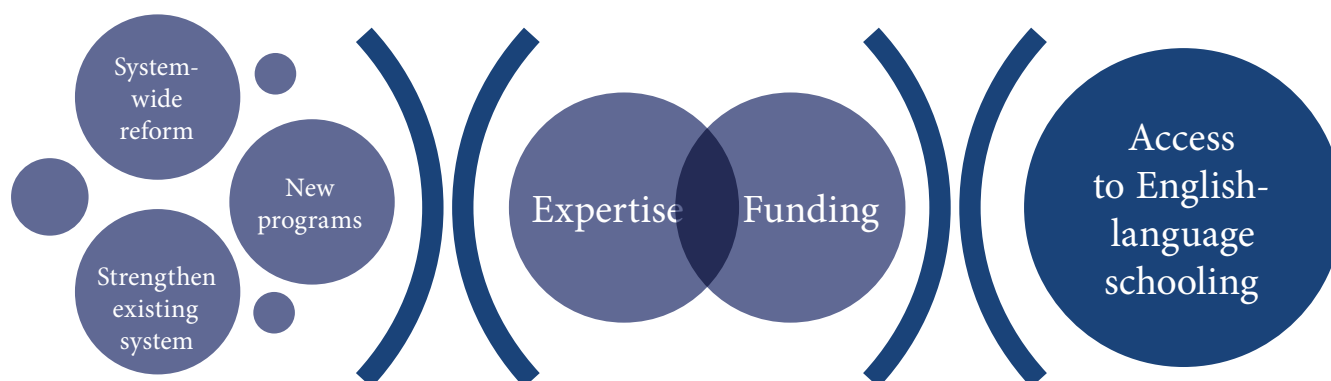
Individual organizations also coordinated with one another through local working groups, such as the EiE Working Group in Kampala (see Table 1). Numerous other standing committees and working groups enable this interorganizational coordination, all of which is premised on organizational stakeholders having the “expert authority” to make decisions on behalf of the national education system (Barnett 2013). These various structures of collaboration and communication are a key part of what defines education in emergencies as a field.

These formal structures unite the work of EiE stakeholders in Uganda, but they do not alleviate the uncertainty about how to tackle the common enterprise of refugee education (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Instead, formal structures, uncertainty, and a shared mission coalesce to create a defined field, which causes organizations within the field to become more like one another. This growing similarity takes place as these organizations look to each other for guidance on how to solve often unsolvable challenges with little data, little relevant expertise, and few resources to do so. In the particular case of how to address the immense challenge of LOI for refugee children in Ugandan schools, institutional isomorphism took over as the preferred strategy, standing in for the rigorous use of data related to language and literacy development.

TENSION BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS, CONSTRAINTS, AND RESULTING APPROACHES

In the institutionally defined field of EiE, aspirational approaches to language and education often confronted significant gaps in funding and expertise. These constraints pushed organizations away from research-backed approaches that would draw on home languages to support English language and literacy development and toward a more familiar—but generally unsupported by research—monolingual focus on English (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Language in Refugee Education Programming—Aspirations, Limiting Constraints, and Resulting Approaches



ASPIRATIONS

Across the sample, those leading the work of refugee education in Uganda described a desire to capitalize on refugee families' multilingualism. They described visions for (1) systemwide education reform; (2) new programs to support language learning within the existing system; and (3) strategies for strengthening existing programs within the existing system.

SYSTEMWIDE REFORM

Many program leaders and policymakers highlighted the need to rethink approaches to language use in the education system, including the need to move away from a monolingual focus on English and to incorporate multilingualism into the teachers' daily work. Madison, for example, shared her desire for systemwide reform. Madison was a literacy specialist working with an international education NGO. Originally from the United States, she had worked as an educator in the US and East Africa and was one of the few stakeholders who had completed graduate training in education. Madison felt that "a firm base in the first language" should be a priority in education for refugee children. Even in the face of considerable linguistic diversity, Madison saw places for systemwide reform that could support children's home language skills, despite national policies that required a focus on English. For Madison, a lack of expertise—in this case, among teachers—was a major barrier to change, but also a reason for engagement and training related to the value of multilingual educational practices. She explained that "what teachers don't understand or aren't empowered or don't know how to do, is that this [English-only policy] doesn't mean you cannot speak any other language, it means that you find ways to support using mother tongue."

In her reflections, Madison highlighted the ways teachers might use languages other than English to support children's learning—even if children ultimately would need to take tests and demonstrate that learning in English. These strategies, including pedagogical translanguaging (Benson 2012; Abiria, Early, and Kendrick 2013; García and Wei 2014), she noted, are used globally across contexts and in multilingual schools, and could be integrated into the kinds of professional development Ugandan teachers receive. As things currently stood in Uganda, however, teacher training tended not to address these issues, as Madison explained:

A lot of the global learning around the language acquisition process, I find, is not really discussed in teacher training colleges....The idea of “how do we learn, how does the brain learn, how does the brain learn language, and then what does that mean for me in the classroom?”...[I] never saw that featured anywhere, that sort of metacognitive level, like “how do I learn something?” So I think that empowering [teachers is a priority], not just training teachers but providing them with ongoing coaching on that topic, especially in those classrooms that have so many languages.

Madison highlighted the gap in understanding and expertise among teachers that relates to language and learning, as well as a related gap in the use of research to improve this knowledge. Her hope was that efforts in refugee education might draw from this research to support teachers systemically.

The importance of focusing on the languages children know best was echoed by others. Gordon, Madison's colleague and the director of education at their organization, dreamed similarly of “providing other approaches in which children can be able to learn at their pace.... I would prefer [to focus on] the local language and put English aside.” Having grown up in Uganda, Gordon knew that English was a steady priority for the national education system. Given this, he hoped that advances in the use of technology in the classroom might provide space to use languages other than English in school, although doing so would require a major reworking of the system.

Lauren similarly hoped for a comprehensive reworking of the education system in order to respond effectively to children's language and learning needs. This was no small feat, however, as she explained: “This is the setting where people really struggle... multilingual teaching as a part of regular teaching.” Lauren could imagine a system in which children's and teachers' multilingualism was integrated into the daily work of the classroom, woven into pedagogy, and seen as an asset rather than a deficit. She reiterated, however, that “this form of multilingual [teaching]...that's where we're most stuck.” Lauren felt that those involved in refugee education—teachers and organizational leaders alike—did not yet have the ability to embrace a pedagogical approach that enabled all members to draw from, strengthen, and learn using a variety of languages, not just English.

NEW APPROACHES WITHIN THE EXISTING SYSTEM

A subset of stakeholders described the kinds of programs they would develop within the existing system if they had the resources to do so. While these approaches were not as comprehensive as those described by Madison, Gordon, and Lauren, they were nonetheless not without significant financial and paradigmatic implications, such as the need to reorient away from a single focus on English, toward acknowledging the value of non-English languages in refugee education.

Sharon, for example, a deputy director of the government body that oversees education in Kampala, described the importance of children's and families' languages. Herself a Ugandan, she explained that the "mother tongue is important for many things, for instance sustainability of the culture...because they don't need to detach themselves from their culture." Sharon felt that it is important for refugee families to maintain their linguistic and cultural practices. She highlighted the role that schoolwide "culture days" could play in helping students hold onto their cultural heritage, of which language was one part. She proposed that schools could encourage students to share traditions "from their own countries, music, storytelling, drama, so they continue doing these things [and] maintain their language."

For Sharon, this was premised on the idea that showcasing diverse practices would allow refugee children to feel "appreciated.... Once they are admired by other students then it means that, you know, fitting in the community becomes easy." The orientation Sharon described was focused on a multicultural "food and festivals" approach rather than on a systematic integration of children's heritage, history, and language at school (Banks and McGee Banks 2009; Reddick 2024). But despite its limitations, Sharon's idea could send an important message about whose traditions are appropriate for public institutions like the school and what full inclusion within the existing education system might look like.

Peace was a Ugandan program leader with Amahoro, a regional NGO that offers afterschool programming to urban refugees. In her view, "everyone must speak their language fluently, understand it to the roots." Peace felt that, in order to achieve this aim, a focal organization was needed to help refugee families resist the encroachment of English and maintain their pre-migration linguistic repertoires. "I really think there should be someone to spearhead it [language maintenance], there should be someone to keep the bonds...and help them not lose that touch," she explained. She elaborated: "That requires that there is a teacher to keep teaching them [pre-migration languages] and also help parents understand why it's really important." She suggested that community meetings could focus on a different activity—something like creating arts and crafts to sell—that would help community members form relationships and, in the process, maintain their languages. Peace also stressed the importance of literacy, pointing not to school but to the home to encourage this:

I think it's not just enough to speak, you must be able to write it. So it would be good to integrate that component for instance in [the] house, we would have a teacher teach children to write Arabic, you have someone teach them to write Kirundi, Somali, whatever, so it would keep that going.

As Sharon and Peace demonstrate, some stakeholders wanted to reject a monolingual focus on English and to use new approaches that might augment the existing system. Culture Days and afterschool classes, for example, are not aimed at systematically transforming the education system, but they do reimagine the importance of non-English languages for refugee families. Sharon, Peace, and others looked toward a more expansive approach to language in refugee education through new programs within the current education system.

STRENGTHENING THE EXISTING SYSTEM

Some stakeholders were not focused on strategies to fundamentally rework the education system or reimagine programming. They instead were looking for ways to support students' access to current educational opportunities. Lisa, who is Ugandan, directs the urban refugee education response for a multilateral organization. She described the programmatic areas where she felt her organization was failing and what she wished they might offer instead. When I asked if her organization helped teachers improve their pedagogy to meet the needs of refugee students more effectively, she demurred: "I would say not directly." She said she wished there were programs and resources available to do so, and that if there were, she would focus on a few key areas:

We would have teachers who are set up with instructional material to teach in English. I would seek teachers who could give extra lessons and they are paid separately. There may be temp[orary] teachers who can come and do remedial classes for new entrants, for students who are learning to speak English.

This approach would combat the widespread practice of putting refugee children in grades far behind where they ought to be. This practice is used to deal with refugee students' limited English-language proficiency upon arrival, and it may contribute to high dropout rates. Lisa felt that having extra teachers would mean "instead of putting a 15-year-old in P2 [second grade], we can put them in P5 [fifth grade] as they are learning extra English [in separate] lessons." This would take the burden off the classroom teachers, who are already overwhelmed: "We would support them with extra teachers to do the instructional and differentiated learning," leaving classroom teachers to teach to the majority.

Henry was a consultant with various international organizations that work on issues of language. Raised in Europe, he had lived and worked in diverse settings around the world. Henry began to focus on refugee education following decades of work on language and literacy in the Global South. He knew the importance of finding the possible, rather than focusing single-mindedly on the ideal.

Henry believed that the most important interventions to buttress refugee children's learning are language supporters—people from the refugee community who are not trained teachers but who are able to communicate in both the language of school and in one of the many languages spoken by refugee children. In Henry's conceptualization, these adults would support children academically by translating key ideas to help them navigate instruction in English, and also serve as “mother figure[s]” by providing emotional support to refugee children, who often feel isolated and lost. They would receive targeted, two-week, school-based training on

how to translate without translating, if you know what I mean. If the poor child is being taught long division in English, and has only [learned] French, then you don't want direct translation, you want the language supporter to be able to summarize the concepts in French.... So you are not looking for that traditional word-for-word translation, it is just the ideas and the flow. Also giving support, giving them the feeling that “when I am totally lost there is someone I can go to and [they will] understand what I am saying.”

Henry noted that language supporters—whose stipends would be paid by international NGOs—should aim to enable refugee children to participate in school and to feel they have someone on their team. He hoped simply knowing there was somewhere to turn to might help children participate in school rather than dropping out—or, better yet, to begin the hard work of learning in English-only classrooms. Lisa, Henry, and others focused their attention on seeking linguistic support in the current school system that might enable young refugees to navigate it more successfully.

CONSTRAINTS THAT NARROW ORGANIZATIONAL PRIORITIES

These participants' diverse aspirations related to language, including systemwide reform, new programs, and small tweaks that would provide better access to English-language classrooms, faced considerable constraints. Two primary barriers emerged that limited the stakeholders' work and narrowed their organizational priorities: limited funding and a lack of expertise. The lack of expertise was among both classroom teachers (as Madison noted above) and some of the EiE decisionmakers, who themselves described challenges in addressing the scope of the challenge. Despite many of the stakeholders' ambitious aspirations and their appreciation of the importance of refugees' multilingualism, these two major constraints caused

pressure and uncertainty, which deepened isomorphic tendencies (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In the end, organizations funneled their efforts away from the kinds of innovations that might buttress education quality and toward access, with basic English skills at the center of these efforts.

FUNDING

There simply is not enough funding, stakeholders explained, to implement comprehensive education programming for refugees that adequately addresses the challenges of language. In the previous section, Lisa described the difficulties that refugee children face when they are submerged (Benson 2012) into classrooms where English is the LOI without sufficient support. Despite the need for remedial classes to help these children make a successful transition, the funds were simply unavailable. Lisa explained:

In Ugandan schools, it is always about English. You will not find classes for primary [school] in French nor in Swahili. The refugee children will have to adapt to speaking English, they will have to struggle. They [should] be supported with remedial classes. Although I think it is important, because of the funding we don't have remedial classes for these children.

Despite her position of relative power as the director of the city's programming for urban refugees, Lisa nonetheless felt her hands were tied by finances.

Henry also pointed to the challenges of funding, in his case to pay the language supporters, as discussed in the previous section. Although the ideal would be to have numerous adults in each classroom to help refugees learn using their existing language skills as they also learned English, Henry acknowledged the challenge of paying for such support. He accepted that it might be necessary to hire only a handful of supporters, some of whom might visit classrooms just once a week. This would primarily signal to refugee children that they have an ally, rather than offering real linguistic support. Henry conceded that, if resources were really stretched, perhaps just one language supporter could be hired for a refugee settlement to target the largest language group in the community, but this would leave the children of the smaller language groups to navigate school on their own.

EXPERTISE

In addition to financial resource constraints, stakeholders also reflected on concerns related to the resources of skills and training. Across interviews, stakeholders noted a lack of expertise within the EiE field to address challenges related to language and learning among refugees. Bethany, who was part of the leadership team of a

multinational organization, explained that the kinds of skills needed for education development often weren't available among those working in refugee response contexts. Having pursued graduate training and professional positions in education development before joining the refugee response in Uganda, Bethany was an exception to this rule. She described the mismatch in terms of skills:

You get those [in the refugee response] who are very much about food drops, lifesaving missions, spending money quickly, saving lives; so because it is often so rapid...not a lot of time is really spent on understanding what local resources were in place to build on in a longer-term educational response.

Bethany explained that this orientation toward short-term goals limited the sector's ability to respond to research and to think strategically about education programming that might support more than immediate access to schooling. Lauren, who was a respected leader in refugee education in the region, described her own lack of formal training in education. She explained that she had worked in project management in humanitarian settings and with child-protection programming before coming to Uganda; her work in refugee education had prompted her to consider graduate study in education. Considering her colleagues in the field, Lauren explained that, aside from Bethany, who had training and experience in education, "I've not come across another education specialist [in the refugee response]. Many of them have fantastic expertise; to have an expertise in this area either in terms of teaching English as a second language or multilingual instruction was much rarer."

Reflecting on the difficulty of navigating issues of language effectively in refugee education, Lauren summarized her own sentiment and that of many of her colleagues: "I think from a practitioner perspective, we are all a little bit overwhelmed.... This is really complicated." Lauren felt that the field had little of the expertise it needed to take on a comprehensive response to the linguistic challenges refugee children faced in Ugandan schools.

The lack of formal training on issues related to language and education among some classroom teachers and EiE policymakers and practitioners also meant that stakeholders had many misunderstandings about the connections between language, learning, and displacement. These narratives largely misrepresented the experiences of children and teachers alike, but they nonetheless shaped the kinds of programming that were prioritized.

For example, Joseph was Ugandan and he oversaw adult education at a Kampala-based nonprofit; his understanding of language use among refugees was similar to that of many stakeholders. Joseph noted that adult refugees,

when they meet their friends who speak the same dialects, most of them start speaking their language. Also, I've noticed this at their homes; before they bring their children, they have to understand where they've come from, their curricula, and language. So, they do use their language to communicate with their children at home.

In these assertions, Joseph echoed ideas I heard throughout data collection that reflected a lack of understanding of the kinds of language loss faced by families who migrate (Zabrodskaia 2025), in particular a misunderstanding of the shifts in language use by refugees in Uganda specifically (Reddick forthcoming). While Joseph's informal impressions of language use are valuable, they leave out data and research that could support his work.

ORGANIZATIONAL ISOMORPHISM IN THE CONTEXT OF CONSTRAINTS

These primary constraints—limited funding and a lack of expertise to address issues of language in refugee education—shaped programmatic priorities across organizations and drove organizational isomorphism toward a focus on English. Below I offer an in-depth example that highlights this broader trend across the field and discuss a partnership developed by Excel, a local NGO for urban refugees, and Vulnerable Youth, an international NGO that has intervened in refugee education in Uganda.

Eric was part of the Excel leadership team. He drew from his own experience as a refugee to develop an education intervention for schools in Kampala that served refugees in the region. Central to his approach was a trilingual education intervention that prepared newly arrived refugees to attend Ugandan schools that use English as the LOI. Eric was closely attuned to the learning gaps and successes of the children he worked with:

We understood the challenge that children are facing, especially when it's come to the language.... We normally have two teachers, one from Uganda and one from the [refugee] community. The one from the community should also be a professional teacher from either Congo, Rwanda, or Burundi.... We believe we should create that transition, not jumping in new. We have to accompany these children from French or Swahili going into English.... In the program, children still have the chance to have things explained in their own languages.... As we move in, we keep on slowing the Swahili or French down so that at the end they can always speak English.

A teacher in the Excel program who was from Uganda was paired with a refugee teacher to ensure that the refugee children didn't have to "jump in new" to a foreign LOI. They instead had support during their transition from French and Swahili into English.

This program, the first of its kind to focus explicitly on the linguistic needs of refugees in Uganda, faced a funding shortfall and required additional resources to extend the work. Eric sought and found a partner, which came in the form of Vulnerable Youth, a large international organization newly working with refugees in Uganda. Together they won a grant that enabled Eric's organization to continue its education work with refugees but also required the work to shift and evolve, including leaving behind its multilingual approach.

Mary, the international staff member at the helm of Vulnerable Youth in Uganda and the architect of the new partnership, was passionate about the work and about the importance of education programming for refugees. She had a graduate degree in international development and had worked in humanitarian emergency response across multiple settings, but she had no formal training related to language learning or education. Reflecting on the language and education programming she was now helping to lead with Excel, Mary noted that few of the staff had relevant training. She saw this lack of professional expertise in issues related to language and education as a broader concern within the refugee response, as she reflected: "We probably need to get a consultant...because we can all guess but none of us are language experts.... Maybe that's one reason we haven't quite cracked it." Mary felt that there wasn't a clear system through which EiE professionals could draw from existing data related to language learning or generate new understandings, thus they had to look outward, such as to a consultant.

Mary was nonetheless committed to leveraging her expertise in international humanitarian response and economic development to tackle the challenge of language and education. Through the new partnership, she was suddenly asked to decide which aspects of Eric's existing program ought to remain and which were no longer necessary. The decision made was to largely restructure the program, as Mary explained: "We've made some edits to it so now we are making it six months because we feel that they can do it [transition to English] in six months." The partners also had to rethink class size. The original model had two teachers for thirty students, a ratio Mary felt was unrealistic, given their limited resources and the pressing need for programming at scale. For Mary, the focus was less on what the data from Eric's previous work taught or about research in language teaching and learning in general, and more about scalability of education programming with a limited budget.

Over the coming months, Excel and Vulnerable Youth implemented a revised language-in-education program in one of Uganda's rural refugee settlements. In contrast to the program's original inclusion of languages familiar to refugees, the reconfigured model focused only on English. Despite Mary's and Eric's shared appreciation of the children's multilingualism, they felt it would be simpler to implement an English-only program quickly. Given her lack of training, Mary still wondered if this was the right approach. She asked herself, "Are we doing more harm than good.... Should we be including in these programs a lesson on the local language?"

The shift away from multilingual education approaches and toward English only that took place through Excel's and Vulnerable Youth's collaboration echoed shifts across other organizations. In Madison's organization, for example, a lack of bandwidth or resources for more ambitious work shifted her focus away from multilingual approaches. Instead, Madison decided that "effectively supporting transition to English as the medium of instruction is the priority area." This move toward a monolingual focus on English was nearly uniform in the field of organizations engaged in refugee education, regardless of organizational size or type.

RESISTANCE TO ISOMORPHIC TRENDS

That said, across all the organizations I examined, there was one exception to broader isomorphic trends toward English language programming. This took place through the Language Support Program, for which Lauren laid the groundwork. Despite Lauren's lack of formal training in education, she saw the need to think about language and education differently and initiated the development of a program to attempt that.

Lauren was able to build momentum toward a different approach to language, and to "influence public perceptions" (Oliver 1991, 158) about language issues in refugee education through several efforts. First, she organized a workshop to discuss language and refugee education within the EiE field. She brought together various stakeholders, including many from the EiE Working Group, to examine the possibilities of an education approach that could build on families' multilingual resources. Lauren invited Eric to share data from his work at Excel in this workshop. I also shared emerging findings from my data collection on language and refugee education. This workshop managed to "neutralize institutional opposition" (Oliver 1991, 158) to considering education approaches that were not monolingual and encouraged participants to look at recent data and evidence, rather than at the challenges of insufficient resources and expertise the field was facing.

Second, instead of relying on accepted norms, Lauren was able to marshal funds and convince the EiE community to hire a consulting organization with expertise in language policy to look closely at the case of refugees in Uganda and to propose an alternate education model. A central part of this proposed model was offering classes

in what the consultants called “African languages” alongside lessons in English and mathematics. This would give children a linguistic and curricular foundation before they transitioned into the Ugandan school system. In this way, experts in language in education were able to make the case for approaches to language that did not focus only on English.

In important ways, then, despite being only partially realized, the Language Support Program represents a divergence from the isomorphism otherwise observed in education programming for refugees. This program aimed to help refugees learn the English language skills needed to enter schools in the national system, but did so by engaging with refugees’ other linguistic resources, distinguishing it from most efforts in Uganda’s EiE field. This strategy—drawing on emerging evaluation and research to help inform problem-solving and identifying resources to fund the work of experts and stakeholders outside the field of organizations—can be adopted across the work of EiE. Although external challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, stalled the Language Support Program, its development helped to shift conversations about what linguistic inclusion in education could mean for refugees in Uganda.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Across organizations and government bodies, stakeholders leading the work of refugee education in Uganda expressed an appreciation for refugees’ diverse linguistic repertoires. However, they consistently faced a barrage of challenges when it came to creating and implementing approaches that might reflect this appreciation. In response to ambitious, multilingual approaches to refugee education, and to simpler programs that might create space for non-English languages, stakeholders faced a variety of challenges. Those working in government, and in local, international, and multilateral organizations, confronted a lack of knowledge about how to create effective multilingual approaches, along with concerns about the limited material and human resources available to undertake such difficult work. Nearly every decisionmaker I interviewed described a gap between the programming they aspired to and what they were able to push in practice, demonstrating the power of the larger field to influence the work of individuals and organizations.

There was one exception to this trend, which emerged in the Language Support Program. There Lauren used her position of authority among EiE stakeholders to resist isomorphic trends and instead to look squarely at the question of language in refugee education. She did so by gathering data on the issue through collaboration with experts in language and literacy, and by shifting the conversation from logistical barriers to what would be possible with adequate data and expertise. Lauren was, to some extent, able to manipulate (Oliver 1991) the structures of the field to point it in a new direction.

EiE is an institutionalized field through which government staff members and organizations engage in a common enterprise—refugee education—and whose structures privilege homogenous responses to uncertainty, budget constraints, and a lack of expertise (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In reaction to these challenges, the field of EiE demonstrates organizational isomorphism. Individual organizations funnel their efforts away from broad educational innovations in language into smaller, more focused programs that address English skills. While this study focuses on language issues, these trends are likely the case across intervention areas, given similar pressures of complexity, limited budgets and scarce human resources, and structures of collaboration. Given this, it is vital that the EiE field critically examine where structures of expediency support the work, and where they undermine it.

An orientation toward homogeneity in the EiE field is of course understandable—in doing such complex work under ever-evolving circumstances, it is necessary to make the best available choices quickly and at scale. It is not surprising that organizations look to each other to determine how to do that, particularly as funding continues to decrease despite the growing needs and demand for thoughtful education programming in emergency settings (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies 2025). At the time of writing, global support for education in contexts of conflict and emergency has been severely reduced, a consequence of the shuttering of USAID and limits on other donor funding (Jesuit Refugee Service 2025). In the midst of a “humanitarian reset,” programs that address the immediate needs of newly arrived refugees are the priority, with few resources remaining for education (Fletcher 2025). While refugee education already faced resource constraints at the time I collected data (2018-2021), this concern is now even more acute.

The pressure toward efficiency, then, is profound, and it is likely to drive further isomorphism as organizations are forced to avoid new ideas and instead to follow trusted paths. Nevertheless, the trend toward isomorphism in language in education, which I have documented in this article, is a warning for the field of EiE and for humanitarian efforts more generally: the structures of collaboration, streamlining, and efficiency that have helped organizations engage productively with governments and other stakeholders may also lead away from innovation and responsiveness to data and toward conformity. To moderate this, as the field of EiE develops new ways of working in the face of profound funding constraints, stakeholders can use the field to incentivize and structure collaborative engagement with data and research. One way to do this is through EiE Working Group meetings that are dedicated to this kind of focused analysis, and through required data-sharing and data-informed decisionmaking cycles. These efforts can be supplemented by rapid evaluations and other efforts to capture snapshots of locally relevant questions, which will provide vital data for local leadership and “devolved” (Fletcher 2025) decisionmaking in refugee education. Such efforts, along with subject-matter expertise and continued efforts to meet strained resource needs, can create space to consider not just the most expeditious but also the

most effective responses to the challenges affecting educators, students, and families in settings of forced displacement.

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EXPLORING HOW EIEPC DATA AND EVIDENCE SUPPORT TEACHING AND LEARNING IN PRACTICE: IMPLEMENTING THE HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN SYRIA

ALLYSON KRUPAR, Wafa AL-AMAIH, BEM TIVKAA,
KHALED AL-YOUSEF, AND ABEER ATTARI

ABSTRACT

In this field note, we describe how data and evidence can support teaching and learning in practice in Syria, drawing from one approach that used the Holistic Assessment for Learning (HAL), a formative assessment designed in 2018 to measure literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning among grade 2 and 3 students in formal education. In 2023, HAL was piloted, revised, and then rolled out across nonformal and formal education settings in northwestern and northeastern Syria by Save the Children International and Arfada for Development. Using training reports, field work data from the tool, teacher surveys, and debriefing tools, we explore in this field note how tools like HAL can inform future formative assessment data. We describe how classroom-level, curriculum-aligned measures can generate immediately actionable insights for teachers while remaining adaptable for aggregation into broader data systems. Teachers in Syria used HAL results on literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning to identify learning gaps and adjust lesson plans and remediation strategies in real time. We also situate the useability and lessons learned about formative assessments within the broader education in emergencies evidence ecosystem, highlighting implications for equity, standardization, and the localization of data systems during crises.

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INTRODUCTION

When education has been disrupted, the programming designed to reach children experiencing crises varies, summative assessments may not occur, and teachers are not always sure of their students' skills, needs, and challenges. Using formative assessments during a crisis can ensure that teachers remain responsive to their learners' needs. Despite the need for valid and reliable data to inform practice and policy during crises (UNESCO 2016), education in emergencies and protracted crises (EiEPC) data ecosystems tend to prioritize national, top-down data collection designed to populate education management information systems (EMIS), rather than formative systems that support classroom practice, teachers, and learning. Evidence gaps persist in how national EMIS data translates into improved teaching and learning. In this field note, we examine how the EiEPC data and evidence ecosystem within and outside EMIS can support teaching and learning. We draw from project documentation, teacher feedback, and published literature to explore the expansion and implementation of the Holistic Assessment for Learning (HAL). We examine the feasibility of data-informed teaching practices and how formative data can be used in the EiEPC evidence ecosystem. HAL is a formative assessment tool developed in Syria in 2018-2019 (Khamis-Dakwar et al. 2022; Tubbs Dolan 2019) through a collaboration between UNICEF, Save the Children, New York University Global TIES for Children, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), and regional experts. HAL was developed to support the use of classroom data as a scalable tool to improve instruction in EiEPC.

We first situate formative assessments within the broader EiEPC evidence ecosystem and then specifically in Syria and outline the persistent gaps between policy and practice. We then present the HAL approach that was implemented in 2023, drawing from project documentation, teacher feedback, and published literature (Khamis-Dakwar et al. 2022; Tubbs Dolan 2019) to generate lessons learned through a local adaptation and implementation. Next, we critically reflect on what HAL reveals about the practicality of data-informed teaching during crises and the challenges and opportunities of embedding such practices in data systems. Finally, we discuss how to strengthen EiEPC data ecosystems, offering recommendations for how to leverage formative assessments to create more equitable, learning-centered, and sustainable approaches to measuring and supporting EiEPC.

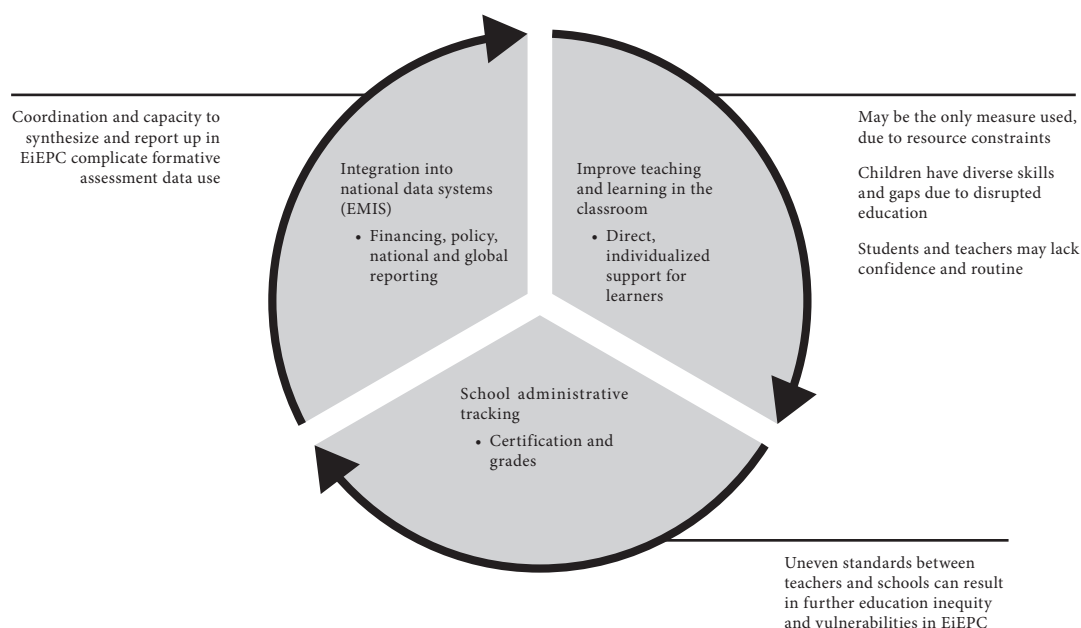
SITUATING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS IN EIEPC

Formative assessments include teacher-led activities that measure students' learning progress to inform teaching and learning activities (Browne 2016). Used in daily classroom practice, formative assessments often are designed in situ. They may include quizzes, oral questions, or short written tasks. Education data ecosystems typically focus on summative, end-of-year exams rather than on ongoing classroom assessments to generate annual snapshots of learning outcomes, whereas formative data offers rich trends to help understand learning throughout a program or academic year (Clarke 2012). National education systems integrate formative assessments into data ecosystems through legislation, curriculum guidelines, rubrics and replicable measures, and teacher professional development (OECD 2005). Some evidence links formative assessment to better student outcomes, particularly when the data generated is immediately actionable (Nitko 1993; OECD 2005). However, evidence on their impact has not been frequently measured (Browne 2016).

USING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS IN DATA ECOSYSTEMS IN EIEPC

Formative assessments used in EiEPC enable educators to identify gaps and adapt their teaching strategies to support learners who face disrupted schooling. This is particularly important when national assessment systems and summative assessments are unavailable or cancelled, due to resource constraints during crises (Bawane and Sharma 2020). Specifically, formative assessments enable teachers to identify the varied learning levels of children whose education has been disrupted. This makes it possible to tailor remedial and accelerated programs for the local environment, which helps to reduce stress and build confidence for both learners and teachers (Ali 2022; Liberman, Levin, and Luna-Bazaldua 2020).

We outline the role of formative assessment data used in EiEPC data ecosystems in Figure 1. This framing outlines the challenges related to integrating formative assessments in national curricula and data ecosystems to improve pedagogy and support administration during crises.

Figure 1: Formative Assessment Data Use in the EiEPC Data Ecosystem

The formative assessment data used in EiEPC is complex and often fragmented. It is used by teachers, students, principles, ministries of education, humanitarian and development actors, and communities to generate, share, and utilize classroom-level data to inform teaching and learning (Kalista 2023). In the classroom, teachers and students engage in day-to-day assessments that immediately inform instruction. At the system level, ministries of education oversee institutional information systems, such as EMIS, to capture classroom assessment data for evidence-informed planning. Humanitarian and development actors, including United Nations agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and donors, also design and implement assessments to monitor program indicator achievement and track progress against goals. These can be used for formative assessment purposes or as program monitoring tools (Kalista 2023). However, the effectiveness of this ecosystem depends on three drivers identified by the World Bank’s SABER framework: an enabling context, system alignment, and assessment quality (World Bank 2013).¹

In a seminal review of formative assessments in crisis contexts, Bawane and Sharma (2020) highlight several examples of how formative assessments have been used. Across examples in Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines, teachers used oral questioning and observation, peer assessment and group activities, and home-based assignments to maintain continuity and track children’s progress during crises (Bawane and Sharma 2020). Finally, across multiple countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, radio and TV lessons offered short quizzes via mobile messaging and online platforms, which enabled teachers to collect student responses and provide feedback (see, e.g., Corcoran, Pinnock, and Twigg 2022; Elliot et al. 2022).

¹ The SABER framework is a systems-level framework for assessing and strengthening national education policies. The focus on data ecosystems is only one part of the framework, which primarily considers how effective the whole system is. Data systems can inform and be informed by the framework.

The literature frames formative assessment in EiEPC in relation to how teachers can measure and track learning and what is being measured. Children affected by emergencies frequently experience stress, health barriers, trauma, and anxiety that interfere with concentration and academic progress. Assessments that capture social-emotional learning (SEL) alongside academic outcomes are therefore crucial for addressing these interrelated domains (Aber et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2020; Krupar and D'Sa 2024; Tubbs Dolan et al. 2022).

The enabling environment is also crucial to establish formative data as part of a functional data ecosystem. For example, in one literature review of formative assessment in sub-Saharan Africa, Browne (2016) found that most studies emphasize the need for stronger teacher training and capacity-building, particularly through practical, in-service programs that provide concrete examples and tools to build local expertise. However, large class sizes, resource constraints, and entrenched school cultures can limit what teachers can implement in EiEPC. Infrastructure constraints, such as poor connectivity, necessitate paper-based adaptations, and formative data is often siloed from national EMIS or donor reporting systems, limiting its systemic impact (Jonathan et al. 2025). Nonetheless, an emerging consensus in the literature suggests that formative assessments embody the principles of localization, equity, and feasibility while generating evidence that can inform both teacher practice and system accountability (Al-Samarai 2021).

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN SYRIA

Education in Syria highlights both the potential and the challenges of formative assessment in EiEPC. Before the civil war, Syria had begun institutionalizing classroom assessment through its 2009 curriculum and through the Center for Education Measurement and Assessment (World Bank 2013). The School Integrated Management Information System (SIMIS) was designed to capture information on schools, students, teachers, infrastructure, and classroom assessment (Al-Samarai 2021). However, in practice, assessments were often weak, focused on recall, and used more for administration than for improving pedagogy, with issues such as grade inflation, uneven standards, and limited feedback undermining effectiveness (World Bank 2013). Conflict further disrupted SIMIS, making reliable data collection extremely difficult, fragmented, and disjointed across education stakeholders (Qaddour and Husain 2022).

Outside of the national system, Hatahet et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between attendance, classroom behavior, and formative assessments in IDP settings and reinforced that formative data was a strong predictor of learning outcomes and early class-based course correction (School-to-School International 2022). Currently, implementing partners and local officials use diverse learning assessment tools, with an emphasis on summative data, with little comparability across schools (Qaddour and Husain 2022). Systemic weaknesses, combined with broader challenges common in emergencies, such as displacement, multiple curricula, and linguistic diversity, underscore the need for formative tools that are both rigorous and feasible in crisis-affected settings.

BACKGROUND TO HAL

In response to the need for systematic formative data in Syria specifically and EiEPC more broadly, HAL was developed to be contextually relevant and curriculum-specific and to provide quantitative tracking and learning logs for teachers to use with children in their classrooms (Tubbs Dolan 2019). It was designed to improve education by informing classroom practice, offering teachers immediate feedback on the skills students have mastered and those requiring further support. Designed for grade 2 and 3 students in both formal and nonformal education (NFE), the HAL toolkit includes administration guidance for teachers to use orally with individual students, measuring literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning and linking observations to a teacher guide with activities to link data to classroom practices (NYU Global TIES for Children 2021).

In 2019, a pilot of HAL with more than 1,400 children emphasized the tools' useability and highlighted a strengths-based approach that considered students' prior knowledge (Tubbs Dolan 2019). During the 2019 pilot, teachers administered HAL two to three times per year, supported by training and peer learning circles. By combining rigorous psychometric development with practical, teacher-centered resources, Tubbs Dolan developed a case study for how formative assessment can be locally adapted as well as aggregable to national ecosystems.

APPROACH: GENERATING DATA ABOUT NFE IN SYRIA

Since the development of HAL in 2019, it has been rolled out to NFE settings and reviewed with additional experts, ministry officials, and Syrian researchers. This section focuses on the data generated in NFE in 2023 following three phases of implementation: a pilot phase to test HAL's reliability and usability with teachers, a training and rollout phase to prepare teachers to administer and use the tool, and a monitoring and follow-up phase to document teacher use of data and refine the tool based on feedback. HAL was implemented in NFE in 2023 through partnerships involving Save the Children, Arfada, UNICEF, and ECW. Training of the core team was delivered remotely in English, while the teacher training was delivered in Arabic and materials were translated into Arabic and validated by the trainees to ensure accessibility and contextual relevancy.

The first phase focused on piloting the HAL tool in NFE with host community or internally displaced children in grades 2 and 3 across northwest Syria and northeast Syria. Arfada staff reviewed and finalized the tool, trained teachers as enumerators on its use and child safeguarding, and conducted field visits to 61 schools in five governorates. Data collection involved individual interviews using KoboToolbox electronic forms, with ethical standards ensuring voluntary and informed participation. The sample included 604 students (304 in grade 2 and 300 in grade 3), with a gender split of 52.8

percent male and 47.2 percent female (see Table 1). This sample was not designed to be representative of all NFE students but was large enough to validate the tool within NFE.

The second phase tested the usability of the paper-based HAL tool through remote training sessions for teachers in NFE. Twenty teachers (10 from NWS and 10 from NES) representing six partner organizations participated in an interactive training in Arabic over three consecutive days (see Table 1). Training aimed at preparing teachers to pilot the tool with five students each and provide feedback on usability.

The third phase scaled up the implementation of HAL through extensive teacher training with teachers in NFE and formal settings in northwest Syria. Remote sessions trained 283 teachers in NFE and 506 teachers in formal settings, covering grades 2 and 3 (see Table 1). The sample was a census based on the population of teachers in schools supported by Save the Children staff. Training focused on administering assessments, analyzing data, and adapting instruction to address learning gaps. Follow-up support included 50 field visits and 50 phone interviews to monitor implementation and provide technical assistance. Teachers used the tool in their classrooms, but this data was not entered into KoboToolbox, since it was for teachers to use in the classroom.

Table 1: Data Collected in HAL Rollout

Phase	Children Assessed				Teachers Trained	
	Grade 2		Grade 3		Grades 2 and 3	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Male	Female
1	155	149	164	136	None	None
2	26	24	31	19	10	8
3	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	168	115

The approach emphasized using teacher's feedback to understand how HAL was used within classrooms. Teachers and enumerators provided structured feedback during piloting, which informed revisions to test items, administration procedures, and guidance materials. Existing teacher learning circles, where teachers in each school met and discussed HAL and other topics, reinforced training and provide peer support.

REFLECTION

This section reflects on how HAL was adapted for NFE and implemented in formal education, and how classroom data supported teaching and learning with recommendations for the EiEPC data ecosystem. Drawing on results from the Phase 2 Teacher Training Report and the Phase 3 Roll-out Report, formal and NFE teachers had different experiences using HAL. In formal settings, primarily in northwest Syria, teachers entered training with a strong familiarity with curriculum pacing, assessment routines, and grade-level expectations. They tended to use HAL as a diagnostic supplement to refine instruction within an already structured system, reporting high confidence gains after training (99.6%), but also emphasizing time pressures and the challenge of integrating HAL into dense schedules. By contrast, NFE teachers, working across northwest and northeast Syria in accelerated, catch-up, and remedial settings, demonstrated equally strong posttraining confidence gains (100%) but relied more heavily on training and follow-up support to build foundational assessment literacy. They used HAL not only to identify learning gaps but to make sense of extreme heterogeneity in age, prior schooling, and learning levels within the same classes. Monitoring visits and interviews showed that NFE teachers more frequently highlighted the need for quiet, dedicated assessment space and motivational strategies to sustain learner engagement, whereas formal teachers focused on alignment with curriculum and workload management, underscoring that HAL functioned as an instructional enhancement tool in formal systems but as a capacity-building and coherence mechanism in NFE contexts.

ADAPTATION FOR NFE

Adapting HAL was a deliberate and multilayered process to ensure its relevance to curricula and usability in crisis-affected Syria. Teachers highlighted how HAL was linguistically and culturally adapted, translated into Arabic, and aligned with local curricula to make it practical for classroom use. Ethical safeguards ensured voluntary, inclusive participation, while operational adjustments addressed infrastructure constraints, such as introducing paper-based versions where tablets were unavailable. HAL was also shortened with teachers to reduce fatigue. Specifically, teachers noted that some literacy items were too easy late in the school year, recommending earlier administration or closer curricular alignment. Teachers also reported using motivational strategies to support learners to continue. These lessons learned suggest that local adaptation is essential for making formative assessments feasible, pedagogically useful, and relevant for all children in humanitarian contexts regardless of their education background.

TEACHERS' USE OF HAL DATA

Teachers reported that HAL data was useful for instructional planning. They reported using assessment data to identify learning levels and skills, differentiate instruction, and plan future lessons. After training, HAL was described as clear, varied, and beneficial for diverse age groups, and teachers emphasized that it strengthened their confidence in using structured formative assessments. Many NFE teachers trained to use HAL had not previously used structured formative assessments. Teachers' reflections, which described HAL as "a wonderful work that helps in knowing the level of the student in all respects," illustrate how capacity building can foster teacher confidence to use data in the classroom even in resource constrained, nonformal settings. Importantly, teachers were encouraged to use data actively rather than to passively collect data, which enabled them to adapt their teaching practices based on HAL data.

DATA QUALITY AND ADMINISTRATION CHALLENGES

Several systems challenges emerged across all phases of HAL implementation. Difficulties obtaining approval from education authorities and camp administrations restricted access to some schools.² Logistical barriers such as rough roads, lack of private rooms for assessment, and insecurity compounded these issues resulting in paper-based data collection in classrooms that could not be systematically reviewed. Teachers sometimes prompted students during tasks with a well-intentioned attempt to help children understand the correct answer, resulting in positive response biases. Some items caused confusion, highlighting the need for item revisions and stronger training protocols. Teachers also noted equity concerns, including challenges for children with speech difficulties or from displacement camps. Most importantly, when looking at formative assessment in policy, data from HAL remains siloed from national EMIS and other reporting systems, limiting systemic impact. Despite these obstacles, teachers overwhelmingly described HAL as comprehensive and valuable, with many recommending expanding the approach to additional grades.

THE DATA ECOSYSTEM

The adaptation of HAL for NFE demonstrates how tools must be linguistically, culturally, and pedagogically contextualized to be effective. Together, these lessons learned suggest that, if formative assessments are embedded in EiEPC data systems, they strengthen teacher practice and have the potential to bridge the gap between classroom data collection and improved learning outcomes in crisis-affected settings.

² Specifically, we could not visit the Mahmoudli camp or the Tawahinah camp because neither camp administration approved data collection.

The experiences from the HAL rollout in Syria underscore the potential of formative assessment as a cornerstone of the EiEPC data ecosystem. In settings where national EMIS are weak or absent and where children's learning trajectories are highly fragmented due to displacement, HAL provided a structured yet flexible mechanism for generating actionable data. Teachers in NFE centers used HAL not only to identify literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning gaps but also to adapt instruction, plan remediation, and advocate for resources, which reflects Clarke's (2012) argument that formative assessment is most powerful when it produces immediate, actionable insights in the classroom.

At the same time, the lessons learned echo broader challenges in NFE contexts. Teachers reported that the tool was lengthy, sometimes leading to fatigue, and that logistical constraints such as lack of private rooms hindered administration. Teachers' tendency to lead students to the correct answers or to teach them during the assessment highlights the need for more detailed training about the purposes of formative assessments and highlights the tension between maintaining psychometric integrity and ensuring useability in humanitarian settings. These issues mirror Al-Samarai's (2021) observation that EiEPC contexts often lack the infrastructure and time required for rigorous assessment.

CONCLUSION

In this field note, we reframe the question of how EiEPC data ecosystems support teaching and learning by examining how formative assessment data is generated and used at the classroom level, and what this reveals about the relationship between instruction and broader data systems. Drawing on the implementation of HAL in Syria, this analysis highlights how formative assessment can produce locally actionable information that supports instructional decisionmaking, while also pointing to the conditions under which such data might inform system-level reflection. In this program, HAL functioned as a classroom-based assessment approach, with data used by teachers to identify learning levels and adapt instruction, rather than as a mechanism for routine upward reporting to ministries, donors, or nongovernmental organizations.

The findings suggest that classroom-level formative data has the potential to contribute to programming and policy discussions, especially when aggregated and disaggregated by key dimensions such as gender, age, grade, and displacement status. However, this potential was not fully realized within the scope of the NFE implementation discussed here. Future efforts to link formative assessment data to EiEPC data ecosystems would require deliberate system design, including clarity on data flows, roles, and purposes, to avoid extractive practices and ensure that data continues to serve teaching and learning first.

Across the implementation, iterative piloting, teacher feedback, and ongoing support shaped how HAL was used and adapted in practice, underscoring the importance of professional learning structures such as existing teacher learning circles to strengthen data use. Our experiences adapting, contextualizing, and supporting teachers to implement HAL documented here point to the interaction between tool design, teacher training, contextual adaptation, and instructional routines. Strengthening EiEPC data ecosystems will therefore depend not only on the availability of psychometrically sound tools, but also on investments in teacher capacity, feedback loops, and system alignment that connect instructional decisions with systems accountability in ways that remain feasible and contextually appropriate.

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CONFRONTING RESEARCH NEOCOLONIALISM: REFLECTIONS ON A QUANTITATIVE STUDY CODESIGN IN MYANMAR

GRAY RINEHART, MYAT THANDAR AUNG, NAW BWAY PAW,
MAY YI MYINT, AND SAW LER MOO

ABSTRACT

Research neocolonialism—a term we use to describe situations where actors from the Global North design and control research while their partners from the Global South play subordinate roles—is pervasive in the education in emergencies field. In this field note, we reflect on our efforts to push back against these dynamics while codesigning quantitative instruments for the Myanmar research program of the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises consortium. Working in monastic and ethnic Karen settings, we sought to move from adapting generic global tools to developing instruments that could serve the local education communities. We describe our codesign process and identify three principles that guided the work: redistributing epistemic authority, practicing contextual and cultural humility, and recognizing the interdependence of different forms of expertise. We also acknowledge where we fell short: compressed timelines, informal rather than intentional learning, and structural arrangements that limited investment in research capacity in the Global South. Our reflections are from Myanmar, but we believe they carry relevance for North-South partnerships wherever neocolonialism shapes how knowledge is produced. Codesign is not a formula, but relational and ethical work.

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship has challenged research in education in emergencies (EiE) because of its entanglements with colonial and imperial logics, particularly in partnerships between actors in the Global North and Global South (Barakat, Bellino, and Paulson 2024). Power asymmetries shape how knowledge is produced: Northern funders often

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set research agendas; Northern researchers tend to lead projects and define what counts as valid knowledge;¹ Southern researchers frequently find their labor extracted, with the data they gathered analyzed and published in the Global North (Shah et al. 2023; Shah et al. 2024). As Moghli and Shuayb (2022) argue, more equitable partnerships require researchers to examine their own positionality, unlearn assumptions about unfamiliar contexts, recognize that knowledge flows in multiple directions, and push back against the structural hierarchies of Global North institutions.

Shanks and Paulson (2022, 169) remind us that ethical research in EiE “is not dependent solely on the activity at the site of research, but also on decisions made across the entire ecosystem of a research project.” Taking this seriously, we use this field note to continue our team’s effort to document the ethical, participatory, and equitable research processes used in the Myanmar research program of the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises (ERICC) consortium. Whereas our earlier reflections examined the co-creation of a country-level research agenda (Rinehart et al. 2025), we focus here on study codesign—specifically, on how we collaboratively developed quantitative instruments for two distinct schooling contexts, monastic education and education for ethnic Karen people, both of which operate within conflict-affected and politically contested settings.

Our authorship reflects a Global South partnership between the Myanmar Country Research Team (CRT), Phoo Pwint Wai Thi (PPWT), and the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD). All authors are based in the Global South; most are affiliated with Global South institutions, one is independent, and all but one of us are from the Global South. This shared positionality shapes the ethical commitments and relational practices behind our approach.

In this field note, we focus on the ethical dimensions of codesigning quantitative research instruments—a topic that receives far less attention in the EiE literature than qualitative approaches. We begin by unpacking how we understand research neocolonialism in North-South partnerships and consider its implications for our multicountry study, which aims for a cross-country comparison. We then describe how we collaborated with our partners from the Global North to develop fit-for-purpose questionnaires for students, teachers, and principals. Finally, we reflect on three principles that helped make our codesign process more equitable, and where we still need to improve.

¹ We use *Northern* and *Southern* researchers as shorthand for researchers affiliated with Global North and Global South institutions, respectively. Research neocolonialism operates primarily through institutional power rather than through the identities of individual researchers, who are mobile and heterogeneous in their positionalities, irrespective of their geographical or racial origin.

RESEARCH NEOCOLONIALISM

Across our collective experiences, we have observed—and at times directly encountered—a constellation of practices that we call research neocolonialism.² By this we mean arrangements in which Global North actors design, control, and direct research carried out in the Global South while involving local actors primarily in subordinate, instrumental, and/or implementation roles. The result is that intellectual labor and data extracted from the Global South is then analyzed, theorized, and packaged in the Global North. The evidence comes from Southern communities; the thinking happens in Northern institutions.

Research neocolonialism operates through three interrelated dimensions: epistemological, relational, and motivational. It is doctrinaire in its adherence to Northern theories, methods, and frameworks as “universally valid knowledge” while sidelining alternative ways of knowing.³ It is characterized by paternalistic assumptions that Northern partners “know best” and that Southern actors require oversight or guidance. It also presents a benevolent framing of research as “helping” or “doing good,” thereby obscuring power asymmetries, shielding practices from critique, and creating a moral hierarchy between “helper” and “helped.”

These dynamics are often set in motion before Southern partners enter the picture. Donors from the Global North frequently require predefined research questions, methodologies, and analytical frameworks before they award funding, which means that the design of a study is largely completed before Southern researchers are meaningfully involved. As Shah et al. (2023, 512) observe, this reproduces a pattern in which Northern organizations “stretch a hand to involve the locals, pay them for the roles they are to perform, and put up measures to ensure those roles are performed... ‘he who pays the piper dictates the tone.’” This intersects with what Tilley and Kalina (2021) describe as the gatekeeping burden placed on Southern researchers, who are expected to mediate Northern researchers’ access to communities while having limited influence over conceptual or methodological decisions. Haelewaters, Hofmann, and Romero-Olivares (2021) call this helicopter research: Northern researchers descend on Global South settings, where they conduct studies and depart without engaging in any meaningful collaboration, coauthorship, or sharing of benefits.

2 We use *neocolonial* rather than *colonial* to emphasize that our critiques are typically reproduced through contemporary (and conventional) arrangements, while also acknowledging that these dynamics may sit atop longer histories of imperialism. We also recognize forms of research collaboration, such as academic activism and solidarity movements, that challenge conventional arrangements.

3 Throughout this field note, we use quotation marks—sometimes called scare quotes—around terms (e.g., “universally valid knowledge”) to signal critical distance from the assumptions or framings these phrases imply, rather than to indicate direct quotation.

We are not writing from a position of innocence. Several of us have worked on projects where these dynamics played out, where we have facilitated access, collected data, and then watched the analysis and publication happen elsewhere and for others. This is one reason why we have tried, in the work described here, to do things differently.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Myanmar is one of four countries in the ERICC Pathways for Learning multicountry study; the others are South Sudan, Bangladesh, and Jordan. The study uses large-scale longitudinal surveys to generate evidence that aligns with the ERICC Conceptual Framework (Kim et al. 2026). Data is collected on conditions of conflict and crisis, four drivers of learning (access, quality, continuity, coherence), and student outcomes related to academic performance, social and emotional learning, and wellbeing.

We want to be clear that our own research with ERICC has not been immune from certain neocolonial dynamics. The overarching ERICC research architecture—its global research agenda, conceptual framework, and methods—was established before the Myanmar CRT had been fully formed and before formal partnerships with PPWT and KECD were in place. We did not shape the foundations of the overall multicountry study. Our role has been to work with principal investigators from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and University College London (UCL), the consortium coleads, to operationalize the global research agenda by developing research processes and instruments that are meaningful, feasible, and appropriate for Myanmar's diverse, fragmented, and conflict-affected landscape.

Since the 2021 military coup, many nonstate education providers operate outside and in parallel to the central public education system, across different political and territorial authorities (Salem-Gervais et al. 2024). As South (2025) argues, Myanmar can no longer be understood as a coherent nation-state; it is better described as a space of multiple sovereignties, each with its own claims to legitimacy. In this context, orienting research and its findings toward the stakeholders with local legitimacy and decisionmaking authority is methodologically sound and ethically necessary. These stakeholders are best positioned to interpret research endeavors in ways that are beneficial to their education community. Hence, the Myanmar study operates through partnerships with PPWT in monastic schooling settings and KECD in Kawthoolei.

Monastic schools follow the national curriculum and policies set by the Naypyitaw Ministry of Education, but they have considerable autonomy in how teaching and learning happen. In the absence of regular ministerial support, they receive assistance from nongovernmental organizations such as PPWT. Accordingly, research evidence should serve not the Ministry but PPWT and the members of the monastic order they

work with, including principals and the national and subnational monastic committees involved in education planning. KECD, meanwhile, functions as the education wing of the political organization representing the self-determination aspirations of the ethnic Karen communities in Kawthoolei. KECD determines its own policies, develops the Karen curriculum, and oversees teacher management and school governance. Its leadership and the bodies shaping education delivery are the primary audience for research evidence.

Research neocolonialism manifests when external actors assume, explicitly or not, that the “appropriate” audience for EiE evidence is a central state ministry or international agency. In Myanmar, such assumptions are inaccurate and harmful. Partnerships with PPWT and KECD challenge the neocolonial logic that institutions in the Global North are best positioned to decide for whom evidence is produced and whose educational priorities matter most.

THE CODESIGN PROCESS

When quantitative instruments are developed without meaningful input from actors in local EiE settings, they risk imposing external constructs, norms, and measurement models that lack contextual and cultural validity and have limited relevance for participants and stakeholders. This is an ethical and methodological issue. Rigorous quantitative research requires collaborative practices through which instruments can be designed in situ, with local expertise shaping what is measured and how. This requires navigating extractive or transactional approaches wherein generic, “off-the-shelf” instruments may be the focus or instruments developed by particular authors or organizations may be desired.

We understand codesign as an iterative process of shared decisionmaking in which Northern and Southern expertise—technical, relational, cultural, contextual—jointly shapes research priorities, constructs, item phrasing, ethical boundaries, and implementation strategies. It involves redistributing epistemic authority and recognizing that validity is negotiated across different perspectives, not handed down from the North.

Working with colleagues from the IRC and UCL, we developed background questionnaires for monastic and Karen students, teachers, and principals across four phases: grounding, building, testing, and refining. Test consultants from each setting worked in parallel with an IRC specialist to design literacy and numeracy assessments tailored to each curriculum. This work was done largely by others not on our primary research teams; thus, the reflections that follow focus on the codesign of questionnaires.

PHASE 1: GROUNDING

Principal investigators from the IRC and UCL convened weeklong workshops with PPWT and KECD in Myanmar and Thailand, respectively. These events socialized the overarching Pathways for Learning study architecture and created space for negotiating how to operationalize it in each context. Drawing from their knowledge of local schooling structures, community dynamics, conflict-related constraints, and what education leaders need from the research, PPWT and KECD led decisions on purposive sampling criteria and what evidence each study should prioritize.

Northern colleagues shared compilations of largely generic items from global surveys that aligned with our study's thematic areas. These provided a starting point, but they also revealed limitations. Many required substantial reworking to reflect the lived realities of children and education personnel in monastic and Karen settings. Through lengthy discussions, it became clear that developing instruments would not be a matter of transferring global tools to Myanmar. Rather, it would require us to jointly negotiate meaning, intent, and feasibility. This phase established the shared North-South foundations, relational and conceptual, on which subsequent work would depend.

PHASE 2: BUILDING

Over several months, the collaborators worked across geographies, some entirely online and others through online and in-person work. We combined video calls—often with our principal investigator from UCL—with extensive offline drafting and, when possible, in-person reviews with colleagues working in physical proximity.

Our focus was twofold. First, we crafted background questionnaires for participants whose educational lives are shaped by instability, displacement, political contestation, and civil war. Second, we identified social and emotional learning and wellbeing scales that were worth piloting, with inspiration from global instruments psychometrically tested in more stable, often wealthier or Western settings. For the background questionnaires, we drew from precedents from the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (implemented in Myanmar in 2019) and the Young Lives Survey (with which our principal investigator had prior experience). For the scales, we examined measures of resilience, school belonging, empathy, and individual attitudes, and asked what assumptions the scales held and whether those assumptions held in our contexts.

We tried to stay attentive throughout to the relational labor that codesign demands when working across geographic, cultural, and institutional boundaries. We created space for reflection and negotiation with our Southern team members and our Northern colleagues. Concerns were surfaced, priorities adjusted, and tensions named. This was fractious at times, such as during discussions about whose priorities were being served or what time and budget limitations we faced, but we made compromises and most

issues were resolved. Our instruments grew more grounded as our own understanding deepened of what rigorous and ethical measurement requires in these settings, and as our Northern colleagues became more familiar with the realities of education in the monastic and Karen contexts.

PHASE 3: TESTING

We piloted all instruments in Burmese and S'gaw Karen, the main languages of each research setting. Our colleagues ran statistical analyses of scale performance, which we used to evaluate suitability and inform selection. We looked at internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha), construct validity (factor analysis), and distribution of responses.

We also carried out a qualitative pilot of the questionnaires. Students and teachers participated in focus group discussions, and principals were interviewed. These methods were essential for identifying issues of comprehension, cultural resonance, and administrative feasibility.

PHASE 4: REFINING

Insights from the pilot led to further revisions. Through several iterations, our instruments became more contextually grounded, linguistically accessible, and culturally appropriate for the monastic and Karen education communities. The process was intensive, and it was also valuable in terms of resisting research neocolonialism by ensuring that the evidence to be produced remained accountable to those the research aimed to serve.

PRINCIPLES FOR CODESIGN

During the codesign process, three interrelated principles emerged that helped us confront neocolonial tendencies and work toward more genuine North-South collaboration. We offer these not as a formula but as orientations that shaped our practice.

REDISTRIBUTING EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

Quantitative studies across multiple countries may often favor generic instruments for standardizing evidence, to the extent possible, and allowing for—in our opinion—reductive cross-country comparison. This reflects doctrinaire assumptions—that is, that items developed in global-level (typically Northern) settings are almost universally valid, and that “localization” involves merely translating or lightly adapting preexisting instruments. In our view, this gets methodology backwards and is especially problematic in EiE settings, which we argue have a greater degree of heterogeneity than stable ones.

Designing rigorous quantitative instruments requires that constructs be developed in situ, with local expertise leading the effort. The choice of what to measure, how to operationalize it, and what response options make sense must emerge as much as possible from the context and culture. When instruments are designed elsewhere and “localized”—what we refer to as imported and adjusted—researchers risk measuring invalid constructs poorly. The problem in such cases is not poor data collection but a poor conceptual fit. Rubbish in, rubbish out.

And yet, context-specific development often does not occur. Timelines are compressed. Budgets are stretched. Funders and journals favor familiar, generic instruments. Northern expertise is valued; Southern expertise is underestimated. There is pressure to use off-the-shelf tools that international audiences recognize, even when they lack local meaning. These dynamics reflect the epistemological dimension of research neocolonialism: privileging Northern ways of knowing over situated understanding.

Redistributing epistemic authority means treating Southern knowledge as the architecture of locally valid measurement. We came to understand localization as a form of stewardship, of the intellectual, cultural, and contextual resources that shape how constructs get defined, operationalized, and interpreted. Without this, instruments are likely to produce data that may satisfy global reporting needs but offer little to local communities. Our codesign process required continuous negotiation between cross-country comparability and local contextual and cultural meaning. Our principal investigator and CRT approached instrument development as substantive methodological work, wherein Southern knowledge shapes the definition of problems, the relevance of items, phrasing, and ethical boundaries.

Consider children who board in monasteries. The issue was not simply creating a category for “boarders.” Many children board as novice monks or nuns not specifically for religious education (monastic schools are secular) but as protection against exposure to conflict, forced recruitment into armed groups, or instability at home. Or consider questions about teacher remuneration. It was not enough to note that Karen teachers receive modest annual stipends; it also was important to recognize that teaching in Karen schools is an act of service rooted in community identity and collective aspiration. The wording of questions required careful attention to avoid undermining teacher morale or misrepresenting their motivation. In both instances, local knowledge reshaped what the constructs actually meant.

CONTEXTUAL AND CULTURAL HUMILITY

Redistributing epistemic authority requires adopting a posture of contextual and cultural humility. This means that researchers working across contextual and cultural boundaries, Northern and Southern alike, must acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge, question assumptions embedded in existing instruments, and make room for alternative ways of knowing to guide decisions. Some might find this particularly uncomfortable, as it may threaten their “expert” status or infringe on other aspects of their identity.

Taking this posture challenges the benevolent dimension of research neocolonialism. When Northern researchers believe they are helping Southern communities by bringing in established tools and frameworks, critique becomes difficult, as it can appear to be ingratitude or obstruction. Adopting an attitude of humility disrupts this by treating external knowledge as provisional rather than authoritative. It acknowledges that external instruments carry normative assumptions about schooling, identity, and social relations that may not hold in local EiE settings shaped by conflict or crisis. Taking a humble approach is a recognition that items that appear technically sound can carry political, historical, or cultural weight that undermines trust or distorts meaning. This attitude of humility enabled our team to interrogate assumptions and avoid reproducing harm, erasing lived experience, or reinforcing problematic narratives. External tools can inform, but we must not lose sight of a critical starting point: what do we want to measure, why, and what can others’ attempts teach us?

For example, terms like peace or unity have long histories of being co-opted by military and state actors in Myanmar, which complicates their use in scales related to civic attitudes. Global measures about gender attitudes often assume patterns of boys being privileged over girls, whereas our own observations and broader evidence from Myanmar (Than 2014) suggest more complex dynamics and debates.

Adopting an attitude of humility means revisiting such constructs with skepticism, having difficult conversations about what ethically can be asked, and designing items in ways that honor lived realities. It reminded us that validity is not a byproduct of technical rigor alone, that it also depends on ethically attuned collaboration.

INTERDEPENDENT EXPERTISE

Finally, effective codesign depends on recognizing that different forms of expertise are complementary and overlapping. In our collaboration, Northern colleagues contributed much technical expertise: methodological structure, psychometric experience, and familiarity with cross-country comparisons. Southern colleagues brought relational expertise: contextual and cultural knowledge, linguistic nuance, political awareness, and the lived experience of conflict-affected education.

But this framing risks reproducing a paternalistic division: Northern expertise as technical and obligatory, Southern as relational and supplementary. We challenged this: we wanted Southern expertise to do more than add contextual color to Northern frameworks. For example, the term “armed conflict” needed reframing to be locally intelligible and safe. In the principal questionnaire, capturing how conflict and crisis affect schooling required collaboration. Northern colleagues understood what the ERICC Conceptual Framework sought to explore; Southern colleagues knew how principals and headteachers would interpret questions about school closures, attacks, and displacement, and what could safely be asked, given local political realities. Technical expertise offered structure but was only partial, while relational expertise created meaning and was required for technical expertise to function at all.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The codesign process was largely empowering, but we see ways it could have been stronger. When decisions hinged on local insights, Southern colleagues made the final call. Nevertheless, the experience revealed structural and procedural gaps that reflected broader challenges in North-South collaboration.

First, the process could have been more systematic. Each instrument went through multiple rounds of engagement (often three or more) which, while productive, put pressure on our teams. These iterations were necessary to achieve the desired quality, but it was not always clear how many rounds of revision to expect, what level of detail was needed, or which aspects of the instrument required the closest attention.

The pressure was intensified by substantial time demands. Over just a few months, we were tasked with operationalizing a multiyear, large-scale study while navigating an emergent process and responding to evolving feedback from across the consortium. We met our deadlines despite the compressed timeline and felt appreciated for doing so, but the pace raised questions about the depth of reflection we were ultimately able to bring, and whether the workload was sustainable. Earlier planning and more flexible timelines would have helped. We were fortunate to have early and total buy-in from all colleagues, and regular communication enabled us to build successful partnerships and navigate research complexities.

Second, our learning was more incidental than intentional. Most learning came through doing work collaboratively rather than from structured capacity-building. Our Southern colleagues, recognizing their limited experience in quantitative research, observed that more in-person time with Northern colleagues would have deepened their understanding of global instruments and the theoretical frameworks behind them. Codesign depends

on shared conceptual clarity, which is harder to build when engagement is largely virtual, fragmented, or under time constraints.

Embedding capacity-building in the process from the outset could have strengthened it. More structured opportunities to engage with the theoretical foundations and methodological considerations shaping quantitative EiE research and the ERICC global research agenda could have improved the quality of our codesign. It also would have supported our partner organizations in developing their own research capacities and enabled them to design and conduct studies independently in the future. This would have required additional time and energy, which is a real tradeoff, but it is nonetheless worth naming. We recommend that research capacity-building receive weight comparable to the generation of evidence, which will help to ensure that the evidence produced is used in context.

To some extent, these gaps reflect neocolonial arrangements in which Southern teams contribute intellectual labor without commensurate investment in their long-term research capabilities. More deliberate and better-resourced approaches to codesign would help ensure that North-South collaborations move beyond extracting instrumental contributions and instead foster enduring research sovereignty within Southern institutions.

CONCLUSION

We do not claim that our codesign process was flawless. It was intensive, at times messy, and occasionally contentious. These conditions may be inevitable when developing complex quantitative instruments across multiple institutions, languages, cultures, and EiE contexts, not to mention being under significant time constraints. But the principles we have outlined—redistributing epistemic authority, demonstrating contextual and cultural humility, and engaging interdependent expertise—helped anchor our work around dialogue, trust, sensitivity, and shared ownership. These principles enabled us to confront research neocolonialism and to create instruments that are meaningful to monastic and Karen education communities.

Our insights reflect the Myanmar context, but we believe they speak to many North-South research partnerships in EiE settings. Wherever neocolonial dynamics shape these partnerships, strengthening codesign matters. It matters in terms of producing more valid and useful evidence, and for building more just and equitable forms of knowledge production across our field.

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DATA STEWARDSHIP AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE IN ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR AFGHAN ADULT LEARNERS: LESSONS FROM PRACTICE

JANICE D'SOUZA AND JEREMY BRYAN COATS

ABSTRACT

As education in emergencies programming relies increasingly on digital and remote modalities, ethical data practices have become a critical but underexamined source of risk. In highly surveilled and politically restrictive contexts, routine educational data collection, such as enrollment records, learning management systems, and monitoring tools, can expose learners to social, legal, or security dangers. In this field note, we reflect on the implementation of an online professional development program for adult learners residing in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. This context was marked by restricted access to education, heightened surveillance, and gender-based exclusion. Drawing from the experience of practitioners, we argue that ethical data stewardship must be treated as a core dimension of program design, rather than as a downstream compliance activity. Using a trauma-informed lens, we examine how decisions about the minimization of data, including consent, access, and use, have shaped recruitment, instruction, monitoring, and evaluation across the program lifecycle. We highlight practical adaptations made to reduce risk while meeting accountability and learning needs, along with the tensions that emerged between the generation of evidence and protection of participants. By documenting how trauma-informed principles were operationalized through concrete data practices, this field note offers practice-based insights for education in emergencies practitioners designing digital education programs in contexts of chronic surveillance and political repression.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethical data practices are a growing concern in education in emergencies (EiE), particularly as education programming increasingly relies on digital and remote modalities. In humanitarian and conflict-affected settings, routine program activities, such as enrollment, online course delivery, and monitoring and evaluation, require collecting and storing learner data. When these practices are poorly aligned with the context, they can unintentionally expose participants to risk (Shanks and Paulson 2022; Mena and Hilhorst 2022).

These risks are especially acute in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Access to education, particularly for women, has been sharply restricted, and participation in learning programs has become politically sensitive (Human Rights Watch 2025). Adult learners face limited digital access, mobility constraints, and heightened surveillance, which means that even basic education data, such as names, contact details, or course submissions, can carry social or security consequences. In this environment, ethical failures in handling data are not abstract concerns but potential sources of harm.

In this field note we observe that, in highly restrictive and surveilled environments, ethical data stewardship must be treated as a core dimension of program design rather than as a downstream compliance requirement. Drawing on field experience from an online professional development program for adult learners in Afghanistan, we demonstrate how decisions about data collection, access, and use shaped learners' safety, participation, and trust throughout the program lifecycle.

While the existing EiE literature has addressed trauma-informed education and ethical considerations in distance learning, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, less attention has been paid to how routine data practices operate as sites of risk in contexts of chronic surveillance and political repression. We offer concrete examples of how data stewardship decisions were integrated into recruitment, instruction, monitoring, and evaluation, and reflect critically on the tensions that emerged between accountability requirements and participant protection.

We proceed by situating this approach within the relevant EiE and distance-learning literature, then describe the program context and design. We conclude with a critical reflection on lessons learned and implications for future EiE programming in similarly high-risk settings.

THE AFGHANISTAN CONTEXT

Since August 2021, following the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan has undergone significant political and institutional transformation (Khan and Khan 2024). Governance structures have been reconfigured, civic space has narrowed, and regulatory expectations remain fluid and are inconsistently enforced. Activities related to education, particularly those involving international actors, may be socially or politically sensitive (Human Rights Watch 2025). Within this environment that is shaped by uncertainty and potential scrutiny, individuals must assess the visibility and perceived acceptability of their actions, including participation in learning programs.

Access to education in Afghanistan has been profoundly affected. Policy changes and institutional restructuring have disrupted secondary, higher, and professional education systems and narrowed the pathways for learning, credentialing, and employment (UNICEF 2024). These effects have been uneven: women have been formally barred from formal education and excluded from most formal employment (Anonymous Author 1, Anonymous Author 2, and Shayan 2025; UNESCO 2023), while other learners face reduced access to institutions and increased uncertainty around permissible forms of study. Despite this, the demand for continued learning persists, particularly among adults seeking to maintain their skills and professional relevance. Participation is often private, intermittent, and shaped by the perceived risk and need to limit visibility (Azimi, Ebrahemi, and Merzaee 2025).

Infrastructure constraints further complicate engagement. Internet access is uneven and often low bandwidth, electricity outages are frequent, and many learners must share devices (World Bank 2023). These conditions affect access, privacy, and willingness to engage, making digital learning both a critical opportunity and a potential source of exposure. These overlapping structural, social, and technological constraints create a context in which participation in education is fragile, contingent, and shaped by considerations that extend beyond access alone.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE AND DATA STEWARDSHIP IN EiE

Trauma-informed care (TIC) has gained increasing attention in the field of education in emergencies (EiE) as a framework for engaging learners in contexts shaped by conflict, displacement, and chronic instability (Elkins et al. 2023; Erickson and Harvey 2023). TIC recognizes that exposure to crisis and prolonged stress can shape how individuals perceive risk, engage with institutions, and participate in learning. Importantly, trauma-informed approaches do not assume clinical trauma or require the provision of mental health services (Edelman 2023; Stone et al. 2025). Rather, they function as a preventive and ethical orientation that centers on safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, peer support, and cultural and historical awareness.

Within EiE practice, trauma-informed principles have most often been applied to pedagogy, learner engagement, and staff behavior, with an emphasis on flexible instruction, supportive relationships, and psychologically safe learning environments (Anderson et al. 2022). Less attention has been paid to how trauma-informed principles might shape data practices, even though monitoring, evaluation, and digital data collection are now routine components of education programming in crisis settings.

Ethical guidance for data collection in humanitarian and fragile contexts emphasizes informed consent, confidentiality, data minimization, and secure storage (Shanks and Paulson 2022; Mena and Hilhorst 2022). These principles are designed to protect participants from harm and prevent misuse of information. In practice, however, data ethics are often treated as a technical or compliance-oriented concern, rather than as an experiential issue shaped by power, fear, and uncertainty.

In highly surveilled or politically restrictive environments, participation in education programs and participation in data collection are frequently inseparable (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). Enrollment, attendance tracking, learning management systems, and feedback mechanisms all require the creation and storage of personal information. When these processes fail to account for learners' lived realities, data practices can inadvertently reproduce experiences of surveillance, reinforce power imbalances, or expose participants to social or political risk. This suggests a need to connect ethical data stewardship more explicitly with trauma-informed approaches that anticipate harm, rather than responding to it after the fact (Guevara et al. 2021).

This literature suggests an unresolved tension in EiE practice. On the one hand, programs are expected to generate data for accountability, learning, and improvement. On the other hand, data collection itself can create risk in contexts characterized by instability, restricted civic space, and surveillance. Trauma-informed care offers a framework for navigating this tension by extending ethical attention beyond instructional interactions to include how information about learners is requested, interpreted, stored, and shared.

With growing recognition of trauma-informed pedagogy and ethical data practices as distinct areas of inquiry, their intersection remains underdocumented in the EiE practice-based literature (Montero and Al Zouhouri 2022). With this field note, we contribute to closing the gap by examining how trauma-informed principles can be operationalized through ethical data stewardship across program design, delivery, and monitoring in a high-risk context.

DESCRIPTION OF THE APPROACH

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In 2023, a donor organization funded the implementation of an online professional education program for adults residing in Afghanistan, whose access to formal education and employment had been severely constrained. The program was designed to support professional continuity in a context of educational exclusion by enabling participants to maintain and strengthen their skills, preserve professional networks, and signal their readiness for future employment opportunities when conditions would allow.

The program offered a series of stackable online courses that culminated in a professional certificate in high-demand fields, including business and entrepreneurship, information technology, education, law, and allied health sciences. While the certificate itself was largely symbolic—it represented participants' sustained engagement and completion of coursework—it was intended to support longer-term employability once access to education and work improves.

More than 400 learners participated in the program. They ranged in age from 20 to 42 and represented a mix of early and mid-career professionals. Approximately 60-70 percent of the participants identified as women. All participants resided in Afghanistan, with representation from both urban and rural areas. Eligibility criteria required the completion of at least some postsecondary education and at least one year of relevant professional experience.

At the outset, the program was guided by trauma-informed principles rather than a fully operationalized framework. These principles, which centered on safety, data minimization, participant agency, and harm reduction, were progressively translated into concrete practices as the program unfolded and as changes emerged within the context. This adaptive approach reflected recognition that program risks and participant needs in a fragile and conflict-affected setting could not be fully anticipated in advance.

The program sponsor and other stakeholders raised the possibility that individuals affiliated with the Taliban might apply to and be selected for the program. This concern emerged through formal risk discussions at the governance level, rather than through observed participant behavior. While this risk did not materialize during implementation, to the authors' knowledge, it could have emerged for participants who did not report it to the program team. Either way, anticipation of the risk informed precautionary design decisions related to data minimization, restricted access to personally identifying information, and limits on data sharing across stakeholders. These safeguards were intended to protect participants from unintended exposure rather than to monitor or screen for affiliation.

This section outlines the program activities and concrete actions taken to ensure data safety supported by trauma-informed principles.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

RECRUITMENT, APPLICATION, AND SELECTION

The core program activities reflected those of international scholarship and professional development initiatives typically supported by the implementing partner, including outreach and recruitment, application review by external panels, participant onboarding, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation. However, these activities were continually reviewed and adapted in response to emerging data and contextual risks.

During the recruitment phase, application data were monitored on a rolling basis. Within the first three weeks of the six-week application window, early review of applications revealed a pronounced gender imbalance, with women submitting significantly fewer applications than anticipated. This demographic skew served as a key signal that initial outreach strategies were not adequately reaching or reassuring women applicants. Adaptations improved gender balance without expanding data collection or increasing the visibility of individual learners, thus demonstrating how ethical, real-time data use can inform program decisions without increasing risk.

In response, the implementing partner and contractor adjusted recruitment strategies mid-cycle. Outreach efforts were redirected toward women-focused channels, including women's universities, professional women's associations, and trusted intermediaries embedded in women's networks. Recruitment communications were also revised to explicitly emphasize data minimization, anonymity options, and the absence of requirements for transcripts, letters of recommendation, or other documentation that could pose safety or security risks. Eligibility criteria and review standards were not altered; rather, the adaptation focused on reducing perceived barriers to participation and improving access for women without compromising selection integrity.

To reinforce data security during the recruitment and application phase, outreach materials were disseminated through secure messaging platforms like WhatsApp, and informational webinars were conducted in "webinar mode" to conceal participant identities. Recordings were made available asynchronously to accommodate limited connectivity and mitigate exposure risks. Application forms were intentionally designed to collect only essential information, with evaluation focused primarily on personal statements and work history, rather than requiring applicants to submit college transcripts or letters of reference that might otherwise expose them to risk. External reviewers accessed applications only through a password-protected cloud storage platform and were required to adhere to confidentiality and data-deletion protocols.

During participant onboarding, learners reviewed program terms and conditions through a secure submission portal that, to support use by those in low-bandwidth settings, did not include any graphics. The terms and conditions included clear information about what data would be collected, how it would be used, and which stakeholders would have access at each stage of the program.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN, DELIVERY, AND PARTICIPANT SUPPORT

The program's data-informed approach extended to engagement with a third-party vendor responsible for course delivery and learning management. The vendor stored participant data as part of their standard operations, but they had limited prior experience working in conflict-affected settings. As a result, the implementing partner engaged in a series of capacity-building and negotiation-based discussions to align vendor practices with the program's trauma-informed and ethical data standards.

Specific adaptations included limiting the scope of the data shared with the vendor and restricting the use of participant family names. Learners who wished to have their full name appear on completion certificates were required to request this explicitly; otherwise, certificates were issued without family names. Additional contractual provisions were introduced to formalize data-protection expectations, and targeted training on trauma-informed approaches and participant data protection was conducted with both vendor staff and instructors. These measures were designed to reduce unnecessary data exposure and ensure a shared understanding of risk in the Afghan context.

Courses were delivered fully online and in English by subject-matter experts based outside Afghanistan. All courses were offered in an asynchronous session that was prerecorded by the instructors, with learner activities outlined in the learning management system. Live class discussion sessions were offered as an option. Given bandwidth issues, very few learners participated. Instructors were selected for their disciplinary expertise rather than prior experience working in Afghanistan. All instructors were informed that learners were participating from within Afghanistan and received guidance on trauma-informed and safety-conscious instructional practices.

To support safe participation, instructors were encouraged to allow participant anonymity during live and asynchronous sessions, avoid prompts that might elicit sensitive disclosures, and adapt to predictable challenges such as internet disruptions, power outages, and variation in education backgrounds. Participant onboarding emphasized protective practices, including using initials on online platforms, communicating through encrypted channels such as WhatsApp, and avoiding sharing personal or location-specific information in coursework or group discussions. Facilitators reinforced these practices throughout the program to support engagement while minimizing risk.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

Monitoring and evaluation were embedded in the implementing partner's responsibilities and designed to align with trauma-informed and ethical data stewardship principles. Given the sensitivity of the context, evaluation activities prioritized learner autonomy, informed consent, and risk minimization from the outset. Participants were invited to engage in monitoring activities on a voluntary basis, with clear communication that participation or nonparticipation would not affect program access or standing.

Monitoring tools were intentionally limited in scope to reduce exposure, while still supporting learning and accountability. A brief application-stage survey was introduced to collect minimal demographic information and assess whether the program was reaching its intended audience, particularly women.

All survey instruments and feedback mechanisms were designed using trauma-informed and culturally responsive principles. Participation was optional, and learners could respond in text, audio, or video formats. Participants were explicitly informed that they could skip questions or withdraw at any time. Survey instructions included practical digital safety guidance, such as clearing browser cache and cookies, in recognition that many learners relied on shared household devices or operated in monitored environments.

To further reduce risk, the implementing partner provided guidance to help participants safeguard their identities during both coursework and evaluation activities. This was particularly important for learners residing in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover, where visible participation in educational programming could result in harassment—or worse. Safeguarding practices included using initials and encrypted communication channels such as WhatsApp, and exercising discretion when publicly disclosing involvement in the program. For some participants, these strategies formalized precautions they were already taking in daily life. For others, especially those less familiar with digital security practices, the guidance provided concrete steps to reduce their visibility and exposure. Participant feedback suggested that explicitly discussing safety protocols increased their confidence in engaging with coursework and evaluation activities, even when underlying risks remained. In this way, data protection functioned not only as a compliance measure but as a relational practice that acknowledged shared vulnerability and distributed responsibility for safety.

Data custody and storage protocols were intentionally centralized and access restricted. Personally identifiable information was stored separately from survey responses, with unique identifiers used to enable limited linkage when necessary. Data were housed on encrypted, password-protected platforms, with two-factor authentication enabled, and access was restricted to a small number of designated staff within the implementing organization. Raw data were not shared externally; reporting to donors and partners

relied exclusively on aggregate or de-identified summaries. Data retention timelines were predefined, and identifying information was deleted once it was no longer operationally required.

The monitoring data were reviewed iteratively and shared only in aggregate or de-identified form. Instructors and program staff used this feedback to adjust course pacing, materials, and engagement strategies in response to learners' needs. Patterns of irregular attendance or temporary disengagement were interpreted through a trauma-informed lens that recognized security concerns, caregiving responsibilities, and connectivity disruptions, rather than treating participation variability as a deficit. Monitoring thus functioned as both an accountability tool and a protective and adaptive practice.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

This program illustrates how principles of ethical data stewardship can be operationalized in EiE settings through a trauma-informed approach across the program lifecycle. Key practices included minimizing the collection of personally identifiable information, ensuring informed consent for monitoring activities, and encrypting all data transfers. In a context marked by surveillance, political volatility, and gender-based restrictions, these measures were not ancillary safeguards but core program features necessary to protect learners, particularly women, whose participation carried elevated risk.

These precautions, however, introduced tradeoffs. Efforts to limit data collection and protect anonymity reduced the ability to track individual learning trajectories, measure longer-term outcomes, and conduct follow-up with participants. In some cases, reduced visibility also constrained opportunities for peer connection and network building. These limitations highlight a central tradeoff: protecting participant safety can limit both what programs are able to measure and what they are able to offer.

Despite these efforts, limitations to the program's success remained. Although more than 400 participants enrolled, only slightly more than half completed the full series of courses required to earn a certificate. Persistent technological constraints shaped participation, including intermittent or low-bandwidth internet, sharing household devices, and restrictions on using technology. Some learners reduced their engagement due to security concerns, caregiving and household responsibilities, or fear of visibility. While trauma-informed flexibility helped mitigate these barriers, it also complicated conventional definitions of success and required ongoing negotiation between accountability, learner safety, and program expectations.

Equitable recruitment proved especially challenging. Despite mid-course adjustments, structural barriers limited the program's reach, particularly among women with restricted mobility and access to information. In retrospect, earlier engagement with program partners may have strengthened outreach while preserving data protection. At the same time, data minimization constrained follow-up, which highlighted a persistent tension in crisis settings between learning objectives and ethical limits on data collection.

Several practical lessons emerged. First, data-informed decisionmaking must be integrated throughout recruitment, delivery, and evaluation, and must always be bounded by explicit risk assessments and participant consent. Second, learners benefit from concrete guidance on the secure use of technology, especially when operating in shared or monitored digital environments. Third, instructors and staff members require preparation, not only in trauma-informed pedagogy but also in trauma-informed data interpretation, including how to read irregular participation without pathologizing learners. Finally, programs should define evidence broadly by incorporating engagement patterns, learner reflections, and indicators of autonomy and perceived safety along with completion metrics.

Although this program was specific to Afghanistan, the lessons apply to other crisis-affected settings where distance learning intersects with surveillance, restricted civic space, or political risk. In this field note, we demonstrate how trauma-informed care can be operationalized through concrete data stewardship practices, which shows when and how programs must deliberately limit what they collect, analyze, and report to reduce harm. By foregrounding learner safety, agency, and context-sensitive practices, education initiatives can sustain meaningful learning opportunities when under extreme constraints, which demonstrates that ethical data restraint is not a weakness of evaluation but a necessary condition for responsible programming in EiE contexts. Programs facing similar challenges can apply these principles by systematically assessing which data are essential, embedding protective measures into every stage of engagement, and continually adapting practices in response to participants' real-time experiences.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This reflection is written from the perspective of the program's project director and evaluation lead, whose roles required balancing participant safety, instructional design, and responsible data management.

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THE MULTIFACETED RESPONSIBILITIES OF EDUCATION CLUSTERS: SUCCESSES AND STRUGGLES

FRIEDRICH W. AFFOLTER AND MICHELLE BROWN

ABSTRACT

Education clusters coordinate education in emergencies responses in crisis-prone and politically volatile settings. In the context of overlapping emergencies and shrinking aid budgets, Humanitarian Reset guidance calls for simpler and localized coordination arrangements. Drawing from education cluster documents across multiple crisis contexts worldwide, along with insights from the coordination literature, this field note examines the achievements and persistent challenges education clusters face in convening diverse actors, harmonizing responses, generating and using evidence, improving cost-effectiveness, and advocating for education needs with decisionmakers. We illustrate the extent to which education clusters are positioned to operationalize the Reset while safeguarding the right of crisis-affected children to protective, continuous, and safe education.

INTRODUCTION

“If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” – African proverb

This field note offers actionable insights to help reinforce the coordination of education across national and subnational clusters. The analysis is situated within the 2025 Humanitarian Reset priorities, which seek to enable humanitarian actors to navigate severe funding constraints, concurrent crises, and the imperative for more localized and resilient systems (Fletcher 2025).¹

¹ The Humanitarian Reset, launched in March 2025 by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, is a major reform effort by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to make aid faster, more localized, and accountable. It addresses funding shortfalls and record needs by shifting from top-down, “life-sustaining” aid to “hyperprioritized,” life-saving, locally led actions that focus on the immediate crisis response (IASC 2025).

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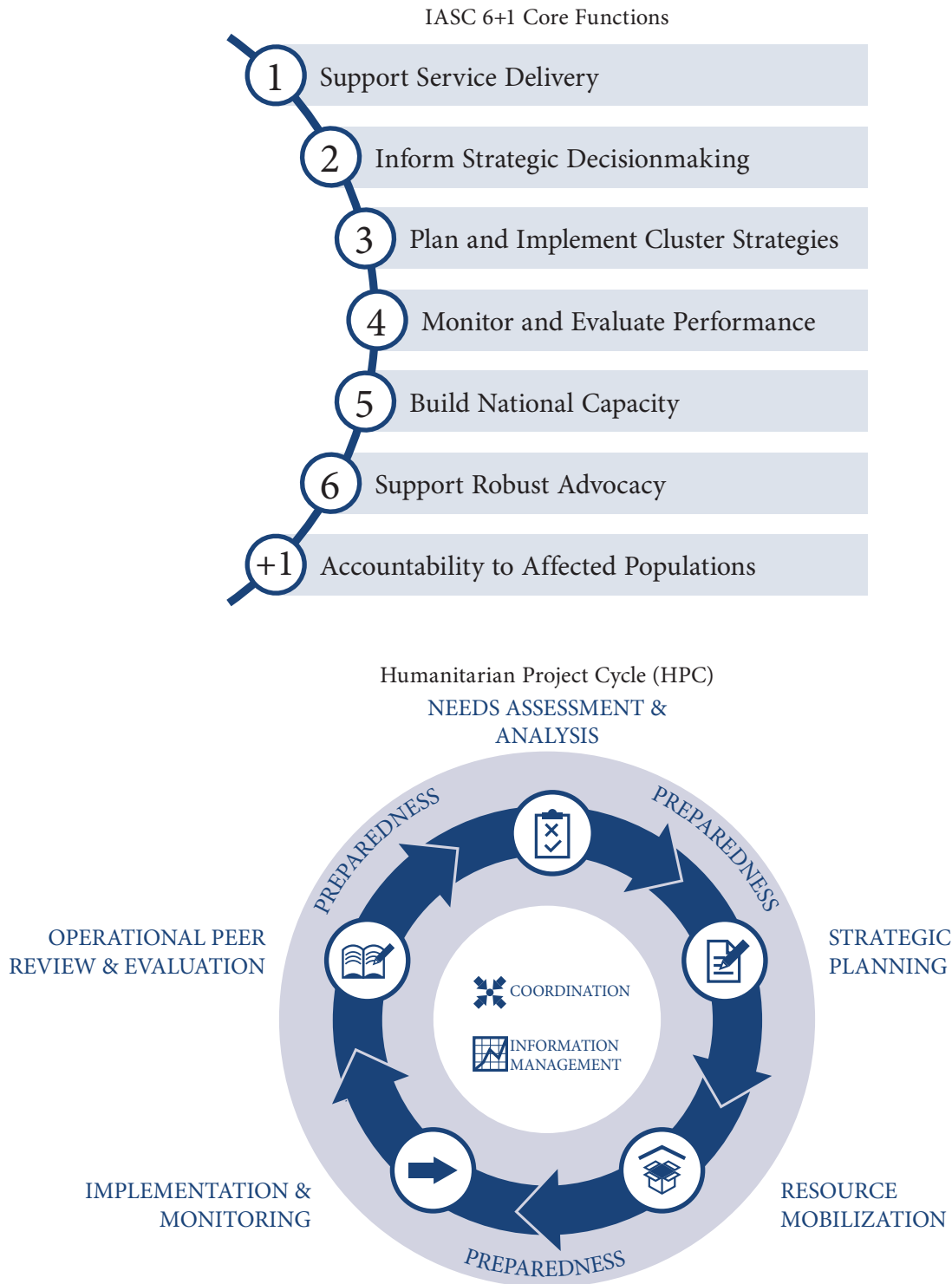
Education clusters form part of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC 2006) Cluster Coordination System, which was established to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response in large-scale emergencies. The system emerged in response to critiques of the humanitarian response in Darfur (2003-2005), where agencies struggled to deliver an inclusive, nationwide response (Adinolfi et al. 2005; Jirouskova 2014; Kruke and Olsen 2012). Education was initially excluded from the first set of lifesaving clusters, which reflected a prevailing but weakly substantiated view that education was “less lifesaving” and peripheral to immediate humanitarian priorities (Anderson and Hodgkin 2010, 2). Consequently, education in emergencies (EiE) stakeholders undertook a sustained advocacy effort to demonstrate the lifesaving and life-sustaining contributions of education, including its role as a platform for delivering essential services (health, nutrition, and water, sanitation, and hygiene) from other sectors (Anderson and Hodgkin 2010, 3). These efforts culminated in the establishment of the Global Education Cluster (GEC) in 2007.

Today the GEC is the only cluster exclusively focused on children, and the only one co-led by a UN agency, UNICEF, and an international nongovernmental agency (I/NGO), Save the Children International (SCI). Education clusters coordinate across a wide range of humanitarian settings—including man-made and environmental disasters, rapid-onset shocks, and protracted crises—in the developing and least-developed countries. Their work is guided by the IASC “6+1 Cluster Core Functions” and operationalized through the Humanitarian Project Cycle (OCHA n.d., see Figure 1). Coordinators and information management officers recruited by UNICEF and SCI serve at the national level and, where funding permits, at subnational levels. They advocate for children's right to safe, inclusive education, and aim to strengthen coordination through joint needs assessments, harmonized response planning, and collective advocacy. By 2024, 26 national education clusters—comprising more than 850 partner organizations, 60 percent of them local—were active across 30 crisis contexts worldwide (GEC 2026).

Education clusters are activated by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator who, through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), oversees global humanitarian coordination. Activation follows a request from resident/humanitarian coordinators (HCs) and requires endorsement by the IASC principals. Once activated, education clusters are accountable to the HC and the humanitarian coordination team (HCT), which ensures that responses align with national capacities and that coordination remains inclusive, strategic, and contextually appropriate. HCTs may employ both directive and decentralized adaptive forms of coordination leadership to address complex and evolving realities in the field (Knox Clarke and Campbell 2018, 666).

Education clusters are supported by the GEC, which helps ensure that international education responses remain predictable, accountable, and effectively led (GEC 2026, 4). Through this support, the GEC enhances the coherence and operational impact of funding allocations for crisis-affected populations (Education Cannot Wait 2022, 37).

Figure 1: Cluster Functions and Processes



Source: OCHA (n.d.)

CLUSTER AGENCY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

Although IASC clusters have been credited with improving the coherence of humanitarian responses by reducing duplication, gaps, and overlaps, they also have been criticized for creating compartmentalized, sector-specific approaches that limit cross-sector coordination; for insufficiently including national and local actors; and for operationalizing responses in ways that are overly resource intensive (ALNAP 2022; Egelund and Msuya 2024; Sida et al. 2024b). Alternative area-based coordination (ABC) models have been proposed to enhance responsiveness by focusing on specific geographic areas, integrating multiple sectors, decentralizing decisionmaking, engaging communities, and leveraging local actors to implement context-driven solutions (Derzsi-Horváth 2025).

With respect to EiE coordination, performance evaluations have credited education clusters with preparing education partners for better crisis response (UNICEF 2022, 173; ALNAP 2022, 167) and with improving access to learning, continuity of learning, and protection for crisis-affected children (Nicolai et al. 2020). However, education clusters have not yet produced evidence demonstrating that coordination itself leads to improvements in education quality, equity, or gender equality, or evidence establishing a causal link between coordination mechanisms and education outcomes that depend on factors beyond coordination alone. Existing monitoring and evaluation systems do not capture these relationships adequately (Nicolai et al. 2020, 36).

Below we review the versatility of education clusters across four areas—inclusive response systems, coordinated planning and operationalization, collective and inclusive generation of evidence and knowledge-sharing, and resource mobilization. All are emphasized in the Humanitarian Reset guidance (Fletcher 2025). These areas were foreshadowed—and later articulated as critical coordination gaps—in the landmark evaluation of the 2003-2005 Darfur response (Adinolfi et al. 2005), which catalyzed the adoption of the original IASC cluster mandate that has governed cluster operations over the past two decades. These areas together provide a basis for assessing whether an education cluster is positioned to operationalize the Reset reforms effectively. The first concerns the humanitarian system’s capacity to build more inclusive response structures.

INCLUSIVE RESPONSE SYSTEMS

National education clusters have demonstrated real advances in promoting inclusive coordination, even as continued attention is needed to ensure that these gains translate into fully inclusive systems (GEC 2026, 5). Clusters have coordinated EiE responses in more than 45 crisis-affected contexts since 2007, which has ensured that education is integrated into OCHA-coordinated humanitarian response plans. Clusters have intensified efforts to make coordination platforms more inclusive, and to strengthen

national capacities by inviting local authorities and civil society organizations to colead or cochair strategic advisory groups and technical working groups. These efforts have taken different forms: a local NGO co-coordinating the South Sudan national education cluster with the lead agencies; district education authorities cochairing subnational coordination structures in Syria; and local women's groups cochairing task forces on school safety in Nigeria. In Myanmar, the cluster advocated for OCHA to earmark at least 30 percent of the annual humanitarian budgets for local civil society organizations (CSOs). In Ukraine, clusters brokered relationships between newly arriving INGOs and local authorities and CSOs. In Yemen and Ethiopia, education clusters negotiated response plans with rival political authorities competing for emergency resources.

A clear illustration of structured coordination between local CSOs and NGOs is provided by the Cox's Bazar Education Cluster, which oversees education services for Rohingya children within a refugee population of approximately 1.1 million. With the cooperation of the Bangladeshi authorities, it convenes international, national, and local implementing agencies.

In other contexts, however, progress on inclusivity and gender remains uneven (GEC 2026, 6; OCHA 2025a). Social norms, mobility and communication restrictions, and the absence of local-language translators frequently inhibit meaningful participation. Ministries of education may be reluctant to delegate authority to CSOs. Calls to increase pool-fund allocations to local service providers often falter when organizations cannot meet donor requirements for risk management, audits, or efficiency standards. These barriers hinder institutional and collective learning within civil society, and the aspired-to "emergence" of communities' capacity to deliver social services and participate in public discourse on local socioeconomic development to support accountable, effective local governance (Wheatley and Frieze 2006).

Some localization advocates argue for timebound ABC platforms to replace clusters in rapid onset emergencies. This position remains contested, however, with critics warning that ABCs may struggle to match the clusters' technical leadership, strategic oversight, or sectoral depth. Education clusters add value through advocacy for children's right to education, technical guidance, and the inclusion of national and local education authorities to reinforce local governance. As ABC approaches evolve—each shaped by distinct opportunities and constraints—the resulting heterogeneity hampers convergence on a shared understanding of the aspired-to impact of ABC models. HCs will need to determine whether they wish to retain clusters, phase them out, or leverage them as an institutional bridge between local and national coordination platforms to safeguard technical quality and ensure coherent, locally led responses. It remains unclear whether HCs and ABCs will avoid deprioritizing education within streamlined ABC models, despite its essential role in safeguarding child protection and community resilience.

The term “inclusivity” also extends to brokering relationships with other social service sectors. The Somalia Education Cluster conducted “principled aid prioritization” to determine minimum package allocations that would reinforce resilience and complement interventions delivered by other clusters (water, sanitation, and hygiene, nutrition, health, child protection). In Sudan, the education cluster collaborated with child protection and shelter clusters to develop guidance for negotiating the conflict-sensitive, dignified transfer of internally displaced people from occupied schools, ensuring that protection standards were upheld.

Coordinated planning and operationalization are imperative for advancing Humanitarian Reset reforms. They are, therefore, examined in education clusters from both achievement oriented and constraint focused perspectives.

COORDINATED PLANNING AND OPERATIONALIZATION

Although education clusters are not implementing agencies, they are mandated under the Humanitarian Project Cycle to assess needs, contribute to strategic planning, support advocacy, and monitor impact. These functions are operationalized by national coordinators and information management staff who serve as intermediaries between field actors, donors, authorities, intersectoral partners, and OCHA secretariats. Cluster teams provide guidance, training, and opportunities for knowledge exchange among education partners.

Preparedness capacities are intended to be strengthened by sharing the INEE Minimum Standards, examples of effective preparedness practices, toolkits on anticipatory action, risk analysis templates, and by supporting joint contingency plans (GEC 2026, 7). In Colombia, the cluster mapped schools at risk of being damaged by floods and storms, and also mobilized teachers and communities to protect infrastructure and supplies and help keep children safe (GEC 2026, 8).

Needs assessments and “people-in-need” statistics draw from the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) (OCHA 2024a), a globally recognized methodology for assessing cross-sectoral needs and protection risks. Over the past four years, education clusters have contributed to 75 humanitarian needs overviews and 91 response plans in 28 crisis-affected countries. They have also supported Education Cannot Wait’s first emergency response allocations and the drafting of multiyear resilience plans, which have directed more than US\$700 million to 23 countries since 2017. Cluster coordinators supported Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) education funding reviews, which allocated US\$48 million to education responses across 28 countries (2021-2024) (GEC 2026, 9). Cluster teams also support the drafting of calls for proposals and cochair proposal evaluations. In Somalia, the cluster “moved” US\$30 million in pooled funds from Education Cannot Wait to partner agencies for the operationalization of the 2024 Somalia multiyear resilience plans.

Clusters aim to monitor the effectiveness of learning platforms—schools as well as temporary and family-based learning spaces, such as those serving 305,000 children in the Cox’s Bazar refugee camp. In Somalia, nonformal education services delivered by cluster partner organizations reach 48 percent of the school age population.

Advocacy is another core function. In Mali, the education cluster supported risk-informed ministry of education policies and advocated for mobilizing volunteer teachers to staff temporary learning spaces after attacks on schools. In Syria and Sudan, it advocated for students’ safe access to national exam centers across control lines and coordinated logistical, academic, and psychosocial support. In Somalia, the education cluster introduced a “unit costing” methodology to inform cross-sectoral investment decisionmaking in anticipation of predictable hazards. In Cox’s Bazar, centralized procurement of textbooks for learning sites run by 46 partners enabled collective bargaining and significant cost savings for materials that benefited 305,000 children.

Clusters are designed to promote adherence to EiE quality standards, which enable ministries and donors to monitor effectiveness across organizations. In Gaza, the cluster advocated for harmonized curriculum and classroom management standards. In Mali, a guidance note on psychosocial support and social-emotional learning (SEL) was developed jointly, based on an analysis of existing modalities and consultations with authorities. The Sudan cluster initiated a harmonization exercise on accelerated education approaches while disseminating global guidance. In Nigeria, the cluster and local authorities developed localized school safety guidance. Clusters can assume these roles because they draw support from UNICEF and Save the Children country offices, as well as GEC help desk support to develop context appropriate tools and frameworks.

Building on this technical role, clusters also aim to contribute to systemwide efficiency. Through end-to-end facilitation of the Humanitarian Project Cycle phases, clusters help deliver the streamlined, needs-driven coordination envisioned by the Humanitarian Reset, even with severe funding constraints. By reducing duplication, clusters reinforce the Reset call for sharper focus. By developing context-specific education plans, they operationalize the Reset requirement for flexible, locally anchored responses in affected communities.

Despite these goals, clusters have fallen short of the expectation that they would deliver the level of effectiveness needed to enable “faster and more decisive humanitarian decision making while wasting fewer resources on bureaucratic processes” (Egelund and Msuya 2024, 5). In response to these systemwide concerns, OCHA’s (2023) boundary-setting initiative proposed further simplification and streamlining by limiting needs analyses to rapid-onset, shock-affected areas, or by constraining response ambitions according to severity rankings, available funding, or operational capacities. Critics argue that such measures risk undermining attention to longer-term rationales for resilience-building (Donnelly and Dhingra 2024). Child welfare agencies argue that these

prioritization frameworks ignore children’s long-term developmental needs. Further dilemmas arise when “severely affected” areas are prioritized and “less severely affected” areas are deprioritized: families relocating to host communities may strain education systems that are ineligible for humanitarian assistance, despite increased demand.

Navigating these prioritization dilemmas underscores the need for strong systems of evidence generation and information-sharing—an essential component highlighted in the Humanitarian Reset.

COLLECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE KNOWLEDGE-SHARING AND GENERATION OF EVIDENCE

The Humanitarian Reset guidance highlights information-sharing and the generation of evidence; however, these functions are often insufficiently operationalized in crisis-affected contexts due to constrained human and financial resources. The JIAF, for example, requires an analytical capacity that smaller organizations rarely possess. Even where independent data collection is feasible, partners may refrain from sharing information in order to preserve a competitive position or to avoid releasing conflict-sensitive data that could have security or political repercussions. Cluster lead agencies could invest in artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies to accelerate cross-sectoral analysis and multilingual information-sharing, particularly in local languages, which could help alleviate unequal access to information and advance the localization priorities set out in the Humanitarian Reset. By improving their accessibility, timeliness, and linguistic reach, analytical tools can enable local actors to participate more substantively in decisionmaking processes and reduce reliance on external intermediaries. However, artificial intelligence platforms must rely on vetted data sources from recognized early warning providers to avoid incorporating unreliable information. A further challenge is that intersectoral trend analyses may be viewed unfavorably by government stakeholders, due to political sensitivities, while hazard-related warnings can generate anxiety in the community and potentially intensify existing social tensions. Education clusters could strengthen data management through harmonized rapid-assessment tools that enable the faster collection of “voices from the ground” via local partner networks.

JIAF’s cross-sectoral data collection includes “access to education” information for multisectoral rapid response planning. However, aside from the tangential rating of the learning conduciveness of learning spaces, this data contains no provisions to verify whether children actually learn once they are enrolled (GEC 2026, 10). This omission is problematic because children’s cognitive, problem-solving, and critical-thinking development requires continual and structured stimulation, but the impact of its absence is not part of the JIAF methodology.

Clusters are well positioned to advance data-management backstopping, cross-organizational learning, participatory decisionmaking, and information-sharing—priorities highlighted in the Humanitarian Reset (Fletcher 2025) and absent from siloed pre-Darfur information-management practices (Kruke and Olsen 2012). Newly generated evidence is shared at cluster meetings and workshops, and through circulated concept notes. Partners value opportunities to cross-check data and the visibility they gain when copublishing reports. The GEC provides data management backstopping support for national clusters in the retrieval of evidence and needs assessment.

Clusters relay evidence and action recommendations to the government counterparts, donors, and media outlets that value education clusters' sectorwide perspectives. The GEC website and global help desk further disseminate successful EiE practices that can be adapted to national contexts.

Despite advances in the generation of evidence and information-sharing, education remains chronically underfunded. This underscores the substantial challenge of mobilizing resources, as highlighted in the Humanitarian Reset.

MOBILIZATION OF RESOURCES

Despite evidence that education consistently ranks among the top priorities of crisis-affected populations (Sida et al. 2024a; Affolter and Allaf 2014) and the broad recognition that schools protect children from hazards, risky behaviors, and recruitment into armed groups (CERF 2020; United Nations Security Council 2024), HCTs frequently prioritize health, nutrition, or water, sanitation, and hygiene, due to their anticipated “instantly life-saving” impact (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies 2024; OCHA 2025b). Even before 2025, only 1 percent of total CERF funds were earmarked for EiE (OCHA 2024b)—a key factor behind the difficulties clusters encounter in advancing the localization commitments made in the Grand Bargain and retaining fully dedicated (rather than “double-hatting”) coordinators in keeping with neutrality principles.

The humanitarian funding cuts in 2025 triggered disproportionate reductions in EiE budgets (Obrecht and Pearson 2025; GEC 2026, 11). In an email to Save the Children and UNICEF, headed “Humanitarian Reset and Education in Emergencies” (July 22, 2025), Under-Secretary-General Tom Fletcher emphasized that the scale of the 2025 funding contraction demands rigorous, clear-eyed prioritization of the most lifesaving and protection-critical elements of the response, along with streamlined processes and multisectoral planning. He stressed that, at the same time, schools and learning spaces must remain integral, even within a hyperprioritized response architecture, given the contribution they make to protection, dignity, and community-anchored humanitarian action.

Mitigating the EiE funding crisis requires the sustained engagement of education clusters in evidence-based advocacy and strategic framing of education as lifesaving, life sustaining, life changing, and protective (GEC 2026, 12). Clusters can strengthen the case for investment by linking EiE to Reset priorities, including protection, gender equality, and resilience. They are uniquely positioned to champion funding for local partner initiatives by building trust with donors and authorities through regular, targeted engagement aligned with donor priorities. Sustained high-level advocacy directed at humanitarian coordinators and donors by the senior leadership of the two cluster lead agencies is also essential, given the sector's persistent struggle to be perceived as having a lifesaving impact on par with other humanitarian domains. At the global level, the GEC can support national actors by sharing relevant evidence, highlighting opportunities and constraints, and engaging with pooled fund mechanisms to enhance the visibility and resourcing of EiE.

CONCLUSION

Coordination remains a critical determinant of effective education responses. Over the past two decades, the global education cluster system has rolled out a standardized coordination framework across diverse crisis contexts. Unlike many global mechanisms that struggle to balance uniformity and flexibility, education clusters have consistently adapted to diverse cultural, political, and geographic variation while upholding core humanitarian principles. This dual capacity—global alignment and contextual relevance—is a notable operational achievement in humanitarian action and it positions the education cluster system as a model of scalable, context-relevant coordination.

The 2025 Humanitarian Reset marks a significant shift away from traditional, top-down approaches and toward a more locally led and globally supported paradigm. Localization and a streamlined humanitarian response will require sustained technical backstopping in areas such as the generation of evidence, capacity development, and representation before national authorities. In the education sector, it is difficult to imagine how this can be operationalized without a dedicated coordination mechanism. Clusters therefore need to evolve from coordination hubs into proactive enablers and communicators of locally driven education responses.

Calls to improve the agility and effectiveness of coordination, while essential, often overlook a structural dilemma that education coordinators continually face. During acute crises, humanitarian decisionmakers operating under severe resource and time constraints are frequently compelled to prioritize immediate survival needs over children's cognitive and psychosocial development. Although understandable, this pattern reflects deeper systemic shortcomings in how emergency responses are funded and structured, and it perpetuates a narrow conception of child wellbeing that sidelines long-term developmental outcomes.

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A FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICS AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES RESEARCH

FRANCINE MENASHY

ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I reflect on the ethical dimensions of education in emergencies (EiE) research, drawing from a keynote address I delivered at the INEE Data and Evidence Summit in Geneva in June 2023. While longstanding gaps in research standards, production, sharing, analysis, and uptake in EiE are well recognized, I suggest a fundamental shift in how the sector conceptualizes research. I argue that ethics—which relates to power dynamics and issues of equity—must be considered as a starting point for improving EiE data ecosystems and propose a four-question framework that may guide future research. Drawing from scholarship and stakeholders’ perspectives, I highlight donor dominance, extractive research practices, Global North epistemic authority, and the marginalization of racialized and crisis-affected communities in agenda-setting and knowledge production. I further critique the privileging of quantitative evidence and the ethical risks of datafication, privacy breaches, and restricted dissemination. I propose that more participatory and equitable approaches that elevate local expertise, broaden methodological rigor, and conceptualize data as a public good will foster a more contextually grounded, just, and ethical EiE field.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a keynote address delivered at the Education in Emergencies Data and Evidence Summit in Geneva on June 6, 2023.

Education in emergencies (EiE) policymakers, practitioners, and academics have long sought high-quality research to strengthen the sector. In response, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) established an EiE Data Working Group in 2019 that focused on many key areas of the EiE research ecosystem, including data standards, production, sharing, analysis, and use, as well as joint monitoring, evaluation, and learning. The Working Group identified enormous gaps in the data on displaced populations, and it criticized the fragmented nature of data collection, poor monitoring, limited research funding, and the poor uptake of evidence in policies and programming in EiE (INEE 2026a).

I agree that these gaps and limitations ought to elicit serious concern, and that adequate support for EiE must address many if not all of them. However, I urge the EiE community to refocus the conversation and to rethink its approach to research by centering on ethics—and, by extension, equity—as the necessary starting point. I propose that, even before attempting to fill the gaps and address the limitations, EiE actors consider the ethical dimensions of data collection and production, its use, and the deep-seated inequities and power dynamics in the research ecosystem.

Two main groups of researchers conduct EiE-related studies: those working within humanitarian organizations, such as international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), donors, and foundations, and academics within universities. While scholars at times conduct research in collaboration with or on behalf of organizations, their academic goals, systems, and outputs often align with different sets of principles and governance structures than those of humanitarian agencies. While acknowledging the distinction between these groups, the arguments I propose below can apply to all those conducting EiE research.

For humanitarian organizations, the ethos of “do no harm”—ensuring that any intervention in a humanitarian context does not worsen a situation for people experiencing crisis—represents a key principle (INEE 2026b). This tenet has acted as a normative obligation (OCHA 2022) across major United Nations agencies and NGOs engaged in humanitarian work. However, this ethos does not obligate humanitarian organizations to follow particular research practices. As a study into the ethics of humanitarian research found, “even positively seeking to ‘do no harm’ can become a well-meant but empty aspiration if refugees are put at further risk by the very process of the research” (Hugman, Pittaway, and Bartolomei 2011, 1272).

Most academics are familiar with standard institutional ethical protocols. Universities require ethical reviews before any research is conducted that involves human subjects, including listing conflicts of interest, confidentiality, compensation, and so forth. While these protocols are necessary and certainly have benefits—for example, they can be applied to diverse research contexts and offer concrete guidance—they are limited. Critics have noted that universities’ ethical standards for research have been developed using a Global North paradigm, through which the expertise and values of those within higher-income countries drive processes and decisionmaking without consideration for the complex histories of crisis-affected settings and power dynamics in humanitarian contexts. For example, ethical review processes and principles “assume regulatory structures and sociopolitical norms that quickly lose relevance outside of Europe and North America” (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018, 607; Tuck and Guishard 2013).

But even within the Global North, such standards have been criticized for seeking to protect institutions from liability rather than protecting participants from harm. As Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, “Research ethics is often seen as being much more about institutional and professional regulations and codes of conduct than it is about the needs, aspirations or world views of ‘marginalised and vulnerable’ communities” (2006, 10). Research processes in both the academic and humanitarian arenas often fail to address many ethical risks. Moreover, no single body governs the research ethics of both organizations and academics in EiE, leading to fragmented oversight. In light of these shortcomings of formal ethical requirements, I suggest that researchers need additional guidance.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICS IN EIE RESEARCH: FOUR QUESTIONS

In order to encourage all those who engage in EiE research to think more deeply about the ethical dimensions of their work, I offer four key questions that might serve as a framework. I do so by drawing from my own research and from studies I’ve conducted with colleagues that have examined relationships and power dynamics in EiE. I also draw from the work of scholars in both EiE and humanitarian studies, as well as civil society actors and activists who have commented on and critiqued the ethical shortcomings of research in the sector.

WHO DETERMINES RESEARCH AGENDAS IN EIE?

Who determines what EiE researchers seek to understand and prioritize? While humanitarian organizations often state that they require “policy-relevant” data, few ask who determined the policies in the first place. Who is in the room, at the table, on the Zoom screen when decisions are made? And, more importantly, whose voices carry weight? Which actors and organizations have most influence? This first question tackles power asymmetries, which can extend throughout the lifecycle of a research project: “These asymmetries may manifest in who decides which questions are studied, how projects are designed, when and when not to conduct research in fragile settings, and how and with whom knowledge is shared” (Bandara et al. 2024, 496).

Of the more than 300 EiE stakeholders I have interviewed over the past decade—people who represent governments, INGOs, multilateral agencies, and foundations who have participated in policy spaces—a vast majority have shared the perspective that donors from the Global North hold most power in EiE because, as a study participant once said, “money talks and people who hold the purse strings are able to influence” (Menashy and Zakharia 2022b, 15). Indeed, institutional funders of

research from the Global North tend to set agendas that align most with their organizational self-interest (Menashy 2019). Because of these priorities, many within the humanitarian sector have questioned the role of donors as leaders in research. Moreover, as a result, donor policies and priorities in EiE have not adequately included the perspectives of those affected by crisis—many of whom have a more accurate and nuanced knowledge of context, history, and political and cultural dynamics.

Recognizing this shortcoming, the humanitarian sector has called for increased participation and localization in decisionmaking. While INEE defines localization as “a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision making by local and national actors in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations” (INEE 2026c), in many cases, localization has become merely a buzzword, with only “symbolic participation” in practice (Maglio 2025). As one study participant stated, “I think the sector preaches about localization but I haven’t seen much action yet” (Menashy and Zakharia 2022b, 14).

Truly participatory and localized agenda-setting in EiE research would mean that affected communities and local researchers define the core questions and priorities from the outset, with external actors playing a supporting role rather than steering inquiry. Free from this genuine participation, EiE evidence risks decontextualization, informing policies and actions based on only narrow or incorrect understandings of the contexts and needs of affected communities. However, few organizational researchers engage in participatory processes. And while some academics have embraced more participatory methodologies, many of these remain small scale and, as discussed below, have had limited policy impact.

Furthermore, the perspectives and priorities of racialized people, particularly those from the Global South, are also often excluded from agenda-setting. Discussions of racism in EiE have often been silenced, and several humanitarian actors over recent years have drawn attention to this absence (Brooks 2020; Menashy and Zakharia 2022a; Oddy 2024). The silencing of race as an area of concern in EiE spaces, including in research agendas, results from entrenched power asymmetries in EiE decisionmaking, where non-White people from the Global South hold limited influence (Menashy and Zakharia 2022a; Oddy and Adinsa 2025; Shah and Dalrymple 2025). This extends to decisionmaking in the research ecosystem, where organizations and actors in the Global North drive the agenda.

WHAT AND WHOSE KNOWLEDGE IS VALUED?

What kinds of research methodologies are valued in the EiE space? International organizations overwhelmingly value quantitative evidence. Policies most frequently reference large-scale datasets in order to generalize for wide populations; these are derived from, for example, standardized testing, surveys, or findings from randomized control trials (RCTs) (Chupein and Glennerster 2018; Cook-Lundgren and Girei 2025). Quantitative data and analyses are of course vitally important, but this unproblematized drive for and privileging of quantitative studies ignores the fact that the evidence gathered represents only part of the story.

For example, researchers have questioned the “meteoric rise” in RCTs, drawing attention to the methodological and application limitations: “The RCT movement has managed to label the method as the only technique able to rigorously identify causal impacts, when RCTs actually only provide evidence of effectiveness in limited settings...[and] display specific biases and political uses when implemented in the real world” (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2019, 735). Many critics have noted that quantitative methods generally struggle to capture the nuances of the social process that shape inequities: “Quantitative methods cannot match qualitative approaches in terms of their suitability for understanding the nuances of the numerous social processes that shape and legitimate...inequity” (Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2018, 160). While some quantitative researchers have addressed such issues using mixed methods approaches (see Burde 2012), many apply a limited scope and, as a result, hide issues of power.

The privileging of certain types of data aligns with what is commonly described as Western knowledge, which, I’d argue, holds most value in the humanitarian and development sectors because of its characterization as scientific and rational. As one study showed, “programme and research design are rooted in Western values and knowledge systems meaning that many programmes inadvertently create a standard based on the West that communities in the Global South are required to meet. Local knowledge is, by default, devalued” (Peace Direct et al. 2021, 5).

I argue that, in order to truly understand and answer pressing questions in EiE, the sector ought to embrace alternatives to the dominant quantitative methodologies in humanitarian research. Particularly valuable are in-depth studies that include participatory elements, which currently are more common in academic research than in organizational studies. These research practices are of course challenging, and bring up their own set of ethical questions, but I believe they should be elevated in terms of value and perceptions of rigor. We need to unpack our assumptions around what knowledge is valued, expand what are considered “rigorous” data and evidence, and embrace—meaning fund, cite, and include in decisionmaking—more nontraditional research methodologies. By doing so, we might “ensure reciprocal

benefit for refugee participants. By advocating for reciprocity, scholars hope to avoid scenarios in which stories are simply extracted from participants, and instead produce community-based research practices, participatory research projects, and relational ethics” (Fritzsche 2024, 606) that prioritize refugee agency.

HOW ARE DATA COLLECTED AND BY WHOM?

The act of gathering data elicits ethical questions in any context; in the EiE space, additional factors require consideration. In academia, researchers generally determine their own methodological approaches that are aligned with ethical protocols. However, when carried out by humanitarian organizations, data-gathering procedures are often dictated by those who fund projects, with limited oversight. Those physically carrying out the data collection are often those living and working directly in crisis-affected contexts; this means they are the ones taking on the major risks, including potential threats to their safety and security.

Research subjects’ emotional and psychological risks may include re-traumatization from recounting distressing memories. Participating in research may also bring legal risks for forcibly displaced people, who often have precarious legal status that could be affected by research participation. And issues related to their financial and security dependency complicate the notion of consent to participate in data collection (Clark-Kazak 2017, 2021).

The act of gathering data in humanitarian settings also carries risks of extraction. Data collected about and from people affected by crisis are mainly used to inform the work of those in the Global North. Even if the intended ends are meant to help those in crisis settings, the evidence is often only used by, and therefore disproportionately benefits, actors within international funding organizations and universities. For example, a Congolese researcher who was discussing participation in an international organization’s impact evaluation said, “You know, we are like gold diggers. The data is gold, and we are the gold-diggers” (Quoted in Marchais, Bazuzi, and Lameke 2020, 377). Research relationships in humanitarian spaces have been described as parasitic: “They come get our data, then waste our time. There is no mutual benefit, the benefit is on one side...So that’s why I say it’s kind of a parasitic relationship” (Quoted in Bilotta 2019, 134). As Shanks and Paulson explain, “the practice of excluding, or extracting from, local actors has been endemic in fragile environments. This domination of knowledge production has resulted in cycles of ‘parachute’ or ‘hit and run’ research in both commissioned and academic projects” (2022, 175).

In response to such practices, some EiE and humanitarian academics and practitioners have begun the challenging process of reflecting on such hierarchical and extractive research relationships and arrangements. For example, Shah and colleagues (2024) reflect on the historical and ongoing colonial legacies of EiE

research using collaborative auto-ethnography. Shuayb and Brun (2021) also argue that research in EiE can benefit from reflective practice that focuses on the relational aspects of North-South collaborative research. Other EiE researchers have provided further critique and pedagogical tools to assist in prompting such reflective practices (Maglio and Pherali 2020; Mendenhall, Chopra, and Bazlen 2022; Shivakoti and Milner 2021). Their work can help us to think through more ethical, nonextractive practices, with sensitivity to power hierarchies between the funders, researchers, those gathering data, and the research subjects.

HOW WILL EIE RESEARCH BE USED AND DISSEMINATED?

Humanitarian contexts present unique issues of data privacy and protection. In recent years, humanitarian organizations have begun to collect biometric data from people experiencing forced displacement (Holloway, Al Masri, and Abu Yahia 2021; Haberkorn 2023). This includes biometric fingerprinting and the extraction of metadata from mobile phones and social media profiles—what some have described as the “datafication of forced migrants”: “Humanitarian organizations have increasingly collected data about forced migrants to improve their efficiency in providing help in crisis situations [but] migration processes are increasingly datafied because of the security concerns of nation states... Migrants do not have control over how these data practices function” (Witteborn 2021, 639). Even if collected with only the most humane aims, these data may be taken out of context or used to support xenophobic, racist, antirefugee, or anti-immigrant policies. For example, as Clark-Kazak (2021, 127) explains, “discussions and policies about migration are heavily politicized...consequently, research findings can be coopted for particular political agendas.”

The dissemination of data after collection and analysis further presents an ethical challenge, such as when findings are not shared with research participants. While member checking—a practice whereby researchers return findings or interpretations to participants for verification—has become more commonplace in academic work, it is not a requirement. And local researchers are often not included in the intellectual ownership of outputs, or credited in publications: “You get your data, you go—maybe use it for your own benefit and you leave us hanging” (Quoted in Bilotta 2019, 134). Unless translation is supported via grant funding, results of studies are often solely disseminated in English. Most work published in academic journals is held behind a paywall, which allows publishers to “hide the knowledge generated by projects behind expensive paywalls rarely accessible to those living in fragile contexts...The prevalence of these mediums of dissemination reflect the extractive nature of research in fragile contexts” (Shanks and Paulson 2022, 184). Authors sometimes pay high fees to academic journals, even after their work is accepted, in order to secure publication, leaving researchers without resources less able to widely disseminate their work. This speaks to the need to consider research outputs

as global public goods that are accessible to all. In response, researcher networks, such as the Open Access Movement, have endeavored to address such barriers by providing publications free from subscription or access costs and by eliminating article submission fees (Open Access Network 2026).

In considering this fourth question—how will research will be used and disseminated—those working with EiE data must prioritize privacy and protection and consider any potential for exploitation. Even when institutional ethics boards approve studies, it is up to researchers to ensure such guidance informs all aspects of projects. As well, those from whom data is collected should understand the limitations of confidentiality in EiE contexts. Credit ought to be given to all those who contributed to the research. And finally, findings ought to be shared back with those from whom the evidence was collected.

CLOSING REFLECTION

I view these four questions as interconnected, all with equal importance and with implications for each other. These questions, moreover, reflect many recent calls to decolonize humanitarianism, including from the INEE Secretariat: “We recognize and acknowledge that we are a part of a global humanitarian system that, while holding good intentions for the world’s most vulnerable, is implicitly colonial in nature” (Brooks 2020). We can take steps toward a more equitable and just EiE community by recognizing and addressing the many ways in which power asymmetries impact research, including data production, gathering, analysis, and use.

I believe that all within the EiE field share a common goal: to ensure access to quality education for everyone experiencing crisis, throughout the world. I hope these four questions will remind us to reflect on our own preconceptions and assumptions and foster further dialogue. With more participatory and equitable approaches that elevate local expertise, broaden methodological rigor, and conceptualize research outputs as public goods, we can foster a more just, ethical, and contextually grounded EiE field.

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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.

ABRAHA ASFAW
Addis Ababa University

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BOOK REVIEW

***SCHOOLING FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN: A SOCIAL JUSTICE
PERSPECTIVE INFORMED BY CHILDREN FROM SYRIA***
**BY ELEANORE HARGREAVES, BRIAN LALLY, BASSEL AKAR,
JUMANA AL-WAELI, AND JASMINE COSTELLO**
UCL PRESS, 2024. XVII + 158 PAGES
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The field of education in emergencies (EiE) has focused increasingly on understanding and advancing social justice in and through education (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2017; Pherali and Magee 2019). This conceptual shift has moved the field from a focus on access to education to more complex explorations of educational equity and quality within “context- and culture-specific circumstances” (p. 2). In *Schooling for Refugee Children: A Social Justice Perspective Informed by Children from Syria*, Eleanore Hargreaves, Brian Lally, Bassel Akar, Jumana Al-Waeli, and Jasmine Costello build on this tradition by presenting the central premise that all children have the right to a socially just education. The book draws on the voices of displaced Syrian children in formal and non-formal schooling to illustrate their experiences of social justice in education (and lack thereof), thereby demonstrating the value of rich, qualitative data for informing policymaking, programming, and funding for EiE.

Schooling for Refugee Children includes case studies of displaced Syrian children’s experiences in three different schooling contexts, two in Lebanon and one in England. The first case study focuses on children and teachers from Multi Aid Programs, a non-formal education (NFE) program in Lebanon run by Syrians for Syrians. The authors conducted participatory research activities with the children over three days, including drawing pictures of themselves in the future and writing letters to teachers to learn about the children’s life histories and learning experiences. The second case study takes place at Relief and Reconciliation for Syria, a Lebanese NFE program offered to Syrian children during the compounded crises of political uprising and COVID-19. The authors collected testimonials from Syrian and Lebanese teachers and conducted classroom observations. The third case study focuses on six Syrian children resettled in England, where they attended an Inner London school. Data was generated over nine months through biweekly meetings with the students, both collectively and individually. Through each project, the authors employed participatory research methods that offered participants opportunities to “share their stories and represent their different educational experiences” (p. 2). Doing so enabled the children to exercise their right to representation in education, a key component of social justice, while also creating space for the authors to investigate how the students experienced social justice.

To facilitate their analysis, Hargreaves et al. bring together Fraser's (2008) theory of social justice with Kohli's (2011) theory of safety, belonging, and success. The authors emphasize social justice as representation in education that considers "the children's expressions of ideas, opinions and preferences as representations." They assert that, to achieve social justice, the children's representations must be "given due consideration and acted upon as appropriate by adults" (p. 18). Hargreaves et al. also highlight Kohli's (2011) theory that safety, belonging, and success are core needs for refugee and asylum-seeking children. The authors emphasize that "the children's need for safety, for belonging and for success may be met" (p. 21) only when social justice is present. Similarly, children are able to represent their needs and views appropriately only when they feel a sense of safety and belonging. The authors thus demonstrate that striving for social justice in EiE is not an add-on but an essential element in facilitating access to high-quality education.

Unsurprisingly, access to social justice varied across the three cases. While Syrian children face structural exclusion from public schools in Lebanon, the shared refugee experiences between teachers and students in the Multi Aid Program fostered a sense of safety and belonging that enabled the children to succeed in their education and enhanced their access to social justice. Conversely, at Relief and Reconciliation for Syria, the rigid pedagogical style that prioritized memorization and repetition negatively affected the children's academic, personal, and emotional growth, which in turn limited their opportunities to access social justice. Although Syrian students attending the Inner London school had greater legal inclusion in the public school system, they experienced a lack of safety and recognition in their schools, which indicates a limited access to social justice. These comparisons underpin the authors' call for a pedagogical transformation to advance social justice in refugee education that would include a shift in power dynamics between students and teachers and "empower learners as critical thinkers, creative innovators and problem solvers" (p. 148). Doing so would create opportunities for increased representation of refugee children, foster greater recognition of students' value, and contribute to students' sense of safety and belonging in the classroom and the community.

Schooling for Refugee Children makes theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of EiE and to refugee education. By integrating refugee experiences in contexts of asylum and resettlement in a single monograph, the authors challenge the dominant scholarly landscape that keeps these two worlds separate. Uniting them reminds readers that the challenges of being a refugee do not end simply by crossing certain borders; a refugee child's search for normalcy, safety, and belonging continues once they are resettled, and a pathway to citizenship does not guarantee social justice in the child's schooling system or daily experiences. By providing substantial detail about their participatory research design, the authors provide valuable guidance for scholars or students seeking to emulate such approaches in their own research.

While the authors recommend ways to improve the practices of educators, school leaders, and teacher trainers, they give limited attention to the systemic transformations needed to sustain meaningful change. This gap is particularly significant in the context of NFE, which often emerges as an alternative method of schooling in refugee and other emergency situations precisely because of the systemic injustices that exclude students from the formal education system. Although the authors provide meaningful recommendations for how to increase student representation and social justice at the school level, they do not address how policymakers might approach the structural barriers and systemic exclusions that give rise to the need for NFE in the first place.

Schooling for Refugee Children provides meaningful insights into the educational experiences of Syrian children and serves as a valuable resource for scholars, educators, and policymakers. The authors' careful attention to the children's own schooling narratives, which they analyzed through the lens of social justice and belonging, underscores the importance of centering refugee voices in research and practice. This sheds light on the importance of qualitative data for the EiE ecosystem, including robust details on how researchers might approach such data collection. Through rich narratives and in-depth analysis, the authors highlight structural and pedagogical barriers to achieving social justice in contexts of both asylum and resettlement, and offer concrete ways to reimagine refugee education in ways that affirm safety, belonging, and meaningful participation.

ELISHEVA COHEN

Indiana University

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BOOK REVIEW

UNSETTLED FAMILIES: REFUGEES, HUMANITARIANISM, AND THE POLITICS OF KINSHIP

BY SOPHIA BALAKIAN

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In the current period of unprecedented global displacement, *Unsettled Families: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Kinship* offers a critical examination of how the Global North and the international refugee regime determine which families merit resettlement and why most are denied this possibility. Sophia Balakian, a sociocultural anthropologist and scholar of forced migration, reveals that categories often treated as objective or technical, such as “fraud” or even “family,” are in fact deeply political and unstable. Drawing from multisited ethnographic research conducted within Nairobi’s humanitarian bureaucracy and the resettlement world of Columbus, Ohio, Balakian follows Somali and Congolese refugees as they navigate overlapping systems of aid, security, and immigration while in pursuit of safety and permanence. Her work highlights not only the complexity of these processes but also the human costs embedded in the bureaucratic logics that govern refugees’ lives. The author’s work is foundational to the field of education in emergencies, which focuses on protecting, sustaining, and rebuilding education during crises such as conflict, displacement, and natural disasters, with an emphasis on access, equity, and psychosocial wellbeing.

In the introduction, Balakian challenges the usual view of resettlement, asking what it looks like when we focus not on the bureaucratic timeline—from UNHCR recognition to arrival in the United States—but on the long-term experiences of those who remain refugees for years or generations (p. 11). Her fieldwork involved moving alongside families—Somali and Congolese—through both official and informal spaces, where she was witness to conversations shaped by waiting, uncertainty, and the overwhelming influence of systems that hold the power to grant or withhold a chance at life. Early in the book, readers come to see how profoundly hegemonic, exclusionary, and discriminatory resettlement systems can be, even as bureaucrats and humanitarian intermediaries in both Nairobi and Columbus justify strict policies as being necessary and rational.

In chapter one, “The Figure of the Fraudulent Refugee,” Balakian introduces the stereotypes and racialized assumptions that underpin national security-driven decisionmaking. Somali and Congolese refugees in Nairobi are often treated as inherently unreliable narrators of their own experiences and are compelled to continually demonstrate suffering, trauma, and legitimacy. Balakian shows how these dynamics position refugees in a perpetual cycle of proving and re-proving their worthiness within a system predisposed to doubt them from the outset.

Across these interconnected narratives, Balakian demonstrates how institutional understandings of “fraud” and “family” unravel when viewed from refugees’ own perspectives. Behaviors interpreted by officials as deceptive are, for refugees, often moral acts—efforts to sustain relationships, honor obligations, or maintain kinship ties that extend far beyond narrow Western definitions of the nuclear family. As these categories blur and even collapse, Balakian reveals how refugees both navigate and contest the very terms used to regulate their movement. By foregrounding kinship within broader debates on humanitarian governance, she illustrates how ideas about “the family” become central to reinforcing, negotiating, and resisting the boundaries of nation-states and the security logics that increasingly shape humanitarian practice.

Although Balakian emphasizes that her ethnography is fundamentally about a legal process rather than a specific group, the book ultimately becomes a richly human account. The stories in chapters two and three demonstrate how people’s stories can deepen our understanding of resettlement. Through Yvette’s experiences, for example, we see how gender, abuse, and vulnerability shape ideas about who counts as a “desirable” refugee. Meanwhile, the story of Mohamed—born in 1991, the year civil war erupted in Somalia—reveals how kinship networks facilitate access to resettlement and sponsorship programs. As Balakian notes, culturally grounded notions of kinship evoke both “the morality of family obligation and the ills of inequality in a world of growing disparity” (p. 115). In this way, her ethnography exceeds its initial framing: it is about legal processes *and* about the everyday lives shaped by them.

In chapter four, Balakian turns to the impact of DNA testing, showing how it can cause a resettlement case to collapse. “In addition to separating families physically, DNA exposed relations that were not as they had appeared” (p. 134). For Somali refugees, kinship terms publicly signal belonging, history, and relational roles, yet these same categories clash with the UNHCR’s narrow definitions of family. Balakian argues that DNA testing reinforces an idealized nuclear-family model, treating it as natural, universal, and morally correct (p. 146), even when it contradicts the kinship structures that sustain people in displacement.

In chapter five, Balakian brings the narrative to the United States, highlighting the continued scrutiny refugee families face even after resettlement. She shows how families remain vulnerable to accusations of fraud and are forced to prove their relationships and reassert their legitimacy. Practices that once ensured survival—forming extended or flexible kin networks, constructing “makeshift” families, or maintaining ties across borders—are now frequently interpreted as suspicious. Through Dahir’s story, Balakian illustrates how delays in family reunification and prolonged separation can inflict profound emotional harm, even after resettlement. She also traces how post-9/11 security policies sharply reduced the likelihood that Somali refugees would gain entry to the United States, as geopolitical fears became embedded in everyday bureaucratic decisions.

In the conclusion, Balakian reflects on the category of “family” as both an analytic concept and a political object. “Legislating issues surrounding marriage and reproduction and what constitutes a family or household is central to contemporary politics” (p. 180), she writes. Balakian’s *Unsettled Families* shows how care, kinship, and belonging are shaped by conflict, displacement, and the regulatory frameworks that determine who is allowed to move and who must remain behind. Balakian interweaves stories of people at different points in their refugee journeys, connecting them to broader theories of kinship and to the restrictive US immigration and refugee policies designed to destabilize networks of care. Balakian invites readers to invest deeply in the families at the center of each chapter. She delivers a pointed critique of the humanitarian apparatus by revealing how systems of aid can inflict violence through prolonged waiting, continuous questioning, and institutionalized doubt. Since Balakian focuses primarily on adults, future research could explore the experiences of children and youth, both in their new homes and schools and in contexts of protracted conflict. Young people often experience separation, displacement, and mobility in different ways than their parents, which highlights an important area for further study.

Readers may find it difficult to sustain hope by the end of Balakian’s book, especially if they expect a conventional resettlement narrative with a reassuring conclusion. But offering a happy ending is not the goal of this work. Balakian instead centers her book on the everyday realities of individuals who are navigating bureaucratic demands—completing forms, attending interviews, undergoing DNA tests, earning and saving money to survive, supporting loved ones across borders, and telling their stories repeatedly until someone in power decides to believe them. Uncovering these quiet, persistent forms of labor is the central contribution of this book. Rather than asking merely whether they “make it out of Nairobi,” Balakian prompts us to consider a more urgent question: How are displaced people supported, heard, and cared for while they are forced to wait?

GABRIELLE OLIVEIRA

Harvard University

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BOOK REVIEW

THE ART OF GLOBAL PEACEBUILDING AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION: PATHWAYS TO HOPEFUL, TRANSFORMATIONAL PRACTICE

BY ANGIE KOTLER AND JO WESTBROOK

ROUTLEDGE, 2025. IV + 188 PAGES

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The Art of Global Peacebuilding and Excellence in Education: Pathways to Hopeful, Transformational Practice by Angie Kotler and Jo Westbrook serves as an invitation for educators and policymakers to meditate on an intractable question in international education: “what constitutes good, effective, and relevant education?” (p. 1). As Kotler notes, this book arrives against the backdrop of persistent conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, the acceleration of climate change, and ongoing threats to teacher autonomy. At a time when globalization continues to reinscribe colonial and capitalist paradigms, the book serves as a conceptual intervention in the field of education in emergencies by unraveling and reclaiming the critical concepts that underpin it (p. 3). This book attempts to challenge our understandings of peacebuilding, excellence, and education—three words that evoke, as the authors underscore, a prescriptive, neoliberal, or top-down approach to peace that is divorced from teacher agency, community voice, or participatory action. As the fields of international education and education in emergencies continue to examine how education interventions either perpetuate colonial logics or reimagine education systems, Kotler and Westbrook invite complexity, reflection, and, ultimately, hope for more imaginative schools in the future. Through case studies woven together from their experiences in Rwanda, Ethiopia, Liberia, and the UK, Kotler and Westbrook center the voices, experiences, and pedagogies of teachers whose everyday actions create opportunities for “learning of relationality: to self, other and the planet” (p. 4).

Inspired by British scholar David Olusoga, Kotler and Westbrook begin by sharing their life histories, which reflects a commitment to reflexivity and making their experiences, identities, beliefs, and values apparent. Kotler explores how her Jewish ancestry, early experiences teaching in the UK and Zimbabwe, and later work in France, Germany, South Africa, and Rwanda sharpened her interest in schooling as a mechanism for individual and social transformation. Westbrook draws similarly from her family history and early teaching experiences to understand the role education plays in fostering more dialogic and peaceful communities. Her time spent teaching in the UK and Western Uganda, coupled with her work in Pakistan, Uganda, Tanzania, Liberia, and Ethiopia, underscored the importance of “socially just and creative pedagogies” (p. 14). By weaving in how they grapple with their positionality, the authors remind us that the work of education is a continuous dialogic process of sense-making and reflection.

This book is divided into three parts. In part one, Kotler and Westbrook review previous scholarship on excellence and peacebuilding in education. Scholarship in international education invariably requires critical engagement with questions of power and the role of education aid in extending Western hegemony. “Excellence,” as the authors note, is perhaps a troubling and unexpected word for a book that seeks to reimagine approaches to peacebuilding and challenge capitalist logics. Indeed, the authors note that excellence connotes the dominant neoliberal paradigm of education that is rooted in competition, performance, and measurement. In reclaiming the word “excellence,” Kotler and Westbrook aim to disrupt the rigid conceptual paradigms that define neoliberal approaches to education. In an effort to steer us away from a market-driven understanding of excellence, they draw from Giroux’s (2004) work to offer an alternative definition that frames excellence in education as a liberatory space where discussion, reflection, and curiosity guide learning. Drawing from scholars who critique peace education as insufficiently challenging Western paradigms and power, Kotler and Westbrook underscore the importance of peace education as a local, justice-oriented endeavor intertwined with the broader sociohistorical context. Rejecting the notion that peace education is apolitical or replicable, the authors argue that peace emerges from a deep understanding of local contexts and attention to history.

In part two, Kotler and Westbrook present case studies from Rwanda, Ethiopia, Liberia, and the UK to demonstrate their expanded definitions of excellence and peace education. Their case studies draw from nearly three decades of work and partnerships with schools, teachers, and organizations. Most of the case studies are authored individually, as Kotler and Westbrook weave theory into their own reflections and experiences. In one example, Kotler describes her role collaborating with an international nongovernmental organization and the Rwandan government to develop a model school that could serve as a site for educator development and learning 20 years after the genocide. What this example and others in the book convey is the inherent moral, spiritual, and sociopolitical complexity embedded in each project. Kotler’s analysis of the partnership between the Rwandan government, educators, and international nongovernmental organizations raises critical questions around power, purpose, and positionality: What should excellence look like in this context? What role did the international nongovernmental organization have in supporting this model school? What values accompanied her decision to participate in the creation of the school? However, in each case study, Kotler and Westbrook avoid a singular definition for what excellence should look like. The strength of their book lies instead in their ability to hold the complexity of what it means to engage in educational projects when schooling worldwide remains inextricably linked with systems of power. The authors succeed in conveying moments when they paused to reflect, when events unfolded differently from what they expected, or when projects fell short of their desired aims. As a reader, one might question whether, given the historical and political weight both terms carry, merely reframing the words “excellence” and “peacebuilding” constitutes a radical enough conceptual departure. If words create

conceptual boundaries, perhaps we need to cultivate more creative language for our future visions of education.

Despite the power and promise of the global education movement, schooling continues to maintain social inequalities and existing power dynamics. Critical scholarship examines how structures perpetuate violence and systemic oppression while offering researchers and practitioners opportunities to reimagine how we exist and learn collectively. This book builds on the work of other scholars, including Anderson et al. (2023), whose book *Creating Third Spaces of Learning for Post-Capitalism: Lessons from Educators, Artists, and Activists* explores examples of learning spaces that challenge capitalist logics and center imagination and collective solidarity. In a world where measurement and results dominate conversations around global education, it can be easy to lose sight of the larger purpose. However, as Kotler and Westbrook remind us, “Meaning is made in the spaces between us” (p. 152). This book is a hopeful invitation to redefine how we conceptualize excellence and peace education; by so doing, Kotler and Westbrook create new meanings for ourselves and our communities.

SOFÍA ANTONIA GÓMEZ-DOYLE

New York University

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BOOK REVIEW

DECOLONIZING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

EDITED BY YVETTE HUTCHINSON, ARTEMIO ARTURO CORTEZ OCHOA,

JULIA PAULSON, AND LEON TIKLY

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In *Decolonizing Education for Sustainable Futures*, Yvette Hutchinson, Artemio Arturo Cortez Ochoa, Julia Paulson, and Leon Tikly pull together contributions from a wide range of authors. These works originated with an online seminar series and contributions to UNESCO's Futures of Education program, which addressed the "enduring presences of extraction and oppression" (p. 2) in education and how to envisage and realize a sustainable future.

The editors have deliberately and skillfully woven the book together in three distinct parts. They start by taking the reader through the conceptual underpinnings of both decolonization in education and futures thinking, a process of attempting to understand possible futures and their implications. The latter two parts of the book heed the calls of Mignolo and Walsh (2018, 138) in ensuring that attention is paid to both practice and theory: "Praxis without theory is blind; theory without praxis is sequestered." The editors intentionally showcase diverse perspectives on decolonization and acknowledge the tensions contained within these different perspectives.

In part one, the editors conceptually explore the connections between decolonization and sustainable futures in education. They start with the opening chapter by Tikly, who lays out five distinct narratives of sustainable futures. These include an expansion of existing thinking on sustainable development and education to include a decolonizing narrative, before charting the past, present, and potential future roles of education in these narratives. The two other chapters in part one draw from the idea that "education is directly implicated in the crises of the Anthropocene and our failure to imagine alternatives" (p. 49). They do so by imagining a series of radical vision statements for the future of education and theoretically redressing the existing divide between contemporary global education and our natural world.

The five chapters in part two focus squarely on praxis and on moving theory to practice and action, including contributions from teachers in the UK city of Bristol. This part of the book takes readers through a critical reflection on the efforts and experiences of decolonizing the curriculum in the "unconducive policy environment" (p. 136) that is the UK school system. The authors of these chapters focus on multiple levels of the

education ecosystem, starting with curriculum and learners, followed by perspectives on the process of decolonization in large institutions, in this case the British Council and the University of Bristol. Chapters by Hutchinson and Birdi respectively examine the complexities and possibilities of organic insurgent people-led processes of decolonization, and how they interact with larger bureaucratic processes led by institutions that espouse similar decolonial aims.

The authors of the four chapters in part three bring these threads back to theory, emphasizing the argument that decolonization cannot occur without a reparative lens. They critique the recent “decolonial bandwagon,” noting how the discourse is often co-opted in performative ways that fail to disrupt coloniality or racial hierarchies, and may even reinforce existing power dynamics. The authors of these chapters argue for the centrality of repair and reparations, and call for historic engagement and concrete action to redress harms and prevent their recurrence.

Despite not making explicit reference to crisis-affected contexts or the field of education in emergencies (EiE), the authors’ perspectives and arguments on the urgent need for a reparative and sustainable future in education, for decolonizing the global education space, and for reimagining education as something more deeply connected to the planet and to people have significant relevance to the EiE field. The book also offers practical examples of efforts to apply futures thinking and decolonial frameworks in education systems and institutions without shying away from how messy this process can be, especially when implementing decolonial ideas in historically colonial institutions. There also are two important, provocative offerings to those in EiE who are seeking to advance thinking, practice, and policy in the field.

The first and potentially most important offering is to encourage EiE theorists and practitioners to adopt a “futures lens” that wrestles with the injustices of past, present, and potential futures. EiE has only recently begun engaging with the questions of how imperialist, racialized, and capitalist logics have underpinned the field and the sector, and of how power is often structured by large agencies, funders, and a cognitive framing of the Global South as the “other” that is in need of intervention (Shah et al. 2025; Novelli and Kutun 2023; Menashy and Zakharia 2023). EiE is too often decoupled from the past. However, there is extensive literature on and recognition of education’s role in creating futures oriented toward peace, which necessitates an engagement with injustices, both past and present (Paulson and Shanks 2023).

A solid starting point for those working in EiE is Paulson’s chapter on reparative pedagogies, which offers reflections on how education systems may choose to grapple with the “truth” of the past, particularly in contexts with violent histories, using examples from practitioners in Colombia and Cambodia. Against the backdrop of cuts to foreign aid and strengthened efforts to meaningfully localize the EiE sector, the question of what sustainable futures we are working toward is more critical than ever. The thinking and

arguments presented throughout the book provide ideas for disrupting short-termism in EiE and can help move the sector beyond the current dominant vision of the future. These ideas include moving EiE toward a more organic, locally led, epistemically just, and decolonial future.

The second offering is to challenge the EiE field to imagine a radically different relationship with the planet. Chapter two, a contribution from the Common Worlds Research Collective, envisions a future in which humans are no longer positioned above the living world and rejects the belief that we can exploit or “improve” nature without consequence. In crisis-affected contexts, the relationship to the environment and the natural world is messy, as both elements can be both the victim and the driver of crises. The book’s contributors offer perspectives on education’s relationship to the planet that challenge us to go further: Could education reframe our relationship with the natural world by valuing the planet as more than a resource for survival? Might this perspective deepen if EiE can embrace diverse epistemologies, including those from indigenous communities? These questions provide useful provocation to reimagine and redefine EiE and challenge us to wrestle with the historic logics and injustices underpinning the field (Shah et al. 2025).

Despite the overall quality, strength, and diversity of this book, we felt at times that it tended to lean toward theory and to underrepresent the political economy of the current moment. Although several contributors frame the current moment as a “polycrisis,” the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, the role of emerging technologies, the rise of militarism, and the underlying political economy of global change in relation to decolonizing education for a sustainable future seem underexplored. However, the book does provide a valuable starting point for expanding and deepening these perspectives. We hope for future work in a similar vein that draws inspiration from this book’s contributors.

Noting the transdisciplinary and intersectional approaches needed to address educational injustices (Jules and Salajan 2025), we thought the editors could have gone further in diversifying the methodologies represented in this volume. While the contributors do use a range of methodologies, there is no representation of quantitative work, which leaves certain voices absent, such as those involved in climate modeling, futures forecasting, or even decolonizing financing. Including this different viewpoint would have been useful in understanding a wider range of efforts to imagine sustainable futures and might have provided a different perspective on ideas of decolonization and reparative justice in practice.

Overall, this book stimulates thought and imagination around the meaning of sustainable futures in and through education. For the EiE field, it provides strong theoretical grounding, practical examples, and insightful reflections for theorists and practitioners on shifting our collective vision for the future and imagining different and radical

possibilities for the role of education in crisis-affected contexts. As explicitly noted in the introductory chapters, the book is not meant to function as a “manual” for decolonization; the aim, rather, is to push the reader to move beyond familiar frameworks, understand decolonization from different viewpoints, and embrace the courageous task of imagining a different kind of future. It does this successfully.

SHREYA SHREERAMAN AND LUKE PYE

Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)

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CONTRIBUTORS

SEUN BUNMI ADEBAYO (adebayo@unhcr.org) is the Pedagogy and Digital Inclusion Lead at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), where he advances Connected Education initiatives across various UNHCR operations to support equitable, quality education for refugees and forcibly displaced learners. With a robust background in research, policy advocacy, digital education, pedagogy, and EdTech, he has extensive experience across Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. He has published his research widely in leading academic journals.

FRIEDRICH W. AFFOLTER was appointed by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) to serve as Global Education Cluster Lead from 2023 to 2026, in partnership with Save the Children International. His earlier assignments include Chief of Education with UNICEF Syria, manager of UNICEF's Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy Programme in New York, and colead of the Education Cluster in Sudan.

WAFI AL-AMAREH (w.alamareh@arfada.org) is a researcher and monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning specialist with more than 20 years of experience leading evidence generation for humanitarian and development programs across the Middle East. She specializes in mixed methods research, gender and protection, resilience, livelihoods, and social policy. She translates rigorous evidence into actionable learning and policy insights for UN agencies, international nongovernmental organizations, and national institutions.

KHALED AL-YOUSEF (k.alyousef@arfada.org) is a monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning specialist and data-analysis professional with extensive experience supporting humanitarian and third-party monitoring and beneficiary feedback systems in northwest Syria. He combines strong quantitative analysis skills with hands-on field management expertise to help organizations strengthen data quality, accountability, and evidence-based program adaptation in complex humanitarian settings.

ABEER ATTARI is an evaluation specialist and data analyst with more than a decade of experience with UNICEF, Save the Children, Mercy Corps, and Oxfam. She has worked primarily in monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning in Jordan. Her work is focused on using evidence and evaluation as strategic tools for institutional learning, adaptive programming, and improved development impact.

MYAT THANDAR AUNG (myat@inedfoundation.org) is an Education Specialist at TeacherFOCUS Education Consulting, where she contributes to participatory education research that informs evidence-based decisionmaking in crisis-affected contexts. Drawing from her own experience in Myanmar's public education system, refugee camp schooling, and Thai-Myanmar border education programs, she has a strong understanding of the communities her research seeks to serve. Her interdisciplinary background spans environmental science, water, sanitation, and hygiene programming, and community development. She holds an MSc from North Carolina State University.

MICHELLE BROWN (michelle.brown@savethechildren.org) is the Co-Coordinator of the Global Education Cluster. She is an experienced humanitarian professional who has worked in Africa, Asia, and across the globe in operational, public health, and quality program roles. Her interests lie in strengthening children's rights, including the right to access a quality protective education, even in crisis contexts.

THOMAS BROWN (thomas.mitchell.brown91@gmail.com) is an education economist with a master of public administration in international development from the Harvard Kennedy School. He has years of experience managing global education research and programming for the World Bank, Save the Children, the University of Adelaide, and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade programs.

CIRENIA CHÁVEZ VILLEGAS (cirenia.chavezvillegas@un.org) is a Development Coordinator Officer and Economist at the Resident Coordinators Office in Honduras. She has more than a decade of experience at multiple UN agencies. At UNHCR, she led the data and statistics function within the education team. At UNICEF Innocenti, she researched the impact of school-related violence on learning across Latin America and the Caribbean. An experienced mixed methods researcher, she holds a PhD in development studies from the University of Cambridge and is a Fulbright Scholar.

JEREMY BRYAN COATS (JCoats@moore.sc.edu) is the Director of International Programs and Partnerships at the Darla Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina. He has more than a decade of experience designing and leading international partnership and exchange initiatives across the university, nonprofit, corporate, foundation, and government sectors.

SILVIA DIAZGRANADOS FERRÁNS is Director of Education Research at the International Rescue Committee, where she leads a global research portfolio across conflict- and crisis-affected countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. She also serves as Research Co-Director of the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) program. Her work focuses on evaluating the implementation, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness of education interventions to improve children's

learning and wellbeing. She holds an EdD and an MA from Harvard University and BA degrees in psychology and philosophy from Universidad de los Andes, Colombia.

JANICE D'SOUZA (jdsouza@iie.org) is the Evaluation and Research Lead at the Institute of International Education. She leads monitoring, evaluation, and learning across international education and education in emergencies programs. She has led evaluations for initiatives funded by the US Department of State, private foundations, and corporate partners, including programs serving displaced scholars and Afghan learners. She has authored works on gender-based violence, water, sanitation, and hygiene programs, and network and systems mapping. Her professional interests include gender, institutional learning, and ethical approaches to evidence generation in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

ALANNA HEYER (heyer@unhcr.org) is a Higher Education Data and Evidence Specialist at UNHCR. She leads the monitoring and evaluation of higher education programs, drives evidence generation, and oversees research initiatives while cultivating key partnerships to strengthen evidence around the inclusion of refugees in higher education. Alanna has led work with nonprofits and government agencies to enable and monitor equitable access to education for disadvantaged communities. She holds a master's degree in public policy.

MARION IMBODEN (marion.imboden@unifr.ch) is a doctoral candidate in international education policy at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Her research is focused on education governance, school leadership, and education in emergencies, with a particular emphasis on NGO-led education in Haiti. She has experience in teaching at the primary, secondary, and higher education level in Switzerland and is a coauthor of "Educational Practice in Switzerland: Searching for Diversity-Engaged Leadership," which appeared in *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*.

FARMAN KHAN is a seasoned education strategist and researcher with more than a decade of expertise in development and education in emergencies. His research-driven approach has underpinned the design of programs that specialize in early childhood care and education, early childhood development, and adolescent economic resilience. His research contributed to the piloting of the Learning Tree mobile application and the development of a distance learning model during COVID-19. His strategic work includes launching Pakistan's "Day 1" approach and designing accelerated learning programs. His experience with field implementation and rigorous analysis help to advance resilient, child-centered education ecosystems.

ALLYSON KRUPAR (akrupar@savechildren.org) is the Lead Advisor in Research, Evidence and Learning at Save the Children US, where her work focuses on education, child protection, and wellbeing in crisis contexts. She also serves as adjunct faculty at American University, where she teaches graduate methods and international development

courses. Her research is focused on lifelong learning and wellbeing in crisis-affected environments. She holds a PhD from the Pennsylvania State University, with a dual title in lifelong learning and adult education, and comparative and international education.

IVAN LOPES (ivancilopes@gmail.com) is a data specialist with eight years of experience at UNHCR and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. An expert in GIS, ArcPython, and data visualization, he uses spatial analytics and data automation to enhance decisionmaking in the humanitarian sector. His work includes leading global data governance projects and streamlining interoperability between complex organizational systems. He is committed to leveraging emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and drone capture to improve data quality and operational efficiency in challenging environments.

IGNACIO LÓPEZ is an applied social researcher and data analyst with experience across academic, institutional, and international projects in Latin America and the United States. His work focuses on quantitative research methods, survey design and analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and evidence generation for social policy and development. He has contributed to research on governance, violence prevention, justice, migration, and development in collaboration with universities, research centers, civil society organizations, and international institutions. His expertise includes statistical analysis, geospatial methods, data systems, technical reporting, and the production of evidence to inform policy and practice.

CATHRYN MAGNO (cathryn.magno@unifr.ch) is Professor of Education Sciences at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Her scholarly work examines intersections in comparative education, governance and leadership, gender, and migration and refugeehood. Her recent publications include a co-edited volume, *(Re)Mapping Migration and Education: Centering Methods and Methodologies*, and “Decolonial Archeology of Migration Spaces,” which appeared in *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*. She produces the Comparative Educational Leadership Lab (www.compedleadershiplab.com), an open-source learning hub, and regularly consults with international organizations in the area of leadership and governance. She is co-editor of *European Education: Issues and Studies* and vice president of the Comparative Education Society in Europe.

FRANCINE MENASHY (francine.menashy@utoronto.ca) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Her research explores global education policy and aid to education humanitarian contexts. She is the author of *International Aid to Education: Power Dynamics in an Era of Partnership*.

SAW LER MOO (researchcoordinator.kecd@gmail.com) is Research Coordinator at the Karen Education and Culture Department. He has more than a decade of experience in the Karen education sector in Kawthoolei and refugee camp settings. He collaborates closely with local educational leaders and service providers to strengthen the Karen

Education System, while also leading a team of researchers committed to advancing sustainable improvements. He also partners with TeacherFOCUS on research in conflict and crisis contexts, where his expertise helps to support resilient and inclusive education for Karen communities.

MAY YI MYINT (mayyimyint@medg.org) is a Project Manager at Phoo Pwint Wai Thi and the focal person for the ERICC research project on monastic education in Myanmar. She has nearly five years of experience in monastic education development in the basic education sector. With her strong understanding of monastic school culture, she works closely with monastic schools across the country to strengthen teacher capacity, leadership development, and school administration. She is particularly committed to helping these schools provide more inclusive, learner-centered education for children from marginalized communities.

NAW BWAY PAW (snow@teacherfocusconsulting.org) is an Education Specialist at TeacherFOCUS Education Consulting, where she co-leads research projects in collaboration with ethnic education organizations, education stakeholders, and global researchers. With more than a decade of experience in ethnic, displaced person, and refugee education, she has worked closely with learners, teachers, and education service providers in these contexts to build extensive community networks. Her contextualized expertise strengthens her contributions to both research and practice, particularly in conflict and crisis settings.

CELIA REDDICK (creddick3@fsu.edu) is an Assistant Professor of education and international development at Florida State University, with a dual appointment in the Education Leadership and Policy Studies Department and the Learning Systems Institute. Her research examines education in settings of forced migration, as well as multilingualism and immigration/migration. She currently leads a research study on the educational experiences of refugee students in the American South. She is also a Jacobs CIFAR Foundation Research Fellow, through which she is conducting a three-country study of language and literacy learning among refugees in Germany, Uganda, and Colombia.

GRAY RINEHART (wgrinehart@protonmail.com) is an educationalist based in Southeast Asia, where he works as an independent researcher with the ERICC consortium. Since the early 2010s, he has worked in various capacities with diverse education communities across the Myanmar context. Within ERICC, he has co-led research on the political economy of education and works closely with colleagues at the International Rescue Committee, University College London, TeacherFOCUS, Phoo Pwint Wai Thi, and the Karen Education and Culture Department on longitudinal, mixed methods studies of learning and teaching in conflict and crisis settings.

CONTRIBUTORS

ARSENII SLIEBA (slieba@unhcr.org) has worked in the United Nations system since 2015 as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Information Management Officer. He joined UNHCR in 2020. He previously worked with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Eastern Europe, and with an international NGO in South-West Asia. He has 15 years of experience in and holds an MSc in GIS.

BERNARD THUO is a Research Coordinator at the International Rescue Committee's Airbel Impact Lab. He leads end-to-end data management—tool development, collection, cleaning, analysis, visualization, and open data science—and trains field teams on research methodology and data-collection protocols for education research studies.

BEM TIVKAA (bem.tivkaa@savethechildren.org) is an education in emergencies and humanitarian expert with 14 years of experience leading complex, high-impact education and child-protection programs in conflict-affected settings, including Syria and Northeast Nigeria. His work spans strategic leadership, program design, evidence generation, and donor engagement, with a strong focus on strengthening education systems, policy reform, and program quality in high-risk environments.

PIERRE VERNIER works in the GIS Support Unit at UNHCR, where he supports country operations and manages the UNHCR GIS infrastructure and database. He previously worked as a GIS specialist for scientific institutes and other humanitarian organizations.

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The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE)*, a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal, aims to fill gaps in education in emergencies (EiE) research and policy. Building on the tradition of collaboration between practitioners and academics in the EiE field, *JEiE*'s purpose is to improve learning in and across service-delivery, policymaking, and academic institutions by providing a space where scholars and practitioners can publish rigorous quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research articles, and robust and compelling field notes that both inform policy and practice and stir debate. *JEiE* provides access to the ideas and evidence needed to inform sound EiE programming, policymaking, funding decisions, academic program curricula, and future research.

JEiE specifically aims to:

1. **Publish rigorous scholarly and applied work** that sets the standard for evidence in the field
2. **Stimulate research and debate** to build evidence and collective knowledge about EiE
3. **Promote learning across service-delivery organizations, academic institutions, and policymakers** that is informed by evidence
4. **Define knowledge gaps and key trends** that will inform future research

To achieve these goals, *JEiE* seeks articles from scholars and practitioners who work across disciplines and sectors on a range of questions related to education in countries and regions affected by crisis and conflict. *JEiE* is part of and works closely with the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)—an open global network of more than 25,000 individual members who are affiliated with more than 5,000 organizations and institutions in 190 countries—to collect new research articles and field note submissions and to distribute high-quality published work. This large global partnership of activists, academics, policymakers, and practitioners in education enables *JEiE* to make a unique and powerful contribution.

STRUCTURE OF *JEiE*

According to the INEE Minimum Standards, education in emergencies is defined as “quality learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, nonformal, technical, vocational, higher and adult education.” *JEiE* publishes research related to education activities in the context of natural disasters and fragile or conflict-affected states, conflict-sensitive education, attacks on education, education for peacebuilding, peace education, education for resilience and disaster risk reduction, and forced migration and education.

ISSUES AND CONTENTS

Each issue features peer-reviewed articles written by researchers and practitioners in the field of EiE. The three sections of *JEiE* are:

EiE Research Articles (Section 1): Articles in this section have a clear research design; use an explicit, well-recognized theoretical or conceptual framework; employ rigorous research methods; and contribute evidence and advance knowledge on EiE. Articles that develop new EiE theoretical or conceptual frameworks or challenge existing ones are also welcome. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods articles are appropriate.

EiE Field Notes (Section 2): Articles in this section address innovative approaches to EiE; progress and challenges in designing, implementing, and evaluating initiatives; and/or observations and commentary on research work. Articles in this section typically are authored by practitioners or practitioner-researcher teams.

EiE Book Reviews (Section 3): Articles in this section offer a critical review of a recently published or upcoming book, or of substantial studies, evaluations, meta-analyses, documentaries, or other media that focus on EiE.

Please see our website (<https://inee.org/journal>) for more information and detailed submission guidelines.

JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

DANA BURDE, PhD
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE)* publishes groundbreaking and outstanding scholarly and practitioner work on education in emergencies (EiE).

JEiE was established in response to the growing need for rigorous research to strengthen EiE evidence, support policy and practice, and improve learning in and across organizations, policy institutes, and academic institutions. *JEiE* facilitates EiE knowledge-generation and knowledge-sharing, thus contributing to the professionalization of the EiE field.

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